# ANGELS OF THE DEEP

## KIRBY CROW

It was not a wraith of light. The demon of Beck's nightmares slid through the dark toward him. It rose up as a wide shadow that blocked his way, lamplight slipping off its humped shape in oily yellow streaks as the darkness coalesced into a man. The man seemed to fill all the world standing there, his long hands tucked casually into a black priest's cassock, his beautiful, cutting smile gently and viciously amused.

#### "Hello, my love."

All Beck could hear was the trip hammer of his heart. The rush of terror that blurred his mind was so strong that, if he could have made any sound at all, he would have screamed. Featuring a roll call of some of the best writers of gay erotica and mysteries today!

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For my Mother, who would have approved. April 1, 2009

### Wystan Parish, Virginia

Wait for it. Feel the hint of dew on the air, the cooling of the sidewalks and the diminishing sounds of traffic from the Interstate. Sense the stars hovering above the town, not yet visible but forever there. People were going inside, returning to their homes. Good smells began to drift past him: kitchen and bread and belonging.

A boy was perched on the concrete garden steps leading down from the doors of the rectory. The garden was a sheltered, dark green cove hidden from the road by a wroughtiron fence heavily overgrown with weeds, honeysuckle and boxwood. It was a secret place, damp and quiet, filled with growing things and presided over by an ancient magnolia fully six feet across at the trunk. The boy was dark-haired, with brilliant, wide-set blue eyes vaguely reminiscent of a cat. He closed his eyes, ending their devouring stare, and inhaled deeply before snapping back to attention, his gaze fixed on the patch of sky he could see through the trees to the west. Becket Merriday was an alert child for a seven year old, but his attention had lapsed and he had almost missed it. It always happened so quickly, and he knew from experience that even a momentary distraction could bring failure.

The world was diminishing, not preparing for sleep, but taking a steadying breath before night hammered down with all its native creatures and habits. The evening birds were out. He did not know their names, but they were swift, ratcheting flyers that seemed to come with the red sunset, black arrow-shapes darting in the brazen light of afternoon. The sun itself was gone, sunken without fanfare. The sky still held the light, but there was no glaring source as an author.

He was captivated by small things: the thumb-print blush of smoky-blue in the southern sky, the band of pink to the north, a razor line of fire in the west. He turned his head expectantly as light winds shifted from north to east, carrying a smell he recognized only as *distance*. A cloud passed, the light dimmed a wisp of a shade, and in the space of one breath to another it happened: dusk covered the small factory town, a brief witching-time between light and shadow.

Beck stared in profound awe and sighed.

He had spent the earlier part of the afternoon in the private library. Father Dane had unlocked it for him with a finger to his lips, well aware of how Father Calvert would feel if he knew that young, careless hands were pawing his revered volumes. Father Dane was much younger than Father Calvert, a new addition to the parish and only recently ordained. Beck trusted him no more than the other priest, but Father Dane only patted his head, made sure he washed his hands, and placidly ignored him with the benevolent, hieratical surety of man utterly convinced that God would take care of His own.

Beck was sure that Father Dane looked at him like he would a mouse that lived under the sink; a small, furtive thing who took great pains not to be noticed, but still needed the crumbs off the table. Lately, Father Dane had begun to allow him to spend hours in the locked, dusty anteroom of the rectory that served as the library, plowing through thick religious treatises and leather-bound volumes of dogma. There were also a few small, neglected chapbooks with crisp, gilt-edged pages describing the evils of sorcery and the fiery end awaiting all heretics. Beck devoured these with the starved hunger of an extremely inquisitive and deprived young mind.

He had read a new story that morning; an exciting one full of monsters and giants and wicked women. Like any boy, he relished such tales, though he was sure he would get into serious trouble if Father Calvert ever found out.

The story was about angels and women and how the children made between them in lust were evil—so purely, irredeemably evil that when such a one was slaughtered, all the demons of the earth had sprung fully formed from its corpse. He liked some of the words in the book, like *lust*. It was a bad word and he had to remember that, just like he had to remember all the other bad things he must not do or say and all the secrets he must never tell.

He told it to the stillness of the garden, holding the rich, rough sound in his throat and rolling it out with his tongue; "Lilliust."

"Hello."

Beck started, jolted out of his ritual, and turned to glare at the intrusion that seemed to spring from thin air. He had heard no one approach.

An elderly woman faced him. Her dress was long and oldfashioned, her white hair knotted into a coil at the back of her neck. One gnarled hand rested on a wooden cane that supported her slight body. Beck thought she looked like she might fall over and blow away without it. Weak, she was. He relaxed. She was not much of a threat, but he had learned that appearances were the least telling thing about people.

"Hullo," he said warily.

She smiled. "You're distrustful. That's good. That's very good."

"You shouldn't be back here," he said in his thin, strong voice. "This is the Father's private garden. He doesn't like visitors back here."

"Yet here you are."

"I live here."

"Are there other children here?"

Beck looked down at his shoes. "Nope."

"Ah, of course. I'd forgotten." She nodded as if she understood everything. "I'm very tired. Is there somewhere an old woman could sit?"

Beck glanced back at the church rectory behind him, shook his head.

"Just for a moment? Please?"

Dusting his palms off on his trousers, he hopped down from the steps and led her to an algae-streaked stone bench under the magnolia, feeling the rich loam sink under his sneakers as he walked and wondering if the old lady was going to punch holes in the moss with her cane. He'd be in trouble then, because of course Father Calvert would think he did it.

Though it was not far, the woman had to stop twice to catch her breath, leaning heavily on the cane and casting a

weathered eye at him. Beck halted when she did, but offered nothing further.

"You keep your distance, child," she breathed as she sank onto the bench like a pale, floating leaf, her voice hoarse with exertion. "And you're ignoring your manners. I know a word." She looked piercingly at him. "*Instinct.* Do you know that word?"

Beck shook his head.

"You have an instinct inside of you. It's like a tiny voice guiding you do to things, or not to do them. Telling you things you never learned but know anyway. At this moment, your little voice tells you not to trust me. Why, I wonder?"

Beck planted his feet and crossed his arms in silent resistance. "Don't like you," he stated mulishly.

"You don't even know me."

"I don't care. You ask too many questions." His nose wrinkled. "And you're stinky."

She laughed with a high, tinkling mirth, and Beck stared with his jaw dropped because when she laughed, the light in the garden seemed to grow more intense. Not brighter, it grew *deep*. The birds stopping singing as the scent of apple blossoms filled his nostrils, and the leaves of the garden suddenly seemed fuller and greener. Perfume flowed from the wild roses and the blooming gardenia and jasmine, and the seed pods of the varicolored four o'clocks swelled and popped as they opened, and every unopened moonflower suddenly unfurled a pallid banner.

Something moved inside Beck, a small, sealed door cracking open an inch to shed a particle of radiance into his soul. Not very much, just enough to let him know the door was *there*. His shaking hand went to massage his chest, wondering at the feel of it, this strange sense of expansion inside his own skin. He had no words to express it, but he knew that the direction of his life had irrevocably changed.

*Change*, the uninvited guest that destroys what once was. He had experienced change once. Change was being left crying on cold stone steps in the snow. Change was when gentle hands left you and never touched you again, when everything you knew went away and never came back.

This time, change was welcome at his door. He relaxed visibly. "Who are you?"

"Call me Claire."

He looked at her thoughtfully. "That's not your name."

Beck reached for the caution he had felt toward her and realized it had vanished. He moved to the bench and sat beside her. A length of silk-embroidered lace from her scarf lay on the stone, and Beck picked it up to admire the pattern. It was an intertwined circle of birds, their wings clasped together.

"What's that other smell?" Beck asked. "Not the apples."

"You don't like it?" He pulled a face and she smiled. "It's called lavender. I thought all old ladies wore it." She waved her hand in the air and the cloying, soapy smell faded. "Better?"

He nodded. "It smells like a funeral. When they bring the coffin in, the thing inside smells like that."

"People?"

He dropped the scarf and shrugged, suddenly diffident as he fidgeted with his thumbs. "The thing inside. It doesn't move anymore."

"It was once a person, Beck. Like you."

Now he looked at her straight, his eyes accusing. "Not like me."

She sighed. "No, Beck. Not like you. I'm sorry I said that."

The light had faded from the garden. Twilight had fallen without their notice and the enclosed area was sunken in tones of mauve and ash. He scooted a little closer to her. "I missed the nightfall," he said, his face drooping into lines of childhood woe.

"There will be other nightfalls."

"They're all different. That's why I can't miss one." Bright tears shone in strange blue eyes that seemed longer and narrower than was natural. They were the color of sapphires. "I have to remember them all, all the ways they're different. Then when I feel bad I..." he trailed off.

"When you feel bad," Claire prompted.

"When I feel bad, I can take them out again. All the little..." he groped for a word.

"Details?"

A nod. "The details. The nightfalls. They keep me safe." He clasped his hands together so hard that his knuckles turned white.

She reached over and held him as he trembled, her spidery hand on the back of his head, but he did not cry. After a moment, he pulled away. A neon street lamp sputtered and crackled to life in the alley, and the bloated glow reached into the garden, scattering the darkness. Something bright winked from the old woman's sunken breast. Beck looked at it.

"What's that?"

She removed it without hesitation. It was a charm necklace, an incised disk of gold on a steel chain, about the size of a quarter. She dropped its weight into Beck's palm and he turned it over with his finger. It was very lovely. On the surface of the raw gold, pitted and dark in places, was a tree in a circle. The fine lines of the branches were grooved and shaped to resemble bark. The tree was leafless and crowned with fire, and a snake twined around its bole. Beck saw none of its flaws, only that the patina of extreme age covered the charm in a shimmering aura of secrets.

Secrets that might speak to him.

Claire smiled as Beck's fist closed over it greedily. "It is yours, Beck."

"Really?" Hope melted into glee, yet still no smile. He would never really learn how to manage that, only to construct an expression that resembled the real thing. The feeling, though... yes. He knew what joy felt like now.

"Oh yes. It's entirely yours now." She looked around the garden then and checked the angle of the sky. "It's getting late. The old priest will be missing you soon."

A shadow filled Beck's eyes at the mention of Father Calvert, kindly Father Calvert, whom everyone spoke so well of. Claire rose and he stared because the cane had vanished. The old woman moved without a trace of stiffness or age.

Beck stood up, suddenly afraid. "Don't go!"

Claire smiled and extended her withered arm to brush a strand of hair from his eyes, which was glossy black and shining as spider-silk. "We will see each other again."

"Again" seemed to roll in the night like faint thunder. She gave his hair a last caress before she turned away. The intricate, wrought iron garden gate that led into the narrow alleyway lay just beyond the reach of light from the street lamp, and Beck heard the gate creak as it opened. Claire's heels clicked on the pavement for several counts before they suddenly ceased. There was no fading sound of her step as she got further away.

Beck rushed to the gate, for once gripped by a more primal fear than darkness. He jerked it open and saw that the alley was empty. He did not bother running out and looking for her. He knew what he would find.

The boy closed the gate and locked it, and in the dark gloom under the eaves surrounding the gate, he reverently spilled the golden charm into his hand, brought it to his mouth, and kissed it.

### *୶*ଡ଼୶ୠଡ଼

"Where is that child?" Father Calvert murmured as he moved aside the pale, smooth lace of the Battenberg curtain with a fingertip, letting the cool touch of its softness slide over his knuckles. Beck was already an hour late. His lips pursed in amusement. Beck was always running off somewhere, elusive and quick as a little lizard, always drawing attention to himself.

The parish had been given the annual sum of fifty thousand dollars in return for feeding, housing and educating Becket Merriday. The money arrived the same day every year, in a vellum envelope hand-delivered by a brisk and unsmiling attorney who answered no questions. Calvert had called their office once, digging for information, and had been so coldly shut down that he had never tried again. Beck's benefactor wished to remain anonymous, he was told, and it was a private matter that he was being paid not to pry into, wasn't he? Calvert had hung up the phone shaking with outrage. He himself had not agreed to the arrangement, but had inherited it, so to speak, from the elder priest in place before him. That priest had died three years ago, and Calvert felt no particular loyalty to any contract the man had made with Beck's mysterious guardian. He often had thoughts that Beck must be a senator's by-blow or some rich heiress's secret, and that whoever owned the little rat could probably afford a whole lot more than they were paying to keep Beck out of sight. At any rate the boy was certainly born out of wedlock. The Church had not taken a hard stand on bastards for some time, but Calvert had his own opinions.

Calvert waited five more minutes at the kitchen window, humming quietly as he watched several dusty sparrows pick for grubs in the dead leaves. He finally left, heading for the quiet hall that led to the rectory, certain that he'd find the boy huddled in some corner with a book. Predictably, as soon as he opened the door to the dimly-lit rectory, he heard a scuttling sound behind the bookcase. He smiled and closed the door, silently pushing the lock into place, double-checking to make sure it held.

"Beck?" he called softly, creeping around the tall bookcase, the air so still he could hear his own heartbeat in his ears. "Are you hiding, angel? I've got something for you."

He looked down and saw a small, dark head bowed over a book, and two childish legs drawn up to a thin chest that shivered and heaved. Beck held the book clasped to him like a shield, arms crossed over its cover. Calvert knelt and gently pried the book away from Beck's grasp, who reacted by drawing up into an even smaller ball. Calvert set the book aside and carded his fingers through the black silk of Beck's hair, sighing deeply when his penis twitched at the contact. He felt his member grow stiff and poke at the restraining fabric of his briefs, and he scooted closer. "Sweet angel," he crooned.

"Lustful priest."

Still on his knees, Calvert jerked back from the boy and whirled, shocked by the unfamiliar voice and dismayed that a stranger had invaded his sanctuary, someone who could have seen *anything*.

He turned back to hiss at Beck to hide somewhere, but stopped, his jaw hanging open, when he saw that neither Beck nor the book was behind the case. It was empty, with only the sweet ache in his groin for evidence that the boy had ever been there.

His eyes darted around the room, searching. The rumpled carpet led a red trail to a hunched shape outlined against the

window. Outside, the streetlamp dripped sour yellow luminance into the rectory, coalescing around the dim form of an old woman who leaned heavily on her cane. Calvert relaxed slightly and stood, consciously smoothing his robes. Only an old lady, probably hard of hearing, too. Whatever she had seen, he could talk her around. He'd always had a way with women and kids.

Calvert wiped the perspiration off his brow with the end of his sleeve as he began to approach the old woman. She was older than he first thought, yet he could have sworn it was a man's voice he heard. Confusion and fear made his charming voice less kind than he was wont to speak in public.

"Can I help you with something?"

"You have helped yourself to quite enough that is mine."

Calvert frowned. Just my luck, he thought. Why do all the crazies find their way down here? You'd think there was something drawing them. Why don't they go uptown, where they can at least get a meal?

"Excuse me, but just how did you get in here?"

The woman advanced, moving away from the leprous light, her cane clicking on the wooden floor with a sound that reminded him of a prowling dog. "In the old days, we knew what to do with men such as you. Faithless priests are no novelty. Still, confession is good for the soul."

His heart began to pound. She *had* seen something. "Now, just wait a moment—"

"But then, it was so much harder to hide it in those days; lack of faith." She stopped and stared at him, her hair pulled back from her face in two white waves and her old eyes knowing and jaded, seeing inside him. "We would take a man like you and hang his skin from the branches of a poisoned tree. But first, we would cut a hole in your belly, pull out a length of your guts, and strangle you with them. This we would have done while your feet roasted over a pit of coals."

Calvert recoiled as much in fear as in startled offense. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave!"

She laughed. It was not the reedy titter of an old woman, but the full-throated laughter of a healthy man. Calvert gasped and took several steps back. His hands worked, fingers curled into fishhooks as he dug at his belt for the solace of his rosary, but that thin comfort evaporated when the woman began to change.

Calvert's jaws opened and closed before his mouth cinched into a drawstring purse of disbelief. The woman's washed-out hair darkened and smoothed as new bones jutted up from her collar, forming broad, square shoulders. Her body plumped and filled out, a wind battering her skin and bones from within.

"Oh God!" Calvert choked, backing up, tripping over a ribbed edge of the blood-red carpet and falling hard on his rump. Fear scalded his bowels as they let loose.

"Llllust!" A bass roar now, a bull-voice that called down sin from the pulpit.

Calvert began to babble. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee *oh God, be with me God, be with me!*" as he held the small wooden crucifix to his mouth, almost eating it in his terror, as the choking stink of his own shit reached his nostrils.

He could see the man now. Not the nightmare monster he had feared would leap, bloody muscle and skin ripped aside, from the old woman's bones, but a man with pale blue eyes and pure black hair that curled at the sides of his long face, dressed in a long black cassock and Roman collar. His beauty made him all the more terrible.

The man stretched out his hand. "He was mine."

Calvert felt his heart trip and seize, and he panted, feeling a chill begin in the center of his chest that grew and quickly seeped into his arms and down to his fingertips. The cold became pain, and pain became howling agony as he flopped and screamed, mouth dripping pink froth from bitten lips, slapping at his chest, vainly trying to put out the fire. The last thing he saw as the muscles of his heart burst and showered his chest cavity with bits of molten lava, was the rise and sweep of two pale curtains that shuttered away his last view of the world.

They looked like wings.

Irenic, New York Twenty five years later

Show me the past, Mastema.

The crippled boat glided like a dead swan on the surface of the dark water, rudderless and at the mercy of the unyielding current. The water was choked with churning winter ice that generated a constant, crunching noise like a dog chewing bones. The unpleasant sound echoed over the lands bordering the Mohawk River.

The body of water had almost hidden Paul from his pursuer. If Mastema had not caught the glimpse of the fast-disappearing boat from the banks, Paul would have escaped, for the old proverb of a spirit being unable to sense across a body of water is true.

The snow-dusted wind beat at them as a slice of the moon peered out from behind a heavy cloud and vanished again, plunging them into a murky, white-limned darkness.

Mastema smiled at his prey. "Hello, my love."

For he did love the creature, now that his pleasure was at hand. The chase was over and his body felt heavy and languid with anticipation. "We are at the end, child. Your game is up. We shall play a new game now."

Paul tried to launch himself over the prow and into the dark water. Mastema slammed Paul's forehead against the rail and threw him down to the shadowed deck.

Paul trembled as he got to his feet. Mastema reached for him in the cold and Paul froze in terror, tried to dart aside, but he was faster and caught Paul by his bright hair. Paul fought in hopeless silence as Mastema stripped him of his dark coat and shirt, rending the garments to tatters in his haste to feel skin.

The wind clutched and pulled at the struggling pair with icy fingers, but they could not feel it. Paul shivered, but not from cold. He was bare from the waist and the tears froze on his satin cheeks, yet his skin remained warm.

Mastema grasped Paul's jaw and twisted his neck to face him. Paul met his eyes only when forced to it by pain.

"But first, the Story. The Tale. Do you wish to hear it? It will give you a few minutes more of life, at the least. What say you?"

Sharp claws tightened on Paul's shoulders, digging red furrows into his flesh. Paul bit his lip and stubbornly refused to cry out. Blood slid beneath Mastema's fingers and he shivered with sudden heat. Mastema shook his captive so hard that his teeth clicked.

"Speak!"

Paul drew in a ragged breath. Mastema was aware of the frenzied motion of Paul's thoughts as they clawed about in his brain like trapped and drowning rats. The bright, cutting scent of apples was all around them.

Paul's flawless features were frozen in terror, and his curved mouth—so like a ripe peach—was drawing tight in his doll's face. The silken, burnished hair spilled like copper shavings over Mastema's wrists. In Mastema's mind, Paul *was* a doll: an animated thing that might as well have been made of fiber and wire, with no business being alive.

None of them had any right to be alive.

Mastema was blond and tall, his skin the color of old bronze. He and Paul were nothing alike, but their eyes were perfectly matched: pale, pale blue ringed with black. Very few Nephilim inherited the eyes of the Watchers.

Paul's struggles became weaker. "Yes," he gasped. "Yes, tell it to me. Tell me the Tale. Show me the past."

Mastema traced his fingers through the blood, drawing idle circles, fascinated by the scent and feel of this creature. He delayed beginning. "Three of you left the sanctuary together. Where is the last one?"

"He left us. He did not say where he would go."

"You're lying." Mastema's voice turned coaxing. "Open the gates for me and I will allow you to live."

Paul's lip lifted in scorn. "I know you, Mastema the Betrayer. You kill your own kind." "There is no other of my kind." Mastema smiled again. "Give me what I ask and I shall let you go."

"You are the liar. You want to destroy us all."

Mastema pulled the resisting body nearer, lover-close, whispering into his ear: "I have destroyed *worlds*."

Paul tried to turn away, and Mastema slid his hand to the small of Paul's back and pulled him tightly closer.

"Now I will tell you, child, for darkness never dies. Harken... it was six thousand years ago in the land of Chaldea. Hanoch was its name." Mastema licked his lips as he said the word, tasting the richness of that primal time when the earth was young. "Hanoch."

Paul trembled but fought to remain calm, to remain still, not to further enrage the beast that held him, and Mastema chuckled to see this.

"Abandon hope. All you have left of your life is a few moments and this story, so listen well. The first screams woke the children from their naps in the appalling heat of noon. The sun was at its zenith, pausing, hovering there before it began its guillotine stroke inevitably toward the dark. The sky was swept of clouds and the wind was stilled; one of those bright, clear days that find a merciless clarity in memory."

"Some sorceries are not dark, but only unknowable, child," Mastema went on, his deep voice like a low horn that sounds over a distance. "There is love in the world and there is hope, but it takes a power beyond any of us to command these to our will." He kissed Paul's cheek tenderly. "And love can exist without hope. Even in Hell, it exists."

"Listen. In the sky over the city of stone and mud and wattle huts on the river Tigris, the Host came out of the sun, brilliance banishing our shadow. The people did not see us until it was too late. They knew they were to be judged. Throughout the long, star filled night the city waited for the verdict. Then, when they saw the great wings of the Host crowding the sky, they knew."

Mastema looked up at the black sky. "My feet touched the sand first and I looked up. I saw them. White wings against the pale, washed blue of desert sky. For me, that image will always mean death. I reached out blindly and took the first thing that ran from me, a woman, and slid the knife between her ribs, then dropped her and seized another, my heart like a stone in my chest. All of them were to die. None would be spared, down to the frailest old woman or the tiniest, helpless infant. This was Yahweh's implacable verdict, the same sentence that was to pass down again and again throughout the ages, but it was the first time for *me*, you understand? Never had I been ordered to such a hideous task. Even I quailed before it! And in my secret heart I was mutinous. But rebellion was hopeless. Tamiel had taught me that much, at least."

"I forced my body to move down the street, killing everything in my path. A tawny lion ran past me with a wailing sheep in his jaws, leaving a red path behind. All the animals were to be killed, and the maids of the wives of the immortal Watchers, and even the blameless human children of the servants, everything and everyone, down to the bird in its cage and the unformed fetus in the womb."

Mastema sighed in sorrow, shaking his head. The creature in his arms fought, but Mastema's strength was such that it was as if he held a butterfly prisoner. Paul's struggles were like the beating of gossamer wings against his arms. *I am stone, still*, he thought.

"Above all," Mastema murmured, "the Nephilim were to be killed without mercy. My hands... I looked down at my hands. They were slippery on the bone handled dagger. I thought it was the heat, until I looked down and saw that I wore a glove of crimson from shoulder to wrist. My feet were bathed in scarlet and the brassy stench of blood was thick all around me. There were only grim faces that day among the Host. Even I, who love the thrill of murder, could not be expected to enjoy such butchery."

"I walked sightlessly, killing by scent and instinct alone, never seeing who it was, until finally the hand of one of my victims brushed my face, and it was a touch and a scent I knew. I looked down at the dying body in my arms... and saw that it was Zefira."

Mastema looked down on Paul. Zefira in his arms as the darkness of the desert closed in, hiding from Tamiel, her rightful husband and my brother, seeking him out with a desperate love that he could never explain or resist. Zefira, her sapphire eyes unfocused with passion, riding his hips, moist flesh pillowed against his. Zefira weeping, Zefira begging him to love her back, unaware that he already did.

Zefira with his knife in her.

"I opened my arms," he whispered to Paul, and tightened his grip on the young one until Paul groaned beast-like in agony. "I opened my arms in a great, wide gesture of blame, and she fell to the sand. She coughed and moved weakly, blood running from her mouth and from the ragged wound in her breast, matting her black hair. Her eyes, blue as the jewel she was named for, clouded and began to look far away."

"Lightning struck my heart, then, child. But I never cried out." The icy wind flowed over them, and Mastema blinked as if to clear the tears from his eyes, but there were none. "I died, yet I could move. Some living part of me was ripped away and torn to fragments, pulled apart on hooks, and it never *showed*," he said in wonder. "I never faltered, but merely glanced down at her and moved on, staying the course ordained for me, which is a thing your kind has never been able to achieve. Obedience. I am Mastema. I must obey."

"And then," Mastema's matchless voice faltered, "Tamiel was beside me, a blur of flashing blue eyes and wild black hair. He seized me, his great strength binding my arms."

"How could you?' he thundered at me. A terrible sorrow was in Tamiel's face. I marveled at its power. The pillars of the earth must tremble at the depth of that misery. Heaven must be shook. 'How could you?' he asked again."

"I am Mastema,' I answered, my words rattling like dry bones. 'I can only obey.' I would not look at Tamiel, if only because he reminded me so much of Zefira; the same black hair and bright blue eyes. Tamiel thrust me aside and knelt at Zefira's feet. I left them and kept moving. The executions continued."

Mastema took a long breath as his fingers moved in Paul's hair. "I heard a lion's roar, for there were always lions in the valley of Jordan. The Watcher spell that had kept the beasts docile was broken. They had reverted to their true nature. In the empty courts the lions snarled and fought among themselves for the feast of raw flesh. The Annunaki Gate, which was destroyed on that day but would be raised again in twenty-five hundred years as the great Ishtar gate of Babylon, was open to the east. Some tried to flee by that passage, but the Host waited for them in the oasis beyond the blue and gold walls, and the glazed mosaic tiles of the arched gate dripped with blood.

"Through it all, the Watchers stood together in a forlorn huddle by the walls of the city and made no effort to protect anyone. Unlike Man, they could never earn their redemption. Their exile would be everlasting, absolute, and beyond all appeal. It devastated them.

"I went to them without fear, child, prepared for a pitched battle, expecting the fierce Watchers, famed for their love of Earth, to defend their families. Yet they stood mute and allowed their loved ones to die. I judged them harshly in my heart for that."

Mastema traced his finger down Paul's cheek almost lovingly, and smiled when the creature whimpered. "Much later, as I played the day over in my mind for perhaps the thousandth time, I came to the conclusion that the Watchers were not to blame. They had dwelled in Heaven from the beginning of the universe, and then suddenly were barred from her gates for eternity. For the crime of creating the third race, they had been dealt the blow of being cut off from the light and love of Yahweh forever. Exiled. Disowned. Forsaken. Quick on the heels of that first judgment came the second; the death sentence of the half-breed children-the Nephilim-and their human mothers, the mortal wives of the Watchers. By nightfall nearly a thousand lay dead and the blood gathered into thin rivers that flowed across the sand in a branching network of red, as if the skin of the earth had been cut away to expose her weeping veins.

"I had worn a white robe, the color of Judgment. By dusk, when I approached the Temple of Sophia, it was crimson from the neck down."

"The temple," Paul whispered, speaking for the first time after his long, agonized silence. "Our temple."

"Ah yes. That interests you, does it not?" Mastema's chest moved with laughter. "I shall tell you of your fabulous *temple*. It was only a rounded hut with curved white walls and a small brass dome. The Watcher's seal, Sophia's serpent of wisdom, was set in the plaster above the arch. A plaster and wattle hut, not the great pyramids or the walls of Jericho or Babylon. That was your temple," he jeered at Paul.

"Powerful enough to keep *you* out," Paul rasped the words out in defiance.

Mastema nearly destroyed the creature then, but no, it was not finished yet.

"I could not enter the temple, true, but I could see inside it," Mastema went on, an edge to his voice. It was nearly over now. "It was silent, and would remain so forever. The Watchers were not there, but gathered some distance away, their faces turned to the river, too sickened and grieving to watch the murder of their families. Tamiel alone had refused to turn away. He had seen everything."

"I felt a trickle of blood running down my forehead from my matted hair as I approached Tamiel. Tamiel's eyes had gone black, but there were no tears. Watchers cannot weep. Like me, Tamiel suffered in silence, but I know how loud a scream can echo in the cage of a deathless mind. Tamiel's gaze slid down my arm and focused on the blood-wetted knife for a long moment."

"I put the weapon away in my robes. 'I warned you, my brother,' I said to Tamiel alone. "This was madness. There is nothing for our kind here. Your grace has been wasted for nothing.'

"Tamiel's eyes lost some of their darkness. Something lucid peered out at me, sane now but stained with a deep sorrow that would never heal. 'Mastema the obedient,' Tamiel mocked me. "Tell me you felt nothing when you murdered her, and I will believe you.'

"His bolt sank home, though I would not admit it, back then. I would now, were he to ask me, but we do not speak, Tamiel and I.

"I lifted my voice to reach the rest of the Watchers. 'Let this be your last defiance. Here in the Deep you chose to disobey. Here you will remain forever. "If I was expecting protest," Mastema said, "I was disappointed. There were worse punishments, and apparently the Watchers cherished their new home. If it did not hold the magic that Heaven possessed, it had a witchery of its own, a lure so powerful it tempted even angels. It baffled me. Tamiel sensed this, and I turned away before he could glean the depth of my frustration. I threw my hand out in a banishing gesture like a curse. *Burn it,* I commanded the Host. 'Burn everything. Pound it into dust and drive them into the desert.' I looked up at the shining blue sky, the brass orb of the blazing sun for a moment blinding me to the sight of Earth and I said... Let nothing remain of Hanoch."

And now it was done. Mastema's eyes met Paul's gaze. He shook his head in wonder and growing rage. "And yet, *you remain!* Tamiel has recreated his Eden. Over and over again, he resurrects what cannot be. Am I never to be done with killing your kind, child? Half-breed. Mistake. Ill-born. Am I never to be free of the curse of you?"

Paul began to weep, knowing what would come now. It was useless to resist, but any creature will fight for its life, no matter how hopeless the outcome, no matter how inevitable.

Mastema smiled gently, his teeth like fangs. "You may scream, if you like," he murmured. "It will not matter in the slightest."

The fear emanating from Paul penetrated Mastema's mind, aroused him, and he gashed Paul's shoulders with his nails. Bright blood poured down, spattering the snow-laced deck with red blossoms. Paul gasped and pushed at him, a feather battering an iron door. Paul's aura changed shape, losing part of its violet hue to black as jagged spikes of orange, the color of pain, leaped from Paul's aura to the thing that was killing him. He screamed as Mastema tore at him and forced him down to the deck.

Mastema pinned Paul's body beneath him on the deck and gripped his flailing hands, laughing when Paul thrashed to avoid the bruising mouth that sought his. A thick, talented serpent of a tongue thrust hard into Paul's mouth as the hot, heavy weight of Mastema's sex pushed against him. "Nephilim," Mastema breathed warmly into Paul's ear, his hands roaming over blood-slick skin. He wound his fist in Paul's soft hair, lifting his head up. Paul's lips, once that delicious peach, were pale and ringed with white. His eyes, so like Mastema's, were drooping. He had bled too much. Once more, Mastema kissed his pale mouth and pulled his faint breath, his life, into him. Paul's heartbeat grew thready and erratic. He took the next breath and Paul's heart began to skip. Death was near.

Mastema's fingers tightened on Paul's throat. He gathered his strength and crushed bone and tissue between his hands. His fingers sank deep into warm flesh, tearing, and he pressed his mouth against Paul's and felt the life rush sweetly out. He drank it in as he rocked the limp form in his arms.

Time passed. He pulled his mouth from Paul's. There was a wet, sucking noise as the air rushed back into the void of Paul's body. He let the corpse fall back and gazed at it for a long time.

Night progressed. He held the dead hand while combing his fingers through red hair that spilled on the deck like a waterfall of molten copper. Moonlight glittered in Paul's staring eyes, seeming to infuse them with a momentary life. They looked like jewels, and Mastema could not remember the last time he had seen such a beautiful thing. Disturbed, he reached out and closed them, and a mocking voice, low and female with tones like pealing bells, laughed at him from the Veil.

Show me the past, Mastema.

You have seen it, Lady.

Never so vivid as through your eyes. Show me, O prince. No.

Then show me your future.

I cannot.

Her rich laughter echoed through the limitless plane of thought and energy, to be picked up and shared by the Host of the thousands within. Mastema closed his eyes and shuddered. He knew she could be cruel.

She, Sophia the Veil, Aeon of wisdom. Sophia, Queen of Heaven.

He dropped Paul's hand and sat back and tucked his heels under him, brooding as the snow covered his shoulders. His satisfaction was weak and diluted, not at all like the thrilling rush that once accompanied these hunts. He remembered the bright singing in his blood, the fire in his skull as he captured them and snuffed out their existence. He should have prolonged the kill. Perhaps then there would not be this numb emptiness filling his mouth, this dull, ghost-pain like the severing of a limb.

There were few creatures he enjoyed destroying as much as the Nephilim. Killing mere men was a pale shadow beside it. Yet, it was not what it used to be. He wondered why.

Sophia knew that his vendetta against the Nephilim had begun with Zefira's death. She knew also of Mastema's long memory and his bottomless capacity for hatred. Not long after Zefira's death, she whispered a prophecy into Mastema's ear. She revealed that it would be one of the Nephilim who would ultimately hold the great Prince's fate in his hands. Only a Nephilim could destroy him.

After, Mastema returned to the world of men and began to slaughter the Nephilim with a viciousness that shocked even Her. This was his nature. Mastema, whose name means *hatred*. Mastema, an Angel.

He drew an ancient bronze knife from beneath his cassock and stared at it with dulled interest. It was a flat, pointed blade set into a white grip carved from the leg bone of a lion, its smooth pommel capped in silver. The long, bronze blade was the length of his hand and the dark metal was pitted and chipped in several places. It was unornamented and ugly, a utilitarian knife from a primitive age. He turned the blade and placed the point against the pristine landscape of Paul's white skin, and pushed deep.

Paul's flesh was not human flesh, and cutting his skin was like sawing through heavy canvas. Opening the chest and digging through muscle was harder still. He chopped through the ridged tissue to reach the ribs, and then smashed those with his fist, revealing the dark, clotted organ beneath their folded embrace. Next were the arteries, severing the heart from the body in which it had pulsed for over four hundred years. If Mastema had left Paul's body whole, the Nephilim soul might have simply returned to it, like parasite to host, and animated the dead flesh to walk again. He had known it to happen.

Mastema lifted the heart out and waited a few minutes to be sure, the organ turning cold in his hand, but Paul was dead, in flesh and in spirit. It was over. He tossed the bloody lump into the icy river, where it sank and disappeared.

Sophia's voice came at him again, spitefully soft and filled with humor, flaying him open once more.

Show me the past, Mastema.

Sleep, Lady. Give me peace.

He was weary. With dawn imminent on the horizon, he raised Paul's body and drew the mark of the Nephilim beneath him, then rose and floated a short way over the water to the shore, his form insubstantial as mist. There he found trees that would speak kindly to him, and he lay down on their roots in the deepening snow and slept.

She was drowning at the halfway point between the sandy, spruce-lined shore and the tiny rock island. The sky was gray and dismal with a cooling northern breeze, and the choppy water of the lake was like boiling lead. Had it not been for the vibrant red of her hair, he would have lost her among all that gray. He could see her struggling for the first few yards as the cramp struck, then her strokes began to flail as the pain got worse and panic set in.

She screamed once, a short, thin, wail that echoed across the lake, finally goading him to act. Beck grabbed the tow rope and splashed out into the chilly lake, dragging the canoe behind him, a cold skin of fear slicking his body.

He had never learned to swim, having feared deep water since he was five years old, since the day Father Calvert pushed his head under the waters of the baptistery and held him there until he scratched Calvert's hands bloody in sheer hysteria. His legs felt as if they were moving through syrup instead of water. The soft sand of the lake bottom seemed to suck at his feet, slowing him down. He rolled into the canoe and grabbed an oar, dug the paddle in the dark water to push off. His lifejacket lay forgotten on the shore.

"I'm coming, Cat!"

He struck out for her. After only a few strokes, the oar stuck in the water as if he had hit mud. He looked back and saw a skeletal hand clinging to the paddle, white bones gleaming in the dull light. Shouting, he jerked the oar free and pushed off from the other side. This time, four hands clung to the oar, dripping with slime.

He could hear Catherine screaming. A movement on the white shore caught his eye. A tall man clothed in a black habit and white collar paced the shoreline, his gold hair a yellow flame against the dark trees.

"Help me!" Beck shouted. He turned to the stranger and his breath caught in his throat.

He knew the man. The name eluded him but he was sure he recognized that face, that skin bronzed by the sun and lined by the wind into a brutal mask of indifference. The eyes were washed-out blue, mouth full but cold. The nameless man regarded Beck's distress with supreme apathy before slowly turning away, ignoring him. Beck heard wolves howling a deranged aria in the distance, floating over the tops of the pines before Catherine's screams cut through the air. He paddled with renewed strength, his back tingling where he imagined the man's eyes on him, watching. Then, miraculously, he was beside Catherine. He thrust his hand out to her.

"Grab on!"

Her arms windmilled, churning the water to a white froth, oblivious to her rescue.

"Catherine!"

Her head went under. He dove for her hair and gripped the long red strands in his fist, hauling her up by force. The canoe rocked dangerously. Then he lost her. He beat at the water desperately, eavesdropping on the coolly contemptuous section of his brain that questioned if he was brave enough or man enough or stupid enough to leap in after her, knowing that he would die if he attempted it.

Is she worth it?

He battered the thought away as he shouted into the surface of the lake, the flat, musty smell of water in his nose.

"Catherine!"

Suddenly, a hand rose from below and seized him, then another. Their snapping fingers tore at his coat and hair. He cried out, but then he had her at last and refused to let go. He pulled her up. Her torso rose out of the water, her face turned down. He held onto her, ignoring the clutching phantoms of the lake, and tilted her chin up. His heart thudded in his throat.

"Cat?"

It wasn't Catherine. It was a dead boy with hair the same copper color as hers. He couldn't have been out of his teens, and he had a winsome, heart-shaped face and a mouth like a blushing peach. The boy was almost too pretty to be real, and it seemed to Beck that he held a lovely, broken doll in his hands. Then the long eyes opened to show pale blue irises ringed with black. Two white hands gripped Beck's shirt. The curved mouth worked and the ancient words fell out:

"Caligo numquam perit."

And the world shattered, split in two by the knell of an enormous chime.

Darkness never dies.

He swam up from the nightmare, hearing the distant sound of the ringing phone, the small morning sounds from the Irenic Sleepy-Inn motel lobby, the maid in the hallway. He was bathed in cold sweat and shaking violently. The phone was ringing. That, at least, had been real. He fumbled for the receiver.

"Merry Christmas. Wake your ass up."

"Sean?" Beck sounded hoarse. The mirror above the low dresser adjacent to the bed reflected his face in the ashen light of a winter morning. A face that appeared much younger than his thirty-one years: unlined, a full mouth burdened with sensitive curves, dark hair, smooth skin, almond-shaped eyes caught in an expression of owlish astonishment. His eyes were a startling sapphire blue that elicited blinks and stares in public.

"It's not Christmas for two days. What time is it?"

"Way past the little hand on the seven."

"Oh... shit." He ducked his head under the covers. Late was one thing. Late and being called on it by your employee was a whole new level of low. "Sorry."

"Uh huh."

"I really am."

"So you said. I covered your shift." Silence for a long moment. "This has got to stop, *chefe*."

"I know. I just... I needed to get a little loose."

"You're too loose lately."

"Shut up," Beck said, suppressing a yawn.

"Santa says bad boy. No biscuit."

"My motto. Anything going on?"

He expected Sean to give him the short list of domestic squabbles and fender-benders, a typical weekday in a small town police department, so he was genuinely shocked when Sean told him that a body had been found on the river.

"Drowned?" he got out after a moment, throwing the covers back.

"Not even close. Bobby the van driver is going to freak when he sees this."

Bobby VanDiver drove the coroner's van. "There's been a murder? *Here?*"

"No, Beck. In Alaska. They have dog sleds there. Salmon, too. Good on bagels, yanno, with a little cream—"

"What happened?"

"Don't know yet. Maybe he just blew into town and fell down dead. Maybe he accidentally cut his own heart out, too."

"Holy..."

"Yeah...well...There's an old boat caught under Moccasin Bridge. You need to get out there."

Beck knocked over the half-full Cuervo Gold bottle on the night stand in search of a pen. Amber liquid spilled on the dogeared cover of the phone book. He wrote through it. "Where are you?"

"I'm in the car. Frank just called."

Beck grunted at the mention of Frank Gauthier, his Deputy Chief. "And how is he handling it?"

"Oh, Santa came early for our Frankie. How soon can you be ready?"

"I need a shower," Beck mumbled, knuckling sleep out of his eyes and looking longingly at the Cuervo bottle.

He noticed that sometime during the night a silverfish had found its way down the neck of the bottle and was now spinning lazily on the surface of its seventy-six proof pond. Firmly, he pushed the bottle away to the edge of the table and sat up. As he picked up the phone book and shook the beads of moisture off the cover, a small photo fluttered down and fell into the puddle of tequila. Beck made a grab for it and wiped it off on the sheets, half-listening to Sean relate the scattered details he had gleaned so far.

"Are you listening to me?"

"Yes, Sean."

"You are not."

"I really am."

"Bullshit. You're probably jerking off."

Beck frowned and dragged the blanket over his groin as if Sean could see him through the phone line. "You're awfully personal this morning."

"I like to keep my hand in."

Beck could hear chuckling. He pictured Sean's heavy features and prizefighter's jaw, his green eyes bright with humor. Beck fell silent and Sean cleared his throat, perhaps sensing another line he had crossed.

"Okay," Sean said. "I'm almost there. Hurry."

Beck replaced the receiver and swiped the picture a last time before inspecting it anxiously for damage. The attractive, rather plump young woman in the photo was his soon-to-be-ex-wife, Catherine. She had an open look to her face, honest and direct, and in the picture she wore his favorite green sweater. Her curly red hair was scraped back into a rebellious ponytail and she was beaming at the camera, her gamine nose wrinkled happily. Behind her sprawled the shoreline and the sparkling blue-slate waters of Lake George.

Beck sighed and traced the miniature oval of her face with his finger before propping the photo carefully against the lamp. He threw off the covers and headed for the closet.

He pushed the sliding door aside and was confronted with his new life: seven matching conservative suits above a paper grocery sack of assorted socks and underwear. A large photo album languished beside his wallet on the shelf above the closet bar, closed and tied with a velvet ribbon. In the wallet was three hundred and twelve dollars in cash, his driver's license, police badge, and a business card for a divorce lawyer in Albany.

He didn't know whether to bang his head on the door or reach for the tequila, bug and all. Three years in this town and still he felt more like a refugee than a resident. No social life. Few friends. His marriage he thought of as an amputation.

A long way from Alexandria, but they had never really left it. Never left that bedroom, really. The same bedroom where he had slapped his wife and begged her to leave him. They had tried again, of course. First a marriage counselor that Beck lied to, cheerfully and often, with frightening ease. One failed reconciliation, followed by another, and finally the drastic move to upstate New York. New jobs for them both, a new house, a new life where they could start over.

Beck surveyed the closet with his hands on his hips, his bare rump developing goose bumps in the chilly room. *Bullshit*, he thought dully. *Like the song goes, the only thing new is the shoes. I* haven't moved an inch in four years.

He grabbed a suit at random and threw it on the rumpled bed. In the bathroom, he turned the shower on full and filled the sink with cold water. Steam boiled over the sliding shower door as he dipped his face in the sink and came up gasping and wide eyed. The warm metal of his golden luck charm swung against his chest and tapped wetly back and forth.

Beck straightened up and looked into the clouded mirror. He reached out to rub the steam away and then froze. It grew very quiet. The sound of running water faded into the background.

He looked into the mirror, and it seemed suddenly as if he was looking into a deep abyss, limitless clouded silver extending into infinity. Beck touched the tip of his index finger to the foggy mirror and drew a coiling line in the moisture, then added an arrow-shaped head to the end of the line. He dotted the head with a crude eye. A snake, but it wasn't right. He frowned, his finger hovering, and then quickly sketched the outline of a branching tree above the snake. Now it was a reasonable likeness of his talisman. He never thought of the gold disc as anything other than a talisman, his own personal touchstone against evil. Hadn't a great evil vanished from his life the very day he received it?

And there was that feeling again. That restless, worrying sensation, like he was on the verge of understanding a profound truth. He felt like he was poised at the rim of a cliff, his toes inching over the edge, just about to take the next step forward, and then... nothing.

The sensation faded and he was staring at a piece of glass. He erased the tree and snake with a swipe of his hand and climbed into the stinging hot shower. No matter how hard he scrubbed under the jet of water, the stale scent of the lake clung to him.

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There was a wooden sign at the town limits. IRENIC. FOUNDED 1680. Beneath it was a smaller plaque containing the names of the Mayor and county council. An addendum in smaller, newer letters read: CHIEF OF POLICE - B. MERRIDAY.

Dutch traders had brought their families to the New World, wisely funded by merchant investors and foolishly depending on promises of amicable treaties established with the native tribes. The colonists elected leaders, built a bridge, erected a town hall, and named their town Irenic, meaning peacemaker, and thrived as a community until they were burned to the ground by angry French and Indian forces ten years later. The next round of Portuguese settlers, who found the charred remains of the settlement in 1701, razed the ruins and began building again.

Irenic's architecture was all Old World, from the smallest salt-box dwelling adjoining Moccasin Bridge to the big house on Schuyler Avenue that used to be an opera theater, now a creaking bed and breakfast. Newer sections outlying the center of town included a mixture of Dutch colonial, bungalow, and federal styles. The streets were cobbled with smooth, round stones taken from the river bed that still bore the scars of horseshoes and iron-plated cart wheels. Most homes had a garden gate and porch, trappings once considered indispensable to civilized living, but now falling under the vacuous real estate umbrella of 'quaint.'

Traffic, as that execrable fixture of urban existence is known, did not abide in Irenic, though the stoplight on Schuyler Avenue could occasionally back up as much as eight cars before changing color. They did not have a town bus route, a taxi, or a Starbucks, and the nearest thimble-sized train station was in neighboring Amsterdam. Irenic was too distant from Schenectady and Albany to become a route to the city, and too near the protected wetlands to attract industrial wealth. The township was doomed to remain a small, quiet town surrounded by other small, quiet towns, which was fine with the residents.

They had not always lived here, he and Catherine. He had woken up one morning in Alexandria and found he did not know who he was. Not in the literal sense, but deeper and more terrible than just forgetting faces and names. He had changed overnight, and there was no way he could ever make her understand why. He could have said the words: *Jane Doe*, and let her connect that with the desiccated female corpse exhumed from the Uinta Mountains of Utah. But Catherine had known little of the grisly particulars of his former job at the FBI, and he fervently hoped to keep it that way. He had finally learned to share part of his life with Catherine, but not everything. His nightmares belonged solely to him.

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There were six cars on the street as Beck drove through the light snow to Moccasin Bridge, hands at twelve and three on the wheel, a cigarette wedged between his fingers. The snow-chains hummed under the Ford chassis as he drove the half-mile through town towards Patriot Park and turned off onto the winding gravel road. Above the township, the skies hung down dark and gray as an old man laying his head on the block.

He arrived at the bridge and parked in the deserted asphalt lot of Hannah's Tasty Kreme drive-in. Hannah was open only during the late spring and summer, when she sold vanilla ice cream cones made from shake powder and milk, and greasy, onion-smelling burgers delicious with dripping cheese and high cholesterol beef fat. Sean called the burgers Bovine Revenge and ordered three at a pop when he was on patrol cruising the park.

A string of blue and green Christmas lights decorated Hannah's sign, and behind it stood a large, wire framed light-up display of penguins skating on a frozen pond. You couldn't really tell they were penguins unless it was dark and the lights were turned on. Otherwise, Beck thought it looked like an octopus with two big arms sweeping up around a couple of indistinct scrawls of wire. The arms were supposed to represent the confines of the pond, he supposed. Oh, you better watch out, kiddies, or the Christmas Octopus will come to town. Beck found a tube of breath mints in the glove box and crunched four of them between his teeth, grimacing at the sharp taste and hoping like hell that they would overpower the sour smell of old tequila. He ducked to look at his reflection in the rearview mirror and clawed his hair into place, knowing it was useless. He had forgotten gloves and the tie did not match the suit. Well, unless he counted that both were wrinkled. There were blue hollows in his cheeks and red lines in his eyes. Unless heroin-chic was in, he looked like shit.

He got out. A cheerful sign presided over the lot: **CLOSED FOR THE SEASON. SEE YOU THIS SPRING!** One of Hannah's grandkids had drawn a dopey yellow smiley face beneath the greeting. The glacial wind cut through his heavy coat as he crossed the street to the bridge. Beck jammed his bare hands deep in his coat pockets as the next blast hit him, making his eyes tear. The site was difficult to access. He could see the derelict boat below, almost under the bridge. A few uniformed police moved around the bank. Joss was easy to recognize from his white-blond hair, and he could make out Sean's big, familiar shape on the boat. Terry Fuller, another of his officers, was standing beside Deputy Chief Gauthier.

Beck descended the slope of the icy bank on foot, holding on for dear life to the bare trees and saplings, his feet sliding helplessly out from under him. The heavy sky began to shroud the dim morning sunlight, and the world took on the thick, stilled silence that comes before a snowfall. Deep winter had come early, as the steady flow of ice churning down the Mohawk attested to. He was concentrating on picking his way down the last few feet of the slope when his cellular rang. Beck dug it out of his coat and straddled an ice patch, wrapping his hand around the trunk of a small, leafless tree.

"Merriday."

"Jesus Christ, Beck. Are you out of your mind? I've been calling your office for two days."

"Can this wait?"

He heard the flat disbelief in her voice. "You promised we'd talk about this."

"Have you talked to the lawyer?"

"The man is a weasel."

No argument. Ari Pettit, Esquire. A twenty-seven year old divorce lawyer who made it a point to inform Beck that he purchased his shoes exclusively from Johnston & Murphy. "Sooner or later we're going to wind up in court. Might as well be sooner."

A burst of static buzzed through their connection. "I can barely hear you," Catherine said. "I'll call you on a hard line after I finish my rounds. It'll be late, the hospital has rotated my shift again."

"No. No. Jesus." Beck rubbed his face tiredly, striving for patience. He knew he was being unfair and even a little cruel. "Don't call me later. Don't worry about me. Don't pick up my dry cleaning. Just get the lawyer, Cat, okay? Get the fucking lawyer."

Her voice rose on a note of hurt and angry confusion. "You get the fucking lawyer!"

"I have to go now." He pushed the end button, cutting her off.

Beck pressed his forehead against the rough bark of the tree and closed his eyes. *She still loves me*, he thought. He hugged the bright truth even as he pushed it away.

Catherine took it well enough when he moved out, and he had known it was because she believed with all her heart that she could turn it all around, nail a piece here or glue a piece in tighter there until she had the puzzle of their marriage figured out. Maybe now she was realizing that Beck was not something her physician's instincts could fix, like a faulty cardiac valve or a malfunctioning kidney. That desperate scent around Catherine lately was the possibility of failure, of losing him for good, the puzzle destroyed, years lost and soured forever in memory.

Beck wanted desperately to call her back, to apologize and beg her to forgive him for all the shit he had put her through, but that would only deepen her false hope and he wouldn't do that to her. He couldn't tell her the one thing she needed to hear, and the sooner she realized it was over, the better for both of them.

#### *୶*ଡ଼୶ୠଡ଼

Joss moved toward him, a very tall, lanky recruit with an officer's uniform so fresh off the rack that the blue dye left rings around his wrists. Beck nodded to him, hoping to avoid an exchange. A rookie with the morbid enthusiasm of all rookies, Joss had wasted no time getting to the river. Joss had a sheen of sweat on his forehead from running, and his breakfast today was a bag of cheese puffs.

Beck's lingering hangover-stomach lurched and he tried to side-step the younger policeman.

Joss maneuvered in front of Beck, excited by the stir of activity and blithely undisturbed that someone had paid for it with their life. "Hey, *chefe*, you're gonna love this!"

Beck doubted it. Since he had moved to New York, he had yet to experience one pang of nostalgia for his old job. Investigating a murder scene was the last thing he expected to be doing in Irenic.

"You have orange teeth, Joss."

Joss's mouth hung open. "So?"

An empty beer bottle plunked into the snow at their feet. Beck looked up. Another bottle sailed out of the sky, narrowly missing Joss. Beck ducked and spied the small cluster of spectators lining the bridge above. They were throwing trash off the bridge onto the police as well as the covered corpse on the boat.

"Merry fucking Christmas!" a man shouted.

Beck pointed. "Do something about that."

"Hey there!" Joss bellowed at the hecklers and waved his arms, the sound alone frightening off those with less bravery and more sense. "Off the bridge! Off!" He began trudging up the bank, his long stride swallowing the difficult ascent.

Beck tiredly walled off his mind to the sound of the of the crowd's catcalls. He had been taught that humans were made only slightly lower than the angels, a reflection of God in whatever mirror he chose to see Himself. As Beck reasoned it, if God pursued relationships with humans, they must necessarily be deserving of it, and were not lowly. Father Dane had often warned him against saying this, claiming that it walked perilously close to pride. Pride was a long way absent this morning, and though he was far past amazement at the casual heartlessness of people, he did feel shame for them, for being one of them.

The antiquated wooden boat had been hauled to the shallows near the bank and roped to a tree. A few wide boards

had been brought down and served as a gangway to the deck. The boat was twenty feet in length and listed to the port side, its rotting hull surrounded by muddy ice. Beck stepped over the streamers of yellow police tape and gingerly made his way over the boards onto the sagging deck. His eyes were drawn to the humped plastic sheet.

The top part of the sheet was drawn back to the waist of the victim. Male, eighteen or nineteen years old, with sensitive features and auburn hair bright as a new penny. The boy was lovely, even with the brutal stamp of rigor mortis on his features.

The corpse's legs were posed straight and his arms pointed directly out from his sides, forming a cross of his body. His chest seemed to have exploded.

Beck's mouth pressed into a thin line. He had thought he was done with murders. Thought he was done with fear, too. Then one day the sun rises and the past has crawled back into your throat.

When he was six, a two-inch wolf spider had crept unnoticed up his leg. After suffering a moment of terrified paralysis, he lifted up his hand to swat it away, and the thing turned all eight of its visible eyes upward and *looked* at him. Beck would have sworn there was intelligence in its little dotted beads of myriad eyes. Intelligence smeared with a kind of knowing menace. As he had looked into them, he felt the tiny hairs on the back of his neck bristle. His stomach clenched and the skin of his balls shriveled. For the first time in his life, Beck had experienced the thinnest edge of true horror.

This corpse gave him the same feeling.

A gust of wind pushed against Beck and he shivered. Cold out here, he thought. He must have been so cold before he died.

"Hey, Merriday!"

Beck looked up.

Deputy Chief Frank Gauthier addressed Beck as chief only when the omission would be glaringly obvious, and entirely avoided the affectionate nickname of *chefe*, formerly owned by Chief Garza. Otherwise, it was plain Merriday. Frank signaled curtly at Beck and approached. He was a burly, bulldog-faced man with a thatch of unruly brown hair and hands the size of small hams. A regulation sidearm was securely locked in leather at his hip, and he smoked noxious, cheap cigars, the aroma of which lingered with him long after the tobacco was ash. His rolling, lumbering walk gave the impression that he was trying to maintain his balance on an untrustworthy earth beneath him.

Silver fingerprint powder dusted a portion of a green-tinged brass railing that was free of snow. Beck realized that Frank had commenced the investigation without him and had completed his examination of the scene.

"Took you a while to get here," Frank said.

"Long night."

Frank squared up to him. Beck ignored the invasion of his personal space and looked beyond Frank's shoulder to the crime scene. Sean was there.

Sean Logan, Irenic's Staff Lieutenant, made an impressive dent in the scenery. Sean stood near the railing, his blond hair glinting like the points of light on the ice below, broad features fixed into a bland expression as he soundlessly eyed Beck and Frank with amusement. Sean must have known how Beck felt, having butted heads with Frank himself for years and no end yet in sight. Thing was, Sean liked butting heads. He liked Frank, too, when you got down to it. Beck could never understand why.

"You got a lot of work done," Beck said to Frank. His expression was mild. Others would have called it sleepy.

Frank's glare held volumes. "Have a look."

Beck moved past Frank and knelt beside the uncovered head of the corpse, peering close at the massive trauma to the neck and throat, noting the open cavity of the chest, the arranged pose. He looked up at Sean.

Sean had a strong, square jaw below a blade-straight nose and high, prominent cheekbones. His deep-set eyes—a watery sea-green flecked with amber—were narrowed to slits against the wind, and the hard line of his mouth drew up into a friendly curve as he nodded at Beck in greeting. Beck smiled back before he could stop himself. Sean was attractive in a brooding, knock-you-over kind of way, and although Beck had never seen him work out, he was built more like a prize fighter than a man who spent half his day behind the wheel of a patrol car and the other half behind a desk. An uncomplicated body, not so with the mind. There was a pensive quality about Sean that Beck found compelling, an air of being able to see more sharply than most. It had troubled him from the moment they met, and he had always felt pulled to the man in some elusive way. He couldn't say it was entirely chaste, but it wasn't just sexual, either. *Drawn* was how he felt, in the purest sense; like being stretched over a distance.

Beck was aware of how messed up it was to be admiring one of his officers while standing over a fresh corpse, but he often felt the wrong things at the wrong times. It was something he'd learned to hide.

Sean was still looking at him. "Good afternoon," he murmured, and Beck heard Frank snort.

It was barely ten o'clock. Sean was going to be like *that* today. "Prints?"

"No prints," Frank rumbled, as if he wished he could say something about Beck's tardiness himself.

Sean nodded. "But we didn't really expect to get any from these surfaces. No murder weapon, no witnesses. The boat's a wreck. Belongs to a man who had it docked for the last ten years. The old guy was surprised someone bothered to steal it. I think he was waiting for it to sink so he wouldn't have to pay the junkyard fees. We got some DNA scrapes. Those will be pending."

Beck pulled the sheet back over the boy's face. "We've got nothing."

Sean crossed his arms over his broad chest and regarded the sky. Behind him, the heavy clouds thinned for a moment. His short, tawny hair became a gold halo as a ray of sunlight struggled out from the gray curtain and chanced across his back.

"We do have one thing," Sean said neutrally. "His pockets were full of cash. Around eight thousand dollars."

Beck whistled lowly. Frank struck a match and cupped his hands over the end of a cigar. Beck stood up and shoved his

hands in his pockets, moving away from the corpse and closer to Sean.

As Frank slowly rolled the cigar between thumb and forefinger, Beck's eyes slid to Sean. *Here it comes.* Sean winked at him and Beck's mouth quirked.

"We've been lucky in this county for a long time," Frank said heavily. He sighed. "Yes sir. The drugs stay south of us, along with the world of shit they drag behind. The only gangs we got are kids who want to look cool in a jacket and scare the crap out of their parents. Not enough money for organized crime. Not enough space for the factories. Yes sir. We've been lucky."

Frank did not have to say that he believed their luck had just run out. He also did not say that he blamed this on Beck, as he blamed everything on Beck, up to and including the closing of the hardware store and the heavy snowfall that collapsed Mr. Bridger's barn last week.

Frank officiously hitched up the waist of his trousers. "Better get started ID'ing this kid, then notify the family," he said in a take-charge tone Beck knew was meant to irritate him.

"Sean and I will handle the investigation," Beck said.

Frank looked sharply at Beck and half-opened his mouth, his face turning red. "I found the body."

"I know." Beck said, derailing him as painlessly as he could. "But you said it yourself, we've been lucky. You've never dealt with anything like this before. I have. So has Sean."

"I outrank Lieutenant Logan."

"I'm not questioning that."

Frank looked from Beck to Sean and back again before making up his mind that, again, the deck was stacked against him. He sneered. "You think I can't handle a senseless—"

"This murder wasn't senseless. It had motive."

"They left eight grand in his pockets!"

"So he wasn't robbed. That doesn't mean what you think it does." Beck spoke plainly, hoping he was getting past that fog of unfocused resentment Frank wrapped himself in like a blanket of hornets. He indicated the covered body. "Sean."

Sean took the cue and took a step forward. Sean was what the girls in the office called *imported goods*. He had moved to Irenic twelve years ago with recommendations from both Pittsburg and Baltimore Homicide. Looking for a change of pace, he had said. The women sighed over him and the men tended to trust and respect him. All except Frank. But then, if you weren't born in Irenic with six generations of your ancestors buried in the family plot, then you were a foreigner to Frank.

"This boy wasn't just cut up," Sean told Frank. "He was cut open. Someone put work into this. Effort and thought. The victim might very well have been random, but the act itself was not. There was reasoning behind it."

Frank stared at Sean flatly. "Reasoning."

"Twisted reasoning, but no less valid to the killer," Beck added. He took the edge of the sheet between his fingers and pulled it away. He traced a line in the air above the body, bisected by another line. "Cruciform posture, the heart excised and discarded—"

"Or taken," Sean put in.

Beck agreed. "Or taken. The body partially stripped, before death or after, severe contusions and laceration to the neck." He let the sheet drop. "There's a message here."

Frank ducked his head, his jaw clenching. "Fine. I'll go back to the station and process my ticket book."

"That would be good, Frank." Beck said it without sarcasm. "Traffic revenue and civil violations are just as important to the orderly operation of a district as policing the streets."

Frank glared at him, clearly seeing monotony where Beck saw only fundamental details. Frank abruptly pitched his cigar into the river and strode off the boat.

Beck sighed and reached for the pack of cigarettes stowed away in his coat, his fingertips counting the ribs of filters through the thin packet. Two left. He wondered if that was enough to last him until they took the body away. That was how long he'd be stuck on the boat, now that Frank had stormed off. Beck lit one the old-fashioned way, striking a wooden match and cupping his fingers around the flame. He suspected this was because he enjoyed the act of kindling fire almost as much as the tobacco itself. It just wasn't the same with a lighter. Beck narrowed his eyes against the smoke and blew out a long, blissful stream. "We need to talk."

"About?"

"About the way we talk."

Sean put his game face on. "Sorry, darling."

"You're an asshole."

"True."

Beck shook his head and continued to smoke. Sean frowned slightly in annoyance as a thin curl of smoke reached him. Like Frank, Sean wore his sidearm on the hip, but whereas Frank's weapon just made him seem more officious and annoying, the leather and gunmetal on Sean only accentuated his aura of rough sensuality. Beck wondered if there was some Freudian giveaway lurking in that, and if that was why he himself wore his own weapon holstered under his arm.

"How can you complain about Gauthier's cigars when you smoke those damn things?" Sean asked.

"You'd have to smoke to know."

Sean's unique scent, a faint mixture of wood and rain, a green smell, drifted to him. He'd asked Sean once what cologne he used. Sean had named some adventive European brand that Beck knew he didn't have a chance of finding in Irenic. Found it in a magazine once, though: one of those peel-apart samples. It hadn't smelled anything like Sean.

Sean drew the hood of his coat up over his hair. "They stink, Beck."

Beck blew another puff into the air. "It keeps people out of my personal space. I could stop bathing and get the same result, if you like."

"You smoke those just to piss me off."

"Works, too."

Sean's bantering surface cracked a little. Beck's co-workers at the station had learned that it took a lot to ruffle Sean's languid, good-natured air. Only Beck knew that it just took Beck. Maybe Sean knew it, too.

He saw flashing lights and looked up the hill. Bobby VanDiver's white car had arrived. The ambulance was pulled up behind it and the paramedics were jockeying a stretcher down the steep hill. "I had a nightmare this morning," Beck said.

"Anything you want to talk about?"

He tensed. "Things I'd like to forget. Never mind."

"Why'd you bring it up, then?"

Beck shrugged. "I don't know. It just seemed weird. I haven't had a nightmare since I was a kid." He shrugged again. "It was just weird."

"You're the boss, chefe."

His cellular rang again. Beck swore under his breath and reached in his pocket to turn it off. The ringing stopped.

"That could've been important."

Beck talked with the cigarette between his teeth. "It's my new cell. I haven't given anyone that number yet except you."

Sean suddenly found the tips of his shoes fascinating.

"Why did you give it to her? I would've thought-""

Sean's head snapped up. "What? What were you thinking, Beck?" An angry, vertical line appeared between his eyebrows. Beck stared out over the river. Sean sighed. "I should have stayed away, taken a vacation or something," he said. "Maybe you wouldn't be looking for a lawyer right now."

"Maybe." Beck sighed and shifted his shoulders to ease the knot forming in his neck muscles. "It's not all about you, you know. Cat and I were having problems from the start. Love isn't always enough, Sean."

Sean gave Beck a look that said he disagreed. "If she hadn't walked in—"

"Nothing would have happened," Beck finished. He gave Sean a stern look. "It wouldn't have."

"If you say so, but if you really don't blame me, then don't put me in the position of choosing sides. Catherine is..." Sean paused, seeming to rethink what he had been about to say. "Catherine deserves better from both of us, and if she asks me a question, I'm going to be honest with her."

Beck nodded, not looking at him. "Fair enough."

They both waited out the uncomfortable silence, and then Beck walked away and knelt carefully by the body again, avoiding the frozen blood. He felt mild repugnance at being this close to the red throat, the pale ligaments and mangled flesh, but nothing like the utter revulsion he would have felt eight years ago. Once cut away, some parts of yourself never grow back.

"This looks torn. See the trauma to the surrounding skin? It's not a cut like the chest wound."

Sean knelt beside him. "Looks like something tried to pull his head off."

Beck nodded. "The autopsy is going to give Bobby a seizure."

Beck glanced around, noting the pints of frozen blood painting the deck. "How far out did they search the area?"

Sean pointed to the line of yellow tape that stretched for an impressive distance down the bank. The team had found nothing. "All clear, so far as they can tell. Nothing that could have done this much damage. We can't dredge the river until the first thaw, and then..." Currents, mud, lost paperwork, loss of interest. He let the possibilities hang there.

Beck saw that the paramedics had finished maneuvering the stretcher down the hill and were approaching the makeshift dock. He covered the boy's face again. "I'm going back to the office to start wading through this. You?"

"Directing traffic for a funeral."

It was a small town. "Whose?"

"Ada Schroder's mother. You remember her? She must have been a hundred years old."

Beck nodded. "Give my respects to Ada, will you?"

"Yeah. Meet you at DiSilva's for lunch?"

His stomach turned over again. "I'll meet you, but I'm not eating garlic at noon."

Sean gave Beck a thoughtful glance. "I'll stay a bit more."

Beck pushed aside his annoyance. Sean had a right to be worried, and not just about his competence. He hadn't had a sober night in a month, a fact Sean could not help but notice when Beck showed up for work smelling like the floor of a bar.

"Has anyone tried to move him?" Sean asked.

Beck knelt again and extended four rigid fingers to move the boy's shoulder. It was stiff, as he expected. Christ, he hated looking at death, but at least this was new death. He hated it much worse when the corpse had lain out in the elements for a few months, the body's juices mingling and souring in the heat or the chill, until the skin corrupted and split, spilling out Death's face in all its wriggly, stinking glory.

Beck had often asked himself why he went into homicide investigation if he disliked its main contributory factor so much. He finally worked up a theory that everyone is drawn in varying degrees to whatever it is they hate, and he was no different. Pondering that he was similar to most people in that regard was reassuring to him, and one of the few things that made him feel normal.

*Poor damn kid.* His regretful gaze traveled the length of the body a last time, and that was when he noticed the one thick, curved line in all that red that didn't look like a splash. It trailed under the body by the ball of the shoulder. He pushed harder, trying to life the boy up. The blood from the neck wound had puddled beneath the victim's upper back and frozen during the night, cementing his torso to the deck. Even cold, the blood seemed to emit a metallic scent that Beck could taste on his tongue like an old penny.

The body suddenly came free with a tearing noise like ripping cloth. "Oh, Jesus Christ," he hissed, jerking his hand back so the boy's shoulder thumped back to the wooden planks.

Beneath the body was a crude symbol drawn in blood. It had been scrawled in haste and smeared by the weight of the body, but Beck recognized it. He had seen it every day of his life since he was seven years old: the unmistakable symbol of a snake coiled around a tree.

Beck's hand went unconsciously to the gold pendant around his neck as he stood hastily and flipped his cigarette butt into the river. Automatically, he tapped out his last cigarette, lit it, and threw the crushed pack into the river as well, his face set in stubborn, immutable lines. He backed away from the body. *It doesn't mean anything*, he intoned uselessly in his head. *It doesn't mean a goddamn thing*.

"Beck..."

"Shut up, Sean."

"Look at me, Beck."

His neck felt like it was turning on rusty screws as he made himself look at Sean. He knew that Sean's face would be set into a hard mold of enigmatic strength, and he wished he had more of that himself.

"There are coincidences every day, but today you're not going to be that lucky. That message was for you. Someone knows you're here." Sean reached out and pressed his fingertip near the hollow of Beck's throat, unerringly finding the surface of the talisman Beck wore under his shirt. He held it there for a moment before withdrawing, his gaze locked with Beck's. "Don't hide from it. If you hide from it, you'll make a mistake. You can't afford mistakes."

Beck nodded. His breath steamed, wafting up and clouding his vision. "No mistakes," he agreed. It didn't occur to him to question how well Sean could read his reaction. Sean did that a lot.

Chunks of ice squeaked against the hull as Beck stared at the corpse, seeing not a dead boy, but the dreaded pattern of change once more taking over his life.

Beck whistled and waved to the group of men on the shore and shouted for the crime photographer to come back to the boat.

"Get some help to lift the body," Beck told the cranky photographer, who was annoyed at being summoned back and eager to get to his warm car. "Photograph the deck beneath him, too."

"What's under there?"

Beck glanced at Sean. "A message."

Beck left the boat and struggled up the incline alone. Sean followed silently to his own patrol car and waved coolly at Beck as he drove by, heading back to town. Beck lingered, watching Sean's car shrink to a small blotch on the long road. The wind gusted in a frigid gale, reminded Beck of his own warm car waiting nearby. He paused at the guardrail before he crossed the street and peered over the side into the water.

Below him was the shrunken boat with its forlorn little figure on the deck. Uniformed paramedics surrounded the corpse, moving awkwardly in the cramped, ice-slick space. One of them held the familiar black body bag. The wind lifted a corner of the plastic and a slender white hand peeked out, as white as the tall birch trees on the bank. Beck saw the men try to lift the corpse into the bag, but the weakened cords and lacerated flesh at the neck finally surrendered to gravity. After rising several inches off the deck, the head fell off. It bumped as it hit the wood and rolled several feet away, precariously close to the bow near the water. A flurry of shouts followed and the men milled about, hesitant and horrified. One paramedic dove for the head and prevented it from falling into the water.

A ragged crow swooped low over Beck's head, wings flapping as it dropped a gravelly croak into the stillness. Beck shivered as if something terrible had passed him by.

In Alexandria, where he had made such a name for himself before coming to Irenic, there had been a common fear among the FBI agents. It was a fear universally shared among all criminal investigators: a killer with a personal interest in the man who hunted him.

He retreated back to his car and turned the heat up, closing his eyes as he concentrated on breathing calmly. After a few minutes, he put the gear shift into drive and turned onto the highway. He headed back to town with the bloody image of his talisman, quite real and visible in his field of vision, as if it had been flash-fried into his retinas.

Someone knows you're here.

Mastema lay unmoving. He was aware of the events transpiring around him: the fear of the men on the boat, the scolding of the crow, the presence of a Watcher nearby. The name eluded him only momentarily, he knew. It would come to him soon. Though his observations were dulled and distant, he would hear and remember everything that transpired. He waited without hurry from the calm depths as the knowledge he sought began to drift toward him.

#### Tamiel.

From deep instinct, he knew that Tamiel was not here to challenge him. The Watchers were never his enemies, but they were Fallen, and so under his justice whenever he could mete it out. He knew that Tamiel would avoid a direct confrontation with him, but he felt mild curiosity that Tamiel would stray so close when he knew Mastema to be so perilous. You may be the Angel of the Deep, Mastema thought idly, but I am Hatred. Beware.

Mastema had entered the deeper flow of the universe, where the white birch trees at whose feet he slept kept their long memories of creation, and where the rocks that are the bones of the earth have souls that speak. The Veil, the living portal and repository of knowledge, is a part of that nether river. Her name is Sophia. Wisdom. Through her, Mastema knew that the boat had been caught in an eddy between a buoy and the pilings of a bridge. He knew that Paul's remains had been discovered and that uniformed men swarmed over the deck in agitation like so many disturbed ants. He knew also that Tamiel was disturbed and hostile, which would be expected. They loved their Nephilim. And there was another creature like Paul, young and untried, perhaps one of Tamiel's latter blasphemies. His senses twitched like a predator scenting blood, and he knew Tamiel was on guard for him, would seek him out very soon. This young creature, this unknown one who lingered near Paul's body, there was something different about him... something just beyond the misty edge of consciousness where Mastema treaded twelve thousand years of memories...

He knew, but he was dreaming.

In his dream, the earth was young and the city in the desert was bathed in light.

Show me the past, Mastema ...

All of his memories seemed to hold sand. It permeated everything in the old earth. Sand in their food, in their beards, their battle wounds. When he had marched with the hordes of half-nude warriors traversing the steep hills between Eridu and Ur, they had done it spitting sand. Sand was ground into their bread during the milling. The warriors skimmed it off the top of the water bucket and chewed their food warily, lest a stray pebble shatter teeth. Mastema had paid for a Nineveh whore and taken her under the moon, an ocean of yellow sand beneath her back, her legs splayed wide and her eyes rolling with senseless pleasure.

Cities of light. He once wandered aimlessly in ancient sunlit cities, admiring the dark beauty of humanity as he trod clean white streets and watched fierce desert hounds cringe and cower out of his way. People had marveled at him, a fair, solitary traveler who showed no fear of bandits or wild animals, crossing the rocky desert hills between the city-states, unshod in winter or summer, his face bared to the blazing sun and stinging particles of sand.

It had been daylight during one of his explorations when a scantily-clad priest crossed the street and approached him reverently. Within an hour the priest had him royally ensconced in a small cell of the Temple of Baal. There had been smoke. Closed heat, muted yellow light, stifling air smelling of flint. Mastema smelled cinnamon perfume and cassia incense, and the little clay pots on the floor held the scent of aloes. Sand scuffled on the stone floor beneath his sandals.

Pestilence walked the land. Famine would come in its wake, and then there would not be enough of the strong and the young left to reap the harvests. The people were idolaters, worshipers of beasts and graven images, forever at war with the descendants of Abraham. As always in those times, men were searching for the door at which to fling their troubles. Soon, blood would be demanded.

It was bright outside and the linen curtain was drawn tight across the doorframe, shielding the interior from the full force of the midday heat. The priest, Shardu, entered first, tugging the linen closed and tying it after him. He bowed deeply to Mastema and touched his palm to his forehead. Shardu was wasted with age and his face graven into crags by sun and wind. His head and jaw were shaven after the manner of his people and he wore a fringed sheepskin kilt, as Mastema did. Through lips stained with brilliant carmine, he spoke holy words with downcast eyes and made an obeisance on the floor. His wizened eyes, lined with kohl and painted with glittering lapis lazuli, were directed at his feet as he approached Mastema and touched a fingertip to the edge of his kilt.

Mastema recoiled fastidiously from the priest as he drew near, for he reeked of old blood and sacrificial smoke. Fearful of displeasing him, Shardu backed away and studied with curiosity the rich kilt and the golden girdle around Mastema's waist, marveling at the giant's height, which towered over his stature like a tall reed among the grasses. He offered wine with shaking hands, the same hands that—not an hour gone—had offered up his youngest daughter on the white streets of Eridu. The priest knew that his people were under a sentence of death and he sought to buy favor and protection with the gift of his daughter's flesh to this sacred creature.

Wise, canny old man. He knew instantly what Mastema was and begged the creature to come and bless his tribe by taking to bed his sweetest, best beloved daughter.

Mastema's lips twisted. Who was he to refuse such generosity? The world was savage and a friendly face was a rare thing. Everywhere, from Assyria to Babylonia, the entire valley of the Euphrates was aflame with the ardor of the children of Abraham, who had brought Yahweh to them. Worshipers of Baal and his sister-wife Anat walked in fear of their lives every waking moment, and the little brown women of the tribe killed their infants unborn rather than see them die in one of Yahweh's Cleansings, of which there were many. Infants were spitted on lances for sport after their parents were gutted and heaped on the fire. Sometimes, they did much worse in the name of God.

Shardu had recognized the ancient one behind the human facade. Perhaps Mastema had visited this placed when Shardu was young, for he had once taken a perverse pleasure in playing a neophyte priest in the temples of that long ago time. Among cool granite halls he would argue heatedly with the wrinkled sages and—even more heatedly—with the pretty, erudite young priests, debating the issues of celibacy and denying the wicked flesh, only to visit the tender ones in the night with a sharpened dagger and several stiff inches of philosophical argument. One year there was a strange plague among priests that nearly wiped out a religion.

Perhaps Shardu recalled Mastema's shape, for he changed only when he wished it. He was fair, rare enough in a desert land, but perhaps the priest remembered his eyes: pale, icy blue, bounded by a thick ring of black.

In either case, Shardu saw him and wished for Mastema's child in his daughter. *Nephilim*, Shardu intoned. Perhaps Shardu thought such a child would save his people from the desolation he saw happening all around him. Mastema would have laughed in his face if his hopes had not been so pitiable.

It would be futile to warn him that his daughter's half-breed offspring would be no blessing to his house, that the volatile mixture of the earthly and heavenly planes which came together in the Nephilim produced creatures vulnerable to the lure of evil. Sometimes they could resist it, mostly they could not. Perhaps the priest's desperation was such that he would not have cared. Certainly he did not truly care for his daughter, who was soon dragged, gagged and struggling, into the cell by two of her father's male slaves. The thralls were fat Hurrians with sunken black eyes like dried dates, doughy faces and huge, loose paunches. They wore only scanty fringe kilts that hid nothing, and Mastema saw that they were eunuchs. The old man bowed to him again.

## "Wewe hanuku," he said.

The language was Ugaritic. Mastema could have reached into the Veil for the knowledge of his tongue, but Shardu's gestures were explicit. He knew he was being invited to drink, to pillow himself on the body of Shardu's pretty, black-eyed daughter. He could smell the myrrh they had hastily anointed her with, thick and musky, heady to his senses.

Mastema drank from the cup of silver. A graven image was struck inside the cup, the false god Baal wearing his horned crown, his feet propped on the slain Leviathan. The Rider of the Clouds stood with his arms outstretched as Mastema looked down his nose at him and drank the purple wine. From that angle it seemed to Mastema that the dark liquid flowed from Baal's open arms like blood.

He looked at the girl. She was not too young to be bedded, perhaps twenty. The vibrancy of her aura announced that she was a virgin and this alone surprised him. Her father must have been saving her as a priestess.

The fat eunuchs held her prone on the rope bed, one holding her wrists, the other eunuch lying across her legs while he fumbled, shame-faced, with her skirts and shawl, pulling them off hurriedly. She made frantic, gasping sounds that might have been screams, had she not been gagged.

Mastema wondered then what she thought of him, a giant, foreign man with strange eyes and light hair, standing silent at the foot of the bed, slowly drinking wine while she was stripped.

He could have calmed her. No human psyche was a match for his will. He could have lulled her into stupefaction so that she felt nothing of what he was about to do, were it not that he enjoyed her fear. The way it radiated outward in a cold draft, brushed against him and puckered his skin, shivering the small of his back. He drank it like the wine, sweeter and more potent. He stepped closer, his body sucking the primeval emotions emanating from her.

The silver cup was drained, and the wine ran down his chin and splashed on his linen kilt. He looked down on the girl and she, seeing him, gave a moan like a beast.

"Little cow," he said in amused contempt.

Shardu was appalled at the sound of his voice, the eunuchs paralyzed. The girl was too far gone into her terror to hear him. He glanced once at Shardu, his mind seeking the Veil for the words in Ugaritic, and spoke in a voice like pebbles sliding on rock.

"You are certain you want this, old father?"

Shardu nodded, dumb with fear, his eyes on the floor. His mouth was open and Mastema saw the last few rotted stumps of his teeth pushing out his lower lip.

"Be warned. She may die. If she lives, she may bear you a calf that will grow to be a bull with horns large enough to destroy your city. Do you understand me?"

His face must have become frightening, for Shardu hesitated. At last he nodded grimly and motioned for Mastema to proceed.

The girl's long hair was like strands of spun glass, black and shining. Her little brown face was unlined. Though not young, she was touchingly pretty, even with the terror in her face. More so.

Fear had always spiced this act for him. Pain was even better. Her dark eyes pleaded with him, but he had no words to tell her that he knew nothing of pity. He could not take mercy on her because mercy had been left out of his being. Love he could know, and also hate. Sorrow and occasionally affection could move him to acts he would otherwise not commit, but of mercy and kindness... nothing.

He remembered a sunbeam lancing through a chink in the mud-mortared cell wall and striking him full on his face. He had always cherished the clean light of day, to his mind Yahweh's fairest creation, next to women. But in that moment, as he was lowering himself onto the struggling body of the girl, the light seemed like an obscenity.

Seduction, especially of the untouched, had been his best pleasure, for he was the Master of succubi and incubi. But seduction was not what he craved now. He pushed away the eunuch holding her wrists and motioned for Shardu and the other to move back. The girl immediately tore at her gag and tried to wriggle out from beneath him. He pushed her back roughly and easily held both her wrists in one of his large hands. With his other hand he guided his body to hers and she bucked and heaved as if she were about to be murdered. He laughed. Then her pain came back at him, thick, luscious, soft-petaled waves. Mastema gasped as he was enfolded in that wonderful, enveloping wave of emotion. It was tangible, a living thing with a form and scent all its own. He could taste it between his very teeth, smell it, inhale it down to the lobes of his lungs and swallow it down, hold it in, explode from inside. He fed on its reddish flavor. It drove him senseless, that rocking, rhythmic motion of sex and the answering backwash of delight. It seemed to go on forever.

The sun was slanting low in the cell when the pressure began to collect in his thighs. The gathering was sweet, a fulsome, expectant sensation that hovered somewhere just beyond his reach, a distant goal that he instinctively strived for. He heard his breath quicken as the light in the cell became painfully acute. His skin became sensitive to the point of agony, both searing and exquisite.

And then, a thing happened.

As he crossed the distance to the goal that beckoned him, like a swimmer laboring to shore, he entered a still place in his mind that often came to him in such moments. It was a stark, vacant plot where only calm and cold analysis dwelled. Human killers know of this domain: a detached sanctuary where they watch their crimes being played out even as they commit them, a place without conscience or regret, where the psyche is safe to witness anything.

In that place he saw her.

The priest's daughter was no longer clothed in her physical form, and was not as Mastema first saw her. The way she appeared was as she saw herself. The armor of spotless virtue was about her, which in that hidden place manifested as a clear and shining bubble surrounding her form. Her blue aura was an imprisoned flame glowing about her, bound by the earthly confines of her body. She was a butterfly under glass, encompassed by that crystalline balloon of purity. Bewitched, Mastema went nearer.

She was nude, as it is sometimes in dreams. He stood as a suppliant at the base of her towering glass sphere. She was standing upright, her head bowed, her arms straight out, as if she had been invisibly crucified within her bubble. Then she raised her chin. Her face was not the same. Not older, not younger either, but a different person. The person she had been in another life.

Sharp teeth sank into Mastema's heart and his breath seemed to freeze in his lungs. He heard an animal moan issue from his throat. He whispered her name.

"Zefira."

Her eyes were hollow, and in them he saw a spark begin to recede, the light of a soul taking the long road to nightfall and oblivion. The blue aura faded, a snuffed candle winking out. He screamed his grief to the fleeing spirit, but it, a blithe thing and blessedly freed from its flesh, had already forgotten him.

When his body reached its release he heard a demonic howling in his ears and dimly realized it was his own voice. It was loud, lion-like, a rumbling thunder in that hot, sandstone cell.

Time passed while he lay spent. Slowly, he became aware of the cowering eunuchs on the floor, the old man bowing, hiding his face from him with a spidery, trembling hand.

The girl was dead, her head lolling off the side of the bed, the whites of her eyes showing. Her tongue protruded from her mouth and flies were already settling on the blood bubbling out between her lips. He had crushed her body beneath him, it seemed. Her chest and belly were a pulpy mass.

When Mastema could stand, he tightened his girdle and smoothed the fringe of his kilt. There was blood on his legs. Not his own blood. He stood and looked down on her lifeless body and mourned.

She was here, right here! He had lost her again, either through the cruel caprice of powers above him or simply his own ignorance and lust. Whatever the reason, knowing it would not bring her back. She was gone.

She had been here, right here, within his grasp, and he had not known her. He had murdered her again. Zefira, whom he had known and loved long ago in Hanoch. Zefira lying nude in the dusty street, torn to ragged shreds. Zefira, Tamiel's wife but never his own, whom once he had been ordered to kill and had now killed again by mistake. Lost, mislaid, misplaced by fate. She was gone. And when would he see her again, if ever? And if by some miracle he was given the chance once more, the prize laid within his grasp, what surety that he would know her in another form, another body, another face? How would he ever find her again, and when? How long must he wait before she returned? Years? Centuries?

Mastema roared a cheated and enraged scream, and then systematically slaughtered everyone in the cell.

### ৵৵৵৾৾৵

Mastema opened his eyes. The dream of the past was over and this sun was dim and cold, much colder than the deserts of the elder world. Zefira was dead as dreams and he had never found her again, not in all his millennia of searching.

Yet, he would never give up. Never. Let the world fall to dust and heaven crumble from the sky. He would look for her always.

Zefira had been Tamiel's wife, but it was Mastema whom she had loved. Tamiel had not wanted to give her up to him, but they never had the chance to settle it in their own manner. Long before it had come to that, Yahweh ordered Hanoch destroyed.

The light slanted through the leafless limbs of the birch and lanced through his body. He took a moment to adjust himself to corporeality, and when he felt denser he stood. Casting a veil of obscurity about him, he leaned against the trunk of a smooth, young birch to watch the men on the boat.

He was material, but their eyes could not pierce the illusion he conjured. The men lifted Paul's half-frozen cadaver. The legs were stiff in the rigor of death, unbending, and only in his partly-severed neck was there any fluidity. As the humans moved, he could see their auras blending and flowing into one another like a swirling rainbow. Then, in the discharge of fear when the weak flesh of Paul's neck finally parted and the head thumped to the deck, their auras leapt and flashed like fireworks. The red of extreme emotion and the orange of fear charged wildly through all the greens and browns, touching off sparks wherever they connected. There were no blues or violets, for those were rare among humans.

He laughed when the little ant-men scattered. The sound thick with form and made corporeal by malignance—took flight and winged over the water in the shape of a black bird, passing over the boats. The men looked to the sky in fear as the croaking bird-form flung its shadow over them. The corporeality flew over the water and turned east. Mastema watched it go, his chuckles forming little black clouds in the air. He thought it great fun.

As the men carried Paul's body away, Mastema turned and was surprised to see that another Nephilim looked steadily down on him from the bridge. The creature, having no more power than the humans on the boat to see him, did not know he was there. Mastema wondered if he was one of the police or simply one of the morbidly curious, drawn there by duty or accident. Or even, the trembling part of him whispered, by fate.

The Nephilim was tall and slim, with dark hair like frayed silk, almost black. His heavy-lidded eyes were a bright sapphire blue, fringed thickly with charcoal lashes, and their long, feline shape spoke purely carnal secrets to Mastema. The lips were full and deeply curved, a generous mouth, hinting of sex and guilt. He looked normal and human, if beautiful, yet he belonged to the unseen world, as Mastema did. His aura, like that of all his kind, was the clear, swirling violet of the immortal. Radiant golden hues hovered like a nimbus about its strangely jagged borders: the Hand of the Divine.

Cold white mist floated up from the water as Mastema stood enthralled to the vision above him. Sheets of clouded aether passed before him, momentarily curtaining the Nephilim from his staring eyes, then were pulled away, coyly, like a woman drawing her veil. The violet aura blazed through the vapor, seeming to burn its way out of the fog towards him. Its uneven outlines, flowed erratically around the human-shape of what housed it, marking a long-term trauma. Mastema smiled. What fortune; beautiful *and* complicated.

The Nephilim had most of the powers of angels: power over wind and fire and the elements of the corporeal earth, in addition to the many frailties of mankind. They were the most perilous creatures to walk the earth since Legion, and Mastema knew how to deal with them. This one would not escape him. None of them would escape.

The sun flashed as it ducked behind the clouds and the air turned heavy, promising more snow. The Nephilim stood on the bridge, his cat's eyes studying the flow of icy water below. Mastema licked his lips and was aware of a deep stirring inside him, a restless chord being plucked for the first time in many years.

These creatures have such power over me, he thought. Perhaps because their angelic perfection is tainted by the blood of man. Polluted virtue, blemished, like a ripe pear marked with one definitive brown bruise. Remnant virtue, a ravaged bride left for dead. I love them. I hate them.

But this creature was different. This one confused and compelled, teased and withdrew, and he had not yet said a word. Perhaps it was—as Mastema saw in an instant before he was able to fully touch the Nephilim's mind—because the creature was ignorant of its true nature. It did not know what it was.

The twin virtues of sin and purity lured Mastema in like a hooked fish, impaled through the cheek with steel desire, swimming hopefully toward death. He reached for the creature. With his whole being he longed to touch the Nephilim's essence, to know his thoughts, to feel his spirit and recognize it if he could. To let the creature know him as well, before Mastema destroyed him.

He was near, just behind the Nephilim's neck. Mastema saw the wispy ends of dark hair brushing the black fabric of his coat. His smell was maddening. Mastema leaned into the creature hoping to meld, to invade that mind, to ravage it if he could, before he did the same with the body.

He flowed into a brain alive with thoughts like quicksilver. He caught glimpses of vivid memory fleeting through the Nephilim's mind: an estranged wife whose memory evoked a pain like stinging thorns, the man the Nephilim knew as Sean, whom the creature saw as a trusted human friend with a clear, potent, strong attraction that danced around the mind-image of Sean like fireflies, and... *yes...* another name.

Beck.

And then a sledgehammer the size of a boulder pounded Mastema's mind. He was thrown back against his will, shoved unceremoniously out of the young mind and tossed into the unforgiving light of day. He staggered back into his body on the snowy bank and heard the birchen ladies moan in distress. He clung to one of their trunks, shocked and disoriented, dragging his head up in time to see the Nephilim shiver and turn, searching.

It was impossible that this young creature had cast him out. What then? Who? Tamiel? He would not dare.

He heard faint laughter like the sound of chimes echo in his brain, and he knew it was she. Sophia.

Denied his lust, Mastema clenched his teeth in rage and reached for the Nephilim again. He froze as he felt the unmistakable shift in the tides of the unseen world that told him that here was the crux the Veil had warned him of. The Veil, changeable as a summer wind, could obscure many things both past and present, but she never lied. Not ever.

Somehow, this weak creature had the power to destroy him. His instinct goaded him to kill, but he dared not. The urge was there to rend and split, to crush the helpless butterfly in his hands, to tug on the wings and see if they held, to rub the glittering dust between his fingers. The creature's violet aura beckoned to him, a lighthouse shining through the murk, calling, seducing, and for the first time ever in Mastema's long and savage existence, he was afraid.

Afraid.

It was noon when Beck returned to the station. Inside, Joss would be flirting with the dispatch girl while Sean would be at his usual perch at DiSilva's Pizza. Britney was the dispatch girl, though he supposed that was pretty sexist of him to think of her that way. Dispatch person, thank you, or just dispatcher. She insisted her name tag read only "Brit" and she spruced up her uniform by wearing weird little buttons on her lapel, like red eyeballs, aliens, and dead rats with tiny xx for eyes. They were symbols of her own internal jokes that she preferred to let people guess at rather than just inform them, and anyway if you guessed you were always wrong. She stuck barrettes into her spiky, gold-streaked brown hair at odd angles and her lip gloss was so pale it was almost white, but she had a ready wink and a loud speaking voice, which Beck considered necessary for a dispatcher. She laughed like a horse, talked constantly about emo bands Beck had never heard of, and wore square, greenrimmed prescription eyeglasses. She had the air of woman who was always Just Trying Too Hard. Joss adored her and Sean grinned at her enthusiasm, but her manner put Beck off. Loud and proud was not his style.

He thought about walking in on Joss's fumbling seductions and opted for DiSilva's. There was a very noisy Christmas wreath made of blue ribbons and shiny aluminum sleigh bells attached to the door of DiSilva's that jangled obnoxiously with the arrival of each new guest. The announcement was unnecessary. No one got into DiSilva's without a personal hail from the owner.

Pietro was in the kitchen, a diminutive, olive-skinned man in his late fifties. He turned a small, sharp face running with sweat towards the door and threw out his arm in a hearty wave. "Chefe!" he sang out, loud enough for them to hear him at the station. "Hey, chefe! Nice to see you!"

"Hey, Pietro!" Beck called back. Pietro alternately dubbed him chefe or *capitão*, just as he had the former police chief. When Beck had urged the man to call him by his first name, Pietro had been insulted. He found out later that it had become a tradition in Irenic to call the ranking officer "*chefe*," beginning with Garza's predecessor. He stopped fighting it after that.

Sean was at a booth facing the door and overlooking the rear garden where Pietro grew oregano and giant, purple-leafed basil in the summer. There was only snow in the bare plot, but Sean occasionally glanced outside, as if he expected to see blooms sprouting at any moment.

He slid into the booth and Sean immediately pushed a spare plate toward him. "Hungry?" He looked at the steaming pan of shells with ricotta cheese and blood-red marinara. There was a scoop missing out of the center of the dish that reminded him of the hole in the dead boy's chest. He pulled a face. "Ugh."

"You love Italian."

"And maybe in a year I'll love it again."

Sean dug his fork into his pasta. Molten cheese the consistency of glue and the temperature of lava oozed from under the shell. He speared a fork full and shoveled it in, oblivious to the heat. "Doctors eat pizza after an operation."

"Cat never did."

"You saw worse things in the city."

"That's what drove me up here."

"Can't hide from the world, Beck. It'll find you wherever you go."

Sean was no doubt referring to the symbol they had seen under the boy's body, but he seemed to be content with hinting at the moment, rather than opening the subject for discussion.

"Don't talk with your mouth full."

Sean pointed his fork at the exit. "You sat at my table, chefe."

"Fine. Be a pig. Be my guest."

"I will, thank you."

Sean had been Irenic's only investigative officer when Beck arrived to take over Manuel Garza's job. The post had been vacated by way of a massive coronary, probably brought on by Pietro's fettuccini Alfredo and double cheese garlic bread. Sean was still the only investigator, since Frank tended to handle criminal cases with a heavy-handedness that amused Sean and irritated Beck. Also, Frank was dismissive about the small print of the law, and to Beck this was sacrilege. Details were a part of Beck's personal trinity that encompassed Catherine, Sean, and his job, and Frank flouted that.

"We've known each other for what, three years now?" Beck asked.

Sean nodded, engrossed in the food. "Uh-huh."

Typical lizard brain behavior from Sean, who would probably sleep through an earthquake and fuck to the sound of machine gun fire.

"So you wouldn't mind if I asked you a personal question?"

Sean tore off a piece of the long loaf of bread and buttered it heavily, smearing oily yellow gloss over the cheese. He peered at Beck over the slice of bread before taking a deep bite, eyes sparkling. "If *you* asked?"

Beck nodded.

"If you asked," Sean repeated. "Well. Ask and let's see. This should be good."

"It's not that personal."

"More's the pity."

Beck closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers. "This is so not going in the direction I had planned."

"Now there's planning?"

"No, not exactly *planning*." Beck snapped, dropping his hand. "I just wanted to know why you didn't take Garza's job when he died. When I came up for the interview, they told me you'd turned it down."

"I did."

"Why?"

"Besides the fact that Frank would have smothered me in my sleep if I'd gotten promoted over him? I'm not the takecommand type, you know that. I like my job the way it is."

"That is such shit. And that bread's going to give you a heart attack."

He chuckled. "No really. It's true. I do much better when I have the game plan laid out for me. I don't want to be in the command chair, capitão. Making all the decisions, filing all the paperwork, calling the shots."

"Getting the migraines."

"Right. That's your thing. You have a feel for details, Beck. You exist for them. I could never do that."

"You make it sound like a weakness."

Sean laughed. "I do? Well, maybe. I didn't mean it that way, though." He took a sip of iced tea, his mood cooling. "Why do we have such awkward conversations, you and me?"

Beck shrugged. "I think-"

"That we should stop talking completely and skip right to the sex?"

Beck had to remind himself to count to five. "I thought we agreed-"

"Okay," Sean interrupted again. "You're right. I broke the rules. Sorry."

"It's just that—"

"Becket." Sean gazed at him from under honey-colored lashes; a long, slow, scrutiny. "I won't do it again unless you ask me."

Beck's face went blank and his heart began to thud painfully as Sean put down his fork and simply smiled at him, his square face darkly amused and mocking. Every time Beck reminded himself that he was married and wondered what this disquieting thing he had with Sean was, a certain light would shade Sean's cheekbones, or his green eyes would widen and flash, and Beck would marvel at the fact that his attraction had no rational explanation.

Or maybe not so irrational. He would not be the first traumatized child who spent his adult life wanting his demon back, looking for it in the face of every lover, every friend. For a split second, he pictured Sean outfitted with a Roman collar and began to feel faintly ill. He almost told Sean about Claire then. He wanted to, and didn't know why he couldn't. He hadn't even been able to tell Catherine about Claire. *That* was a level of intimacy he had never been able to have with anyone: the depraved details of his childhood. But Sean was different. Sean seemed to invite Beck's intimacy just by breathing. His eyes said he wanted to hear about nightmares and damp plaster walls sweating in the Virginia summer, about a crawlspace roughly the size of a small boy. Somehow, Sean made Beck feel that he could mend this bleeding part of the past, could pick it up in his big, capable hands like clay and mold it to a better ending, but first Beck had to open up.

"Maybe," Sean said lowly "we should stop playing this game."

"It's your game, Sean."

"Then why are we playing by your rules only?"

"I've told you, I don't..." Beck shifted back in his seat uncomfortably. "That night, we were both a little drunk and I was feeling, I don't know, fractured. I mean, of all people, you're the last one I would fool around with."

"Wow, thanks," Sean deadpanned.

"You know what I mean. Because you work for me. Because you're my friend and shit like this fucks friendships up." Beck sighed. "Cat could sue me for adultery, Sean. I could lose my job."

"She'd never do that," Sean scoffed.

"I don't know." Beck looked pained. "A woman scorned, etcetera. She's been really pissed for a long time."

"She wouldn't," Sean insisted. "And besides, nothing really happened."

"It might not have looked like that from her angle," Beck said morosely, recalling how his office had suddenly flooded with illumination. He had turned around to see Catherine staring at him in shock, her hand on the light switch as Sean stepped hastily away and pulled his hands from Beck. "I haven't done anything like that since college," he admitted.

"What, kissed?"

Beck gave him a mild glare. Sean leaned forward and slid his hand over the tabletop and placed it over Beck's.

"You said it yourself, Beck. It wasn't just that night. It was a lot more and none of it had anything to do with me, so stop beating yourself up over one goddamn night."

Beck withdrew his hand slowly, making the effort not to just snatch it back. "What do you know about it, anyway?" he groused.

"Only what you tell me. You're not a very open person."

The muscles of Beck's shoulders tensed. That was a little too much coincidence. "And you are?"

Sean threw up his hands and retreated, as cold now as he was heated a moment ago, fire and ice teasing Beck's skin.

"Hey, this was your parley, Beck. I came to stuff my face and drool over a glass of Chianti that I can't have until fivethirty. I didn't expect the side dish of angst."

Beck stood up. "Forget I said anything. I'm sorry I-"

"Oh, shut up." Sean looked disgusted. "Sit down."

He sat. Sean sighed and Beck chanced looking at him again. Sean was no model: face too rugged to be called pretty, hands too big, the line of jaw and nose just a bit too prominent. There was nothing delicate or fetching about Sean, nothing that Beck could rationalize the scent of femininity into and so forgive himself for thinking about what Sean might look like under that jacket. His features were heavy and rough, his powerful chest tapering into a long torso with narrow hips. Sean was not a man who would lack for company anywhere, but Beck was certain that Sean's blunt attitude had warned off more than one potential mate. No, there was something more that drove him to pick up the phone and call Sean on nights when he was too restless to sleep and there wasn't enough paperwork on his desk.

"I've got to go see Cat," Beck blurted, then wondered why he told Sean at all.

Sean took another bite of pasta, avoiding eye contact. "Fine, go. She'll be happy to see you."

"No, she won't."

"Okay, she'll be two points up on you if you go to her before she shows up here. Is that better?"

"She doesn't do that, damn it. She doesn't play your games." Cold anger and nowhere to put it. It wasn't Sean's fault that he had failed to piece his life and his conscience back together.

"Marriage is always a game," Sean said, chewing. "Who calls first, who apologizes first, and who gets to pick the vacation spot. The only thing missing is score cards. Love? Now that's different. Most married people aren't in love. Not like it should be."

Beck was nettled by Sean's surety. "And you know all about that."

"About love? You bet."

Beck's curiosity was piqued—perversely so, since he'd been trying to get Sean to back off the personal issues—but he decided against digging himself in deeper. "Can we change the subject?"

"Sure." Sean resumed eating. "So what do you think?"

About the murder, he meant. "Shame about that kid," Beck said sadly. "I don't understand why it bothers me so much. Like you said, I saw worse in the city."

Sean gave him a soft look. "There's nothing wrong with empathy. And no predicting it either. You can't pick apart every reason for what you feel."

"But..." Beck paused, thinking. "I don't know what I'm trying to say exactly. I feel for that kid but I don't know why so much for him and not someone else, not a teenage girl or some baby washed up on the shore. I think the one thing that comforts me is that all people seem to have pretty shitty lives."

"Jesus, Beck."

"No, I mean it. There's no one alive that hasn't felt terrible pain or won't feel terrible pain before they die, and the one thing that makes any sense is that pain happens to everyone. It's normal. None of us are singled out for it."

Sean stared at him. "How close to home are we hitting here?"

Beck looked away, trying not to see red carpeting or smell the musky, citrine reek of frankincense. "I wasn't singled out," he lied.

"Well, somebody damn sure singled that kid out."

"Yeah," Beck agreed softly. "They did."

"I think I will have that wine." Sean spied Pietro in the kitchen and waved at him. "Hey, Pietro! Quero alguma coisa para beber?"

Pietro grinned and nodded, wiping his broad, waterwrinkled hands on a spotless white towel. Beck measured his thumb and forefinger an inch apart.

"A small glass. You're on shift until six."

"Five thirty."

"Six," Beck answered. "I'm changing it again." He strove for a normal tone, seeking to get away from the heaviness of Sean's gaze, wanting to bury his thoughts in details again. "It doesn't work to have a shift change when people are driving home. We miss all the speeders and tickets are down, accidents are up."

"You're a devious, devious man."

"It keeps people on their toes. Especially you. Don't plow through Cooper's Field in my new patrol car."

"I was hammered when I did that," Sean confessed, giving Beck a look of mock repentance.

"You told me you swerved to avoid a deer."

"I did! Just ... spilled my beer in my lap when she leapt out."

"Bullshit."

Sean winked and Beck snorted, and the pall lifted from them a little. Pietro brought the wine.

"Obrigado," Sean said softly. Pietro patted him on the back and returned to his baking.

"You're learning Portuguese now?"

Sean shrugged. "A little here, a little there. No big deal."

Beck remembered Ada Schroder's mother, the bird-thin little woman whose voice rattled like a loose nail, and how he had once caught Sean speaking very hushed and very fluent German to her.

The entrance door swung open and the little bell chimed. Joss strode in. Rather, he bounded in. He spotted Sean and Beck and made a bee-line for them like an eager puppy. "Chefe!"

Beck winced. "What?"

Joss held up a clear evidence baggie. Inside was a blue plastic card. "We found the victim's clothing, what was left of it anyway. This was in the shirt pocket." Joss held it out further for Beck's inspection. "It's been dusted already. No prints."

Beck sighed. "Joss, we're in a public place. You can't carry evidence around like that." He eyed the baggie. "Are you positive all the prints have been taken?"

A pink flush crawled across Joss's cheeks. "C'mon, chefe. I haven't done anything stupid in ages and ages, it's clean now," Joss whined. The long-suffering face he pulled told Beck that Joss believed he would never live down his earlier mistakes on the job. Beck took the baggie and opened it. It was a cash card, the gift kind used in department stores, activated with a swipe across the magnetic bar on its back. Marger's Outfitter was stamped across the facing.

"Is this the shop on Amsterdam Street?"

Sean reached for the card. "Yeah. They sell camping gear. All kinds of designer outdoor wear that's too expensive to wear outdoors." He glanced at the back of the card, then handed it to Beck. "You want me to check it out?"

"No, I'll do it. I have to make that stop first." Beck noted Sean's flash of annoyance. "I'll check back later. Call me if anything comes in."

"Sure. Whatever." Sean went back to his food, dismissing him.

Beck stood up. "I'll call later," he repeated lamely.

"Would you go already?"

Pietro arrived with the wine and Joss, oily as an otter, slid into Beck's vacated seat. Joss flashed Sean a toothsome white grin that faded off into embarrassment when Sean failed to return anything but a pokerfaced stare.

"And take him with you? Please?"

#### ୧୬ ୧୬

Virginia winters were cold, but compared to New York they paled dramatically. New York was ice cold, cold like old men brag how it was in their youth, Jack London cold, killer cold.

Beck emerged from Pietro's, his arms folded over his chest, shivering after the moist, cozy warmth of the restaurant. Joss exited the restaurant and waved at him, hurrying down the street towards the police station. Beck lingered on the sidewalk, acutely aware of the haven behind him and Sean's stare on his back. A sudden, frigid blast stole the air from his lungs and nearly drove him back inside. Fuck it. Let Sean have the case. Let Frank have my job. Let Cat have the house. I'm done here.

He didn't mean it. Beck could never resist a mystery. Even though he had left that branch of police work far behind, the habit of curiosity was as ingrained in him as the lines in his palm; the need to understand what forces were alive around him, driving the actions of others, crime and motivator, cause and effect, his damnable hunger to *know*. He was addicted to it like a woman. Come here, lover. What do you got for daddy tonight?

He set his jaw and trudged to the car, mumbling darkly to himself. He knew Sean was still watching him from the window.

## *~*??~??

The steady, hypnotic hum of the snow chains buzzed through the Ford. Tall white cedars and Douglas firs lined the highway, their heavy branches swaying dangerously low under the weight of powder snow clumped on their needles. The sunlight had fled, obscured behind dense clouds, and the world was in a blue, daytime shadow that reminded Beck of the witching-light of an eclipse. He glanced anxiously to the west. Still several hours until dusk. There was plenty of time. It had been years since he'd missed filing the details of a sunset away in memory. He didn't intend to start now.

A herd of stocky deer foraged in the middle of a corn field as he drove past, nibbling at the frozen, tawny stubble of stalks remaining from the fall harvest. The buck nearest the road bounded away at the sound of the engine, white tail lifted in warning, and the rest of the herd turned like a flock of birds and melted in the forest.

Autumn. Now there was the time to be in New York. He remembered leaves falling, orange and red and yellow, and how the air smelled like good, wet earth. Not the flowery, humid smell of spring, but the scent of going to sleep. He raked leaves while Catherine gave out Halloween candy and pretended to be afraid of pint-sized monsters, caught up in the silly drama. They had still believed they could make it work back then. Maybe Sean was right. He'd been going back and forth with Cat for years. If it was a game, it was an unkind one. Maybe that's what Sean was trying to tell him, that it was cruel to allow the pretense to go on any longer. Someone had to step up. By rights it should be Beck, since he was the one who decided they couldn't stay together.

It had happened four years ago and he remembered it like it was yesterday.

Four years ago, he had woken up and realized he did not understand himself anymore. It was a strange sensation for a man who prided himself on reason, rather like waking up to find yourself wearing army boots or something equally ridiculous. Or looking down at your hands and realizing—with a little pinprick of revulsion—that they are not your own, that the shape and color and age of them had become wholly different than you remembered. Horror was too hollow a word. There would have to have been a new word for what he felt that night.

An early frost had swept down on Alexandria from the north that night and given him a taste of the season that reminds men of death. Early October, and the leaves had turned brown and crisp on the trees before they could fall. Autumn had come, winter looming like a scar on the calendar, and his world changed in the space of one afternoon.

Beck had stood beside his marriage bed in the darkness and looked down on the small mound snuggled into the mattress. His breath hitched as she turned in her sleep, a length of silk wrapped around her body. He recognized the champagne nightgown she had worn on their honeymoon.

He had turned and caught sight of himself in the mirror: narrow, glazed eyes, skin blanched dead white, cold sweat shining on his face. He remembered clenching his hands repeatedly, as if seeking a grasp on invisible foes.

Earlier that day, a body had arrived at Quantico, a female corpse identified first as Jane Doe, then as Omega Jane, flown in from Utah in a sealed crate. Was it only a week ago they had returned from Lake George? It seemed like months. The cold ball he carried around in his gut seemed fused there. He had managed to go back to work, spread a smile on his face, pay the bills and methodically eat whatever was put in front of him, unwilling to confess that life had turned sour around him. Denial can work miracles as surely as faith.

Jane had been twenty years old. There was evidence of torture on her ruined body, primarily the amputation of her arms and legs and what the horrified Utah detectives initially thought was the Greek letter Omega carved into her skull. Beck often wished he could have said it ended there, but it had not. Jane had endured atrocities Beck had never heard of, or imagined. After four years at VICAP, he believed he had seen everything there was to see in terms of human depravity. He was appalled to find himself wrong. Anger was no part of it.

Beck was the best, a criminal profiler with the instincts of a bloodhound and a nature that his AO termed as "damnably single-minded." Everyone at VICAP knew he would be assigned to the case. He knew it. Still, he cringed when the AO dropped the file on his desk.

Beck spent the morning reviewing pictures of the site where Omega Jane was unearthed. He made phone calls and browsed through killer profiles, looking for someplace to begin. In his mind, Beck imagined all of his suspects as motionless suits of medieval armor: faceless, cautious, and well-guarded against him. He knew that in every defense there was a weakness, a small chink suitable to slip the tip of a blade into, or a thin spot where a spear thrust would be deadly. All he had to do was study the crime long enough and this chink would appear. It could be anything; the pose of a victim's body, the color of her shirt, the patterns of wounds on the body. He could extrapolate volumes from the smallest detail. His method was imprecise in the way he executed it, and wholly unexplainable. It was also infallible. He himself did not fully understand how he did it so well. When asked, he could only claim it was instinct.

Beck ate his lunch and then waited all afternoon for the autopsy report to come in. When it did, he read the catalogue of Jane's agonies and began his own profile on her killer. And when it was over—when he should have felt like someone had taken his heart and wrung the blood out of it—he felt nothing.

Nothing. Curiosity, perhaps. Professional interest. Beck kept checking his feelings like a mother would check on a sick baby, hoping for a spark, some tender emotion that one human feels for another, but there was nothing. No sorrow, no rage. In fact, anger was conspicuously absent from his mood lately. Something had changed in him after Lake George. He had left some vital part of himself on the water, something that he needed as much as a heart or both lungs to survive. Perhaps it was pity he had lost back there, or human compassion. He knew that everyone experienced a feeling of heartlessness now and then, a byproduct of living in an age where at any time you can witness human suffering the moment it happens anywhere in the world: A flood in India, an earthquake in Brazil, ten thousand dead, twenty thousand. Perhaps it was true that humans only have the capacity to feel for those they can attach an identity to. A child falls down a well and money pours in from all over the country. A mud slide buries faceless thousands, yet it barely makes the evening news.

But Jane had a face. Why did he feel nothing for her? People were tiresome or ignorant at their best and brutal animals at their worst. In his line of work, he saw them at their worst with alarming frequency. Perhaps that had finally caught up with him. Humanity itself had become faceless, a horde of blank, ferocious things that savaged and clawed each other for supremacy, leaving a wash of red in their wake; no society, no brotherhood. The world was chaos, a mob locked into seeking their own petty wants, disconnected from one another, apathetic, greedy, and suspicious. He was weary of them. Turn off the news. Find a new channel.

That was why he spent the next year tracking down Leonard Talmadge with such a vengeance. Not because he had killed twelve other women in the same manner. Not because Talmadge destroyed hundreds of other lives in the process. Not because he deserved to die. The reason he hunted Talmadge like Ahab hunted the whale was because Talmadge had made Beck see himself.

To be forced to look inside and see that eye glaring back at him. To acknowledge pride and apathy and selfishness as the sum of your own soul, or to realize that you are less a creature of God than a beast like all the other beasts around you. No one could forgive another for that, and he could not live with it unless he could live with it alone.

He loved nothing. Not life, not his work, not even Catherine.

He knew it that day, just after he read Jane's autopsy report. He had closed his office and headed for the garage. There, he had sat in the car and fingered the talisman under his shirt, listening to the sounds around him, feeling a distant awareness that he should be on his way. The gold was warm between his fingers, having been close to his skin all day. Even on the rare days he took it off, it always heated back up rapidly. It was a beautiful, troublesome talisman; a small, solid disk of gold incised with a tree crowned with fire. Around the bole of the tree twined a large snake, its tongue flickering out to test the air. He wore it because of Claire. It was the only gift she had ever given him, and then she vanished. No one knew where she had gone. Indeed, no one but him could recall ever having seen her. It was not that she had done anything wondrous for him. She had talked to him and asked how he was. She smiled, patted his cheek, and gave him a present. In those days, that was enough of a miracle.

Then suddenly Claire was gone, like so many other people who had vanished abruptly from his life, leaving only tokens in place of themselves. His mother had left him a worn, handmade blanket and a name scribbled on a slip of lined note paper. Father Dane had left him his books. Father Calvert...

Don't think about what Father Calvert left me.

He had driven to Alexandria and came within a mile of home before he began stalling, driving around the block, looping the neighborhood, anything to avoid going home. The mundane became the impossible. He could not picture opening the door and kissing Catherine after the revelations of the day. Other simple acts—sitting down to dinner, watching TV, going to bed—similarly terrified him. He could not face it. Through it all he suffered the nagging, unfulfilled sensation of being on the verge of a great and terrible understanding. He reached for it and it evaporated, only to return and torment him again, burrowing under his skin like a thorn. The smell of change.

He kept driving. Finally he turned one corner and saw the tall spire of a church rising above the skyline, and he considered entering that most hallowed and hated sanctuary. He climbed the wide steps to the double doors of the church and hesitated, fighting down a surge of revulsion. Not surprising, considering the memories. Flat on his face behind the altar, cheek pressed against the scratchy fibers, nose running snot and his mouth full of tears.

It had been many years since he felt a need to pray, but God had not answered Beck as a suffering child and he expected no answer now. It was more obstinacy than piety that drove him there. Like poking a sore tooth to see if it still ached, he had to know if he was as inhuman as he suspected. In a laughable twist of fate, once again he found himself in church, looking for validation.

The nave was almost silent, with only a few worshipers scattered throughout the pews, kneeling or praying over their rosaries. The rich woods were dark and polished and he smelled lemon oils and the bright tang of frankincense. Beck's stomach churned at the detested smell and he turned to leave, and then the priest was there.

"Can I help you, my son?"

Beck gaped at him. The priest was old and white-haired, with a leathern face and a flap of wrinkled skin hanging down like an iguana's over the white clerical collar. For a horrible moment Beck was back there, at the little brownstone church in Wystan Parish, a scared little boy hiding from a man who poked in the corners of the transept and called softly for him.

"Angel? Where are you, angel?"

He was scuttling back into the woodwork, drawing his small body into a tight ball, his fingernails gouging red furrows into his palm as the heavy footsteps drummed closer. Muffled by the deep, blood-red carpet, they sounded like cannon charges to him. He tried to make himself yet smaller, but there was nowhere else to go. He would have drawn skin and bones into himself if he could.

Real or imagined, the smell of frankincense had grown strong, as if the priest had bathed in it. A red haze fell over Beck's vision. He raised his fist as if to strike the old man and the priest's eyes went round in fright as he backed away, his withered hands clawing for the crucifix under his shirt. The fear on the priest's face gave Beck a sick thrill of pleasure, but it wasn't enough. He wanted to hurt someone. He might have even wanted to kill to someone.

Nearly blind with rage, Beck shoved past the priest and stumbled for the exit. There was nothing here for him. There never had been. He made it to the steps before he fell to his knees and vomited on the stone. He made it home somehow. Catherine stirred in her sleep and turned, and her features were suddenly set in silver as the moonlight touched her cheek and rendered sharp the outline of a tiny golden cross on a fragile chain around her neck.

The cross had been a birthday present from him. He had laughed as he gave it, knowing she believed in such things and grateful that she never tried to convince him of them. The only holy shape he knew was the talisman Claire had given him.

There was also gratitude that she never asked where his dislike of the church came from. He really, truly, would have preferred to die rather than tell her about it, to see the tenderness in her eyes change to wariness and pity and disgust. As far as Catherine knew, he had been raised by a trust fund ministered by the state of Virginia, then helped through college with what money remained after he graduated. It was partly true. After he left Wystan Parish, there had been no more dark corners or the shadow of a crucifix to witness his screams. He was provided with a good boarding school watched over by proctors who were distant but kind, and no one touched him. At least, not for a long time. At fourteen, Beck finally discovered that he did not object to the touch of another human being, so long as it came about of his own permission.

After that, there had been high school girls and dates and sweaty, agrestic sex in whatever backseat or bedroom that was readily available, and then experiments with boys in college when he was studying criminal justice too hard to be bothered with movies and parties. His choice of partners had not been emotionally motivated, since he had no clear preference for either men or women, nor had he been sating some deeper psychological call. Boys were simply easier. If you gave a guy a blowjob in the shower or a slow jerk-off reclining against the pillows of a narrow dorm bed, he usually figured the high part of the evening was over and was okay with leaving afterwards. Most girls wanted to stay, seeking a deeper connection that Beck had no experience in giving.

Years later, he had asked Catherine out to dinner over thirtyeight stitches and the sting of an anesthetic needle. She had been the attending physician at County when he was shot and had insisted on checking his leg one more time before discharging him. She swore it was the cleanest gunshot wound she had ever seen, and Beck had noticed how she was more pretty than beautiful, with an upturned nose that wrinkled when she laughed, and that she actually seemed to care about his wellbeing. That was the rare thing, the precious thing about her; she wanted to care for him.

After their first date, he told himself that he didn't have time for her, but then caught himself calling her on the weekends, and then again when he got home at night. The lure of being valued and wanted was too great for him, and by that time they had several changes of clothes at each other's apartments as well as the respective toothbrush. She laughed a lot, at least in the beginning, and dressed in clothes that accentuated the full curves of her body, knowing Beck loved to watch the purely feminine shape of her move in them. Watching her dress had fascinated him. He would contemplate her like surveying the lie of a foreign land as she chose a bra, a pair of skimpy underwear with lace, the jade teardrop earrings she liked. He would sigh and lean forward as she applied lip gloss and eveliner, eager and aroused. They always fucked wildly afterward. Catherine used to accuse him of being cheap and planning it to get out of paying for a movie and dinner, but he never bothered to examine why these things attracted him. It had never seemed very important, and for several years the physical part of their marriage had distracted them from the bigger issues.

He had been sure he loved her.

Disarrayed curls of red hair framed Catherine's face as she opened her eyes. They flickered with awareness. Something was wrong.

"Beck?"

Beck sat on the bed and touched her face. She did not see the tremor in his fingers as he leaned close and kissed her hard. Not the usual greeting kiss he gave her, but something starved and angry and vindictive. Beck kissed her as if he could pull retribution from her mouth, take back something that was lost. As if she had been the one who hurt him, which could never be true. Catherine was the innocent here, but not him, never him.

His mouth was hard on hers, biting her lips. She tried to say his name. It came out muffled, hindered by his tongue. She flinched. He ignored it. His hand found her breast and he squeezed cruelly, pushing her shoulders back and heaving his body over hers, on top of her. She came fully awake then and pushed him away, her hands suddenly strong, and then he broke.

He hit her. An open-handed slap that stung and flared red on her cheek. A flash of bitter satisfaction burned up from the cold ball in his stomach and he hit her again, a back-handed blow that rocked her temple against the headboard. He found himself smiling tightly because it felt so fucking *good* to hit her. Someone had to pay for what had been done to him, so why not her? At least it was something to feel! Beck began to imagine his hands around her throat.

Catherine's eyes went dull and a trickle of blood began to seep from her nose. She stared at him in profound shock, not yet afraid, but terribly dismayed and hurt.

Ice water washed over him. The brief, unholy flash of pleasure and satisfaction vanished, replaced by shriveling shame. Had he really been thinking about hurting her? God help him... killing her? What was *wrong* with him? He wanted to die, to cut off his hand, to crawl away and never have to face her again. *Run away*. He clung to the solution like a lifeline and sank to his knees on the carpet, pressing his face into the mattress. He was appalled to feel her hand stroking the back of his neck.

"My god, Beck, what's happened?" Pain and anger in that tone, but there was also love.

He did not want it, would have no part of it. "I can't," he said in a strangled voice. He got up and backed away from her.

She turned on the light "Beck, what's happened? Tell me!"

"I don't know!" He heard the shrillness in his voice and despised it. "I can't try anymore. It's not in me. There's no good in me!"

She wiped the thin line of blood from her nose and tried to assume a calm and adult command of the situation, though she was barely in control of herself. She clasped her hands together to hide their shaking and swung her legs over the side of the bed. "That's not true. Calm down and we'll talk. Whatever it is, we'll—" "No. No! It doesn't matter what happened. It won't change. It's me. It's in me. It will always be inside of me." Beck realized he was raving and closed his mouth with a snap.

She rose from the bed to come to him. He retreated from her, holding his hands out to defend himself from the blindness of her love. "You don't know, Cat. You don't know all of it." You don't know that I never really tried to save you. I would have let you die. I don't really love you, or anyone. I'm dead inside.

"Then tell me!"

"I can't! Just... just let me go away. I'm going to go away."

"Go?" She mouthed the word as if it were a new and frightening thing. "Go where?"

"I'm moving out."

"What?" Her amber skin paled, highlighting the scarlet print of his hand.

"I'm leaving. I need time. I need to think."

It was several moments before she could speak. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"Would you get a fucking clue!" he snarled. "I'm doing this *for* you! No!" He jerked away as she reached for him. "You look at me every day, but you don't see me. You don't see me. I mean," he choked on the words and laughed suddenly, "look what I just did, look at you! That proves it."

"It proves you need to calm down!"

He sobered suddenly, laughter dying. "I'm sorry for this, Cat. I know you love me."

"I do love you, Beck."

"I know. That's why I'm doing this."

Her words came out in a desolate wail. "I don't understand!"

Beck slumped against the wall beside the antique dresser and covered his face. Minutes passed. At last he heard her moving, silken nightgown sliding against her legs, her feet padding on the carpeted floor. She opened a dresser drawer and scooped up an armful of clothes.

"I don't think you should go anywhere tonight," she said. "You're too upset. I'll leave."

Beck groaned in shame. He closed his heart, walled it off from his mind as he tried not to hear the sounds of her leaving. Then she was beside him, her fingertips on the doorknob. She halted and he dropped his hands. The face she turned to him was white-lipped and staring. Her movements were stilted and careful, as if he had wounded her mortally.

"I'm going to go stay at Jenny's tonight. I can't get a handle on this, Beck."

He nodded. "All right." God, let this end. Please let this end. Please just go away.

She started to say goodbye out of habit, then, in a gesture more terrible than a curse, she simply left, closing the door quietly behind her. He listened to her for half an hour, hearing her dial her friend's phone number, her pattering around the house as she packed what she needed from the laundry room while scrupulously avoiding the bedroom. The front door closing, the car backing out of the driveway, and the slowfading echo of the engine as she left him.

Only when she was truly gone did he lose his fragile control. He rose and looked around the empty room, his chest heaving, then drove his fist into the wall, putting the full weight of his body behind it. His hand disappeared into the plaster and he threw his shoulder against it, hearing the sharp *crack* of wooden slats snapping behind the drywall. The standing lamp went down under a sweep of his foot. It shattered on the floor and the light bulb blew out with a white flash. He stomped on it, crushing the delicate parchment shade under his shoes and kicking its fragments around the room. The lamp pole went sailing into the mirror, punctuating his demolishment of the room with the sound of shattering glass. He roared his anger, baying so loud that the walls shook and the windows rattled in their frames.

"Damn damn damn all!" He brought his fist down on the heavy oak dresser. The surface shattered on impact and he hit it again and again, howling, until there was nothing left but slats and splinters and his voice gave out. He stood, gasping, redfaced, fury vibrating every nerve in his body. His vision moved in and out of focus and the room jumped madly. The fury waited just beneath his skin, a slumbering demon temporarily appeased by release, but expecting the next outburst. Eager for it.

At last. At last. Something he could feel.

Then he looked at his hands. His eyes glazed over in shock. The dresser was Catherine's treasure, an antique French armoire one hundred and sixty years old, carved from solid oak and banded with mahogany. It was sound as iron. His arms should have been bruised and torn, his fingers bleeding and broken, nails ripped away.

They were spotless. Not a scratch.

Later, as he brooded on that day, he would wonder how he explained that to himself. He would suppose, like so many other clues over the years, that he just pushed it aside. In time, the starched and well-shaped denial he wore became his habit as much as any priest's.

They tried again, of course. Beck quit his job and they uprooted their lives and moved to upstate New York, only to have the same issues crop back up in a new place. Beck thought that highly unfair. He had made the effort, damn it. Why hadn't it worked? He had wanted it to work so badly.

#### ୧୬ ୧୬

The nurse's station on the second floor was quiet. Large paper snowflakes of green and red hung over the computers, and there was a tiny plastic Christmas tree on the high counter, decorated with foil-wrapped chocolate kisses. Beck decided there was nothing *less* appetizing in the world than the thought of eating candy that had been dangling day and night in the infected air of a hospital ward. A thin, mousey-looking nurse in her forties—he thought her name might have been Anna looked up from her charts as Beck approached. Her gaze turned narrow. There were few secrets in hospitals, especially from coworkers.

"Looking for Doctor Merriday?"

Beck nodded. The nurse twirled her pencil and stuck it behind her ear before dropping her eyes back to the chart. "She's on break. Check the canteen."

"Thanks. Um..." he rummaged in his pocket, expecting to feel the crinkly lightness of cellophane and foil paper, then remembered he was out. The unfriendly air of the nurse made him want to yank her chain. "You wouldn't happen to have a cigarette machine here, would you?" She glared. He tapped the counter. "Didn't think so. Thanks."

Scarred candy and soda machines hulked near rickety plastic chairs, and scratched tables, forever gummy with spilled coffee and sugar, sagged at their posts. Catherine was sitting near the change machine. A paper coffee cup was in front of her and her head was bent over a book. The fluorescent light overhead gave the pages a green cast and transformed her brilliant hair to a sickly shade of dried blood.

Always a book, always reading. Not a romance or a fluff novel either, never that. She did not read for leisure, but to shake her mind and goad her to new pathways of thought. Catherine and her puzzles. Like Beck, she could never resist the challenge of mystery. They were alike in that, if nothing else, and they had fit so well together in the beginning. Cat and Beck, two short, sharp sounds for two restless souls who were the happiest when they worked hard. Less time to think, he supposed. Fewer hours to examine the more personal questions itching at the backs of their brains, all the whys that would never be answered. They had fit in other ways, too; one providing what the other lacked in a symbiosis as old as bee and flower.

"Hi."

She looked up. A sheen of light gleamed off the entwined serpents of her caduceus pin as her initial surprise quickly faded to wariness. "Hi."

"I'm sorry I was rude this morning."

She closed the book with a snap. "You weren't. A person is *rude* to strangers. You were being uncaring and hurtful and a rotten bastard."

"Guilty." He wrapped his coat more tightly about him and sat gingerly, hearing the plastic chair creak a complaint under his weight.

She gave him an arch look in return. "I know this. It's the I'm-not-going-to-fight-with-you speech."

"I braved the icy stares of your nurses to come here, so give me a little credit, okay?" "Why did you come?" She looked at him critically and her gaze softened. The breath went out of her. "Jesus, Beck, you look like shit. Are you all right?"

He nodded and scraped his unruly hair from his forehead. Sniffed. "I'm fine."

She pushed the book aside. "Have you been sleeping? When did you last eat?"

His heart tugged and he resisted it fiercely. He knew what he was doing, how he was manipulating her to give a damn about him, but he refused to fall back into that; his need and longing to be loved, an addiction that she was more than happy to satisfy. It was unfair to her. He had driven here with a purpose, now the words were like swallowing stones.

"I need to know how you want to go about this," he said, pulling back from her, putting a cold wall between them.

"This?"

"The divorce."

Someone walked by in the outer hall and she leaned forward. Her voice was loud. "I don't want a divorce."

"Someone's going to hear."

"I don't give a shit."

Beck knuckled one eye tiredly, wondering just how many hours of sleep he had enjoyed in a solid week. "Tell the truth, Cat. Do you ever see us digging our way out of this?"

"I'm not a fortune teller."

He blew his breath out in a huff. "Jesus Christ. Don't, okay? I'm sick to death of all this baseless optimism. You can't claim we don't know what the future holds anymore. We tried."

"No, Beck. I tried. You just came along to prove me wrong."

That shook him. "You think this is how I wanted us to turn out?"

Her lips thinned in real anger. "I think you don't like being wrong. You said you were no good for me, so you absented yourself from our marriage. You believed you were a terrible husband, so you cheated on me with your Lieutenant. That was a good hit, Beck. I could have fought another woman for you, but I have no clue how to begin fighting Sean. Congratulations." "I didn't. I haven't."

"Yet."

"No." He shook his head. "Nothing happened, and it's not going to."

"It sure as hell would have if I hadn't walked in."

He sighed. "That's not true. I just had a bad night. I felt..." he trailed off.

"What, Beck?"

"I was lonely," he finished. His nails dug into his palm and he hid his hands under the table where she couldn't see.

She stared at him. "I think that's the worst thing you've ever said to me."

His posture crumpled a little. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to hurt you. You wanted the truth."

"So I made you feel lonely?"

"No!" he said quickly. "That's not it at all. I've always felt that way, even before us. It just gets worse sometimes."

Her eyes were on him, measuring. "And Sean makes you feel... what? Better? Not lonely?"

His shoulders moved in a helpless shrug. "Sometimes." "Why?"

Unforgivably, he laughed a little, harshly and without warmth. "You're asking *me?* He just does."

"What does Sean say about this?"

"He doesn't know."

"Oh." Her eyebrows crept up. "Then Sean and I have something in common." Her feelings were hurt, but she was more angry than sorrowed. "Maybe I should give him a call. We could meet for coffee and girl talk."

He closed his eyes briefly. To hit back was unthinkable. He wouldn't do it. "If you don't file for divorce, I'm going to have to."

"That's how it is, huh?" He nodded. She took a shaking breath. "Well." She stood up and the metal chair legs squealed unpleasantly on the floor. "I'll file. At least I can say I did that much for my self-respect. Take care of yourself, Becket." She threw her cup in the trash can behind him and tepid brown dregs of coffee spattered his coat. It felt like she was spitting on him. He sat there for quarter of an hour after she walked out, hopelessly listening for the hollow sound of her heels clicking on the tiled floor, coming back to him, coming to tell him it was all right, that she understood, that he was right to go and she forgave him.

She didn't return. He would have been ashamed if she had. Beck rose heavily to face the long drive back to Irenic.

# ৵৵৵৵

Marger's Outfitter was in the old Seed building, three stories of fire-baked brick and seasoned timber with a wide central shaft that was once the sole, celebrated elevator in Irenic. The building smelled of must and decay in the summer, and in the dead of winter its joists creaked and popped so loud it seemed as if the structure were on the point of collapse. Cold wind whistled through a dozen tiny, secret crevices on the second and third floors. Occasionally, two or more of the wind entrances would inexplicably fall into tune and a low howl would reverberate through the upper floors. It had given the Seed building the reputation of being haunted, and Brenda Marger enjoyed a windfall of business every Halloween.

The SORRY WE'RE CLOSED sign was propped up in the window next to an arrangement of stained glass hummingbirds. Beck knocked on the door and it swung open. Warm, electricheated air wafted out of the shop's interior, smelling of canvas and neoprene. He pushed the door open and walked in, his boot heels giving off deep bass thrums on the wooden planks.

"Mrs. Marger? Anybody here? Hello?" Beck rapped his knuckles smartly on the counter, knocking. "It's Chief Merriday. Anybody home?"

He dinged the service bell on the counter and checked behind the register. No one there. The lights were on in the back office and the door was open.

A rush of cold air swept in as the front door swung open by itself. Beck's eyes widened. Now he could smell it. A whiff of brass and metal on the warm air, like biting on tinfoil, the taste of copper in his throat. His teeth tingled with it.

Oh, Jesus. He moved around the counter to the office and tried to push the door open. Something bumped against it with

a wet sound and he looked down. At first all he could see was red; Brenda Marger's blood covering every inch of the office floor. Her pulped face was just a raised impression against the background of crimson. Blood spilled from her mouth and her open eyes were filled with little puddles of gelatinous red fluid. In the corner, propped up like a doll, was another body. A man, or what had been one, sitting slumped with his long legs sticking straight out. He was wearing brown leather loafers without socks and the tops of his feet were white, so white, against all the bright red blood.

Beck gagged as the smell hit him. They had not been dead long enough for decay to really set in, but the hard, iron scent of drying blood in the closed space was just as bad. He backed up and reached for the radio at his belt, breathing though his mouth.

"Jesus Christ! Jesus fucking Christ!"

It had been too long. Irenic had been his haven. This was what he had come here to avoid, and it had made him soft. He hadn't seen blood like this for a long time.

### *୶*ଌ୶ୢ

Boot heels drummed on the wooden planks. "You okay, chefe?"

He looked up to see Joss's plain, broad face creased in worry. He nodded. "Sure."

"Three bodies in one day. I think we're gonna make the papers in Albany with this one."

Beck looked up, his brow a thundercloud. Joss cleared his throat uncomfortably and held out a sheet of printed paper. "This is Brenda's computer's printout from yesterday's sales. The last data entry was a swipe for a cash card purchased six months ago. Get this, I just called the station and the data on this printout matches the data on the back of the cash card found on the body from this morning. Looks like the last transaction Brenda made before she was killed. The lock on the back door was broken, too, but the alarm wasn't on."

Beck listened as he skimmed the printout and read the name and address next to the customer record; *Paul Rossetti, De Solo Road, Irenic New York.* He looked at Joss expectantly. "And?" Joss thought hard. "The stiff we found on the boat might have been here when the killer showed up, then escaped out the back door while Brenda and this other poor bastard got theirs."

Beck nodded. "It's possible. Could be ten other explanations, but at the moment this one sounds likely." He looked at the printout again. "This must be wrong. That, or he gave a fake address. There is no Desolo Road in Irenic."

"You have the roads memorized?"

"Not exactly, but this name," he tapped the paper, "this name I would have remembered."

"What for?"

"Do you know what it means? Desolo?" Joss shook his head, managing to look blank. Not a big stretch for Joss. Beck chewed his lip. "Where's Sean?"

"He went on patrol about two. Asked for you to call him when you got back. He said to make sure you got the message."

Beck checked his watch. If he hurried, he could make it to the county office and back before dark. When you came right down to it, Irenic just wasn't big enough to hide a road. There had to be a record somewhere. He stood up. "I've got my radio. Call me if anything comes in."

Joss bounded after him. "It could be dangerous. You sure you don't want a ride-along?"

Like I want an anal probe and bamboo splinters shoved under my fingernails. He patted Joss's arm gravely, liking the man even through his annoyance. "Maybe next time."

Joss took his meaning and gave him an uncertain smile. "Sure, chefe."

The unpaved road was deep in snow and ended at a stand of bare trees facing west. Beck looked left and right, searching for signs of life. There was nothing here. There had been a street sign after all. It was a short, vine-covered, marble plinth set three-quarters of a mile back from the road. Chiseled into the stone was the word *Desolo*, and he had followed the rough, unused trail to a dead end.

Sunlight glanced off the pallid bark of the birch trees, casting long bars of shadow on the pure white ground behind them. He looked closer, feeling the presence of something behind those trees.

Beck stared and felt a twinge of misgiving. He had been wrong. Somehow, the name of the road had been left off the new maps. He had finally found it by dragging an old, folded tax plat from a file cabinet in the county assessor's office two doors down from his office. It gave the location of a Desolo Road in Irenic two miles past the bridge, just before the long, deserted stretch of rural highway that led to Amsterdam and beyond.

The tires of the Ford spun on the ice as he backed up, then turned the steering wheel hard to the left and edged past the stand of trees. There was a long, gray impression in the snow behind the trees and another thick stand of birch about ten feet back, running north to south where they would cast the longest shadows at morning and sunset.

Clever. Two stands of trees right next to each other, spaced by depth, approachable from the road only in a straight line. Anyone coming down this road would think they saw a dead end and turn back, unless they thought to try going around the first stand. It would work especially well in winter, where that narrow access road could be a depression, a ditch, or maybe even a dried-up stream bed.

Beck worried his lip with his teeth and wished for a cigarette. Whoever they were, they had taken care to appear

invisible, and that fact said things that put his instincts on alert. He jockeyed the car around the first stand and steered the tires onto the access road, which seemed surprisingly smooth under the snow. Soon, he could see the house.

It was an estate, a Georgian mansion set back about a half mile from the road in a shallow, bowl-shaped depression like a miniature valley. If it had been on a hill, his instincts would have been eased. But no one would build such a large structure on low ground this close to the river. The risk of flooding was too great. That is, he thought, unless what they built needed to be hidden. Then it might be worth it.

The access road ended at a wrought iron gate, spear tipped and black with age. A tall black fence ambled for several hundred yards north and south and curved around the back of the house, enclosing several acres of field and forest. An odd gatehouse stood just outside the front gate, a tiny white hut with rounded plaster walls and a domed roof surmounted by a tall minaret cut from white stone. The minaret was anchored to the apex of the dome like a finger pointing to heaven, the doorway below it a curving arch cut into the wall. Inside it was empty. A squat, black security camera and intercom were mounted on a pole nearby.

He pulled up to the closed gates and stared at the house through the icy windshield. It looked like a block of bricks from here, topped with a mound of snow. He got out of the car and approached the tall gate that was adorned with a necklace of icicles glistening in the gray light. When he drew nearer, he saw that the gate was not wrought iron, but hollow steel bars incised with many circular cuts, like the finger holes of a flute. The points that Beck had thought were spears seemed to be welded mouthpieces, as if the gate were an immense pipe to be played by the wind. The gate would function like a massive carillon, transforming wind to sound. A molded bronze plaque was affixed to the main gate. It was small, about eight inches in diameter, and in its center was a tree with its bough engulfed in flame. Around the short trunk coiled a snake, its single eye impaling him to the spot. It was his talisman. Beck's hand went to his neck, feeling the shape of the charm against his skin, and he tried to swallow in a throat gone dry. *Change*, the wind whispered. *Shift. The end of everything*.

The eye of the snake was incised with sharp, clever little lines, so cunningly wrought that for a moment Beck imagined he saw intelligence winking at him from the pupil. He looked away from it, disturbed. The sky was the color of ash and seemed to muffle all sound. Beck flashed his badge at the security camera. "Hello in the house!" he called. His voice seemed deadened and without tone. The opaque fish eye of the camera stared back at him indifferently.

It was too quiet. No birds. No traffic. No sound at all. He felt the heavy silence closing in and settling on his shoulders like claustrophobia. A thought crossed his mind that he was trapped, caught between the layers of cloud above and the layers of snow beneath. A narrow, tunneled realm where he moved like a restless ghost bound to an empty world.

Beck peered inside the gatehouse, not liking it. It reminded him of something out of place. "No guard," he said. He was lonely for any sound, even for his own voice. He jammed his cold hands in his coat and approached the gate. It was locked.

"Hello?" He was unnerved at how loud he sounded in the stillness. He pressed the buzzer on the intercom and waited, then tried again. The mansion crouched in the shallow valley, the square black panes of the windows seeming to stare balefully up at him. The hairs on the back of his neck rose and he pushed the gate.

He looked back at the house, which—it now seemed—did not merely recline in the belly of the valley, but hulked there like a sullen beast brooding at being deprived of warmth and light. An ashen cloud passed overhead and the light faded abruptly. Beck shivered. Whatever familiarity he had once associated with this thing's shape was gone now. It was not a house, it was a living thing, malevolent and vindictive. In a moment he would back away and run to the car.

Get a grip. It's a house. Everything looks spooky in upstate New York in winter. It's a spook paradise.

He blew on his fingertips to warm them, his eyes watchful on the house, then jumped violently as the arm of the security camera swiveled and creaked. It turned to focus on him and the flat bolt spanning the two halves of the gate suddenly pinged and withdrew into its housing. The gates snapped open a fraction of an inch.

Beck faced the cold camera eye and felt a snake of apprehension slithering up his spine. Whoever had opened the gate could see him, but had not answered. He thought about calling Sean for backup before he went in, suffused with a prickly sense of hyper-awareness that made him feel three feet smaller and twenty years younger. Something told him he had been very wrong to come alone.

Jesus Christ, how much of a baby are you going to be today?

Sean's voice, not his. That's what he would say if Beck called him. To hell with that.

Beck dragged the gate apart wide enough for the car to pass through, then drove down the icy, curving driveway. The house grew larger through the windshield.

Beck stepped out of the car and looked to the front doors. Someone had to be in there. The gate hadn't opened by itself, after all. What were they waiting for? He found his eyes wandering up to survey the house.

The mansion was three stories of timber and brick with iron bars defending the windows like black teeth. Green Lebanon cedars, hatted with snow, stood guard in a line at the front of the house, and decorative brick quoins stamped with a complex design framed the building. The hipped roof, sloping and topped with a central dormer, seemed ready to ambush intruders with an avalanche of accumulated snowfall. He found himself staring at the quoins. The pattern was an ennead, the nine-pointed star of the goddess in ancient mythology, but there were differences. The center of this star was an eye like the one on the gate. *It's like I've seen it before, or drawn it, but I can't remember*. Unconsciously, the fingers of his right hand twitched as he mentally sketched its outlines. *So familiar*...

Beck jumped when the front doors opened and disgorged a tall young man, dressed somberly in a casual black sweater and trousers, onto the portico. He had hair like a newly-minted copper penny. Beck noted at once the resemblance to the boy on the boat; the same sweetness of face, the disarming innocence around the mouth, the same copper-red hair. The red-haired man's blue eyes had depth and life in them, and Beck made the comparison between them and Paul Rossetti's dead stare.

The man smiled at Beck and those eyes struck hard, as if they were drilling holes in his face. "*Salvete*," he said. His voice was deep, spiced with a Mediterranean accent, "It's snowing. Come inside and get warm."

And then he laughed lightly as if at a poor joke and motioned for Beck to follow him. He ushered Beck through the pedimented doorway and the dim foyer, moving with a catlike, commanding assurance, gliding rather than walking. Beck found himself hurrying after him.

A burst of scent seemed to ooze from the walls, a bright, stinging smell like a freshly-cut apple. Beck repressed a shiver. The smell gave him an odd chill, like a bad dream long forgotten. Beneath his feet a vast expanse of cold checkerboard terrazzo led into many shadowy hallways that branched out like veins into the depths of the mansion. He smelled a wood fire burning somewhere in the house. Several, perhaps.

From far down the corridors the sound of several voices floated in the air, muffled and ghostlike. The high arched ceilings were laden with baroque cornices, and white stone busts directed their blank stares to the center of the room from recessed niches. A fall of fresh, out-of-season wisteria spilled over the edges of a gargantuan Chinese vase. The aura of the house was heavy and oppressive, filled with an idleness almost sultry in its inertia.

Beck began to speak as they walked. "My name is..." He stopped, listening to the way the sentence echoed and rolled in the cavernous hall. Somewhere he heard the click of heels on the terrazzo, and then the upswell of voices ceased as if they held their collective breath. The man stopped as well and turned, his expression one of polite interest.

"I'm Chief Merriday, with the Irenic police department. I'd like to speak to the head of the household."

He looked at Beck's offered badge and touched it, then rubbed his fingers together. "Nicolo." Without a word, Nicolo turned and moved down a highceilinged corridor. Beck had no choice but to follow. The light faded a few feet into the corridor, and he stumbled. Nicolo reached without looking and steadied him. Beck jerked back from the touch.

"Careful," Nicolo said. "Not much light here. Not much at all. *Caligo numquam perit.*"

Darkness never dies. Beck started and stared at him. Always a quick study, Beck had learned Latin first from the Mass and later from Father Dane's library. But Nicolo had no way of knowing that he understood, or that he had heard those words very recently.

"How do you like our home, Chief Merriday?"

"Very nice," he said automatically.

"Of course, you're seeing it in the dying season. We don't like the bare winter as much as the summer months, so we tend to stay indoors, where we can be near our fires. When the green days return, we will build our fires outside and listen to the night under the moon."

Just a pack of regular nature boys, Beck thought, and Nicolo chuckled. Beck had an uncomfortable feeling that his thoughts had been heard. They suddenly halted before a large wooden door. Nicolo rapped once.

"Enter."

The voice was from the other side, muffled and deep. Nicolo pushed the door open and held it for Beck to pass. *"Sumus quod sumus, frater.* We are who we are. I hope to see you again, sweet brother."

Beck pondered the phrase as he continued to stare at Nicolo. Nicolo smiled, an expression of gentleness and warmth which seemed to emanate from the man's entire body. Beck felt the pull of the man, the fondness that seemed to be trying to reach into him, testing, demanding a response. He opened his mouth, looking into Nicolo's face, wondering what he was going to say, but needing and wanting to ask why it was all so familiar.

"Why is it all so familiar?"

Startled, Beck turned to see a tall man silhouetted in the ashen light streaming through an enormous elliptical window.

The window was interrupted by two curved horizontal steel bars and resembled nothing so much as a large, lidless eye gazing out into the world. There was even a ring of iron welded between the two curved bars, like a pupil. Beyond the window was a low, thick wall of rough stones encircling a sunken garden, now dead and cold and hung with ice.

The man who had asked the question was framed against the eye window, his face to the waxen sunlight, watching the snow drift into the stone court. He was dressed in plain trousers and a dark oyster sweater was stretched across broad shoulders. He turned.

"Nothing ever really feels new, does it?"

Beck gaped at the room. It contained only a few pieces of nondescript furniture: a desk, chair, and a wide daybed in the corner covered in eggshell linen. Everything extraordinary was in the walls.

The walls were painted a soft gray and decorated from floor to ceiling with raised plasterwork to represent a far sky. From behind the billowing clouds emerged the tapered wings of birds curved in flight, if indeed they were birds; only their wings were visible, their bodies hidden behind the gusty clouds. Starsraised beads of plaster tipped with silvery dust-arranged in the patterns of constellations glittered in the background. All of these things were so modestly rendered, their coloring so subtle, that the eye could ignore the walls and let them fade into the background, yet when he turned his head, the shadows on the plasterwork shifted back into primacy and wings surrounded him. He imagined he heard the cooing of doves. There were no lights on in the room, only the somber glow falling naturally through the bare windows. The fanciful room seemed incongruous in this foreboding place, as did the man waiting patiently for him to speak.

Beck found his voice. "Are you the owner of this house?"

"House?" The voice held amusement. "This place is called Desolo."

Forsaken, he named it. "Then I'm looking for the owner of this place."

"You've found him. Please come in. Close the door, Nicolo."

Nicolo bowed himself out of the room. The man at the window smiled. "My name is Tamiel."

Beck paled. *Tamiel.* He felt something deep stirring inside him, a dark well of memory that rippled at the sound of the name, as if a stone had been dropped into its waters, concentric shockwaves that struck down into nerves and flesh. He tried to hide it, inhaling deeply and striving for composure. What the hell was that?

Tamiel's voice, like Nicolo's, was soft and cultured, the accent distinct but unfamiliar to Beck, though he was an expert in recognizing and identifying such. The man was tall, about Sean's height, and Beck guessed his age to be anywhere between thirty-five and forty-five. He had trouble pinning it down. Tamiel's hair was a deep black, his face sharp-planed to the point of delicacy, the bones long, the jaw pronounced and strong. But the sum of him was more than these things. He was beautiful.

Truly beautiful. Not feminine, not weak, Tamiel seemed above conventional descriptions. He did not look like anyone Beck knew, yet he did not look foreign or exotic. Beck found himself staring. Observing this, Tamiel raised his dark eyebrows and a curl of amusement touched his mouth but not his eyes, which remained cold but interested. They were startling eyes, a pale, icy blue ringed with black.

Beck realized he was staring and stopped, embarrassed. For the third time, Beck flashed his badge. Tamiel did not look at it.

"I know who you are, Beck. I wanted to see you. That's why you were allowed to find this place. No one sees us unless we want to be seen."

Allowed? "What's that supposed to mean?"

Tamiel turned back to the window. Beck saw that the snow had begun to thicken, sheets of white slanting in the dim light. He wondered how bad the storm was going to get.

"Why is it so familiar?" Tamiel repeated, ignoring Beck's question. "The snow, the cold, the ice on the trees. I had never seen snow before I came to New York, yet it did not seem strange to me. It was like remembering a dream. Isn't that odd?"

"I don't know," Beck said, wondering why he bothered to answer trivialities. That wasn't what he came for. "I suppose movies, books, television, that sort of thing. We pick up the images without realizing it, so when we do encounter a place we've never seen before, sometimes it feels like we've been there."

He saw that Tamiel was smiling, but it was like flowers on a tomb, sadness and beauty laid upon stone.

"Television," Tamiel echoed. The skin around his eyes wrinkled.

"I'm here regarding Paul Rossetti."

Tamiel laid one hand on the cold glass of the window, as if testing its temperature. They were unusually long hands, fine-boned and white, with fingers so long that they seemed like talons. "You have bad news about Paul." It was not a question.

"We suspect so, yes. I need you or someone who knows Paul to come into town to make a visual identification." Beck considered telling him about the second unidentified body found at Brenda Marger's place, but decided against it. It was best to hold as much back as possible and see what leaked out before playing the hand. He had tripped up more than one criminal that way.

"Identification." Calm and clipped. "You mean of the body."

Beck nodded. "Yes. I'm sorry. But remember that we're not certain it's actually Paul Rossetti. There was no ID. We're still running on clues right now." He strove for a hopeful tone. "This could all be just a big mistake."

Tamiel bent his head in silence for a moment, then he folded his arms across his middle and turned, his gaze focusing on a point above Beck's head. "There is no mistake. The body is Paul's," he said.

Beck waited a long moment before asking; "And how would you know that?"

"You came here with questions. Ask them."

Beck's jaw tightened. It was not that he had lost the advantage in the interview, he had just never had it.

"All right. Did Paul Rossetti live here?"

"He did when he was alive."

A strange thing to say, but people often did or said bizarre things after being informed of a death. Beck ignored it. "Are you his next of kin?"

Tamiel visibly hesitated. "No. Nicolo was his brother. His older brother."

"Could you call Nicolo back in here please?"

"That's not necessary. Nicolo already knows that Paul is dead."

Beck took out a small notebook and began to write. "How could he know that?"

"The same way I did. Oh, don't bother with your little book, Chief Merriday. I didn't kill Paul. Neither did Nicolo."

"Then my original question stands."

"I can't help you."

Beck checked himself on what he was about to say, the threat of law he was about to brandish. Too often it was a mistake. Outside, a dun-brown rabbit loped over the snow. He temporized. "Let's try this again. Who would want Paul dead?"

"Almost anyone. He was young and beautiful. That is excuse enough for many."

Beck caught on the word *beautiful*. "How long did you know him?"

"Most of his life."

"Friend of the family?"

"You could say that."

A thin shadow—a bird or hawk—swept over the ground outside and the rabbit bolted for cover, hind feet throwing skirls of snow.

"What exactly was the nature of your relationship with Paul Rosseti?"

"I told you. He lived here."

"In what capacity?"

Tamiel waited a moment before replying. "I don't take your meaning."

Beck moved closer to Tamiel, watchful of the man's expression. "What did he do here? Was he a guest?"

Tamiel tilted his head to the side. He seemed amused at the line of questioning. "Are you asking if Paul was my lover?"

"Rent boy is the term I had in mind."

Tamiel chuckled quietly. It had a shining sound to it, bright tones just beyond the edge of hearing. "No. Nothing like that at all. Are you disappointed?"

Beck's mouth tightened in discomfort. "I'll need to speak with Nicolo before I leave."

"Nicolo doesn't care for questions."

Beck slipped the notebook back into his pocket, fighting down a surge of irritation. Getting angry wasn't going to help anything.

But he's annoying as hell. He acts like he knows something without really saying anything, and he knows that I know it and he's taunting me with it.

"We can do this now," Beck said deliberately, "or we can do it later from a jail cell."

Tamiel smiled again, that tired expression of loss. "I'm afraid I can't allow that."

So much for the temperate approach. Beck took another step closer to Tamiel. "I remind you that I'm a... a police..." he stuttered, then his vision swam as a surge of dizziness overcame him.

Beck swayed on his feet and felt something *push* at his body, an invisible wall like a hammer sheathed in velvet, soft to the touch but steel underneath. It was not painful, but it was relentless. It pushed him back step for step, then pressed him down to the floor. He tried to resist it, his breath growing hot in his lungs as his knees collapsed. He gasped for air. A low sound like distant thunder was in his ears.

Footsteps. Tamiel flowed down on one knee beside Beck and touched his neck. A strong arm slipped around his shoulders and helped him to stand. He leaned heavily on it. Tamiel's voice was in his ear, so close that he felt heated lips brush his skin.

"Questions?"

The hand on his shoulder seemed to burn through the layers of fabric. Beck struggled to breathe and craned his neck to look at Tamiel. *It's him doing this*, Beck realized. *Somehow, it's him.* "What's happening?"

Slowly, with deliberate intent, Tamiel scrutinized him, starting at his face and moving downward, then back up until he

reached Beck's eyes. The examination was intimate and ruthless, and Beck involuntarily shied from it, knowing that in doing so he lost the last shred of his authority. Tamiel pressed his hand to Beck's cheek and moved his fingers in a gentle caress. Beck froze in panic.

"Do you believe in fate?" Tamiel asked. "That we are destined to play a role in life? That we cannot rest until that part is completed?" Closer still, and whispered, "That we will return even from death to finish it?"

"No," Beck quavered, listening to the thin and frightened sound of his own voice. "I don't believe in fate."

"You will."

Tamiel released him. Beck stood on his own, wobbling like a newborn colt.

"Nicolo will show you out."

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Nicolo closed the doors behind them. The tall man said nothing as he led Beck out of the house. Beck was still in shock, unable to summon the presence of mind to form a protest. The front door closed and the lock clicked. Beck was alone outside in the eerie half-light of dusk, the muted sound of falling snow surrounding him.

Force of habit made him turn his face to the west, looking once again for that indefinable quality that separated one day from the next, one sunset from every other sunset. A bookmark to hold his place in a life he did not comprehend and never had, and for once he did not find it. This sky was the same as the sky yesterday and the day before. All was gray. All was shadow.

Suddenly, the silence was enormous.

Beck ran, stumbling, to the car, his hands shaking as he fumbled with the keys. He had no explanations, no answers. He just wanted to get out, get away, escape from this place and the alien feelings it stirred in him. Once behind the wheel, he breathed easier and drove quickly up the long incline, a cold skin of sweat slicking his body under his clothes. He arrived at the carillon gates and got out. They were locked again. He glanced fearfully back at the house, waiting, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, before both patience and courage snapped. "Open it!" he shouted, knowing in his gut that they were listening.

There was a loud *click* and the gate sprang open. The tension in his shoulders eased and he was almost pathetically grateful to realize that it was over, that he really was getting out of there.

Aided by the wind, Beck pushed one side of the gate open. A strong gust blew against the black gates and piped a haunting tune through the round iron holes and the whorls of filigree, the voices of twenty small howls, now fading, now near, building with every gust to a demented, netherworld calliope. No other sounds. Only the wind and its instrument, the gate.

He glanced back down into the valley. It was full twilight and no lights were on in the house. Smoke rose lazily from several exits on the roof, but he saw no cars or other signs of occupation. Traffic on the country road was nonexistent. He felt alone again.

Another sound joined the piping of the gate and he realized his teeth were chattering. A button popped as his coat was torn open by the wind. Beck tugged his collar close around his neck and shivered as snow fell in a slow cascade and the wind chewed at his face with teeth like tiny needles. He was about to open the other side of the gate when he again noticed the bronze plaque on the gate, with its eye and nine-pointed star.

The eye moved.

Beck jumped. He backed away from the gate and looked wildly around, but the hammering wind pushed him nearer to the fearsome bronze eye again. He wanted to call for help, but knew no one would come. A stand of leafless birches swayed in the forest that lined the driveway just outside the gate. The dry fingers of their limbs clattered like laughter and he moaned, frightened beyond all reason for a grown man in no apparent danger.

Slowly, irresistibly, his gaze was drawn back to the eye.

It was staring at him. The metal seemed to have acquired a liquid surface, glistening like tears, and Beck expected it to take life at any moment, for those metal branches incised in the bronze to sway, for the crackle of fire to be heard over the wind. It was several moments before he discovered he could not look away. The eye seemed to be pulling his gaze upward, to something on the edge of the trees across the rutted road. There, beneath the moving branches, stood a man in black cassock and white collar. A priest.

No... not a priest, Beck thought. A nightmare.

Beck had only seen this man in his nightmares. From them, Beck knew every curve of his face, every muscle under his long cassock, the texture of his hair. He knew every line of him. The man was tall, wide shouldered, with large hands and long fingers. His skin was dark bronze, as if he lived in the sun, and his curling hair was a brassy gold streaked with chestnut. His eyes were like Tamiel's, deep-set and pale blue with black rings around the iris. Those eyes barely seemed human, but the rest of him was beautiful.

The man touched his mouth with those elongated fingers, three fingers to his lips, and then extended them in Beck's direction. A kiss. The wind carried it to Beck in the form of a scent, exotic, a hot, foreign, fascinating smell. Like patchouli or musk, but dry as charcoal and clean as fresh linen. The man smiled then, as if he sensed Beck's unwilling pleasure, and their eyes locked. In those eyes, Beck saw a blazing hunger that terrified him. He gripped the iron shafts of the gate, the raw cold searing his bare hands, and trembled as he stared. The man gave Beck a feral, bladed smile and bowed to him

The white birch beside the man shuddered and swayed, dislodging a drift of snow from the bare branches before a long strip of white bark peeled from the trunk and unfolded like a bird's wing to move and dance with the breeze.

The birch tree did a slow serpent's dance, the entire trunk now peeling back and unfolding to become a pale sunburst in motion, white arms writhing in the air like a vengeful Kali. Light appeared in its center, a core of diamond glowing brilliantly. A dozen comparisons crowded Beck's mind: a new star being born, the sun of another world, a sea creature. An archangel. His mouth dried up.

The man pushed his hand inside the center of the glow and smiled. The tree widened and light spilled into the world as it swallowed his arm. He stepped into it and vanished.

The rip closed with a soundless *crack* of static electricity. Something touched Beck's shoulder. He started violently and wrenched his hands from the gate, feeling a sharp pain. His palms had frozen to the iron bars. Patches of skin had been torn off when he pulled away.

Tamiel was beside him, looking very concerned. "Are you well?"

"Did you see it?" he gasped out. His hands felt like they had been painted with acid.

Tamiel pointed to the stand of trees across the road. "A tree fell."

Beck looked. The white birch had fallen, split in two as if a giant axe had cleaved it down the center. Fluffs of snow were still settling. He glanced back at the mansion and saw that it was only a building. The living eye on the gate was merely metal again.

"Such things have happened before," Tamiel said. He pushed the other half of the gate open for Beck. "Come back anytime. Nicolo has been told to let you in."

Beck's ears were ringing. He did not move.

Tamiel frowned. "It has not been easy keeping the minds of men away from this place. For their safety, keep what you saw here a secret, and if you happen to see any other falling trees, don't approach them. Don't look at them." Tamiel touched Beck's face with cool fingers. "Poor creature. How is it that you still remember nothing? How is it that you have not guessed what you are?"

Something in Tamiel's touch stilled Beck and slowed the pounding of his heart, held him immobile and helpless as Tamiel bent his head closer, his warm breath flowing over Beck's mouth.

His cell phone rang.

Beck's muscles were freed and he shoved Tamiel away from him, stumbling back. He scrubbed a hand across his mouth, as if Tamiel had succeeded in touching him there, then backed away and got in the car. Tamiel made no move to stop him.

Beck drove off and did not look back until he was nearly a mile down the road. The phone stopped ringing for a minute and then began again. He rummaged for it in his coat and punched the talk button with a bleeding finger.

"Hello?"

"Merriday?" It was Frank, irritated and officious. "Better get back here. We got another one."

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Tamiel watched Beck race away in the car, fleeing from the past nipping at his heels. The wind kicked up dancing ghosts about his knees as he closed the gates and checked the lock. Footsteps crunched in the snow behind him. A gentle hand gripped his shoulder.

Tamiel brushed his fingers down the cold iron bars of the gate. "Stay inside the gates and do not interfere. Do nothing, Nicolo. Please."

Nicolo's hand moved in a slow circle, giving comfort as well as support. "Perhaps it is not wise to put so much of your fate and trust solely in his hands. Beck is confused and haunted, and he has never known peace in any of his lives."

"Thanks to me."

"You take too much on yourself. God does not want Beck to live in peace. He means to use him like He has used Beck in the past and failed. Once Beck's strength is exhausted, he will be discarded once again," Nicolo said slowly. "I think that this has taken its toll on Beck. He's not the person you knew before. He will fail, and what then? What of me and all my brothers?"

"I will protect as many as I can."

"What of those you cannot save? Shopak, Andrej, and Paul are dead. Matho... he does not answer me."

"He cannot." That is not my voice, he thought. Do I sound as anguished as I feel? I have become a great liar, after all.

Nicolo was relentless. "Did you know Matho would die today? Did you feel him die as you were seducing Beck?"

"They left me," Tamiel snapped. "They chose to risk life outside these walls." He tried to push his anger aside and failed. He settled for brushing Nicolo's hand away. "Fools."

"At least they tried."

"Tried? Do you know what their grand plan was?" Tamiel turned. They have no idea how to survive out there, he thought. Of how to appear human or hide. You were Paul's brother. How could you let him go?

Tamiel did not voice the accusation. Nicolo was suffering enough and it was too late now, in any event.

"They were going to pretend to be campers," Tamiel said bitterly. "That was the extent of their planning. Never mind that it's winter and forty below. That they would have run out of money in six months and as transients they would have been noticed and questioned. They had forgotten the rule: No one sees us unless we want them to see. They wanted to be *seen*, Nicolo, they wanted to live out in that world, but they had no grasp of it. None of them did."

"They never had to understand this world before," Nicolo said. "Your protection made them weak."

"Without my protection, most of your kind would have been dead before you were a month old," Tamiel snarled. "You forget, I've seen what mothers do when they birth monsters."

"Monsters. Your words are unkind." Nicolo cocked his head to the side and a bright lock of his hair fell over his cheek. "But then, you are often unkind. We forgive you because we know there is only one thing you seek. One thing you have ever sought, all these many centuries, and that it has always been denied you. Why are you angry with me?"

Tamiel's shoulders sagged at the accusation of unkindness. He was not angry, only sorrowed and afraid of losing them all. "You have no idea what has been denied me."

"Zefira."

"Not only her. Oh no... it's much more than that. And you have no more conception of what I seek than Paul did of the world outside. You are the eldest of my sons, Nicolo, and dear to me. But do not presume." He made his voice cold and distant.

"But we are Mastema's sons too, are we not? If all the Host are one, then all of your brethren are all our fathers, though I like some of my sires more than others."

Tamiel sighed. "Yet you are a child, still. Remember that you are only the eldest because all your predecessors are dead. Heed my commands."

"I am not as ignorant as you think, father. Half a Seraphim is enough to know my own kind. I, too, want to be seen, but I must be stronger than them. Or you." "Enough." Tamiel glowered at Nicolo, willing him to obey. "You will remain here and keep order."

Nicolo nodded obediently, but his face was mutinous. That rebellious nature bothered Tamiel. Given enough motive—and enough leash—any dog will turn. Seeing how far Nicolo had been pushed, he thought it wise to relent. "Matho was the strongest of them, of any here, save for you. I cannot risk losing you as well."

"I'm not truly your servant, Neverborn."

"But you will do as I say."

That bright head dipped in homage. "Of course."

Tamiel gave him a look of doubt. "You will not pass these gates," he stressed.

"No."

"No, you won't leave or no you won't obey?"

Nicolo sighed. "I have always obeyed you."

"Not always." At Nicolo's look, Tamiel softened. "When it mattered, you did. I don't doubt your love, only your judgment."

Nicolo fixed his eyes at the shattered tree beyond the gates. "Command me."

"Go inside. Tell the others."

Nicolo spread his hands eloquently, the gesture plainly asking what he should say.

"That the time is not right. We must wait yet a little longer. Beck is so newly born to his nature that he is not strong enough to face Mastema. He has to be protected. I am bringing him to Desolo, where he *will* have sanctuary." His voice dared Nicolo to argue with him.

Nicolo obeyed, turning to walk down the long path to deliver the message to his brothers inside Desolo. Tamiel had to fight a wave of guilt and the sudden impulse to pursue Nicolo and beg his forgiveness.

I have not lied about that, at least, Tamiel swore fiercely. If one day Mastema falls, the threat is over and you and your brothers can leave Desolo forever. You can live in the same world that seduced angels. You can be seen, so long as you leave me alone to silence, leave me alone with her. She came to me over the dunes, her body wet with river water, her black hair in long ropes that whipped her calves as she walked, and my heart nearly stopped. How beautiful are the daughters of men...

No, let Nicolo go. Nicolo who is not the innocent boy he appears to be, but an ancient and powerful Nephilim named Tempus, though I must never speak that name. True names are power. Let him try to hold them together. He was right to doubt me. After all, what was I offering? He knew I was powerless against Mastema, who is an angel of the High Order. So was I, or I had been. What I am now is difficult to explain. Fallen, but a believer. Diminished but still fey and dangerous. Exiled, but not very far. Out of favor but not down for the count.

Maybe that's what drove Mastema to such extremes, the fact that God punished but did not annihilate. Mastema prefers absolutes. He wants fences on the world and everything in its place, neat and tidy as a churchyard garden. God is not like that. God is boundless. For all his wisdom, Mastema cannot comprehend Yahweh's need for surprises. An omniscient Being would naturally yearn for things beyond His control, futures He could not see, wills He could influence but not command. Strange, yes. It is odd when the puppeteer desires his wooden slaves to cut their strings, yet that is exactly what He did when he granted humans free will.

Of her own will she said yes, she would be mine. She lay with me in the garden, her white legs around my back, the scent of green leaves beneath us, her sapphire eyes wide open as I entered her and declared us wed...

Granted. Some say blessed, though not I. Free will can be a curse. Or so humans say. I would not know that. We were never given free will in the first place, and so our rebellion was unnatural and could not be forgiven. Angels are creatures of obedience. None of us are more an example of that than Mastema. He loves Yahweh without feeling the need to approve of His methods. Pity I could not do the same. The world might be a vastly different place. Hanoch was to be our garden, our own place in the deep where we could create Heaven in earthly form. Already there were shining, blue-tiled walls and fountains of mosaic where rainbow fish swam. There were fragrant hanging gardens and small fields of golden wheat, and our children—the *bene anak* were the most beautiful creatures yet born to Man. There was order and beauty, all the things Yahweh professed to love.

White skin, now red. Her flesh was torn, her perfect ivory breast pierced under her ribs. Everywhere, it was red. So much of it. I did not know humans could bleed so much...

He destroyed us with a sweep of His hand. Like Sodom and Gomorrah, He brought us to ruin in the space of an hour, sending our own brethren to hunt down our families with club and sword. Afterward, we lost many of our number. The Watchers numbered two hundred in the beginning. To this day, I know where only a dozen or more can be found. Not even the Veil can say fully where my brothers have gone. Perhaps she's hiding them, dispersed to sentient atoms in the limitless reach of her gaze, for I know she pities us, and she can be kind when it suits her.

As she was kind when she told me when and where to find Zefira reborn. I found a pretty, blue-eyed child in the care of priests, abandoned by his mother. I knew it was her, but I left the boy there. I was afraid Mastema would find Beck as he found the Chaldean priest's daughter in Eridu. I was afraid of losing him. If I had known what kind of life he would endure at the church I would have taken him that moment, hidden him far away with people I could trust, until the day he grew strong enough to bear the knowledge of what and who he was.

But there, again we come back to it. The great handicap of ignorance. Only the Veil can see all futures, and she chose to keep the lecherous priest's nature from me. Who can say why? Perhaps we cannot grow strong without adversity. Our pain makes us who we are. Though there are some sorrows I would gladly forgo—and forsake the strength they brought me as well—I cannot say who I would be without them. Through the Veil, I saw the young mother leave Beck with the priests. I only dared to check on him once, one precious little peek; a red autumn afternoon spent visiting a lonely boy in the guise of an old woman named Claire. He was sitting on the steps of the rectory in the fiery dusk, staring westward for the last shreds of light clinging to the sky. He was quiet even then, a loner by habit more than character. By then, I had guessed what caused his silence and the dark, hollow reaches in his gaze, but it was too late. I could not erase his past, for that is forbidden. The past is written in stone. All I could do for him was kill the priest.

I found Father Calvert in the rectory, his trembling hands skittering over his rosary, that milk-mild, smiling face twisted in horror. Before he died, I let him know what I was and what awaited him in Hell. Angel I am, but I can feel anger, and vengeance is in my blood. He died screaming, his heart burst to pulp.

They moved Beck soon after that, and the church in Wystan Parish quietly closed forever that year. Beck spent the next four years as an elderly priest's ward in Connecticut, a decent Orthodox man who did not believe in earthy attachments but believed strongly in duty. Beck was raised well there, but generally ignored, as per the secret instructions. Love would only confuse the boy. When that old priest succumbed finally to his mortality, Beck spent a month in a sterile foster home awaiting placement in another Catholic facility, but it proved difficult to assign the guardianship of a secretive, troublesome boy a breath away from puberty. He was sent south of Wystan Parish to a good Virginia boarding school, his tuition paid in full by a mysterious benefactor. It was the last time I interfered in his childhood. I had no further need to. The Veil had shown me when and where our lives would intersect again. Fate would bring Beck to me in Irenic-

I could not scream when she died. Though I felt her soul peeling away from flesh and beginning the long drift, I could not utter a sound. I held her as her body cooled and all around me the slaughter continued. One of my children ran past, white-faced with terror, not even recognizing me. A winged angel flashed by and swooped after him like an eagle. His white sword glinted in the sun and clove my son's body in two as he ran. The child's torso rolled in the sand and perversely wound up facing me, looking right through me, his little hands still trembling...

And so, as predicted, Beck came to Irenic. Not so maimed as I expected, but far from whole. With him he brought the woman, Catherine. I saw at once that he cared for her, though it was a guilty and halting emotion that confused him. The Nephilim are not capable of sustained intimacy with humans. Their detached natures make sacrifice and compromise impossible for any period of time. Quite simply, they care for very little other than themselves and their love affair with the Earth, and prefer casual copulation with humans or the embrace of their own kind. Many at Desolo had been lovers for centuries.

Beck, who did not know what he was, expected more from himself. He was an excellent chameleon and mimicker of human behavior, but his spirit was pure Nephilim. When he could not find what he saw as human qualities—compassion, love, empathy—on the surface of himself, he went digging for them, mining his psyche to find his idyllic conception of humanity, appalled when he found only clever emulations of it. It was enough to drive him away from Catherine in confusion, yet he always went back to her, grasping at his precious humanity, hoping for a seed to rub off on him and take root. It never happened. Love was a path of thorns for Beck, and it led him inexorably to Desolo and the truth.

And to Mastema.

Beck had known instantly that the snake drawn in blood under Paul's body—a replica of the talisman I had given him was a message. He had not known the message was meant for me. I felt it when Beck was born, whereas Mastema had not, but I had no hope of keeping Beck from him forever or of keeping them apart once they met. I could only delay and deny, stringing Beck along like a hooked fish, teasing him with bits of the truth, hints and suspicions, until he uncovered it himself. Mastema had all the subtlety of a hammer. He attempted to batter Beck with facts and history and visions, hoping that Zefira's soul, in collapse, would finally surrender to him. Could yet surrender to him. The Veil gave me no guarantees, only that Beck and I would meet again here and that there would be a chance to reclaim my love. Now that Zefira's soul was contained in an immortal vessel, we could be together forever, but first I had to keep Beck alive and let him grow strong. He could do that here.

"Zefira, Zefira," I whispered to her cold face, her wide blue eyes that saw nothing. Hot, desert wind scattered grains of sand on her face, and I laid my hand over her stilled heart. "You are my love forever, Zefira. You are my love forever. My love forever..."

"How did the address check out?"

"It didn't," Beck lied.

Beck had crossed paths with Sean on the highway and completed a dizzy, fishtailing U-turn to turn the car around, just before the flashing red and blue lights of Sean's patrol car turned off onto the county landfill road.

Sean walked by his side as they picked their way down a steep, icy hill to the jumbled valley of exposed refuse below. "So... what happened?"

Beck bridled before he admitted to himself that Sean had a right to ask. However, he had no explanation for how Tamiel had managed to overpower his will and force him to leave the estate. And then there was the warning: *for their safety, keep what you saw here a secret.* 

"Like I said, nothing."

"Is this going to become a habit?" Sean grunted as he nearly turned his ankle on a stone. When Beck didn't answer, Sean's jaw went hard. "You were in a warm, fuzzy, sharing mood earlier. Now you're all uptight again. It's starting to bug me."

"You'll get over it," Beck answered.

The landfill was a large, hollowed-out bowl ringed by earthen retaining walls that provided a buffer both practical and esthetic; motorists passing by on the highway were not subjected to the sight of towering mounds of rotting garbage. It also, Beck observed, seemed to keep the smell in. Now that they were close, the stench hit him like a wet slap. It was almost overpowering. He coughed behind his hand and saw Frank standing beside a large blue carryall parked near a mound of exposed garbage. Joss was beside him.

Someone was vomiting. Terry Fuller was braced against the steel siding of the carryall, which was still wet and slimy despite the freezing temperature. He was retching painfully, one hand clasped to his heaving abdomen. Beck stopped and patted Terry's shoulder. His palm itched where it had been frozen to the gate.

"Back to the station." Beck looked at Joss. "Help him, please."

Joss grabbed Terry's arm just as his knees folded. Joss glared at Beck resentfully as he held the younger man up.

"What am I, his mommy? It's not my fault if he can't handle this."

Beck had a biting comment ready about babysitting some of Joss's recent fuck-ups himself, but he merely looked at Joss and waited for him to relent.

"Just do it, Joss," Sean murmured.

Joss swore under his breath and hauled Terry away. Frank gnawed the end of his cigar and nodded at Beck.

"Welcome to bedlam," Frank said. "Are you a religious man, Merriday?"

"No."

Frank took the cigar out of his mouth and Beck saw the slight tremor in his hand. Frank ground out the butt on his shoe and dropped the damp tobacco in his pocket, his attempt at leaving the crime scene uncontaminated.

"I'll tell you something. I'm not religious either, but after today I'll be seeing a lot more of the inside of a church, because whatever did this is not human."

Sean's voice seemed to ring on the air. "Merciful God..."

Christ, was it *moving?* A step closer and Beck knew that it was. A twisted, dark mass that writhed wetly, accompanied by small popping noises that he realized were the sounds of them eating. Them.

"Where the hell are those lights?" Frank bellowed. "Lights, goddamn it!"

Light bloomed with an electric snap. The landfill became fiercely illuminated. Beck stared, his face turning deathly pale. Frank's voice sounded like it was issuing from a hollow tube.

"You usually don't find them above ground this time of year, but garbage means bacteria, which means warmth. Garbage, heat. Heat, they don't hibernate. There are hot spots all over this landfill." Beck's stomach felt as if it was trying to crawl up his throat. The cockroaches swarmed away from the light in a dark, chitinous stream, fleeing instinctively from the illumination and the warmth of their new-found meal, back into the crevices of boxes and rotting vegetable rinds and plastic cartons, under the blue carryalls and beneath the corpse they fed upon.

Beck tried not to gag. "Who found him?"

The body of the prone victim had been eviscerated and partially skinned. His abdomen was laid open as if in sacrificial offering and the skin of his face had been split and peeled back to reveal the grinning, lipless skull. His chest was a gaping red maw.

Frank hitched his trousers up officiously. "A bum. Some vagrant drunk, wandered in from God knows where. I gather from the attendants that he lives here sometimes. They see him around at night when they check the methane gauges. Can't ever catch him to toss him out, so they leave him be. Poor bastard," Frank sympathized and spat in the snow. "The old man said he saw something odd and wandered down here. Maybe he thought it was a deer carcass or something. What he found was this. Shook him up pretty bad."

Beck's head came up like a scenting hound. "Did he see the killer?"

"No such luck." Frank was already looking away to the sound of the ambulance crunching down the gravel path, emergency lights throwing red strobes on the dirty snow. "I had him taken up to the station for the report. I hope you still have some of that good hooch left in your desk. He's going to need a shot or two."

"Is he all right?"

"What?" Frank looked like he was surprised Beck was still there. "Oh, he'll be okay. Why don't you go and take the report? Getting cold out here." It was clear in the way Frank sized him up that he thought Beck might just freeze and shatter in the next gust.

Beck nodded to a cleared area free of officers. "Step over here, Frank."

Frank looked like he would bluster, but he saw the stone set of Beck's face and some heretofore untapped instinct must have cautioned him. He followed Beck.

"I'm telling you this tonight so there won't be any misunderstandings later." Beck's jaw clenched but he fought to hold his temper. It would be a mistake to go too far now and regret it later. "Let's get at least one thing straight: I'm your boss. What that means is I get to tell you how to do your job. It's not the other way around. Stop showboating around the men, especially in front of Terry and Joss. Terry I don't mind so much. He's a rookie but he's solid enough to know a bark from a bite. Joss already has his head up his ass. Don't confuse him any more than he already is."

Frank cleared his throat and spat before stuffing his meaty hands in his pockets. "This is my hometown, Merriday. Did you know that?" He took the shake of Beck's head as permission to continue. "I was born here. So far I haven't had to drive up to a neighbor's house or to some family my kids go to school with and tell them that their son or their brother is dead. Way back when I was a rookie, I was pissed off damn near all the time. You see... I realized I would never see the big cases come my way in Irenic. After a while, I was glad of it."

"The point, please."

Frank looked sharply at him, his eyes going narrow. "You know the only thing a small town dislikes more than outsiders? People who move to their town and stay outsiders. You've been here for three years, Beck, but you're not really *here*, are you?"

Beck was indignant. "That's not true at all."

"Where do you have dinner on Saturday night?" Frank challenged "Who do you play cards with? Where do Terry Fuller's kids go to school? You only know when Little League starts because you have to turn off the park lights at ten."

"I'm so sorry that I don't keep up with local sports."

"Don't give me that crap! I'm not talking about your goddamn level of sophistication. It's not about your tastes, it's about dedication."

Beck met his eyes levelly. "I'm as dedicated to my job as any officer—"

"But you're not *involved*. Not with these people and not with this town. You might live here, Merriday, but your heart isn't in it. You don't care what happens here half as much as I do. You can't."

To Beck's astonishment, Frank began to acquire an aura of wounded dignity. What makes this truly unbearable, Beck thought, is that he's absolutely right.

Beck nodded. He wasn't about to retreat into lies at this point. "All right, let's say you do care more than me. That qualifies you for what? There's no university degree for empathy, Frank. I got the job you wanted on my merits, based on skill and experience. The rest is none of your business."

Frank's expression showed he disagreed severely, but there's no way to tell a man that his heart is not what it should be. Not without being ready to back it up with a fist. Frank looked away.

"So how did that address check out?"

"It didn't," Beck said. "It was a dead end." Which was not exactly a lie.

"Maybe I ought to give it a shot," Frank said with casual indifference.

Beck turned on him, wolflike and furious, and Frank backed up a step in alarm. "No! No one goes there. Just do your goddamned job and keep out of my way, Frank. You hear me? Stay away from Desolo. I mean it."

Frank stared in astonishment as Beck stalked away.

Beck retrieved an evidence kit before he returned to the corpse. A roach crunched under his shoe as he approached and his throat moved in disgust. The body was posed in a cruciform, his head almost touching the greasy wheel of the green metal dumpster. The evisceration was crude and extreme, the entrails pulled forcibly out of the body and strewn in a trailing mass around the victim's legs and ankles. The ribs were pulled open and the heart had, as with Paul Rossetti, been removed.

He began examining the head. Thick, rubbery skin was peeled back from the face, exposing teeth, gums, muscle and white bone. The skin and eyelid from the right eye might have been difficult for the killer to remove, for the socket was empty, a dark gouged hole. The other eye was intact, a brilliant, mintgreen orb that must have been beautiful in life. Somehow, that made it look much worse. The hair—what Beck could see of it under the blood—was a shining copper.

Beck hissed in pain. There it was again. That surge of unreasoning grief, a throb of misery deep as a hammer hitting bone. It made no sense.

Flakes of snow blew against his face. Beck blinked and saw something on the corpse's chest. There, camouflaged by gore, was a small object glued to the skin with congealed blood. He took a pair of small tweezers from the kit and gingerly plucked the corner of the object. He peeled it off and held it up to the light.

It was a piece of thin foil backed with paper. There was a primitive snake scrawled in red across the paper side in ink. It looked like the creased, foil-paper lining of a cigarette pack. His brand of cigarettes. He was about to call for Frank when a spark of light flared at the end of the alleyway, behind the dumpster. Beck dropped the paper into a baggie and stood, moving around the dumpster to see. His chest seemed to freeze, icy tentacles sweeping into his veins, pounding in his neck.

The blond man from Desolo stood facing him, his face a mask of blood. It was in his hair and eyes. Streamers of crimson ran down his neck and gave his black cassock a glistening surface. The man's expression was nothing, no shadow of emotion, no feeling, as if he were the real corpse and not the lidless, mouthless thing on the ground. Beck clawed at his gun, but the man's bloodied eyes seized him, ate at him. He couldn't move, couldn't look away from that devouring gaze. The brick wall behind the blond man began to shimmer. A white wave rippled over the stone and a small cloud of light coalesced behind him. Beck knew it was happening again.

The killer reached out to Beck with a bloody hand. Beck wanted to recoil, and found he was frozen in place. The man held a torn bit of red and white paper. He clearly saw it was from a cigarette pack, exactly like the brand he smoked. The man silently tucked the paper into Beck's coat pocket, just above the trip-hammer of his heart. The cloud behind the killer swirled at its nexus, became clotted with brilliance, and then it rapidly grew until the man's body was bathed in the enveloping white light. Beck thought about reaching for the gun under his arm and recognized it for the pathetic gesture it would be. What use would a weapon be against this? The man took a step back and disappeared into the wall, but until the end his eyes held Beck's in an unbreakable grip. Then the light crawled over that bloody face, breaking the spell. Another soundless *crack!* as the wall quivered with the residue of energy, then was still.

He was gone. The light, if it had even been real, was gone too. Beck knew a moment of true terror as a new notion wormed its way into his head like a nail of ice: that nothing he had seen today was real. That he might be going insane. Beck felt the thin, dry texture of the paper in his shirt pocket. He took it out and looked at it. The paper was torn into the shape of a ragged heart and stained with blood.

This exists, Beck thought. This is a solid, tangible thing, just like the bloody drawing under Paul's body. That was real, too.

Was anyone with me when I saw that? How do I know I didn't draw it myself?

Then Beck saw his hands and he made a sound like a child, a frightened whimper muffled by the wind. Where before his palms had been pitted with raw, bleeding patches from the frozen gate at Desolo, was new, healthy skin, pink and scaling around the edges. His hands had healed.

Doug Lee Strunk, aged sixty-three, crouched in an uncomfortable high-backed wooden chair and clasped his hands to still their shaking. His chest rose and fell in an unhealthy rhythm, a soft, throaty ocean of phlegm and cheap tobacco vapors. Beck poured him a solid shot of tequila into a chipped coffee cup that was probably as old as the chair.

"Sorry about the cup," he said as he handed it over. The building that served for the police station in Irenic dated back to 1860. The solid oak doors were eight feet high, the ceilings easily ten, and the floors were polished, dove-tailed oak planks that reported every footfall throughout the building. Beck's office, with its blackened varnish door and its three pane casement window, gave off a particularly bygone feel, and sometimes Beck felt he was surrounded by echoes.

Frank claimed that Strunk lived at the landfill. He sure as hell smelled like it anyway. Beck wrinkled his nose, pushing his disgust aside. He sat on the edge of his desk, nearer to Doug than he wanted to be. Sean closed the door and turned on the tape recorder. He pulled out some forms as the old man drained the cup and offered it up like a sacred vessel.

"Couldn't spare a bit more, could you?" His accent was pure Corn Belt, south of Nebraska with a bit of country tang. Oklahoma, maybe. He coughed wetly.

"Later," Beck said. "Get through the deposition and you can take the bottle with you."

"Promise?"

"It's a deal," he agreed, though it hurt. Sean shot him a look that he ignored. Frank called it good hooch. Nut-brown Anejo Seleccion Suprema, at around three hundred dollars a bottle. It smelled like dirt and raw honey and kicked like a mule. All tequila had that, but none of them went down like this, a clean, dry finish like a sharp razor. When Beck first came to Irenic, he had traditionally kept a bottle in his desk and reached for it perhaps once a month. Over several years, his drinking habits had changed, sliding from moderate to indulgent to suicidally unwise, but the good bottle of Anejo remained inviolate and seldom used. Giving it up said more about how close he had gotten to this case than words would have, and it had been just over twelve hours since Paul Rossetti's body was found in the Mohawk.

Doug smacked his lips. "Sure is good stuff."

Sean grunted.

"That it is," Beck agreed. "Now, tell me in your own words what happened tonight."

Doug set the cup down carefully. He folded his arms under the white hospital blanket purloined from the ambulance crew. No one had asked for it back. "I ain't had a drop tonight before this. I want you to know that."

Beck nodded. "Okay."

"So when I tell you what I saw, don't go shaking your heads at me behind my back. I ain't no junkie, either. I was sober as a stone when I went down to the blue bins."

"The carryalls?"

"Yeah, they haul 'em in every day. The fresh stuff is on the bins. Everyone knows that. We all got our territories, too. Don't nobody bother me out there, they know what's mine. Except tonight when I got there, this other fella had done beat me to it."

"Who?"

"Didn't see his face. Didn't get a chance to see much of anything." Rheumy eyes stared at a point on the wall, his voice growing distant with strain. He moved the blanket aside and held up grimy hands encased in green knit gloves. "There was this white sheet of light, tall as a truck. A big light like a firework going off on the ground, all sparkly and shiny, but the light didn't go out. It moved." He made shadow motions with his hands as he spoke, mute gestures to portray what could not be described. "It looked like it had arms, sorta. More than two. A lot. It waved like it was underwater, or like it was dancing."

Beck nodded, feeling a hot prickle on the skin of his face that told him he was going pale. "Go on."

"An' then this fella who was in my spot, he saw the light and got all excited and started to run, but the light seemed to move around him and got in front of him. He tried to get away from it but the damned thing seemed to know where he was going before he did. And then..." Strunk tapered off and licked his lips, looking up at Beck. "You sure I can't have any more of that good stuff, boss?"

"Go on," Beck whispered. "What happened?"

Sean glanced up at Beck's hushed tone. "Beck?"

"What happened?" Beck demanded with an edge.

"All right, then. Don't say I didn't warn you." The old man sighed. "There was this fella on the ground, red-haired. I remember that now. Red as an Irish setter. Didn't have no coat or nothing, either, poor bastard. Someone's always worse off than you. Anyway, he was on the ground and that light was stalking him. I seen cats plays with birds and mice after they caught 'em, and lemme tell you it was just like that. That light went after him three, four times, moving across him, and every time it touched him he screamed like it was cutting him in two. His shirt started smoking and after a minute I seen it was on fire. That's when I decided I could move, I guess. I've been burnt myself."

Doug pulled off one of his knit gloves and showed Beck the patchy web-work of white scars on one hand. "You'd never guess where I got this, I bet. I know what it's like to have your skin start cooking while it's still on you. Wouldn't wish it on nobody, not even my worst enemy, nossir. I dropped my bundle and I took off down the hill towards it." He gave a short laugh. "Don't know what I was thinkin'. I mean, what was I gonna do? Throw a bucket of water on him? On *it?*" He chuckled again, then his expression went flat. "Anyway, it was too late. Took me a minute or two to get over the fence. There was ice all over it. When I got there, he was like you boys found him, skinned like a deer."

Doug's eyes had gone dark around the edges, and when he raised his head, Beck felt like he was peering down into a deep, dark well where firmly-buried memories had begun to stir restlessly.

"And if you try and tell me that boy fell into some kind of machinery or had himself an *industrial accident*, I'll call you a liar

to your face," Doug said. "Not even that light did that to him. That was hand work. I seen it before."

Beck swallowed. "Where could you possibly have seen anything like that?"

Doug held up his scarred hand and wiggled the pale fingers. "You're the same as every other snot-nose. You think the world began in the seventies? Men do things in wartime they'd never do otherwise." He hauled both battered dignity and aging frame up from the chair, pulling his glove on with sharp, angry movements. "And I'm telling you now, whoever did that to that boy had a score to settle. Make no mistake." He gave Beck a stare as hard as flint. "That was goddamned personal."

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Beck closed the door firmly, ignoring the avid interest of Joss and Terry in the outer lobby. Sean took Doug Strunk's half-completed deposition form, folded it, and shoved it in a drawer.

"That was interesting. A huge waste of time, but interesting."

Beck took a deep breath. "I saw him."

Sean frowned, sweeping a bit of paper off the desk into the trash can. "Who?"

"The killer."

Sean went dead still. "You saw him? Where?"

He hesitated, remembering Tamiel's warning, but no, it had gone further now. He would keep the more bizarre happenings from Frank and Joss, but he could trust Sean. "At the landfill. At least, I saw him there for the second time. The first was at Desolo."

"Desolo. Which would be... the address you told me didn't check out." Sean moved a paperweight on Beck's desk, his green eyes hooded and unreadable. "So you let him walk away."

"We couldn't have stopped him."

"There were a dozen armed officers around that landfill." Sean's voice was leading, prodding Beck along to an unknown conclusion. "You must have had your reasons for keeping quiet." "That's just it, I don't think I did. It wouldn't have mattered. He disappeared. And when I say disappeared, I don't mean he ran away, he just flat-out *disappeared*. One second he was there and the next he was gone. Damn it." Beck rubbed his temples to soothe the throbbing ache that had settled deep in his skull. "I don't know if I can say this."

Sean was looking at levelly. "No judgment," he said. "Spill it already. I'm listening."

"At the landfill," Beck began. "Frank said that whatever did this-the boat, Brenda Marger's store-he said that it wasn't human."

"Humans are capable of almost any atrocity, you know that. But now you're beginning to doubt it, aren't you?"

"Of course not," Beck scoffed immediately. "What I'm trying to say is that I was hallucinating back there. There's no other explanation."

"Oh, there is. There are a lot of explanations, you just don't want to think about them."

Beck frowned. This was not going like he imagined it would. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that you've got a nice, safe bubble going for yourself, chefe. For you, the world is made of concrete. Nothing invisible. No mystery and no monsters, and that follows no miracles and no gods."

Beck made a dismissive, uncomfortable sound and Sean began to look angry.

"No, you listen to me, damn it. You don't want to believe in anything spiritual because that implies that the rules can change. If there are no variables, then you have all the control in your life. You get to choose. Master of your own destiny, right? Only it isn't turning out that way." Sean's words seem to lash at Beck like hot smoke. "There are terrible, frightening things happening to you right now. You'd stop them from happening if you had a clue how they even began."

Beck's mouth was a thin line. "You don't know the first thing about what's happened to me, or what I believe."

"Don't be so sure."

Beck was surprised. "What are you...?"

The command came like a slap. "Tell me what you saw at Desolo."

Beck realized he did not want to defy that voice. "A man," Beck whispered, shocked into obeying. "A tall man... blond... with eyes like holes. He ripped a tree open that spilled out light like... like it was blood, like it was *bleeding* light, and he went into it."

"Joss didn't go with you to this Desolo, right? You were alone."

Beck nodded.

"So you have no corroboration for these events?"

"None," Beck murmured. "I also have no history of hallucinations or delusional paranoia. Today was the first time anything like this has ever happened to me. It's just bad luck that I went alone. Otherwise you or maybe Joss would have seen what happened to me or..." he groped for words. "Maybe you'd have seen what caused this. Maybe I had a seizure or something." Beck clasped his hands behind his neck in frustration. He knew what he sounded like. He could see it in Sean's eyes, which he imagined as guarded now against him, against his instability.

"Do you want to make a report?"

"Oh, Frank would love that, wouldn't he? Don't be fucking stupid." It came out harsher than he intended. "Listen, I know how it sounds, but I saw what I saw. I just... I have to find out what's causing it. There has to be some rational explanation."

Beck knew if Frank got wind of any *visions* there would be a shit storm. There's nothing worse than giving a man who feels slighted actual proof that he got passed over for an inferior candidate. Beck would be finished in Irenic. He wasn't ready for that. Not by a long shot.

"You don't believe me," Beck accused Sean flatly.

"I didn't say that."

"Well, then what?"

Sean's eyes slid to the empty coffee cup that had lately held Doug's shot of expensive tequila. "Beck... when you're ready to stop sublimating your mind with alcohol to avoid the truth, I might be able to answer you. The world is more than a test in logic. I can't say what you want me to say." "Which is?" Beck demanded. The barb about his drinking stung. Sean had always turned a blind eye to it before. He realized he had been depending on that for a long time now, the way Sean covered for him and forgave him and winked at his fuckups.

"Occam's Razor. Lex parsimoniae. You want a simple explanation free of elements that have nothing to do with the phenomenon you've been witnessing. I can't give you that. I can't help you wish away what you've been seeing, or tell you that it doesn't mean what your gut tells you it means."

Beck was shocked into silence for a moment. *He believes what* he's saying, Beck realized. *And he wants me to believe it, too.* 

"No," Beck said. "It's not that."

Sean smiled a little. "Not what?" he asked gently. He leaned back in the chair and studied Beck. "Not something that can't be put under a slide and examine? Not a piece of evidence or an intriguing puzzle you can reason a path into, slice it open, find out how it works? You want me to say that god and the devil have nothing to do with this. You want me to say that what you saw wasn't pure evil wearing a human skin, and I can't say that. I won't."

Beck tried to make his tongue work. Suddenly, it seemed he was in the room with a stranger. "We..." he croaked. He wet his lips and tried again, turning his back to Sean so the man could not see how rattled he was. *I'm fucking coming unhinged.* "We have to make some calls, the state and the FBI. At this stage, we're required to. People are dying. We need a better investigator, a team..." He raked his hand through his dark hair, leaving it spiked and wild-looking. "Someone better at this than me."

"There's no one better at this than you, and we're not calling anyone."

"We have to!" Beck snapped. "We have more than enough evidence that points to a serial killing. There are state procedures we have to follow, protocols." Beck found he suddenly needed that very badly, needed boundaries as comforting as a prison cell, the confines of rules and details, and a clear path to follow, one that did not deviate into dark alleys where black eyes gripped you and made you wish you were dead before you ever had to look at them again.

"We're not calling anyone," Sean repeated quietly. He got up and moved behind Beck quietly, putting his hands on Beck's shoulders, his hands moving in circles at first, then stroking down Beck's arms. "We don't need them. You can do this, Beck. Just stop denying it all and you'll have the answers." Sean was nearly purring against Beck's neck. "You're afraid of yourself, afraid of what you're capable of, of the things you might do. Don't be. Let it go and you'll know what's right. Just let it go, Beck. Let go."

Beck felt like his strength was being unraveled like a ball of string by Sean's words, like that deep, soothing voice was reaching inside him and stroking everything away with sound and warmth. In a minute he would collapse into Sean's arms and beg him to deal with this, to take it all away, make it not true.

Beck shrugged Sean off violently. "That's enough, damn it," he said shakily. He tried to draw the dignity of his rank back on like a coat that no longer fit him, just barely managing to meet Sean's eyes. "Make the goddamn calls, Sean. I want it done by the time I get back. That's an order." Beck crossed the room and jerked the door open, where Frank was planted like a broad tree in the doorway, one beefy hand raised to knock.

"Excuse me," Beck said coldly. He deftly maneuvered around Frank's bulk.

"Where are you going?" Sean called worriedly after him.

I need a drink, came immediately to mind, though he resisted the perverse urge to say it. He shouldered his way past Joss in the lobby and was out the door.

## *~*???

Sean observed that Frank's bad mood had gotten worse since his dressing-down at the landfill. He lit a cigar in Beck's tidy office and proceeded to fill every corner with the smell of dirt tobacco.

"What's the deal with the bat out of hell?"

Frank had never had much of a way with a phrase. "Could you translate that for me?"

"Maybe you missed it, but Merriday just took off like he was on fire." Frank stared down his nose at Sean. "What's the matter? He cutting you out of the loop, too?"

Sean gave him a dry smile. "Frank, we do not have a loop in Irenic. Or if we do, it's the size of a rubber band."

Frank took the cigar out of his mouth and held it between two fingers. Sean knew what ate at him, had seen it in his swagger and his too-loud voice and the way he pushed himself physically into everyone's space. All of that said: *I deserved a better life than this*.

Well, perhaps he did. Perhaps he knew he could have left his mother to the indifferent care of the state nursing home and gone off to technical college. Maybe he realized that selling plastic baggies for one night on a dirty corner in Buffalo would have netted him a week's paycheck from a factory job. But Frank Gauthier had made his choices. He just did not know they were the right ones, the only ones he could have lived with.

Sean moved around the desk and sat down. "Do you know how Beck solved the Omega murders?"

Frank shuffled to one of the smaller wooden chairs and settled his bulk into it. "Okay, I'll bite. Dazzle me, Logan."

"Quantico's preliminary profile was off track," Sean said. "There were a lot of theories. The symbol that Leonard Talmadge carved into his victim's foreheads was assumed to be the Greek letter omega, which has many, many connotations that could lead to any number of profiles. It's vital to find the one that has meaning to the killer, and that's a hard task. Sometimes it's impossible. But Beck theorized that omega was actually the Enochian letter mals. Enochian is a system of Gematria, or mystic geometry, developed in the sixteenth century. Mals and omega look exactly the same and are often confused, but they have different esoteric meanings. Beck constructed a lust-killer profile based solely on research using his mals theory. He was one hundred percent correct, right down to what area the killer lived in and his first name: Leo, the astrological correlation of mals. Talmadge was signing his work."

"Mystic geometry," Frank repeated. "Goddamn, that's sharp," he admitted.

And it burns your tongue to say so, Sean thought.

"It's more than that," Sean pressed, unwilling to let the blustering man off the hook. "The symbol could have meant a thousand different things to the killer. They combed the profile a dozen ways and came up with variables that could easily have led them in other directions. Wrong directions. The chance of hitting on exactly the right one is sometimes astronomical, and dangerous, because more people can die while you're tracking the wrong way. Only Beck was never wrong. He wasn't using his head when he constructed his profiles. He has something most investigators cultivate all their lives and never quite get the knack for: Instinct." He regarded Frank without pity. "Beck can't help it if what he does looks effortless on the outside. It's like playing the violin or being a great artist. You can't resent people for their talent. It's a waste of energy."

After a long moment, Frank nodded grudgingly. "I still want to squeeze his head like a grape."

Sean shrugged. "Get in line."

Frank coughed to hide his reaction. He looked like he wanted to say more, perhaps hoping he had finally found an ally who didn't think the sun shone out of Beck's ass, but instead he lumbered out of the chair and to the door. "Just one more thing—did Merriday get any leads from that Desolo Road?"

Sean kept his expression neutral. Either Joss or someone at the tax office must have told Frank what Beck was looking for, and how to find it. That made sense. As abrasive as he was, people here trusted Frank. "Not a thing."

"What did he find there?"

"Nothing. It's an empty lot."

Frank stared. "You're sure about that."

"Say what you came to say, Frank."

Frank shook his head and suddenly grinned, his hand on the door. "Forget it. Time for patrol anyway."

Frank left, closing the door more quietly than he had done in months. Sean frowned. He was not deceived that Frank had either accepted his answer or would let it lie there. Frank might even go after the truth himself. God help him if he did.

Carefully, Sean took the plastic baggie he had lifted from Beck's pocket out of his desk. Beck was one of the most focused individuals he had ever met, but sometimes he could be wonderfully distracted by the simplest of things, such as the nearness of another man. Sean held the baggie up to the light, turning it slowly so the drops of blood smeared on the plastic were illuminated like stained glass.

"Poor Matho," he murmured. "Why couldn't you wait? I had promised."

Sean pulled Beck's desk drawer open and scrounged inside the neat, organized dividers of paper clips and staples, bringing out a box of matches. He pulled the metal wastepaper can close to his chair and struck one.

The clear baggie caught immediately. Burning, melted drops fell and spattered the green rim of the can. The thin foil paper ignited with a hiss, and suddenly the scent of apples was bright in the air, chasing the odor of smoking plastic as the thin flames turned from yellow to violet. Sean held the baggie until it was consumed completely, turning his hand up so the last corner of plastic was ignited. Searing, four-hundred degree fragments dropped on his palm. He let them burn on his skin, then casually wiped the gluey ash away with a tissue.

His skin was unmarked

## &&&&&

Frank tapped on Britney's computer at the front desk as he was leaving the station. "I'm heading out," he told her.

Britney looked up from her rapid-fire typing and smiled at him, or tried to. A gnawed, tooth-marked pencil was in her mouth and one of her spiky braids swung back and forth before her eyes. She took the pencil out. "Where you going, Frank?"

"Patrol," he said, but Britney only winked.

"I know where you're going," she said smartly.

"Then keep it to yourself," Frank replied, wishing he had asked someone other than Britney what Merriday had been looking for at the tax office.

Britney imitated a growly German accent. "I know nothing. I see nothing." She hummed a little tune and tapped a few keys with black-painted fingernails. "But don't be late getting back," she quipped, enthusiastic now. "I have to get home and wash my hair. I bought this really cool new shampoo bombe from BP. It's infected with apple essence!"

What the hell is a shampoo bomb? And the only BP store Frank knew of sold two things: gas and motor oil. He didn't count the condom dispenser in the men's bathroom. Britney always made Frank feel like he was talking to an alien. She probably made everyone feel that way, except maybe Joss, who was as straight as Britney was odd. "I think you mean infused."

She shrugged and became engrossed in her typing again, her fingers flying over the keys, and Frank took the opportunity to make a quiet exit.

"Chefe doesn't know about this," Joss stated around a mouthful of cheese crackers. He sat beside Frank in the patrol car with the muted crackle of the police radio punctuating the rasp of hard snow on the windshield. They were parked behind the station, just sitting there.

"He doesn't know, does he?"

Frank's jaw was tight. "You're getting crumbs down in the seat."

Joss brushed his pants free of cracker fragments. "I'm supposed to go out with Brit this weekend. If the chefe finds out I helped you, he'll have me in the filing room until New Year's."

Frank thought about the odd little girl with the crazy hair he had known since she was old enough to ride her bike on the street. Her parents lived five houses down from him, and it was he who recommended her for the dispatch job to Merriday. She and Joss were an unlikely pair, but it was Frank's opinion that opposites were good for each other.

"You be sure you're nice to her," Frank warned, though truth to tell, it was Joss he should be worrying about.

"You're going to get written up," Joss worried. He saw that Frank waited until the red tail lights of Sean's car were far down the road before he started the engine. "Formal reprimand, Frank. Or fired."

Frank pulled out into the street and headed away from town, in the opposite direction. "We're not going to get fired."

"We?" Joss ducked his head. "I've got no beef with Merriday. I don't want him to start thinking I'm a troublemaker."

"Like me, huh?"

Joss winced. "Sorry."

Frank sighed heavily. "Everybody loves the chefe, don't they?"

"He's a decent shit, Frank. We all know that. What do you got against him, anyway?"

Frank gave Joss a glare that said exactly what he had against Becket Merriday, if Joss were capable of reading such things. It said that Beck was fifteen years younger and had snatched the rank of Chief from under his nose. That Mayor Cobbs had wanted a man with more experience than paunchy, small-town Gauthier. *Big time*, were his exact words, and Beck had plenty of that. Frank had heard the stories.

And he knew, beyond a shadow of doubt, that Irenic was going to hell in a hand basket under Merriday's derelict guidance. He'd known that the minute he laid eyes on the stuffy little shit, with his pretty blue eyes that stared right through a person's head.

Irenic was—had been—a tidy paradise of calm in a floundering state of crime, sex, and drugs. An officer had to ride these undesirable elements hard when they cropped up, had to keep at it and ward the filth away from decent people, but Merriday looked at shit and saw cinnamon. He let transients through without ticketing, settled domestic squabbles without arrests, and chased kids out of the park rather than drag their half-naked little asses home to their parents like he should have. He'd seen it the first time he'd laid eyes on Merriday: the laziness, the lenient attitude, no better than Sean in some respects, who was never going to buck for Chief anyway so it didn't matter as much what Sean did.

He'd thought he could change things at first, show the man the danger of his thinking, but no matter how much he glared, wrote complaints or tipped off the state office in Albany, it got him nowhere with Merriday. Those blue eyes just stared. Bastard. Probably inherited those china doll looks from the mother who spoiled him rotten and paid his tuition through that genteel Southern college.

Not like his old lady, who pushed and prodded him all through high school to make something of himself, only to admit in his senior year, as she stood and wrung her hands in her damp yellow apron, that the only way he was going to college was if he took the job at Forner Gloves and saved it up for himself. So he did, and two long years later he had enough for exactly two semesters at any of the Ivy League colleges in his growing stack of admissions pamphlets. But it would pay his entire tuition at community college. Then his mother suffered her first stroke, and that had stitched it all up nicely. He had made the best of it. He really had.

Frank glanced at Joss. "We'll be back in an hour, okay? Promise. One hour. I just want to check something out."

"There's nothing to check out. The chefe wouldn't say so unless it was true."

"He should have let me check it out for him," Frank said stubbornly.

"But why?" Joss pressed. "Come on, Frank. You've been all over Marger's place, the boat, the landfill. Do you have to be let in on every single thing?" Joss's tone revealed his bewilderment.

"You don't get it," Frank said. "You're right, Merriday lets me in on everything. Hell, he lets *you* in on everything. He doesn't give a damn who does what in his town as long as it gets done. No sense of rank at all. But for some reason, he doesn't want anyone within a mile of this Desolo Road, so that's where we're going."

Frank fished a lighter out of his pocket as he steered. He threw Joss a confident grin, teeth clamped around his cigar. "Don't worry so much, kid. It'll be fun."

Frank's callused thumb stroked the flint wheel of the lighter, briefly illuminating his features, and Joss felt a rill of cold running through his spine, like someone had dropped an ice cube down his collar. In the yellow spark of fire, Frank's face had looked like a grinning skull.



It took them twenty minutes in the dark to reach the dead end of Desolo Road. It had begun to snow heavily and neither of them could see anything past the trees, only darkness beyond the steep incline. Even Frank finally admitted they could do this just as well in the daylight as the dark, and he began to turn back.

Frank turned the wheel sharply to back the car up close to the edge of the trees lining the road, intending to make a threepoint turn back to the highway. As he pulled forward, he overshot, skidding on the ice, and the car rolled partly into the ditch on the opposite side. He turned the beams on high and the angled car aimed the headlights across the stand of birches instead of straight on. The black groove of the access road, almost invisible in sunlight, curved through the white birches like a dark arrow aiming them into the valley.

Frank took it as a sign.

Minutes down the hidden road. Frank stepped on the brake and stared through the windshield. The *whup-whup* of the wiper blades cleared new snow from the glass as Joss sat amazed beside him, mouth fallen open.

"Joss?"

"Uh?"

"You ever see this place before?"

Joss shook his head. "Nuh-uh."

Frank's answer was tight. "Neither have I. Not in all my forty-five years on this little spot of earth." His voice was insulted, angry with disbelief. "This place doesn't exist."

There were few mansions in Irenic. Like any small town, the grandiose homes were often used as landmarks, even those that were well off the beaten path. There was no possibility that this house had stood here for even six weeks without notice. Yet, as Frank saw immediately when he climbed out of the car, it had been there for decades, maybe longer. There was no sign of new construction anywhere; no broken ground or piled equipment, nothing that spoke of recent building. The oddlyshaped metal gate at the bottom of the hill was closed, transformed by the harsh headlights into black spikes jutting from the earth. Joss got out and stared down the hill. "I think we should head back, Frank."

Frank did not answer.

Joss turned to look at him over the hood of the car. "Hey, Frank?"

Frank was staring at the gates. The wind buffeted past them and hit the gate, drawing a long wail from the pipes.

Joss shivered. "I really think we should go back now!"

Privately, Frank agreed. There was something here. Something that elicited the same edgy feeling he had gotten back at the landfill, a heavy, pregnant sense of expectation, liberally laced with dread. He might have decided to go back. He might have pushed on and gotten as far as the strange gates before its locked mouth and mournful howls drove him back. But the matter was decided for him when a white owl burst from a tall evergreen, trailing a comet of snow from her wings.

Frank looked up at the bird that seemed to drift far too slowly overhead, gliding rather than flying, as if sailing on a calm lake. He opened his mouth to say something to Joss, turned his head, and saw hell from the corner of his eye.

An iron bar smashed across his face. At first, that's what he thought it was, and then he saw fingers attached to it. An arm. It couldn't be an arm. Flesh did not feel like that. Frank fell back, his broken mouth running blood down the front of his jacket in a red tide. He tried to shout a warning to Joss, but his jaw wasn't working right.

"Guh..." he mumbled, crawling back on his arms, dazed from the blow. Joss ran around the front of the car and halted in the glare of the headlight beams, looking down on Frank with fear practically leaping out of his broad face.

"Jaysus Christ, what the hell?" Joss clawed for the weapon at his hip.

"Yurr!" Frank tried to shout the warning. His jaw dangled uselessly, a dislodged tooth rolling on his tongue like a pebble.

Joss stood looking down at the ruin of Frank's face as Mastema seized him from behind, took the man's wide jaw under his hand and wrenched savagely, breaking his spine at the neck. Mastema changed his grip and pulled, ripping through skin and muscle until Joss's neck parted from his shoulder. Frank saw the white cords of tendon showing in Joss's neck in the shock-slowed instant before the great spouting of blood began. He wailed, a sound of pure revulsion and dismay, and scuttled back further to avoid the arching splash of red thrown over the snow.

*Red paint!* His mind babbled. *Somebody spilled some paint!* It was not—could not—all be Joss's blood. Not all of it. Not this stream that flowed from the mangled thing at his feet. Then, whatever had killed Joss, the man, the creature, turned its eyes on him, and Frank felt his bowels let go.

He had been right all along. The killing thing in Irenic was not human. Eyes too large and black, the skin pocked by patches of stiff animal hair, sharp teeth looming from a wide mouth, and the eyes *the eyes his eyes swallow the world*...

Just make it quick, God, he prayed soundlessly. That's all I ask. Just make it quick.

It was not.

Beck tossed his keys on the scratched night stand and collapsed on the bed. He noted that the silverfish still bodysurfed in the tequila bottle, its hair-like legs trawling the liquor. He picked the bottle up and watched the insect spin around, wondering if he was desperate enough for a drink that included bug parts.

Well, that depends. What do you mean by desperate? There's all kinds isn't there? Frank is desperate for my job. Joss wants a promotion and a pretty girl. Catherine wants me back, and Sean... god knows what Sean wants. The keys to the liquor cabinet, maybe. A curfew for wayward cops. Or me naked and trussed with an apple in my mouth.

Beck's throat ached with wanting a drink and he felt a crawling need in his gut. He poured the tequila into the sink and turned off the light. The bed was narrow but deep, and sleep did not elude him for long.

## *୶*ଡ଼୶ୠଡ଼

No, Sean.

He hadn't thought it could be so hard to shut a goddamn door. Sean pounded on the thick, dead-bolted frame until he opened it, then apologized and wheedled and smiled until he had his foot wedged in the door. He really meant to say no, but hadn't counted on Sean being so friendly, so persuasive, pressure without pressuring. Beck said *no* several times, right up until Sean was in his hotel room, sitting on the bed with him, a teasing smile playing about his mouth, saying something about... owls? He was talking about owls and taking a CD out of his pocket. He put the music on and it started to play.

No, Sean.

He didn't want to listen to music or talk, especially not this music. He wanted that damned buggy bottle of Cuervo back and a hot shower and maybe a quick, soap-assisted jack-off under the spray. To tell the truth, masturbation had only lately occurred to him. Maybe that was because Sean kept scooting his big frame closer to him on the bed, hiding his everincreasing proximity with animated talk about the discordant music wailing on the stereo, and Beck said *No, Sean* again when Sean laughed at something Beck said. Sean dropped his arm around Beck's shoulders.

No, Sean as Sean's hand brushed across his face, then dropped and settled on his stomach. Began rubbing in circles. Like it was a slow game of rub-your-belly-pat-your-head, only Sean wasn't patting his head. He was drawing the muscled arm he had draped around Beck's shoulders closer, pulling him tighter and No. Sean as a firm mouth touched his and a heated tongue parted his lips. He was quite sure he repeated it several times before his back touched the mattress and Sean was unbuttoning his shirt. And oh god, no, Sean when clever fingers argued with his belt and zipper, pulling his pants down to his ankles and pushing his shirt off his shoulders. Somehow his shoes dropped to the floor and Sean-NO Sean!-was raising his legs and then a hand slipped between their bodies and he heard a belt being unbuckled, the hiss of a zipper. He felt a warm brushing on his stomach as Sean took his penis out and began rubbing it on Beck's skin, down around his balls, sliding it in the groove of his stomach, pressing the dripping head into his navel and he was hard, oh Christ, Sean was hard for him.

His breath hitched as he sensed Sean fumbling with something on the table beside the bed. Small, jerky movements, and then cold, slick fingers touched him and he hissed in alarm, truly frightened now and—*Sean, goddamnit!*—then there was the old pressure and the pain. The old terror, which was not terror now because it was friend-Sean and not the demon-priest. And Beck kept insisting that Sean had to stop, that they couldn't do this, and Sean kept nodding soberly and agreeing, and at the same time lined up his lubricated cock and began to gently and deliberately push at Beck's tight hole.

No, Sean. Jesus, stop. I don't... I can't... Beck panted and argued logic with Sean in fierce whispers, but his legs were bending and wrapping around Sean's back, pulling him close, and Sean was smiling down at him in lust and love but still pushing his dick into him with oh so measured movements.

Beck's nails scrabbled at Sean's bare back—when did Sean take his shirt off?—as Sean pressed deeper into him, to the hilt, and rested there, his mouth close to Beck's ear. Warm breath gusting over his cheek as Sean finally made a trembling sound of pleasure. A low, soft moan whispered into his ear, followed by the wet trace of tongue as Sean began to move inside him and *what was that music*? A shrill, keening, female voice ululating exotic words with unknown meanings, accented by pipes and shaken rattles and a small host of bells that seemed to cut right through his skull and burrow into his ears. Where had he heard it before?

Sean pulled out a fraction of an inch and pushed back in with agonizing slowness, repeated it, and Beck realized that this really was happening, that Sean was actually fucking him.

The breath shuddered out of him in a wracking thrill as Sean rose up on his arms and changed his angle, brushing his cock across that incredible spot deep inside of him. Icy darts flashed up his spine, making him arch his back and spread his legs wider in a silent, shamed plea for more. Sean chuckled and winked at him and obliged, taking him in short, hard strokes that forced a yelp from Beck's throat. It didn't hurt. Not really. Not much.

And this was Sean, his friend. Sean, who wouldn't hurt him, but who was still curling his large fingers around Beck's wrists and shoving his arms above his head, holding him pinned as he began to thrust into him roughly and oh shit—*shit!*—now it was hurting all right, it hurt like hell.

Beck whimpered and whipped his head from side to side— Sean, no, please. Stop, okay? Just stop—begging and moving not in passion but in fear, trying to squirm out from under the larger body, finally giving a desperate, cheated cry of betrayal and wrenching one wrist free to throw a punch—

Found it caught fast in a grip like iron teeth ready to cut his wrist in two. He stared into Sean's face, shocked beyond speech, only it wasn't Sean.

The white priest's collar glowered at him like something alive, sickly white, a pale, dead worm wound around the man's neck, and Father Calvert looked down on Beck and gave him his good-natured, mocking smile. The one that used to terrify him as a boy, knowing it portended some new and inventive cruelty for his body.

"My angel," Calvert crooned, and pushed deep into him. Beck screamed.

## ୖ୶ଡ଼୶ୠ

He opened his eyes, the scream in his throat still fighting to get out, pushing at the cage of his lips until his tongue felt like it was bulging. Beck rolled out of the damp bed, feverish, the sharp tang of his own sweat churning his stomach, and hurried into the bathroom where he puked up dark, sour coffee into the toilet bowl.

He ran the sink full and splashed his hot face, rinsed his mouth out and poured a handful of cool water over the back of his neck, eyes closed and body wracked with post-vomiting shudders. Through it all, he had the feeling that he was being watched. The skin of his arms pimpled into gooseflesh as he regarded the empty bottle of Cuervo still resting on the counter, a few piss-yellow drops left in the bottom.

Fuck this, he thought, cold tremors vibrating his muscles, his heart sinking into lines of defeat. Just fuck this. What am I even trying for?

He dressed quickly, so eager to get away from the silent, watching room that his hands shook and his fingernails scratched bloody lines into his right leg as he jerked his pants on.

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Beck's cell phone rang as just as he maneuvered the car onto Albany Street. He held it in his hand for a moment, sorely tempted to throw it out the window and hear the satisfying crunch as it hit the pavement. There was no traffic on the slushy street, just piles of snow dinged with dirt and churned into dark gray slurry by tires and road salt.

"Merriday."

"It's me."

"Hi," he said guardedly, the skin of his face beginning to tingle as he remembered his dream.

Sean's husky voice lapsed into an uncomfortable pause. "Okay, this is the part where I say something funny and clever and you make a slightly less funny comeback and then I ask you to meet me somewhere to hash this out."

The corner of his mouth twitched. "That's good. I haven't heard that one before."

"See? Now we're doing the clever thing."

"You really want to meet me?"

"Uh-huh."

"It's getting pretty late," he stalled, deciding.

"The Garrison. Twenty minutes." Sean hung up.

Beck dropped the phone on the seat and started looking for a spot to turn around. He had driven aimlessly for half an hour, out to the park, past Bridger's field, over to the old Stone Church. When he realized he was avoiding certain places, like Marger's Outfitter and Moccasin Bridge, he drove past those, too, and wound up staring at the battered sign pointing to the interstate, wondering if he should just take the on-ramp and keep going. Albany would hire him. Hell, they'd be thrilled to get him. He could push on, all the way back to Virginia, rent a box-sized apartment and get lost in a basement full of case files at Quantico. They would be happy enough to get him back. They would even accept his insistence on desk work. He was not sure he ever wanted to be back in the field again.

Then there was the empty white church in Wystan Parish, where not so many years ago a nice, personable priest had been known to quietly take in orphans. Father Calvert had died when Beck was seven and the diocese had appointed a new priest after him, a Jersey native with sandy hair and sparkling blue eyes. The new priest had tried to be kind to Beck, but whenever he came close all the boy could see was skin like parchment, outstretched hands dry and rough as old paper...

Angel? Where are you, angel?

So much of Hell in so small a place. Evil doesn't need much room to grow. It can shelter well in the transept behind the altar, where the red carpet hides bloodstains as well as other, darker fluids. Evil can flourish under the most watchful eye and never be noticed. Goodness can burrow like a frightened animal and never show its face. Every inch of the earth is a battleground, Beck thought.

If all the evil in the world suddenly vanished overnight there would be live feeds on nightly news and hosannas to the stars. Who marks when goodness departs? At best, they're still only icons, like Mother Theresa and all those moldering Popes. Holiness is not conferred by a uniform, and Beck had found more of God in Catherine's love than he had ever seen robed in a black habit. What about the small saint, an old woman who brought forbidden hope to a lonely boy on the steps of a church? Claire vanished the same day she appeared in his life. Maybe she died the same day as Father Calvert. Everyone said he was lucky to be spared a life as a ward of the state. They told him war stories about foster homes and pretend-fathers smelling of whiskey and sweat, and the sound of footsteps outside the bedroom door. If they only knew the stories he could tell.

Angel, my angel. Don't ever tell, angel. Don't ever, ever tell...

They lectured the boys day and night about evil and temptation, but never about good. As if true goodness could never enter into their mortal experience. Evil, that was easy to believe in. It's all around, always. But purity, a great and shining *good* that exists for reasons unknown, a good that you can touch and see, that's too much to believe in.

Sean had not believed him. Why should he? He sure as hell wouldn't believe anyone who stumbled in with that story. He might give the guy a breathalyzer test or call the hospital to see if there was someone in the psych department on call, but he wouldn't believe him. Occam's Razor aside, he had not been the most reliable guy lately, and he had no right to resent Sean for it. He wouldn't blame Sean a bit if he spilled everything to Frank.

God, I need a drink.

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The Garrison lot was full and the bus station lot was snowed under. Beck drove around the block and entered the centuriesold Stockade section, looking for a cleared space to park. He navigated the cobbled streets, the symmetrical bulk of Federalist and Georgian architecture casting wide swaths of shadow on the narrow, tree-lined avenue. He was about to turn when the road dipped and the wheels began to skid on the ice under the crisp new snow. Beck fought with the steering wheel, tapping the brake. No help. The car slid down the road in eerie silence, gathering speed and—*holy shit!*—skidding into the other lane, the front end turning inexorably toward a row of parked cars. In a panic, Beck downshifted viciously, hearing the grind of metal on metal. He tapped the brake again, then slammed his foot down and narrowly missed pushing the fender into the trunk of a large oak. The car came to a slippery halt. He cut the engine and looked at his hands. They were shaking.

# Fire clawing up his arm.

An angry line gathered between his eyebrows as he stared at his hands, the only sound the popping of the cooling engine and the soft scratching of snow falling on the roof.

#### I'm not hurt, Cat...

Lake George, four years ago. Catherine had fretted and paced behind him as he poured lamp oil on the dry firewood stacked in the stone fireplace. They had managed to get a small fire going with twigs, but it had died when they piled the larger wood on top. Catherine had warned him several times that it was dangerous to pour fuel on heated wood, but Beck ignored her. There must have been a few hot coals left under the stack. The purified oil had caught the heat shockingly fast and the blaze had roared up, igniting the sleeve of his sweater.

*I'm not hurt, Cat!* He was laughing. *Laughing.* He knew he was not hurt, could not be hurt, but she could.

Catherine had uttered little shrieks of alarm, flogging him with a throw rug as he rolled on the floor, laughing with fright and embarrassment. They had made love quickly on the floor, the smell of burnt wool in the air, their bodies urgent from relief and concern. Catherine kissed Beck's arm repeatedly to assure herself that he was truly not burned.

Later, as the firelight played on her amber skin, Beck placed the tiny golden cross around her neck, his present to her. He had twirled it around his fingers, admiring the way the shining gold accented the tanned cleft between her small breasts. Beck had no faith of his own and he had mildly ridiculed her for her belief. Not once, but several times. They had fought about it and the gift was his apology. She never took it off.

The next day she went swimming alone in the lake.

No one had ever kissed him that gently, had ever been so patient and loving and demanded only his love in return. And how did he repay her? He said the words often enough. *I love you*, whispered under the covers at night, the goodbye kiss in the morning, the last thing you say before you hang up the phone, but he had never meant it. He knew that now. He would have let her die.

When they returned to Virginia, he began to hear the strained notes of concern and worry in her voice. She finally noticed he could not look at her straightly, that he avoided meeting her eyes.

"What's wrong, honey?"

The pain was like a vise tightening on his throat. Nothing, babe. Same old song. Just don't call me if your life is in danger. Don't get caught in a burning building, a sinking ship, a cramp in the water, because I'll save my own ass first.

Beck sat hugging his arms to his chest until he could breathe again. He took the dog-eared little photo of her in the green sweater out of his pocket and stared at it until his eyes smarted.

I did love her, he thought fiercely. I really thought I did.

After a while, he stuffed it back in and fumbled for his keys. He knew it was too cold to be outside for long, but a part of him craved the discomfort. Cold can punish as easily as heat.

He walked with his fists jammed deep into his pockets, chin tucked into his collar, breathing down into his shirt to gather the scanty warmth from his breath. Questions marched like soldiers in his head. Questions about Catherine, about Sean, about the bodies of dead men. He tried to sidestep them but they would not go away. One loomed largest of all, and he flinched from it.

Was he hallucinating or merely-finally-going insane?

The old houses with their winter-dark upper stories seemed to loom over the narrow street. Beck saw Christmas tree lights winking from behind curtains and antique doors hung with fragrant evergreens and firs. A rainbow of tiny lights was strung from house to house in a contented row, as if uniting them in cheer.

In contrast, the brick walls of the many small alleys were covered with brittle brown streamers of dormant English ivy. The streetlamps conspired with the moon and the snow and the cramped, black spaces to cast long, serpentine shadows across his path. Darkness can alter so many things. Shadows can seem like strangers, long fingers of dusk outstretched to ensnare.

Beck walked slowly past the deserted courtyard of an eighteenth-century church. All that was left of the grounds was the worn cemetery, the charnel house and part of the church's collapsed stone foundation and mortared chimney. The large charnel house, which had once housed unearthed bones to make space in the church graveyard, was shaped like a beehive with an arched entrance that would open east if the timbered double-doors had not been padlocked shut. Beck had ordered the locks himself the last time a fire had broken out in there. Apparently someone, either kids or just locals inclined to the occult, thought it was very cool to burn candles in the charnel house on Halloween and full moon nights. He had nothing against that, but whoever they were, they were careless and they left trash lying around to catch fire. Leaving it open had become a hazard.

All the human remains that had once lined the interior of the building had long since been moved to other interments and the bare earth floor poured with cement, but it was still a ghoulish reminder of the end of all flesh. Perhaps that was the intent.

Pure white snow cascaded past the dark colors of the charnel house. Something about the rock and mortar building captivated Beck. Maybe it was simply the age and somewhat macabre history of the place, or the way the packed snow gleamed like icing on the sloping roof. The fascination seemed to pull at his feet, so that every step he took past the little graveyard nearby was an effort. He hurried past and did not look back.

The Stockade had a sullen gothic aura that appealed to him. The temptation was there, dripping like icicles from the stone walls, to linger over the silent buildings and brood. He knew why so many people were fascinated with gargoyles. For a moment, he imagined he were one of them, spending a century contemplating the end of his nose, or the color of rain on moss-covered rock. One of his quirks was that he tended to interpret much from stone and inanimate objects. Some of them had a feeling of power to them. *Mana*, he thought, the power that you lend to a thing.

Bright lights bobbed through the white haze at the end of the street. THE GARRISON, announced the sign on the brass post. The building was constructed of centuries-old timber on a rough-hewn stone base. It was stout and square and had the feel of a castle, and it had served as a blockhouse for the town in colonial times.

Inside, the bar was packed. The number of people and the sprawling bar and large oak tables made it seem smaller than it was, cramped and narrow near the entrance. The floor was oak, the ceiling high and timbered, and the bar lined with a brass rail. Red and green streamers hung over the bar, and an enormous juniper tree, blazing with too many lights and enough tinsel to open a small aluminum mine, lurked in the corner, topped by a white plastic angel holding an ugly pink nub of a baby Jesus. Music pounded full bass and without much quality, the air full of cigarette smoke.

Sean was sitting at the bar. He waved at Beck as a short, pretty brunette appeared at his elbow. The girl leaned on her palm, smiling up at Sean. Sean grinned down at the girl and handed her several quarters, mouthing the word *music* at her. The girl kissed Sean on the cheek and sauntered off to the jukebox.

Beck deliberately walked away, his cheeks burning with heat. He chose a table to the rear of the bar near the pool tables and bathrooms, where the noise was muted to a faint roar. After a few moments, Sean followed him.

"What do you want?" Beck said before he could sit down.

Sean sat anyway. "To talk."

"Why don't you go back to your friend over there... what's her name?"

"Janine something."

"Sentimental, aren't you?"

Sean gave him a hard look. "Her name doesn't matter because I'm not going to marry her. I'm just going to sleep with her."

That hurt. Beck tried to steady his breathing and calm down. His hands were shaking and he clasped them tightly together before Sean could see. "Why?"

"Because it's Christmas and I'm lonely and I'm bored and she's willing. But she's not my friend. You're my friend."

The waitress appeared. "Cigarettes," Beck said quickly, glad for the interruption. He tossed his empty pack on the table to show her the brand. "And Tequila." He held up three fingers, a double shot. "This much."

"House brand?"

Beck named a medium-quality anejo.

"It's price-eey," she warned him in a sing-song voice.

"I know."

She moved away. Sean was watching him. "Did you see Catherine?"

"Don't."

"I was just—"

"Don't!" Beck slammed his hand on the table. Sean didn't flinch. "You have more games than... Jesus, I don't know what. You called *me*, Sean. I'm here. Now either get rid of the girl or go back to her, but don't sit there like a goddamn jilted bride."

Sean splayed his large hands flat on the table. "I'm doing what you told me to do. I backed off." He gave Beck a long look. "I *do* want to talk, but did you think I was going to turn celibate just because you turned me down? Because you keep turning me down?"

Beck kept the bitter response behind his teeth until his drink and smokes arrived. The waitress took her money and disappeared quickly, sensing the tension at the table. Beck tipped half the shot glass into his mouth and held the burning liquid on his tongue for an instant before swallowing. Spreading warmth began in his stomach and reached down to his legs. He lit a cigarette.

"You and me, Beck, we're the types who find it hard to be faithful." Sean indicated his empty shot glass. "You have your way of straying and I have mine. Don't ask me to belly up to the bar if you're not going to meet me there."

"No idea what you're talking about," Beck lied. He downed the rest of the shot.

"Better dial it down on that."

"I'm not drinking to get drunk. If I wanted that, I'd order mescalero. I'm cold and I'm tired."

"Come back to my place, then. We'll talk."

Beck snorted. "You mean we'll talk about the murders. What for? I saw what I saw."

"What did you see?"

Beck blew a stream of smoke out of his lungs. "I don't want to talk about it anymore. Not with you."

Sean said nothing for several moments. Beck could see him struggling for words. "What can I say?"

"You could start by apologizing."

"Mm. I have nicer ways to apologize than talking."

That was like Sean, thinking he could fix anything if he could just pour enough charm into it. Beck refused to be charmed.

"Okay. Sorry for the girl or sorry for not believing you?"

"Take your pick."

Dubiously: "Sorry doesn't really fix anything, you know."

"I want to hear it anyway."

"All right, I'm sorry." Sean paused. "I'm sorry for noticing that you drink yourself to sleep every night. I'm sorry for trying to pull you out of that moody funk you get off wallowing in. I'm sorry for not encouraging you to believe you're going insane rather than believe in something you can't examine under a microscope. Happy now?"

"No," Beck said flatly.

Sean hissed out a breath of frustration. "You're so goddamned angry. Not just over this, over everything. Where does all this come from, Beck? Who hurt you so badly that you have to hurt anyone who tries to get close to you to get even?"

Beck swallowed hard. "I definitely don't want to talk about that."

"Why?" Sean challenged. "Are you actually admitting you're afraid of something? That's why you do this, you know. Fear. I can smell it on you every time I touch you."

Beck shook his head soundlessly in denial. He was not going to tell Sean about Father Calvert. Never. And he knew that's what Sean was pushing for, to be let in. Sean already knew all the surface details of his life. He even knew the intimate details of his relationship with Catherine, but there was a line there that Beck never let Sean cross, and it started when he was seven, the day Father Calvert died. Anything previous to that was an abyss as far as Sean was concerned. He would never let anyone into that painful depth, never.

Beck could feel the bass from the music vibrating through the floor under his shoes, and he stared at the black window against the far wall so hard that his eyes ached, willing the sudden pain in his chest to go away.

"Maybe you should just stop touching me, then," Beck said coldly. Unforgivably. "That would solve both our problems."

Sean simply looked at him. When he spoke, his voice was low and subdued. "Tasting sorrows of which we have no part. That's where rage comes from. Who made you taste that grief, Beck?"

"None of your goddamned business," Beck said with a catch in his voice, suddenly fearful. Sean almost sounded like he *knew*, but he couldn't know. Beck had never told. No one ever knew.

"I'm sorry."

Beck stabbed his cigarette out in the ashtray with short, angry motions. "You're right. Sorry doesn't fix anything."

"When are you going to stop being such a prick?"

"When you stop sticking yours in anything that moves."

The insult made Sean's lips go white. "That's hitting low, chefe."

Maybe it was. Beck looked away in shame. "Sorry," he mumbled.

Sean stood up. "When you're ready to be friends, I'll be around."

Beck felt heartsick as he realized Sean was leaving, going back to his girl, giving up on him. *Haven't I given him plenty of reason to give up on me*? "Do me a favor, Sean."

Sean turned back. "Anything."

Beck saw the curve of Sean's jaw, the way his wheat-colored hair caught the light and threw back gold. Most of all it was his eyes, artless green, direct, subtle as a hammer hitting between his ribs. He whispered it with all the need he had left, "Stop being my friend."

Sean froze. Beck thought he might have seen hope there. "Are you asking me?"

He nodded, a little breathless. "Uh huh."

Sean studied him, his eyes narrowed inscrutably. Doubt? Beck hoped not. Expressions were masks. There was so much more hiding under the surface, and he desperately wanted to pry off the lid and discover what waited there. For the first time, he wanted Sean to do the same to him, to reach inside and lever past that wall of rage, to climb into him carrying that goddamned gentle concern like a healing balm and make him whole again. If anyone could, it had to be Sean.

Sean's fingers closed on Beck's arm and then he was hustling Beck out of the bar, towards the back door, into the frigid air of the night. Sean was only a few inches taller than he was, but Beck could feel the strength in his arms. If he wanted to, Sean could have slung Beck over his shoulder and carried him out.

Sean shut the door firmly and the sudden quiet engulfed them. Beck heard the heels of his shoes sliding on wood and then crusted ice. There was a trim cobblestone courtyard behind the bar, a round space neatly framed by tall, antique monuments of brick with square, empty, dark windows like blinded eyes staring out into the world. A fresh layer of snow had fallen over the tiny courtyard, and the antique gas streetlamp slid flickering golden light over Sean's features. He could hear the sputtering of the lamps, and the breath of the wind as it sighed through the trees a block away.

Sean put his big hands on Beck's shoulders and pushed him against the rough, freezing stone of the wall. Beck stood there dumbly, his muscles loose, letting Sean move him however he would. He was tired of resisting when he didn't even know why or what he was fighting against. *Ghosts, that's what. You've been pushing him away for three years because of a ghost with a white collar.* He was weary of fighting it. All he wanted now was to pull Sean close and beg forgiveness.

Sean bunched his hands in the collar of Beck's coat and pressed his body against Beck's. He brushed Beck's lips carefully with his mouth, a feathery press of skin that shivered Beck's spine and sent a rill of ice up his back. This was what he didn't want? This was what he was fighting so hard not to reach for?

Beck's arms wound around Sean's waist and he held him loosely, tilting his head back and parting his lips, wanting to feel Sean's tongue graze his. When it did, Beck gasped like an electric wire had been placed against his skin. It felt like a snap of energy, a connection that had just needed the right conductor to channel the kind of power he felt zinging up his nerve pathways. There was something mystic about it, too, something voluptuous and arcane in finding the perfect mouth to kiss, the perfect one to understand.

The kiss deepened, reached inside Beck and began to tear something down within him. He moaned into it, swaying forward. He didn't have a thought for the people inside the bar, people who might recognize their police chief being dragged out the back door of a bar by his officer, who might look and see Beck's hands rise and his fingers tangle in Sean's tawny hair as Sean pulled Beck closer, almost dragging him off his toes. Right now, he didn't give a damn if their pictures wound up on the front page of the newspaper. He just wanted more of Sean's mouth, craved it like air or water as he licked his way into another kiss, moaning as their teeth clicked together and Sean's tongue wrapped around his.

Beck felt his knees want to give, to go down, and he imagined what it might feel like to have the silky, sweet feel of Sean's hard cock in his mouth. That thought alone was enough to make his hips jerk forward. He whimpered against Sean's mouth, needing him so damn *bad*...

"Beck," Sean whispered, pulling back and looking into his eyes.

Beck was breathing hard, grinding his hips against Sean's, both of his hands suddenly jammed into the hollow of Sean's

thighs, where his fingers fumbled with the zipper of Sean's pants.

"I want to make you feel good," Beck whispered. His warm breath fogged against Sean's cheek. "I can. I want to. *Please*."

"Oh damn," Sean groaned, and kissed Beck again. Sean wrapped his fingers around Beck's wrist and rubbed Beck's palm against the hard outline of his cock as his tongue sought out all the hidden, tickly places in Beck's mouth, learning him.

Beck found the tab on Sean's zipper and slid it down. It seemed very loud in the cold silence of the courtyard.

"Wait." Sean pulled back and looked at Beck steadily, an even light in his green eyes. He glanced around at the deserted place. "Not here. Come home with me."

It didn't seem to be a question. In fact, Beck was through questioning this altogether. And suddenly, he felt a heaviness lift from his shoulders, something that had been weighing him down for years, sodden and reeking with bad memory. It was all going to be okay. Sean was here and he cared about him and he would know what to do. It didn't matter that Beck hadn't given control over to another person since he was seven years old. It was different with Sean. Sean wouldn't use that power to pull him into pieces and laugh at him, or leave him bleeding on a hygienic church floor. There was still one person in the world who believed him. Sean loved him.

He loves me.

For once, the fact wasn't a burden. He didn't have to live up to it or prove anything. Sean knew him better than anyone, and it hadn't seemed to matter a bit that he fucked up on a daily basis, that he was a failure at his marriage or empathy or relating to people. Sean saw everything that was wrong with him and somehow didn't see *wrong* but only *desired*.

There really was something in him to love.

The clean warmth of that seemed to pour into Beck's chest, as if Sean were transfusing him, changing him, making him whole.

Beck licked his lips, finding he had to make an effort to speak. "My car is in the lot."

Sean glanced back at the bar. "I left my coat inside. And Janine..." He gave Beck a wicked grin and Beck could feel

Sean's stomach moving with laughter as he chuckled. "I guess she'll learn to live with disappointment."

Beck touched Sean's bright hair, tracing an errant strand with his finger. God, he was handsome. He felt a fleeting, weak pity for Janine. She was never going to know what it was like to look into those eyes and feel loved. If he had anything to say about it, Miss Janine was never going to look at Sean again at all, period. "Go settle her and meet me across the street."

Sean kissed him again, lighter this time, but Beck could feel the longing in him. "Keep that warm for me." Sean said in a strained voice as he opened the door, spilling out a rush of chatter and music from the bar, and went back inside.

Beck leaned back against the wall, tipping his head back to grin at the sky. Wonderful. He felt like he could kick a hole in the moon, like a kid on Christmas morning, except he had never been that kid. He chuckled and buttoned his coat up, shoving his hands in his pockets and turning for the snowy little path that would lead him around the bar and back to the parking lot. He saw what was there and froze like a frightened animal.

It was not a wraith of light. The demon of Beck's nightmares slid through the dark toward him. It rose up as a wide shadow that blocked his way, lamplight slipping off its humped shape in oily yellow streaks as the darkness coalesced into a man. The man seemed to fill all the world standing there, his long hands tucked casually into a black priest's cassock, his beautiful, cutting smile gently and viciously amused. "Hello, my love."

All Beck could hear was the trip hammer of his heart. The rush of terror that blurred his mind was so strong that, if he could have made any sound at all, he would have screamed.

Mastema had once heard a human poem: Tiger tiger burning bright...

The Nephilim burned.

Mastema had watched them together in the bar. Beck's pure violet aura blazed and cut through the weak colors of human auras. Even in the rush of voices, the noise and music and random shouts, his aura had pushed their colors back in a great swath, dominating them effortlessly. No wonder Becket felt alone in the world. He *was* alone. It could be no other way.

The auras of the bar crowd engaged in an orgy of seeking, tendrils spread wide, touching as many as possible. A great psychic sharing, completely unobserved by the humans, as were the shades that rose from the wooden floor in a cool spiral wave, opalescent and insubstantial, the blending of thousands of emotions left behind over the period of centuries. The building was centuries old, the emanations of the past potent and visible. It was a strong place.

He had lurked and watched there, too, watched the kiss and the desire stirring in the pair as they clutched and pulled at each other. He had wanted to rip Beck away and immediately claim what was his, but then suddenly Beck was alone in the night.

Now, Beck could see him.

The desire to touch the Nephilim's skin was a burning coal inside Mastema's chest. He wanted to be near Beck, to enter his mind and savor his memories, rape them open and fill the void with his own essence. To possess him.

He reached out in command. Beck's aura writhed as it was called, and he stared at Mastema in abject terror. Mastema felt the dull, red shock of Beck's fear. He reached out again and stilled the Nephilim's trembling mind, then he walked to the stone bench under the gas lamp and reclined, draping his arms over the bench's wide back. Beck started violently when Mastema lifted one unnaturally long hand to command him closer. Beck came haltingly to the bench, resistance making his steps jerky and unsure. The full moon was cloaked behind the laden clouds and snow drifted down lazily in the pleasant yellow glow of the antique lamp. Mastema smelled fuel oil burning and the muted stink of urine from the nearby alleyway. The wind that trailed cold fingers down his collar carried with it the heady, apple-scent of the Nephilim.

"Who are you?" Beck asked. His body shook in violent chills that rattled his frame and edged Mastema's excitement to a new pitch.

"Sit beside me, Beck."

Beck shivered again and started to back away, out of the small circle of light.

"Stop." Beck froze. His eyes were round with fear, his mouth a tight, white line. How terrifying it must be, to hear a command you cannot disobey. Every muscle might shriek in denial and try to escape, but Beck was in his power now.

Mastema stood and went to him, stepping so close that he could see the snowflakes melting on his dark eyelashes. Mastema stared, aching. Beck's aura called Mastema and yet repelled, the conflicting pull of desires maddening him like a teasing caress.

He has beautiful skin, white and smooth, he thought idly, then was amused. How long will it remain white? Do I kill him now, or later? He watched snowflakes land on Beck's cheeks and nose and melt instantly, and wondered how his blood would taste.

"Once giants were upon the earth," Mastema said in a confiding tone. "Men of great renown, the children of the Watchers. But they were evil and Yahweh denied them, cursed their birth. Accursed, too, were their fathers, the Watchers, and cast from heaven. The exiles were doomed to live forever upon the earth and their children, the *bene anak*, were slaughtered."

Beck stammered. "What?" His teeth chattered.

"Watchers, the earthbound. An ancient sect of my kind." As he watched Beck, he began to suspect his trembling was from more than fear. He then realized what was happening. It shocked him. *He truly feels the cold! How powerfully his mind writes in his body.*  He gripped Beck's arms. "You are not a human being. You never were. You have so many names; *Bene Anak, Nephilim, Rephaim, Egregori, Anakhim, Gibborim.* Your race has existed throughout time."

"You're crazy." Beck twisted in his grasp.

Mastema passed his hand in front of Beck's face, across his vision, knowing that he could feel the unnatural heat from Mastema's body radiating towards him, the feather-touch of his aura as it brushed his. *"See,"* he commanded.

Beck gasped.

Beck's eyes unfocused as Mastema's power washed over his sight and the vision unfolded before him, the disobedience of the Watchers, their sin, their offspring who had polluted the earth with evil. He saw it all; the final punishment at Hanoch, the dead families in the streets, the exile of his forefathers from Heaven. And then, their long hibernation and eventual rebirth into the world of men, the new generations of Nephilim born to them, gathered at Desolo to protect themselves from Mastema.

Beck was like no creature Mastema had ever felt before. A struggle existed inside Beck that marked him as different from the others, a tortured state of spiritual limbo not unlike the struggle between light and darkness. Such a struggle was irresistible to Mastema, who existed to create conflict in men's hearts, to tempt and seduce. Here was one whose very skin smelled of that conflict.

The Nephilim were never ordinary. They were, one and all, exceptional beings of high intelligence, multifarious deeds, and complex natures. They also possessed the cold conscience of gods, the powers of angels, and all the frailties and lusts of the human side of their natures. In short, they were chaos and God rightly destroyed them. Yet God had allowed their return. He allowed them to flourish.

There were always the few who outstripped their brothers. The rabid conquerors, killers and madmen whose names lived far longer than they: Attila, Temujin, Jack the Ripper, Goliath, Alexander. The ones who feared death as they feared no foe, knowing that death put them on equal footing with mortal humanity, rendered up for judgment before the throne of the first and last authority in the universe. They would let a world be annihilated before they would give up their own life.

Or watch a beloved wife drown before risking death to save her. Yes, Mastema had seen that much when he peered into Beck's mind. He really would have let Catherine die. Any of Beck's brethren would. The irony was that Nephilim cannot drown.

Linked as they were, Beck heard that thought and saw the comparison in Mastema's mind. He finally perceived his kinship.

Beck recoiled from the revelation, shaking his head. "No... no no no..."

"Yes." Mastema insisted. "It is the truth I give you, the key to your spirit. You cannot deny it. Look within."

Beck screwed his eyes shut and backed away from him, against the stone wall of the bar. "No!"

"Yes. You are not human. Why do you think you've felt these deaths more deeply than you've ever felt anything? It is because they were your *brothers*."

Beck's eyes flew open and he crossed his hands over his chest, as if he could shelter and protect his soul against the truth, as if by sheer will he could retain a human heart. "I'm not like you, not one of them. I'm human!"

"No."

Mastema gave him no proof, no history. He only allowed Beck to see his certainty, his impassive confidence that in time Beck would come to feel the evidence within himself.

"I won't let this happen to me," Beck said. He began to edge sideways against the wall. Mastema stepped closer and pressed his hand against the stone, blocking him.

"Nothing has happened. You have always been this way." "Let me go!"

"Go where? You cannot hide from me. I can find you anywhere, anytime, and I can be there instantly. You have seen how I can do it."

Beck inched the other way and Mastema blocked him again, both hands against the wall and him trapped between. His chest heaved in choking gasps as Mastema touched his neck, closing his eyes in pleasure as Beck's aura sent sparks flaring into the skin of his assumed form. So young, this ignorant, innocent creature, but so beautifully marred. *Where are you, angel?* 

"You are powerful." Mastema brushed his palm flat across Beck's aura in the region of his heart. "Your strengths spring from your contradictions. It is an old soul that crouches inside this shell. Who are you? I must know." Mastema touched Beck's cheek, caressed the line of his face, leaned and placed his mouth next to Beck's ear and breathed on him. "Angel..."

Beck's fear finally won out over his caution and he pressed a trembling hand against Mastema's chest, pushing to force him away. Mastema smiled and brushed his lips against the velvet of Beck's ear, whispering, his tongue darting. He held Beck and forced his chin up.

Their eyes met and Mastema transferred to Beck an insight, a small revelation of what he truly was beyond the black pits of eyes staring out of a human countenance, a face elongated and sharp-planed, smiling in vicious pleasure, the long white teeth, the eyes that nailed Beck's soul and undressed his secrets. Beck saw what few men see and live.

Mastema felt Beck's terror of him and embraced it. And then, as he let Beck see into him, he looked as well, and was stunned.

The echo of low, feminine laughter pierced Mastema's dazed state, deep tones ringing out like iron bells, mocking him.

Show me the past, Mastema.

In that wasteland, that still, quiet, seat of the soul, was the image of a nude woman encased in a glass sphere, her arms spread wide as if she would give a benediction to the world.

Mastema was stricken. A loud cry escaped him. "No!"

He denied it. His head whipped from side to side. Mastema tried to close the inner eye of his mind, but it was there, burned into him like a brand. His lips pulled back in a grimace and he laughed aloud at the utter irony, the absurd cruelty of it all. Yahweh was ridiculing him, torturing him for the sake of His own timeless boredom. He threw his head back and shouted a wordless cry that faded to a name.

"Zefira."

O my God! My God... You are unequaled! What matchless cruelty, to place within the shell of this damaged immortal the soul of the only woman I have ever loved... Zefira...

This was the knowledge that Tamiel had wished to keep from him. This was the human soul inside Beck. Of all the souls in the universe, Yahweh had chosen this one. It could not have been by accident. Thus is a God's sense of humor.

Beck was struggling wildly in his grip. No longer gentle, Mastema pushed him back against the stone wall, pinning his wrists until he felt his bones grind. Beck cried out and Mastema rattled him like a doll, slammed him back and shouted in his face.

"What is my name?"

"I don't know!"

Even his voice enchanted. Mastema felt the pit of his belly move with excitement. "Say my name, Beck... Zefira. You know who I am."

Beck fought, kicking, turning his head to sink his teeth into unyielding flesh. "You're no part of me!"

"Oh, but I am. I always was. We shared a life together once, your life, until I was made to take it from you." Mastema kissed his forehead, leaving a red welt. "But that life is over and here we are again. A miracle or a curse. We will see."

"No," Beck pleaded.

"Yes. Once more, I learn why He is the master and I am only a slave. I will teach you these things," he promised. "Nothing will part us again."

"I..." Beck panted, beginning to sweat even in the cold. "I won't do this."

"Then tell me you hate me." Mastema pressed his body to Beck's, feeling his helpless and involuntary response, the unwilling desire that Beck desperately wanted to deny.

"I hate you!"

Mastema laughed softly in Beck's ear, his red mouth curved in a vulpine grin, his teeth like fangs. "Your body does not."

Beck thrashed, kicking at Mastema's legs. Mastema saw that Beck was almost beyond caring about the danger he was in. He only wanted to get away, to flee from the truth. Bracing himself, Mastema gathered a part of his essence and breathed deliberately in Beck's face, a small, feathery cloud of vapor. Beck inhaled and gasped, instantly shocked into stillness.

"I can make you want me, Beck. Half of you is only flesh." Mastema exhaled again and felt Beck's legs tremble as he fought to remain standing.

"What are you doing?" Beck whispered. His strength was like blood when the vein is cut, flowing out of his limbs in a rush.

A third time he sent a part of his substance into Beck's lungs.

"Stop," Beck whispered, his voice failing.

"Breathe, Beck."

Beck exhaled and Mastema pulled the expelled air into his lungs. Beck's chest rose to meet Mastema's, as if a string was attached to his breath. Beck inhaled shallowly in little gasps, his eyes narrowed to blue slits.

*Nefesh* and *Ruah.* The breath and the spirit, the vast, untapped power of the air. Once more, his breath was taken. Beck sagged in Mastema's arms. Mastema held him up, unable to resist the impulse to brush his own lips against the pale, pressed flowers of Beck's mouth. "Now do you want me?"

Beck's face was upturned as if inviting another kiss, his eyes misted over with a look of hunger.

"Yes..."

"Who am I, Beck?"

A thread of a whisper, blown away by the wind. "Mastema..."

His name. It had been so long since an earthly creature had spoken to him, had known his name and recognized him, that a bolt of pleasure flashed through Mastema. The pleasure, so intense for so small a thing, shamed him. He felt lessened that anyone should have this power over him, to give him such gratification with so little effort. Mastema shivered and felt his corporeal body react in a very male way to the nearness of another's heat. Beck hung limp in his arms, his head flung back and his white throat exposed. Mastema let his hand draw a burning trail down that deceptively tender neck. His fingers touched the steel chain circling Beck's throat, and he tugged the gold talisman from the shirt and turned the disk in his fingers. The serpent and the tree, the warding-seal of Sophia. And it was ancient, not a copy or a reproduction. Only Tamiel could have given it to him. How could he possess this and not know what he was?

"Tell me," Mastema whispered as he broke the chain and clenched it in his fist. "Who are you?"

"Zefira."

Mastema grasped Beck's hair at the nape of his neck. He recognized the deep ache throbbing in his bones as sorrow. "Welcome home, beloved."

Mastema's strength was many times that of a human's. He threw Beck against the wall and felt Beck's blood splash against his face, warm and sweet, before his skin absorbed it like a sponge. Beck slumped to the ground. Mastema bent and lifted him up. He took Beck's chin under his right hand and grasped his shoulder with his left, then twisted until he heard Beck's neck snap.

Beck convulsed, his azure eyes gone wide and staring. Mastema dropped him. Beck fell in a boneless heap and Mastema stood over him, his hands clenched into fists.

Male. Older. His features and coloring were reminiscent of her, but only the eyes were the same: the same color, the same feline shape.

The same accusation.

And for a moment, it was she. It was Zefira who stared up at him from the bed of snow, her sapphire eyes rived with surprise and pain. Mastema made an aborted movement, his hand outstretched in profound longing and grief, then drew back as the door opened to spill light and noise from the tavern into the square.

He called the Veil and fled.

#### "You're going to be fine, Beck."

Beck heard the voice in his ear over the scream of the siren, felt the rocking motion of the ambulance and the tender, brisk hands ministering to him. Their touch was urgent, but forlorn, and he knew through their hands that they thought him dead already. The young paramedic, particularly, as she placed the oxygen mask over his face, let her fingers linger on his cheek in farewell. Beck sensed her detached mourning and heard her wistful thoughts; that he was young and cute and looked like a decent guy, and it was a damned waste that he was going to end up cold meat in a metal locker.

Beck was too disoriented to wonder why he could suddenly see through their skulls to the thoughts within. He laid there, a sleeping embryo, aware of everything happening around him, but softly filtered, a child peering through gauze at the world outside.

Pain. It coursed through his nerves in rolling crimson waves. He convulsed, shaken with the enormity of it, powerless to hold the tide at bay. Beck felt someone take his hand and whisper his name. Sean.

Sean's fingers gripped his hand tenderly as his care and concern radiated into Beck's skin like sunlight. Sean's skin was warm. It felt so very familiar, as if he had never lived without the touch of Sean's skin against his, when they had hardly touched at all. How could he know the scent and feel of the man so well? What was this familiar intimacy that even now seemed to call to him?

"I'm sorry," Sean whispered. "I'm sorry, Beck, I was too late. I will make it right..."

The siren droned on and he drifted in and out of consciousness, riding on the swells of pain, searching for a place that was not occupied by pain.

Everything he had ever thought, every theory, every truth, had been shaken to the core. He no longer knew who he was or

what the world contained. He had been tossed into a sea of raw knowledge like a newborn into cold water, shocked awake, gasping and confused, into a foreign universe.

Zefira. His name had been Zefira and he was once...

Agony hammered at him. He faded out. After a time, he sensed light, a brilliant ball of it hovering over his face. He realized he must be in the emergency room. The doctor's hands were on him, probing his limp flesh for answers. Beck's head was strapped to a board and he felt the icy bee-sting of a needle entering his arm.

An alarm shrilled and the doctors became galvanized. To his horror, Catherine entered the room. She shouted and shoved a rolling metal tray so hard that it slammed against the wall, scattering instruments. She pushed one of her colleagues out of the way and got in next to Beck, shining a light in his eyes. Her mouth was moving, shouting orders, but he couldn't hear it. They moved their hands upon him furiously. Confusion reigned. It annoyed him and he rose above it all, floating on the ceiling, where he observed the people pushing and yelling at each other in their rush to save his life. They seemed brighter, the curves of their bodies sharper and every line of their faces painfully defined.

Sean stood to the side, courteously out of the path of the furor, and watched with composed features the apparent demise of Beck's body. It annoyed him further that Sean should be so calm.

The frail body fading from life on the stretcher became unreal to him and he drifted further away.

Sean looked up. Their eyes met and it seemed as if Sean knew Beck was there. It distracted him, and he fell back into his body on the stretcher. His senses went grainy again, no longer the searing clarity of disembodiment. Something pulled apart in his chest and some vital part of him fell away, severed like a hewn tree culled from the forest.

"My God... is all this his blood? There's nothing under it." He heard Catherine's breath catch on a grateful sob. "He's not cut."

Other voices: "This man came in here with a broken neck. Somebody tell me that didn't happen!"

"The EMT says yeah, snapped like a stick."

"What the hell happened?"

"Jesus, he's stable. BP normal, respiration normal, heart rate. It's all normal, Cat. Everything. He's... fine."

Beck tried to turn his head on the stretcher, but it was still strapped down. He felt tears leaking from his eyes and whimpered a meaningless protest. Catherine's hand was touching him. She was saying he was fine, that he was okay. Someone bathed his face, cooing comfort. He only wept harder, unable to express what he knew. Sorrow washed over him in uncontrollable surges, cresting on anguish, eddies of disbelief, and then back to misery as he watched the last of whatever had been human in him fly away on leather wings.

He had lost his place. It was gone. He did not belong anymore. Only his body had survived. Beck huddled in his soul and wept for the loss of his humanity.

# *୶*ଡ଼୶ୠଡ଼

He expected pain. When consciousness first began to intrude on Beck's blurred world, he anticipated it. He braced for it, ground his teeth and stiffened his legs and steeled whatever will he had left to meet it, but it never came.

His neck and face felt warm. The red wave of torture that had dimly penetrated his drugged nightmare was gone. The bone-jarring throbs of pain that woke him repeatedly throughout the night had also disappeared, leaving simple warmth behind.

Hesitantly, he turned his neck, expecting a backwash of torment. No pain. He opened his eyes to see the drab beige surroundings of a hospital room. A thin hospital gown was pulled around him and an IV shunt protruded awkwardly from his wrist. Dim sunlight slanted through the partially-drawn blinds, the low angle hinting of dawn. He wondered briefly where Sean was before he began to remember. Beck sat upright, blinking like an owl, his mouth slack with dull amazement.

I know what he is. He came to kill me last night, but I wasn't what he expected...

And grappling with that for a dazed moment before he tackled the next impossible summit: *I'm not human*. Not me. I don't belong here. I don't belong... anywhere.

Zefira's presence was in the back of his mind, a locked door that refused to open no matter how much he prodded it. Strange that he had almost no memories of her, only dim images of a walled city and the blurred faces of people he felt he ought to recognize, but didn't. Everything he knew about her life he had seen in Mastema's mind in that instant when Mastema had pushed their bodies close and nearly murdered him. Beck had heard his own vertebrae snap and he had prepared, in the serene compliance of the moment of death, for the end of his life. But it never happened.

Memory flooded back. He saw a white flash as strong hands twisted his neck, tasted coppery fluids in his mouth and the snow falling on his slowly numbing lips. Last, before the red curtain fell across his vision, he heard the sound of Sean's steady voice in his ear, his warm breath rushing past his cheek.

"I'm here, Beck. I'm here."

He suffered a twinge of shame. What would Sean say now, if he knew? He was a mistake of the cosmic order, a result of defiance. God created these angels, these supermen, and gave them intelligence and great power, but he also gave them the capacity to love and hate and reason. A bizarre conversation played out in his brain: Now, God says, I'm making a paradise for these new children I'm creating. I'll call them Mankind. They're not as beautiful, or as powerful, and they're damn sure not as smart, but I like them. And you see their pretty world? Keep off. No trespassing.

What child wouldn't be bitter about that? What child wouldn't rebel and try to take it anyway?

Beck rolled to his side in the bed and found the little bedside unit that held the phone. Beside the phone was a metal prep tray with tape and a pair of bandage scissors, their long blades capped with rounded tips like tiny silver moons. Inside the drawer was his badge and wallet, but his gun and money were missing. They must have stored them in the hospital safe or given them to Sean. He pushed the articles aside and scrabbled around the corners of the drawer, searching, but it wasn't there. He had lost Catherine's picture and the plastic baggie with the snake drawn on foil paper that he had taken off the body at the landfill. He was not sure what he would have done with that, but now the decision was moot. Worse, his talisman was gone. His fingers traced the line where it had circled his neck for over two decades. Gone, like everything else.

He started peeling the IV tape off his wrist and his lip curled in black humor. Yesterday, he had believed that a few bloody fingerprints would solve the case. Well, he had solved it. He had his killer. It was just going to be fucking impossible to stop him. How do you capture a demon?

He slid the needle out, quickly pressing his thumb on the puncture to stem the little squirt of blood. Removing the tape had hurt worse. He pushed the covers off and stood up. His pants and shoes were in the narrow closet, but his shirt and coat were missing, probably because of the blood. Beck winced at that thought and very slowly raised his hand to his face. He touched his skin. It was smooth and unbroken. He hurried into the bathroom and gazed into the mirror mounted above the sink.

No marks. His face was uninjured, healed without a trace. Not even the smallest swelling or scar to show that it had ever been damaged. The skin on his palms had fully regenerated, though they still itched. His mind flitted back over the years and he realized that he never scarred. Even the bullet hole through his thigh had healed without a blemish.

You can't reinvent yourself. We carry our truths with us, rattling around about our necks like ghost chains. No matter how deep we bury them, they claw their way up from their orphan graves in the end. I've always known what I am.

He closed his eyes and steadied himself against the door, fighting a wave of dizziness. When he felt better he pulled off the gown and dressed in the dark suit trousers. He left the bathroom, intending to find an open locker room and a shirt. As his hand touched the outer door, he heard a step in the hall. He froze. He didn't know how he knew, but he did. It was not a nurse with her cart of needles or a janitor with his mop. It was Mastema.

Beck's world slanted. Where before he had been a rational man, a personality who clung to clean lines and stark, packaged rationality, now he was caught—stick pinned like a rare moth on a sickly landscape of distorted illusion. Forever at the back of his mind would be a wall of gibbering madness, of truth held at bay. From that moment, Beck knew that peace would elude him for the rest of his life.

Irrationally, he thought of Macbeth, *something wicked this way comes*, and as the door slowly opened and he saw what stood there, he began to tremble.

# *୶*ଡ଼୶ୠଡ଼

Beck wanted to scream and cover his eyes like a child. He had never been so terrified in his life.

Mastema, Prince of the evil spirits of the earth.

He did not look alive at first. Even with his beauty, he seemed like a creature merely inhabiting a human shell, but who had no further affinity with it than that of host and parasite. It was animated. It walked and talked and breathed, but the movements seemed insect-like on Mastema, precise and deadly.

He was taller than Beck remembered, blond like Sean. The eyes reminded him of Sean, too, though Mastema's were much lighter and had striking ring of black around the irises. The resemblance ended there.

Nothing was human in this mobile corpse, this walking horror in black who drew near. Mastema's movements seemed as coldly unthinking as a machine.

Sean had idly remarked once that evil had a face, a recognizable form in the world. Beck never truly comprehended that until Mastema stood three feet away from him. Mastema pushed the door closed behind him as Beck backed away slowly. His hands were shaking. He seemed to have no control over it. Mastema backed him up all the way to the bed, not speaking, just advancing slowly enough for Beck to realize that it was fear that moved him rather than force.

Mastema took one step more and Beck retreated away from him until the mattress hit the back of his thighs. He sank down on the edge of the bed, trembling violently. Mastema's scent assailed him, a sharp, exotic mixture of spice, copper, salt, and sweat. Heat poured from Mastema's body, bathing Beck in warmth.

Mastema let Beck suffer at his presence for some time, then, "Do you believe me now?"

Beck cringed away. Something had happened to Mastema's voice. Some *thing* had happened to it. Sound lashed at his skin, poured like molten lead on his flesh, the syllables entering his ears felt like boiling water.

"Nephilim," Mastema said again in that agonizing voice. "Zefira. How strange is fate. I might have killed you again, never knowing who you were."

Even through the pain Beck found strength to rebel. "Stop!" He writhed on the bed. "Fucking stop it!"

"Tamiel was wise to keep you in the human world, away from me," Mastema continued, unconcerned with his pain. "Wiser still to keep you from the knowledge of yourself. But the truth has not stayed hidden entirely, has it?"

Mastema's fingers were tipped with dark nails that resembled claws. He took Beck's hands and drew him to his feet. "Don't be afraid," he whispered.

The living agony of his voice was suddenly lessened. Beck shivered in relief, cold sweat trickling down his back.

"I was going to kill you last night, but I saw the truth in time. I only hurt you to prove to you what you are. It was a gift."

"A gift," Beck echoed. The pain had decreased. He found the strength to pull away. "You broke my neck." Dull and shocked.

"I could do much worse, and this time you would not survive." Beck shrank back as Mastema held up a long finger. "But I'm giving you a chance to live."

"Why?" He struggled to speak "Why would you do that?"

Mastema smiled. "I know the meaning of death. I once lay sleeping beneath the deserts of Chaldea for five generations. Some deaths are like that. Others are much worse. Believe me, you do not want to die. Not yet. Not without having any of those answers you want so desperately." Mastema's hand circled Beck's neck. "Say you accept me and you shall live."

The fingers grew tighter. Beck's vision faded to white, replaced by a shimmering image dancing before his eyes: Sand and blue skies and the shadow of white wings descending. Oh, God, my God, they have come to kill us.

A cold lump of fear settled in Beck's chest. He pushed himself back from Mastema, who, remarkably, let him go.

"You killed them all," Beck whispered. "All the people of Hanoch. The children, the animals, the servants. Me."

Mastema nodded solemnly and took Beck's hand. Clawed fingers circled his narrow wrist and tightened until Beck winced.

Mastema pulled his lips back in a wide, wolfish grin. "Does it hurt? Good. It means you're still alive. You have played dead in this tomb you call a *human life* for years, pretending, denying. Tamiel catered to your cowardice, protecting you from the world and the truth for his own reasons. But the earth is for the living, little one. I will drag you back into life."

The name of Tamiel stirred a hidden well of memories within Beck. He could feel that dark water rippling again, the sound of a stone falling into the depths, spiraling waves within his soul.

Tamiel, master of the movements of the stars, the angel of the deep.

Mastema laughed. "Go back to Desolo. Find Nicolo. All will become clear in time." He brushed Beck's hair out of his eyes. "Soon you will remember me," he said, his face suffused with a cold, frightening mirth.

The spiraling waves in Beck's soul began to widen, filling him up, swelling with a red, senseless rage. He has killed me, destroyed everything I ever loved, hounded me from life to life and nearly driven me insane. And now he laughs.

Fury blazed up in him. Mastema must have sensed it, because he shoved Beck hard, making him stumble back onto the bed, his hands clawing the sheets, trying to scuttle away. Mastema loomed over Beck, his eyes growing black as pits, holes in his face, holes in the world. There was no life at all in those eyes, dead and flat as a shark's.

Beck's nerveless fingers groped over the sheet and the nearby table and wrapped around the bandage scissors on the tray. He pointed the scissors in warning. "Stay back!"

His hand was shaking. Blood from the wrist IV puncture slid across his palm and made the weapon slippery in his grasp. Mastema's lips skinned back to reveal a vicious smile.

"I said stay away!"

Mastema grabbed his shoulder, nails clawing hard enough to break the skin. Beck focused on Mastema's neck as he drew his arm back to strike.

*Do it, Beck,* Mastema wanted to say, aroused by the Nephilim's rage and the nearness of his blood that seemed so ready to be spilled.

Mastema waited for Beck to stab him in the neck. When it was clear that Beck would not, or could not, Mastema plucked the thin implement from Beck's hand and broke it in half, grinding the metal between his palms, spilling the twisted debris to the floor.

"How civilized of you," Mastema said, disappointed. "How very *human*."

"Christ..." Beck breathed. Beck threw a punch at Mastema, who caught his hand easily and tightened his fingers until Beck's knuckles popped.

"Time for a lesson, angel."

There was a split-second flash of light before Beck was slammed back into the wall. He did not scream as his flesh burst from the hand he had attempted to strike Mastema with. Bloody strips of skin floated down like dead butterflies, and Beck's eyes fluttered closed as he slumped to the tiled, wax-slick floor, blood running from his hand and nose and ears and puddling into crimson pools.

Mastema knelt and pressed his fingers to Beck's throat to feel the weak, stuttering pulse. He felt Beck's warmth and heard his traumatized heart struggling feebly toward its end. *Let him die*, the wary part of him urged. He knew it was right.

Why could he not?

Mastema raised Beck's shredded hand, pressed his lips to the hot, pulped flesh and breathed on it. The bloody meat shivered and Beck moaned as the new, pearly skin coalesced over the bone. Mastema bent and placed a burning kiss on Beck's forehead, sealing the hemorrhage in his brain. Last, he placed his hand on Beck's chest to feel the broken rhythm and coaxed it to a steady beat. Beck drew a shuddering breath and his eyelids twitched. He awoke to see Mastema holding his hand to his cheek.

Beck regarded Mastema for several moments, wide-eyed and almost too stunned to breathe. Eventually, Beck pulled away and groped to his knees, cradling his pink hand and wiping blood from his face. He was pale and sweating, his breath uneven.

Beck grimaced, showing his teeth ferally. "What did you do to me?"

"Demonstrated the error of mercy," Mastema said ruefully. He shook his head in amusement at his own folly. But I could not do otherwise. I have not waited six thousand years to lose now. "If ever again you get a chance to strike at me, take it."

With a little twinge of alarm, Mastema noted that his voice had lost its power over the Nephilim. He had healed Beck and shared a vital part of himself to save Beck's life, and now Beck was stronger for it.

"What are you?"

"I have already answered that. I am Mastema, an angel."

"A demon."

He dismissed that. "There is no such thing. Evil is as necessary as good. One can never triumph wholly over the other, lest we all die. There are no demons. There are only angels of the light and angels of the dark."

Beck probed the bones of his hand for damage. "Which one am I?"

"You are a human soul in the ageless body of a Nephilim. An enigma. A catalyst for... I know not. Something terrible."

"Liar."

Mastema laughed. "Still you deny it, angel."

"Don't ever call me that," Beck said, slow and wintry as a dagger of ice in his ear. Beck raised his eyes and Mastema saw the anger boiling in his brain. "Ever. My name is Beck."

"You're an angel. Angel, angel, angel," Mastema taunted. "Half an angel, anyway. Your mother realized what you were and discarded you before your first year. Humans raised you and you believed yourself to be human, but you never were. You are as much a *demon* as I am." Mastema leaned over and touched Beck's cheek with his forefinger, tapping it to accent his words. "You." Tap. "Want." Tap. "To kill me. Don't you, angel?"

Beck glared at him with raw, naked desire plainly written on his mind. A child could have read it. And he's never felt this before, does not know what it is, what he needs. Would he cry, I wonder, if I told him that all he needs to feel whole is the sweet sensation of a pulsing artery between his teeth?

He gripped Beck's tender, newly-healed hand. "Now there—*there!*—is the Nephilim. There is the giant, the killer. You are more savage than any human, because part of you is like me. There is the key to your power. Use it!"

Beck recoiled from him, hissing in pain, and regarded him with burning eyes, nursing his hatred. Mastema adored that look. He produced a box of wooden matches from his pocket, much like the kind Beck preferred to use.

"I have another gift for you, angel. Have you ever been burned?" He smiled at Beck's expression of fresh alarm. The acrid phosphorous of the match flared bright yellow. "Everyone gets burned now and then, smokers especially. But you've never been burned, have you? Not ever. Don't you find that odd? The Nephilim, like angels, are masters of the earth plane. Fire is an element. It cannot hurt you. You cannot drown, suffocate, freeze..."

Beck seized on this. "I can feel the cold!"

"You think you feel it because you think you're supposed to. This is your eidolon of humanity, your ideal fantasy of what you believe you wish to be. Humans feel the cold. They feel heat as well, and love and compassion." He touched the match to Beck's wrist. It guttered and died on Beck's skin.

Beck brushed it away, shaken.

"Have you ever been ill?" Mastema pressed. "Have you ever been injured?"

"I was shot," Beck answered faintly. "Homicide case. It's how I met my wife."

"And the bullet left no scar. Have you ever had a cold? A disease? Sunburn?" In a blur of movement Mastema seized Beck's throat and pulled him out of the corner, dragging him to his feet. Mastema placed his fingers on Beck's temples. Beck

twisted and grimaced as if the pads of Mastema's fingers burned him. He tried to twist out of that steely grip. Useless.

"Let me in, Beck," Mastema hissed, relentless. "Let me into your mind. I want to crawl inside you. Let me help you understand. *I will have you!*"

Beck clenched his teeth. "No! Fuck you!" His fists flailed. He kicked at Mastema and missed, then thrashed wildly, trying to break free. When that failed, he spat in Mastema's face and raved obscenities.

"Goddamned motherfucking son of a whore fucking bastard..."

Mastema smiled and wrapped his arms around Beck, holding him immobile, letting him vent his rage uselessly. They battled for several minutes, until Beck's chest heaved and sweat poured off him. His dark hair was wet at the temples, black strands like strokes of ink dripping onto his flushed face. He fought Mastema with a vicious, desperate strength that would have prevailed against a lesser being.

All at once, Beck gave up. He went limp, his body hanging in Mastema's arms as he drew in deep, wheezing breaths, eyes closed and the white lids trembling. He stubbornly kept his face turned to the floor, away from Mastema.

Is this surrender? Mastema wondered. Surely not, but it is a chance.

Mastema forced Beck's chin up and turned his face until their foreheads touched. Beck's body jerked once as Mastema injected himself into Beck's mind, penetration like a knife, dragging thoughts like black blood from his brain, and Beck screamed. Beck knew what would happen. It had happened outside the bar in the cold night. Mastema had taken his mind like a rapist takes a victim, opening him against his will and slithering inside, hot and pulsing. Beck stopped fighting and dredged up every scrap of resistance he had left to armor his thoughts, barricading himself behind a shield of fury.

I won't let you do that to me again.

Then Mastema's forehead was pressed against his and a thrust of pure pain stabbed into Beck's consciousness so deeply that he could only gasp in stunned shock. The Veil shrieked into the room, a roaring tower of diamond light. They fell together through the long opal tunnel into the vortex, and Beck's eyes flew wide open.

Light ate him.

It stripped his skin away and sank fangs into his bones, chewed into his marrow and tunneled down his veins, exploding atoms from inside out, bits of him shredding into nothingness. No throat to scream, no hands to fend it away, mind torn open like a paper bag, thoughts and deeds spilling out, ripe fruit from his brain.

When he was about to forget his name and lose himself inside the agony, the Veil suddenly entered him. There was no question of permission. It did not ask or seek his approval, it just came. It poured inside him, hot and sweet like melted syrup, filling every part of him with such ecstatic heat that he wept silently inside his soul.

Oh, yes, he wanted it, all of it. To know this, to be beyond pain and fear and the ugly realities of flesh; growing old, dying, ultimately rotting. So clean, this light, and yet not. It awakened things in him he did not even know existed. Truths light and dark, innocent and terrible. An overwhelming sense of revulsion passed over him as he felt himself growing hard, the skin of his cock tightening with ruttish, incoherent desire. Vast surprise. Wonderment as he was pulled away from the earth. Gone was the fear and rage against Mastema, replaced by a trembling reverence bordering on pleasure. It was not life as he knew it, but the Veil *was* alive. A sentient being who existed outside of every lineament of time Beck lived by. He wanted to know that existence, the pulse of her that burned and flared on the edges of reason, to be swallowed alive by her, if that was his fate. To burn bright for one shining second in the heart of the sun, failed but glorious, choices taken away, swept into the arms of destiny. Owned and enslaved by her.

It's all so beautiful, he thought. A voice answered him: It can all be yours.

His young and cynical laugh poured bright through the cold reaches of the Veil. For a price. That's the part that bothers me.

Mastema threaded his desire through Beck's mind, carding through his thoughts like fingers through sand, feeling the helpless shudder of his passionate response. *I can end your pain. I can give you anything you could ever want.* 

Liar.

The father of lies, yes, but not in this. I have the key to your power.

Beck wavered, balanced on the thorn of decision, and then he looked—really looked—at Mastema for the first time. Not as a killer, not as the demon, but simply as the creature God had created.

Mastema existed as he was meant to, a flawless instrument perfectly suited to its purpose. Beck knew he would never be able to describe the beauty of that simplicity. He could only hold it in his thoughts for a moment, knowing he would not see it like this again. An instant more and it would be lost...

He could not believe the soundless words came from him: Name your price.

Mastema pushed his consciousness further into Beck's mind, ripping, tearing through the barriers. Beck's psyche fell before the onslaught, its juvenile armor torn away like cobwebs, and Mastema fused their souls for one flaring instant. Beck's body arched, his teeth grinding together and the cords standing out on his neck. A tortured cry came from Beck's throat and his long, silent screams echoed in Mastema's brain.

Stop! Ah, God, stop!

## ৵৵৵৾৾৵

A weightless sensation rolled over Beck, as if he was falling very slowly from a great height. He awoke and felt heat contained in textured grit under his hands. Sand. He opened his eyes.

Disorientation. He gasped and his heart gave a hard and aching thump. The tiled ceiling of the hospital room had disappeared and above him was a sky so dark it might have been ink instead of space.

Stars began to appear in that measureless expanse. They were incredible. Giant diamonds, baseballs, glittering and flashing like fire in all hues: red, blue, white, green and yellow, thousands upon thousands of them, so many that they defied pattern or design. Beck could not recognize one constellation. He sat up.

Mastema was gone. Beck's common sense told him that this was a dream, yet something deeper in him, something wiser, knew it was not. He was in a place that existed somewhere else besides earth.

Beck looked around. He was in a vast yellow desert that was ringed by low hills. In the distance rose the jagged purple spears of tall mountains, barely discernible against the night sky. The ocher sand beneath his fingers was fine and powder-soft, still retaining the warmth of day. He glanced about wonderingly, confused but not frightened in the supernal quiet. The wind smelled of salt and he opened his mouth and tasted it, thinking he must be near the sea.

He became aware of light above him. A full moon hung bright in the starry vault, and the light it cast on the desert below was not soft or romantic as moonlight usually is, but clear and hard. A brief flash arched across the sky, spitting flame as it went. Beck's eyes tracked a single, white star, small and radiant, falling in eerie silence in a long, straight drop to the earth. The star touched down on a nearby hill, causing a whirling shimmer of sand and light. He felt a tug of affinity with it and knew that in a way the star was himself.

It's more than just me. We are all conceived this way.

The light changed to gold and coalesced into the low, powerful shape of an enormous lion crouched on the dune, starlight sliding across sleek, tawny muscles silhouetted against the black of space. A thick, powerful neck arched to the sky as the steady stream of his heated breath fogged the air, white at first, then gradually turning red. The lion breathed fire.

Sound returned to the desert and Beck could hear the low moan of wind over the dunes. The lion turned his shaggy head and looked at Beck with sublime apathy, his lambent eyes glowing like citrine in the moonlight. Beck stood up, remembering that he should be afraid of the lion, but not knowing why. The sand shifted under his feet and he felt the coolness of the lower layers seeping into his skin. He turned slowly around in a complete circle, gazing out over the desolate landscape. On one hill crouched the lion, and on another, directly opposite, a pale shadow of movement caught Beck's eye. The ghostlike form shimmered restlessly, and then slowly firmed into the shape of a white ox.

Beck stared. The ox had a large, fleshy hump between his shoulders, drooping, pendulous ears and one long dewlap hanging down in soft folds that ran from chin to groin. It was also an extraordinarily large animal, with great horns curving over his skull and steely muscles beneath his short, ivory pelt.

The ox stood with endless patience and regarded Beck with round, shining black eyes. Between his horns was a glowing sphere shining like a second moon in the night. As Beck watched, the ox turned and plodded down the hill, away from him and out of his sight. An impulse came over him to follow the ox, but he hesitated and looked to the lion first. The lion sat immobile and regally impassive. In a subconscious choice beyond Beck's reasoning, he turned to follow the ox.

Beck began to climb the hill. His feet slid beneath him, plunging deep into the sand and slowing his progress to a crawl. He realized he had lost his socks, and then it occurred to him that he also seemed to have lost the rest of his clothes, a matter that seemed very unimportant. Naked, he continued to climb the hill, half-crawling, digging with his hands to reach the summit. The only sound was the wind, a dry, lonely susurration. The sound made him feel lost, abandoned. From the top of the hill Beck could make out a dark spot in the pale desert below. It was a grassy area at the base of a low, rocky cliff ringed with palm trees, where a pool of clear water at the center of an oasis was fed by a narrow cascade of water from the rocks. The pure silence of the night became filled with the babbling sound of the fertile, rushing water. The wind shifted and a tone came out of the desert. Like the carillon gates of Desolo, a hollow, silvery piping as the wind played about the whorls of rock in the cliffs, under and around and through each camber and loop carved by the relentless wind into the brittle rock. Beck grasped the implication, sensing the link between this place and Desolo.

Desolo. Forsaken.

A woman was bathing under the small waterfall. She was nude and her dark hair hung down in long, wet ropes to her ankles. The water had an opaline quality, silvery. It slid over her skin in iridescent rills and wound smooth chains about her waist.

Beck did not remember descending the hill. He recalled wanting to be closer to the woman, and suddenly he was. She was standing a few feet in front of him, so close that he could feel the cool spray from the waterfall loosening the desert-dried skin of his face.

Her body was perfect, the small globes of her breasts a snowy-white, her waist deep and hollow, hips flared. Her eyes remained closed. The pearly water gave her a diaphanous robe as she arched the white column of her neck and the cataract poured onto her face. She parted her red lips and opened her mouth and water gushed into it. She spoke that way, her mouth open to the water, and he heard and understood her over the sound of the wailing pipes.

#### "This is the garden."

Her voice was what his mind expected, low and robust, with a strange, exotic accent. She stepped out of the waterfall and approached him. Even now she did not open her eyes, yet she approached him with precision. Her walk was serpentine, deceptively torpid and saturated with rolling, orbital curves and arches, her hips dipping low. The water seemed to dry instantaneously on her skin and the dark ropes of her hair became flowing waves that curled into black tendrils around her face.

Her hair was the color of charcoal and gave off no light. Beck felt that if he plunged his hand into that dark mass he would withdraw it covered in soot. As her hair slid over her body, Beck saw that her skin was pale and flawless.

"This is the garden of Hanoch," she said aloud. "It will be founded by the children of Cain many years hence. This is the oasis that will sustain them, and I am the refuge that you sought when Mastema thrust you, alone, into this reality. I am Zefira."

Beck was speechless for a moment, feeling the vibration of that impossible paradox. "But..." He closed his mouth. What objection would have made sense?

"The Veil is wisdom," she said. "She is Sophia, Queen of Heaven and the keeper of all knowledge. I am the remnant of the existence of Zefira, the reverberation of her life. An echo, if you will."

"Then you're me," Beck ventured.

Her red lips curled upward to a smile. "Am I? Are you here, or am I asleep in *your* bed, dreaming that I'm a man dreaming of a woman in the desert? Who is the figment here, you or I?" She approached him, still with her eyes closed. "I know your secrets, Beck." *You can't know*.

"I know that you would have let your wife die," she said, hearing his thoughts. "Do you know why? I do."

"Shut up," he whispered.

"It is because the Nephilim have the sight of God. You see flesh as He sees flesh, as crude matter for His sculpting. Death, life, it is all the same. They are dross, you are light. Just as the Watchers allowed us to die in Hanoch, you would have let your human wife die." Those red lips smiled again. "The Nephilim are an avaricious breed. It is your nature to serve yourself first. You will never sacrifice your life to save one or a thousand of theirs. Death is the great leveler. It brings you down to the rank of humanity. Death consigns you to God's judgment, but your immortality is your means to escape that. Your only means. Her life pales to dust before this truth." "No." Beck thought of Catherine, of the taste of her hair against his mouth, her skin. And also, in his new-found sight, of how she must appear to Mastema. He cried out in pain at this new understanding.

"Worms," Zefira said. "Mud. Sediment. She is imperfect. Low. They all are. Be done with them."

Beck tried to banish the vision of Catherine as raw flesh, rotting meat, decaying tissue. "I love her. I do!"

"Would you not have let her die?" She smiled. "Oh, you cling to your mask of love and pity. You cling so tightly. You try so hard to feel everything, but only because you really feel nothing."

Beck shuddered. "That's not true."

"Pity is not for you, Beck. Love, mercy; these are human words. When you accept the truth, your pain will end. That is the key to your power."

"You want me to lose my humanity," he said softly, mournfully.

"You never had it."

Her words chilled him and her closed, shuttered eyes seemed to focus his attention even more on her voice. She stood before him and spoke without moving, only those slowspilling words shading his world with things he could not bear to hear. She reached out one slim arm. Her fingers brushed his shoulder with a touch so slight, so soft, yet scalding.

"Are all the others like this?" Beck asked. "Are they all evil?"

"Is that how you see yourself? They will allow others to die to save themselves, but death is not evil in itself. Like any natural creature they will kill to stay alive, and like any unnatural one they will embrace darkness rather than perish. You are one of them, Beck, and yet not. There is much in you that is different from those that came before you. You are unique. Mastema senses this."

"How do you know?"

"Is it true?"

He drew back from her touch. "I don't know." He felt suddenly cold and shivered, his chest aching with a soft lump of agony. He did not want to cry in front of her. How could she bring out the pain in him so well? She purred. "Who better?"

"Did you bring me here?" His breath hitched on a sob. He felt lost again. "Why am I here?"

"Like calls to like. Mastema can force you into the Veil, but he cannot make you see what is not the truth. You are here because you sought answers. Who would know the Nephilim better than I, who myself birthed three of them?"

She laid both of her small hands on his shoulders and pressed her body against his. At first she felt insubstantial, like steam, a furred, sliding heat on his skin, then she became solid.

Beck experienced a reeling sense of déjà vu, remembering the boat with Paul lying dead and frozen on the deck, the terrible certainty that something evil had passed him by. "Is there someone else here?"

She laughed. "There is no one, just you and I. Come to me. I feel completed with you."

Her hands pulled and enticed him, her nails scratching the line of hairs below his navel, but she never opened her eyes. The night took on a nightmarish tinge. Beck told himself that he was dreaming, to wake up and see the hospital room.

"This isn't real."

"But it is. Am I not warm to your touch?" She placed his hand on her breast and drew the other down between her thighs, where the wet touch of her sex burned him. She brushed her lips against his ear.

"Do I not desire you?"

His thoughts became inarticulate as she pulled his fingers up into her. He took in a shuddering breath and swayed as she urged him down until he was lying on the soft, cool grass by the pool. Wind caressed his body, drawing shivers from his flesh, and her hands followed the path the wind drew. She touched him with sure knowledge, confident of her skill. Her hands found their place between his legs and stroked him.

He was hard instantly and moaned deep in his throat, surprised at how quickly he was ready. Her low laugh answered him, and then was stoppered as she put her lips on him, taking him into her throat. Beck's hands knotted into fists and he felt the edge rear close, so swiftly it shocked him. It had been a long time. "Wait... wait..." he whispered, and she withdrew, a thread of saliva trailing on her chin. Then she was climbing on top of him, her hand on his member, guiding it to her body. He grabbed her hips and pulled her to him.

She opened her eyes.

The instant terror was almost painful. Beck's heart iced over in its grip, cutting through him. The lamp of the moon hanging above their twined bodies illuminated her face and Beck realized with a little jolt of horror that his own blue sapphire eyes stared back at him.

His heaving breath stuttered into a low hiss. "I don't want this," he heard himself say. "Please stop. *Please*."

The oasis evaporated. He felt sand under him again, but the sky had disappeared. He could see only Zefira as she ground her hips against him. Beyond her, the world was an obscure void, no moon or stars. A pure absence of sound fell on his ears with dead, lurid expectation. She plunged down on his length, but his body had turned wooden, numb to pleasure. Suddenly Zefira stiffened on top of him and lifted her head. She sniffed the wind and growled deep in her throat.

Beck heard an answering snarl from the darkness and turned his head. A steel-gray wolf emerged from the void, slinking out of the shadowland to hulk next to their coiled bodies. An acrid smell came with it, a dry and biting fetor like iron and burned hair.

It was an animal out of legend, of monstrous size, with paws the size of plates and whiskers like steel wire. It arched its gigantic head to the vacuous sky and howled. The sound was stupendous, deafening.

The world vibrated beneath Beck and he pressed his fists to his ears and held back a scream because that howl—the desolate, ululating wails that seemed to issue peal upon peal out of its throat without end—was the sound of all the pain in the world. It was Mastema's true voice. Agony incarnate. Hopeless, endless suffering, torment piled on torment until the sound itself was alive, an eternal lamentation, like Hell given a voice. It seemed to flay Beck's skin with whips of tone and pitch. The sound ceased and Beck collapsed limply, still conscious. The wolf lowered its shaggy head close to Beck's face and nosed him with its snout.

A stinging miasma surrounded him. He smelled musk and salt, patchouli and ammonia, a suffocating cloud of smells that encircled his senses. Beck coughed and choked. The wolf turned on Zefira and bared its teeth.

"Mine!" she spat, and clutched Beck harder.

The wolf snapped blade-sized fangs just inches from her face. Zefira glowered at it in fury, but she eased herself off Beck and began to back away into the darkness that edged the world.

The wolf watched her warily, only the golden eyes moving. Beck wanted to rise and flee, but his limbs were strangely liquid. He had no strength to move, not even to turn and look at the beast that was once more lowering its muzzle to him. The wolf showed its fangs again, but not so widely, almost as if it were pulling back its lips to smile.

He was so close. *He*. Definitely male. Beck was close enough to see that, and his size was alarming. His eyes were yellow lamps. He gazed at Beck frankly and did not break the stare or look away, as a normal animal would have done.

The wolf stepped over Beck and straddled his body. Beck endured the shock of contact as the wolf stretched his sinewy body to lie on him, the coarse hairs scratching his skin, the warmth of his underbelly pressing close. All around him the landscape seemed to be made of shifting black smoke. He thought that here and there the smoke took shape, that he could see the outlines of human limbs: arms, twisted fingers, rubbery skulls with their smoldering mouths stretched in screams.

He tried to push the animal off, sheer instinct goading him, but he could only twitch his arms. He tried so hard to move that sweat popped out on his forehead and black dots swam in his vision. The wolf licked his face, one long stroke starting at Beck's chin and ending at his brow. The wolf's hot breath was spicy, like cinnamon or white pepper.

The wolf began to melt. Beck made a mewling sound of horror and tried to shut his eyes, finding even that small escape denied him. He watched helplessly as the wolf's flesh sagged and the grizzled head caved in. Hair and skin flowed down and pooled onto Beck's torso, and the remaining skeleton twisted and knobbled itself into the shape of a human form. The wet flesh firmed and smoothed to become skin, paws became hands, the long, vulpine snout became a head, and a man was covering him.

His skin burned. Beck felt the man's hard sex pressing against his thigh. Suddenly he could move. Trembling, he pushed at the broad shoulders pinning him down, and the man lifted himself up on his arms, as a man will do with a woman.

It was Mastema. A steel hand shot out and caught Beck's chin. Mastema's thumb jabbed cruelly into the nerve point in Beck's jaw, forcing it open. Hard lips covered his mouth, sealing off the cry of protest.

The tongue forced deep into his mouth was thick and huge. Beck gagged and bit reflexively. He tasted blood, briny and hot, but the offending organ was not removed. It went on for an appalling amount of time, that patient, insistent stroking inside his mouth. At length, Mastema withdrew and nuzzled Beck's ear as Beck gasped and coughed.

"Careful," Mastema whispered.

Beck could hear himself sobbing in shame, knowing what was to come.

"I can make this a dream or I can make it a nightmare," Mastema promised. "Pleasure or pain. Love or rape."

"Please," Beck managed to croak. "No."

Mastema's shoulders shook with laughter as he dragged his cheek against Beck's. "But all your dreams are nightmares, aren't they? *Even when you dream about Sean*."

"Stop..."

Mastema kissed his skin. "You suffer so beautifully. Why do you want human love? To be loved by a human? You cannot accept it even when it is given freely. Sean would come to you willingly, his heart in his hands, but you would make him into your demon. Whose face would you see when he mounted you? Whose lips would touch yours when he spent himself warm and slippery inside you?" Mastema laughed throatily. "*Angel... don't tell, angel...*"

"Please. Please stop. Don't do this."

"You don't mean that."

Desolation settled over Beck in a glaucous cloud. He wept harder. *What's happening to me?* 

Mastema eyes grew darker, the blue iris swallowed by pupils that spanned out and swallowed them, black gaze holding Beck captive. His face changed, the outlines becoming sharper, his lip curling, teeth gleaming wetly in the starlight.

Mastema pitched his voice low seductively. "So pretty when you're broken. You want this, Becket. Ah, but you don't like it when I use your proper name. Is it because it's the name your mother gave you? The only thing she ever gave you, besides life? It's a complicated name, isn't it? The name of a saint. But you're no saint, Beck. You knew you never would be. *Beck*. A name like a bird call. You want to join me, Beck. You know you do. Deep down, don't you hate humanity? Yes." Mastema touched the corner of Beck's eye with a fingertip as he lay paralyzed, helpless to prevent it.

But I don't want it, Beck thought, enormously relieved to find it was true. He did not want to be evil. He did not want to be brushed by it, or belong to it.

He wanted to be human.

"What have you seen with these eyes? Remember Paul and the humans who threw garbage upon him as he lay dead. You long to see mankind suffer for its atrocities, its cruelty, its bigotry and lusts and greed and lies. Don't you wish you could be the one to punish them?" Mastema's hand slid up his bare hip, pinching lasciviously.

Beck's terror reached a crescendo and he was able to shut his eyes and twist his face away. He felt Mastema's laughter again and the touch of his mouth on him, moving over his lips, humming breathless against his tongue. At last it stopped and Mastema drew back, leaving Beck shaking in despair and desire. He was aware of the landscape changing around him, losing its blackness and brightening to cloudy silver shot with mauve. The gruesome phantom limbs transformed into the outlines of bare trees where here and there a small star winked through, like a winter forest etched in dust and scattered with diamonds. Nothing was clear, and nothing could last. *Anything can be real here*, Beck realized lucidly. *It's different for everyone*. "Hush," Mastema soothed, his hands working on Beck's face, smoothing down the lines of his cheeks as if he would mold him to a different shape. "So sweet. So willing. You know exactly what I am, yet you still want me. You could even love me. What does that say of you?"

Beck felt hands closing on his arms, turning him over gently onto his belly. His chest rested on the warm sand. Mastema's hands were in his hair, carefully assuring, stroking.

"Soon, you will beg me not to stop."

Warmth penetrated his skin beneath Mastema's touch, and Beck's limbs relaxed. His eyelids drooped. He felt drugged, heavy. Mastema's hands were on his back now, caressing. They moved lower. He tensed, and immediately warmth poured over him, robbing him of his will. Through it all there was a roar in his ears like the ocean, and his body suddenly surrendered and relaxed. That was when he felt the stiff member nudging wetly between his cheeks, the snubbed head slicked with bodily fluids. A broken sound fell from Beck's mouth and panic rose despite the dizzying elixir in his blood.

Mastema was laughing in his ear. "I am the master of succubae, and my knowledge of the flesh is older than Eden. I promise you will enjoy it. Stop resisting me."

Beck felt a bitter rage blaze up at his helplessness. Mastema was taking it all, he was taking the last parts of him that were human. He was going to change him, to take what good was left in him and pollute it like fouling a clear stream with stinking industrial ichor. He was going to turn him into what Mastema was. I won't let him! Beck's fury rose. I won't let him! My name is Becket Merriday. I'm human. My name is Becket Merriday and I'm human, I'm human, I am...

Beck bit down hard on his lip, hoping the pain would shock him out of the paralysis. He tasted blood and felt it dribble warmly down his chin. Then, too suddenly to be natural, the pain was gone. Mastema had blocked it, taking away Beck's last defense against him. Beck rubbed his face in the sand, trying to abrade his skin in the gritty warmth.

"I hate you, hate you..."

Mastema chuckled low in his throat, but he was correct. Before Mastema was finished with him and released his mind, Beck begged him not to stop.

## ୬୬୬୬

Sweet, so sweet, the possession. The sharing of body and soul.

Mastema had known it would be good. Just how good had rendered him mute with amazement. Between them there had always been a space where only they—he and Zefira—could go, a solitary sliver of ordinary magic they forged together that excluded the rest of the universe. The doorway of magic had sealed when Zefira died, but Mastema had found it again and now he never wanted it to stop.

But the sweetness could not last, for there were not of the same breed, and Mastema's endurance was not Beck's. Finally, Mastema admitted to himself he must release Beck's mind or destroy it utterly. Beck had already retreated into a dark pit of consciousness where not even the most brutal thrusts could follow, and Mastema ceased at last, slaked but not sated. The Nephilim were a wellspring he never tired of.

Projecting his will to the Veil, Mastema sent Beck to that place which blazed most vividly in all of his memories. His home, if it could be called that, if a creature such as him could have one, and he laid Beck down on the warm yellow sand that covered the tower and stood away.

Presently, Beck stirred.

Beck's feet twitched as he awakened, as if he would flee from truth even in his dreams. Stubborn creature, and remarkable, to have survived for so long in this state of absolute denial. He had never before seen the like; a creature that had absolutely no knowledge of himself or what he was. He wondered how it had happened, and why.

Beck moaned and his arm moved up to shade his eyes. Three times he tried to raise himself, shaking violently. He finally succeeded and sat blinking in the dazzling light, turned to find Mastema staring at him.

In the Veil, as in dreams, the mind clothes the body. Beck wore a bloody white shirt and dark trousers. He was barefoot and the grisly shirt stuck to him like a second skin. Mastema waited several paces away from him. To his surprise, Beck did not try to run. Perhaps he had learned that running was futile.

Beck groped weakly to his feet and swayed there. They were standing on the roof of a crude, rock-walled tower. It was bright day, the sky a washed-out blue, the sun baking the bonewhite stones to a temperature that would burn flesh. The ancient tower, constructed of rock and primitive mortar, was over forty feet tall. At the time of its building, it was the tallest man-made structure in the world.

The ruins of a small and ancient desert city lay spread before them. Every roof was gone. All that remained were chalky stone walls, clay-packed enclosures and earthen floors. The yellow sand was stark against the apple-green of a large oasis that reigned in solitary glory over the landscape. In the heart of the oasis, from beneath a mound of broken rock, a clear spring bubbled into a deep basin hewn from the stone. Bushy palms with their green branches bending and heavy with fruit surrounded the miniature paradise. The walls enclosing the city were made of stone, twice the height of a man and heavily buttressed. A hot, salt-tasting wind blew from the south as the sun stroked them with a fiery hand.

Beck stepped away from Mastema and moved to the edge of the roof, looking down and in all directions, his lips parted in astonishment and awe. He shuddered.

He's remembering me, Mastema thought with pleasure. The desert and the wolf, how torment had transformed to desire. He's wondering what response he should make now that the nightmare is over, my power over him loosed, and his lips free to curse me again.

Mastema stepped close enough for Beck's aura to meld into his, and a stinging river of pain clawed up his side, enough to quiet his soul. To his faint surprise, Beck did not move away.

Beck whispered. "Where am I?" His voice sounded raw, as if he had been screaming. Perhaps he had. Mastema would not have noticed, such was the tangle of pleasure he had been knotted in.

"My home." Mastema breathed in Beck's scent and closed his eyes to say the word, to whisper it into the wind. "Hanoch." Beck must have felt the abyss the name invoked in him, for he shivered sympathetically. A string of memories blew past Mastema like a trail of smoke: Zefira, her gown trailing with desert flowers, Zefira crowned with starlight, clad only in dew and the moon and her midnight hair, needing no other ornament. Zefira, her arms locked around my neck and her thighs clasping my hips, greedy in our hunger, devouring each other.

Pain clutched at him. All these sorrows are past. I will not think of these things.

"Tasting sorrows of which we have no part," Beck whispered, and Mastema knew Beck could hear his thoughts as clearly as he could hear Beck's. "That's where rage comes from."

"I am not angry, Beck."

"You've never stopped being angry."

He could not deny it. Mastema looked over the top of Beck's head to the ruins, to the dead, deserted city of the Nephilim. Beyond the oasis lay a wasteland, an arid desolation of yellow sand and stones laid out into forever, the flat, red line of the horizon lurking like the edge of a blade, ready to slice and decapitate.

"The valley itself was barren for millennia after the massacre," Mastema said. Beck seemed not to hear. "It is a condemned land, cursed by Yahweh himself. Nothing grew here for five thousand years. Nothing at all. It is an ugly place with ugly memories, yet I keep coming back. Bizarre, how much I love this valley even after all I suffered here."

"You can't love," Beck whispered. He blindly stared down into the valley.

Mastema laughed quietly. "All things can love, if they *choose*. Love exists even in Hell." He pointed to the east. "Do you see that river there, that green ribbon in the distance? Jordan is its name. This is the land of Canaan, the great rift of the Jordan valley, more than six hundred feet below where the sea meets the land. Here lies the oldest walled city in the world." He bent and whispered into Beck's ear. "Have you ever seen these things before? Would you like to see more? I have the key to it all." Beck shuddered in plain repugnance, and Mastema was unaccountably wounded. What else should I expect? What have I been to him since we met again? Killer, rapist, kidnapper. And what was I to him before, in another life?

"Why did you bring me here?" Beck asked, hostile curiosity in his voice.

"To awaken your memories of me, so you could appreciate the fact that I am not a generous creature, and that what I have offered you is an extraordinary thing, coming from me."

Words ground between teeth, angry and frustrated, "And what exactly is your offer?"

Again, Mastema wanted to laugh. How this one hated the inquisitiveness inherent in his nature, the intense curiosity, the keen mind that must *know* or burst.

"Friendship," he said. "Kinship, alliance. Join with me as you once did."

Beck cast a look far off into the distance. "I'm not that person. I have no memory of Zefira, or very little. Images mostly, but they're like cut-outs from a picture book. Still frames without meaning." His eyes were drawn unwillingly to Mastema's face. "But I knew you. From the first moment I saw you at the carillon gate, I recognized you, without even knowing your name."

"Of course. The curtain of death cannot erase everything. Our souls call to one another." Mastema breathed deep of the familiar air. "The last time I was here, it was with you."

Beck's voice was hushed, as if he were afraid of disturbing sleeping spirits. "When was that?"

He smiled a little. "The question is, when is this? This is the Hanoch I once knew, before Babylon was raised, before the great ziggurat of Ur, when Yahweh was known to man simply as El, or god. This is how it appeared five thousand years ago. A moment past you were with Zefira's shade in that oasis we see below, and that was a thousand years ago."

Beck took a step nearer to the edge of the tower, seeming mesmerized by this living vision. "How can we be here?"

"Anything that can be dreamed can be done. The Veil is omniscient. Her name is Sophia, which means wisdom. She knows everything, and she can be anywhere, at any time, or many places at once. We simply choose when to enter and when to leave. Sophia is the doorway between all states of existence, between heaven and earth, life and death. Between the corporeal world and the spiritual."

"Can she take me back in time, to my own life when I was younger?"

"Beware of her," Mastema said abruptly, sensing the direction of Beck's interest. "Oh, to erase the pain, to change fate. I know well the temptation. The act that no angel will dare, fearing a wrath greater than any of us; the changing of the past. Beware, Beck. The Veil can be cruel in what she chooses to reveal, and not all you see here is exact or the full truth. Hope is a human quality. We must do without it, and accept."

"But if she could take me back—" Beck began, his voice rising on a note of excitement.

"The past is written in stone," Mastema snapped. "Only the future is malleable." He bent on one knee and gathered a handful of sand to watch it slide through his fingers, the separate distinction of each grain becoming lost as it rejoined the sand on the tower, as souls are in death. "Forget the past. The past is only a mirror. I offer you a future, if not as a king, at least as prince at my side. We could rule this earth, Beck, if that's what you wanted."

"It's not."

"No? What do you want, then? You have but to ask."

Beck smiled and his shoulders shook, but he saw that it was not really laughter. "You said it yourself, no winners. Good and evil are all the same. We're locked into this forever, so what's the use of asking what I *want*?" Beck turned away, his blue eyes narrowed spitefully, and Mastema was stirred at the potential in that hateful, shuttered glance.

"One cannot vanquish the other for all time, no. That would be the end of the world, and of us, too. Good and evil will always exist, but you don't have to be alone. Flesh is a prison, and only I can teach you how to escape it. I could be your companion. Your *eternal* companion. I would never leave you, or die, or change." Beck shivered, and Mastema craned his neck, looking up at him. He stood up, dusting his hands together. "Isn't that what you fear the most? Change?"

"No."

He chuckled. "My dear, my dear," Mastema chided. "You were always a poor liar."

Beck faced him, his hands knotted into fists. "I've seen what you are. You hunted those men like they were sport!"

"Ah, but they weren't really *men*, were they? And aren't you a hunter, too? Don't you capture your human monsters and destroy them the same way I do? Don't you kill your prey when it's caught? Or do you condemn it to a slow and rotting death in a prison cell? My methods are kinder. We are more alike than you realize, my hunter."

He did not answer. Mastema pitched his voice to seduce him. "You want this. Do you not hate and fear humanity? Don't you want to escape them, punish them? Yes." He stepped close to Beck and touched the corner of one of those incredible sapphire eyes again. "Remember, I know what you have seen with these eyes."

Beck pushed his hand away and moved to the western side of the tower to give Mastema the view of his back in denial. "No."

"Come with me," he coaxed, his voice a promise of all the ecstasy to come.

"I won't!"

"I will never give up, Beck."

"What do you want from me?"

"It is I who offered you a gift, not the reverse. One gift from me you have already; the truth."

"Your gifts pain me."

"Truth is often painful, but I gave you another: the key to your power."

"I don't want this power, I want my life back!"

"You want to be human again?" Mastema offered Beck his hand. "Come be human with me for a night, an hour."

Beck closed his eyes. No, was his soft rejection. Too soft.

"It's not wise to deny me," Mastema said carefully. "There are worse things in life than my favor."

"Name one."

"Death."

Beck was silent for a time as Mastema stood listening to the desert. The only sound was the wind, a dry, lonely susurration. *It is strange*, he thought, *how the absence of sounds can make us feel like forgotten children. Abandoned.* 

"I'm not afraid to die," Beck said.

"Death is no release for your kind. You know that."

Mastema saw the despair reflected in Beck's face. Of course he knew it. Death meant the eternal pit for the Nephilim. Any kind of existence at all was better than that.

"I can't. I can't do it," Beck whispered, thin and low.

Mastema edged closer to him. Beck did not move away. "Armageddon is fought every day, every hour, for someone. Today is just your turn, as Hanoch was mine."

"I don't understand."

He saw that the blood on Beck's shirt had vanished. His mind had accepted the trauma and dismissed it, and Mastema marveled at the changes being wrought in him.

Beck hugged his arms and shivered in the sweltering heat. "I don't feel alive anymore. I'm cold. I want to leave this place. And you."

Mastema put his hands on the Beck's shoulders and turned him, making Beck face him. "The spirit of Yahweh resides in me," he said, his voice low and tightly controlled, as if he held the end of the world at bay with it. "Of all the creatures in this universe, only five are greater than I, and one of them is God. Think carefully what you do when you deny me."

"Don't I have free will? Can't I choose?"

"Choose carefully, for what I love and lose I will destroy. It is my nature."

"That's no choice at all. You hang consequences on this *will* that you agree I have. You're nothing but a liar!"

Mastema was unmoved. In truth, he was glad to be insulted again. It took the barbed edge off his desire, smoothed it into something he could work with. "And what have you done all your life but lie to yourself? Show me your moment of truth. Show me when you first *knew* what you were." The Veil shifted, and the shores of a mountain lake took form around them, trees sprouting from the aether, the scent of pine rushing in. Heavy clouds obscured the sun, and a brisk wind capped the waters with white froth. The sky seemed an endless expanse of sweeping mist, and the air smelled clean and damp and organic, like wet sand.

"Where are we, Beck?"

Beck looked around him, his voice low in dread. "Lake George."

"What is this place to you?"

"This is where my wife almost died."

Mastema felt the surge of grief run through Beck and into him, and his own aura rippled with it.

"I left her."

"Why?"

"Because she deserved better," Beck spat.

"Deserved better than an immortal? What kind of human is she, your wife?"

"She's a doctor," he said. "A healer." He pointed to three struggling figures on the water, a woman in the lake— Catherine—obviously in distress, and two men attempting to rescue her. "Look at them, at those people helping her out of the water. They saved her, not me."

"Why not you?"

"Because," the young voice held abysmal irony "I can't swim."

Mastema chuckled and watched the spiteful sound sew through Beck's skin. "You thought you would die if you entered the water. The Nephilim do not surrender their lives easily. That level of sacrifice is not in your nature, and why should it be?"

Mastema waved his arm and banished the woman and rescuers alike with the gesture. The lake contained nothing but water.

"This place is not your epiphany, Beck. This is your shame."

Beck hung his head. The lake began to fade, and slowly, like a watercolor left in the rain, the landscape dispersed, returning them to the tower of Hanoch and the hard, bright desert. The sun resumed its journey across the sky. Beck turned to lock eyes with Mastema. Fine, yellow sand blew past them on the wind. Their hair and skin acquired a powdery coat of it.

Finally Beck looked away, breaking their silent communion. His mouth shook, and Mastema was astonished to see wet traces in the dust on Beck's face.

For me? Or for all of us, residents of earth and heaven and hell, forever lost in Yahweh's dream of creation? Or for himself, for the humanity he still believes he can keep?

He ached for Beck's innocence, for his simple, ridiculous faith in the power of being human. He bent and took the tears on his lips, his tongue stroking Beck's skin, and felt the tremor in Beck's body and the answering shock in his own. Whatever else they were, they had always had this between them, though neither of them understood it. Mastema could see that Beck felt the inexplicable pull as well, that he reveled in it even as he raged against it. Despair lined Beck's brow and mouth when Mastema drew back, and he had to strain to hear his words.

"I don't know what to do."

Stark honesty. Of all the things he expected, this was not one of them. He drew Beck into a close embrace. "Say my name," he whispered.

"Mastema."

The syllables were pure pleasure. His hands tightened on Beck's arms. He knew he was hurting him, but Beck did not protest or pull away.

"What is to be shall be, in the natural way of things. Even I cannot see the mind of God, and His plan, if He has one, is unknown to me."

Naturally, there was a plan. There was always a plan. Mastema had no illusions that he knew all of Yahweh's grand design. Obedience was his only concern.

I am Mastema. I must obey.

But in that moment, high on the tower of the decayed city, he wanted so much. He wished for so many things, ached for so many futures in which Beck's blood was not on his hands, and very few of them were possible.

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all your heart and mind and soul. Thou shalt have no other love before me...

That included the love he had for Beck. Mastema released him abruptly, pushing him back. For a moment, he thought Beck looked sad, that maybe he, too, longed for something beyond reach. He realized there was only one way to possess Beck, and that Beck would never join him willingly, no matter how much he wanted to. Beck was not capable of saying yes, but neither could he deny what bound them together. He knew that Beck wanted him. There were merely obstacles in the way. Well, obstacles could be dealt with.

The time he had spared for gentleness was over. "I will ask you once more, and afterward, if you refuse me, there can be no more civility between us. Will you join me freely?"

Beck shook his head, tears filling his eyes so that they resembled watered blue flowers. "No."

"I will have you," Mastema promised again, wondering if Beck could understand what he was forcing him to do. "I will not be swayed."

"No!"

Mastema stepped back, creating further distance between them. "The next time we meet, I will take what I want," he said softly, almost lovingly. "You say you want your humanity back. I can destroy your human life. I can destroy everything you ever loved. Everything you will *ever* love."

Beck quailed under the threat, but did not surrender. His chin lifted in stubborn denial.

"Think carefully what you do," Mastema said. "I love you. I do not wish to become your enemy."

But Mastema suffered the tiniest bit of doubt when Beck glared at him, and the ghost of Zefira was behind the lens, and it was her voice that spoke. "We were never anything else."

A dull beige wall swam into view, and Beck awoke to the feeling of an uncomfortable hospital mattress under him. It was still light, but days could have passed while he had been inside The Veil. He was alone.

The only evidence that Mastema had ever been with him was the soreness in his limbs and the scattered bits of metal on the floor. He sat up, carefully expectant of pain, but there was very little. He sat there for a long time.

Beck pictured himself writhing in the sand, the muscles in his jaw twitching as he tried not to moan and plead for more, clenching Mastema's dark hands convulsively, tearing his own skin with his nails, begging...

Don't. God, don't think about it. It was too much like rape to remember, too much like heaven to forget. He could block the sensual images, push away the searing, tactile memory of Mastema's body, but he could not forget his words.

Bene anak, he said. Immortal. Not human. Not me. And if I'm not human, what am I?

Nephilim was just a word to him, a story that he believed but could not remember. Then he remembered what Mastema had told him. *Here is the key*.

He shivered. A distant wisdom beyond his grasp knew this key Mastema spoke of, even if his human self rejected it. It was like the miraculous healing of his body; if he stepped back and allowed it, the part of himself that was not human at all knew what to do.

He stared at the broken metal on the white hospital tiles and knew that he did not yet have the courage to seek inside himself, inside his suddenly alien skull, for the answers he so desperately wanted.

Ask them at Desolo, Mastema had said.

Beck's temples ached. What was happening? How did he get back here? Was any of this even real? His bickering with Sean in the bar suddenly seemed very small and petty. And Catherine... could he have ever believed he could not love her?

He picked up the phone.

#### ୖ୶ଡ଼୶ୠଡ଼

The taxi let him out in front of the house in the dim winter light of noon. The driver knew him, but Beck couldn't recall where he had seen the man before. His life previous to this moment seemed like a sketchy drawing scrawled while halfasleep, and his memory had a haze over it like looking through frosted glass. When the taxi drove off and the sound of its engine had faded, he was suddenly struck by the lucidity of the narrow neighborhood street and the modest brick house in front of him, a little island of cohesive sanity thrusting up into the invisible fog surrounding him. Maybe if he just went inside, he could stay there. Maybe it would shelter him once more.

The reading lamp, the one Catherine sat beneath in the den when she brought work home, was now in the living room. He could see the outline of the ruffled shade through the round bay window facing the porch. Catherine's car was parked in the street, the twined snakes of the caduceus sticker in her rear window blurred by a film of ice.

*Snakes again,* he thought. The driveway needed shoveling. That had been his job.

He stood looking at the tidy frame bungalow. They had fallen in love with it three years ago. It was simple, and above all they had longed for simplicity at that stage, a ready-made something they didn't need to figure out.

I thought I would grow old here.

He rang the bell and waited, his stare fixed on his ice-muddy shoes on the plastic welcome mat. They were not his shoes, as the shirt and jacket were not his. His bloodied clothes had been thrown away. Someone, probably an intern, had left a locker open near the staff room.

Catherine opened the door. "Beck!" She took in the state of him. "Oh my god."

He devoured the sight of her hungrily, his eyes huge, blue shadows like smudges of ink above his cheekbones. She wore a

shapeless sweater and jeans that could not hide the curves of her body. He wanted to gather her in his arms.

Instead he asked, "Did you know?"

She didn't understand, or pretended not to. "Beck, you should still be in bed. How did you..."

"I'm fine, Cat." He knew his appearance told another story. That, and the nightmares still in his eyes. "Fine," he repeated. "Can I come in?"

She opened the door wider. He entered and sloughed his coat in one motion. It dropped behind him, a beetle-shell lump on the floor. Catherine picked it up automatically and followed Beck as he walked stiffly into the kitchen. His shoes dripping water, he stood looking around the room, at the cluttered counters and the polished wood of the breakfast nook, searching, reaching out to catch the memory of things lost.

"How long have you known?"

She wrinkled her forehead, her sleek, red eyebrows furrowing as she shook and folded his coat, crisp irritation in her movements. "How long... what? What are you talking about?"

"How long have you suspected that I'm not," he stuttered to a halt and changed his mind, "normal?"

"Suspected? The first time you opened your mouth, it wasn't theory anymore."

"Damn it, Cat. For god's *sake*." He sank into a chair, all the fight gone out of him.

"I'm sorry. That was mean." She stretched her hand out penitently to caress his uncombed hair, smoothing the dark mass it over his forehead. "I'll make some coffee."

"No coffee," he muttered. "Tequila."

"I don't keep—"

"There's a bottle in the cabinet, above the plates."

"Are you sure?" She draped his coat over a chair and opened the cabinet, bringing out a tall bottle, half-full. "Wow." She shook the bottle and blew dust off the side. "I guess I haven't paid much attention to the house since you moved out." She shrugged "It seems like a lot of work lately for just one person, and I'm the only one to see it, anyway. I made a note to ask you about selling it." Sell the house? The thought made him miserable. Two tumblers plunked down on the table. She poured Beck a hefty shot and a splash for her before sitting warily in the dining chair across from him.

"I suppose it would be useless to say something about mixing alcohol and head injuries right now."

Beck grunted his assent. He picked the glass up and held it tightly in his hand. "Did you know?"

Catherine sighed. "What's that you used to say? The only thing new is the shoes." She looked up at the ceiling, steeling herself. "Did I ever notice anything different about you?" She nodded, her eyes still averted. "Yes. I'm a doctor. More, I was *your* doctor, so yeah, I noticed some things. You don't scar, for one. I don't mean you scar very little, I mean at all. You don't really sleep but you're never tired. You catnap in the evening and spend the night prowling the house, working on your files." Her eyes flickered and a bitter edge crept into her voice. "Calling Sean at all hours. For *advice*. That was your story anyway. And you never get sick. Not ever."

She waved her hands, a restless, banishing gesture, as if casting blame aside for her next rush of words. "As a physician I know that some lucky people do enjoy exceptional health, but not when they abuse their body like you do. You smoke like a chimney. Two packs a day sometimes. You never sleep more than four hours a night, you don't eat for days. I've seen you drink more than three men put together, yet you're not an alcoholic. You can stop anytime you want, and have. How does that all add up?"

"It doesn't."

She leaned forward, finally looking at him. "So tell me. Dazzle me. Give me the missing piece."

He drained the glass and pushed it toward her. "You make me sound so sinister. What if I said everything you suspect is right?"

She ignored the empty glass. "What do I suspect?"

"That I'm not what I seem."

She smiled, suddenly reluctant to have it said, to have the answers out in the open. "No mystery there. I've always known there was more to you than meets the eye. That's one of the reasons I fell in love with you. I knew you were the puzzle I'd never solve, and I loved that about you."

Tears stung his eyes. His hand flailed at his chest, slapping against his shirt. "But I'm..." A wave of self-loathing broke over him. *She doesn't know what I am!* 

She grabbed his hand and laced her fingers with his. "I know who you are, even if I don't know what you are. You're Becket Merriday and I love you. I always have. There's nothing sinister or evil about you. You're just," she hesitated, despairing. Her voice rose. "Jesus, you're just so *lost.* You're the most alienated person I've ever met. And it's not fair, because I know how much you want to love and be loved back. I know you, Beck. I know *you.*"

He tried to answer her through the messy agony playing through his chest, could not and only croaked a sound of denial.

She watched the tears slide down his face and made a noise of pure distress. "Oh, don't. Please." She wiped them away and stood to put her arms around him, pulling him close to cradle his head against her belly.

"Beck. Oh, Beck." She rocked him. Beck's arms slid around her waist to hold her tight as he buried his face in her sweater, ugly sounds wracking him.

Catherine held him while he wept and did not know—could not know—how much of an ending it was.

# ৵৵৵৵

It was Sean who came for him. He expected maybe Joss or Terry to cruise past the house when they checked the hospital and found him gone, but he was surprised when the patrol car pulled up in front of the house and Sean got out. Sean looked pissed. He was halfway to the door when Beck came out of the house buttoning his coat.

"Let's go," Beck said, walking past him. He had left Catherine sitting forlorn at the table, with no better answers than he had.

"Christ, Beck, are you okay?"

"Yeah, fine. I woke up and felt okay, so I left."

"You didn't look okay last night. Far from it. Are you sure...?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. Who's at the station?"

Sean touched his arm. Beck shrugged him off.

"Beck, please."

Beck's face was set. "Who's at the station?"

Sean sighed heavily, perhaps in relief, perhaps in anger at the avoidance. It put Beck's already tattered nerves on edge. Sean was probably the best thing in his life, the only thing he hadn't ruined beyond repair, but sometimes he wished Sean would just shut the fuck up and stop poking.

"Everybody but Joss, Frank and Dale," Sean said. "I was supposed to call in the moment you regained consciousness. Imagine my surprise when the hospital called and said you'd gone missing. The station is a madhouse. Joss and Frank haven't shown up for work. Terry was at the hospital all night. I finally sent him home." He reached for his cell phone.

"No."

"But, Beck—"

"I said no. Leave it alone, Sean." Beck fumbled with the heavy buttons of his coat. His hand still tingled and the newlygrown skin itched like fire ants were dropping little bites all over his fingertips. "Don't call anyone. Not yet."

Sean looked to the bungalow and back at him. "How's Cat?" "Peachy."

"Anything you want to tell me?"

"No."

"No?" Sean's broad face was carefully devoid of emotion. "Why are you so fucking hostile, then? Whatever strange place you've been, Beck, you need to come back from it and talk to me."

Beck had to remind himself that Sean could not know about the Veil. He seemed to know *something*, though. "What kind of thing is that to say?"

Sean seemed to discard his sympathy and worry and go straight for anger. He folded his arms. "Why did you go to Catherine? Why not to me? Correct me if I'm wrong, but I was under the impression that certain chapters in your life were over. In fact," he added meaningfully, stepping closer to Beck. "I thought we were opening new ones."

Beck shoved his cold hands in his pockets, thinking how unfair it was that he couldn't convince himself that he wasn't cold after all. He was supposed to be immune to this, right? It was somewhat of comfort to realize he could still feel something. "I can't explain it this minute."

Sean made a sound of defeat. "Okay, fine. So forget about us for now. We still need to talk about what happened to you."

"Not yet." A gulf of silence and secrets yawned between them. He knew Sean felt it. "Please trust me."

"Beck, the man who attacked you wasn't—"

"No!" Beck held up his hand. "No, not... just give me a little time. I'll tell you everything, I promise. Soon. Just bear with me. Please?"

Sean answered with painful slowness, as if he were biting his tongue on the words. "What do you want me to do?"

"Get me out of here. Let's just go."

Sean would have helped him into the car, but Beck waved him away. "Knock it off." He sank into the deep upholstery and wished for sleep. Real sleep, not the frightening visions he was growing accustomed to.

Sean cranked the engine in too-careful silence. In minutes they were on the highway. The scenery beyond the window was frozen and still.

"Take a left here," Beck said.

"Where are we going?"

"Back to Desolo."

Sean's jaw tightened. He didn't look happy. "What for?"

He knew there was no rational way he could explain to Sean how Tamiel had willed him to leave Desolo, or the connection Mastema had hinted at. "What's with all the questions?"

"What's with all the dodging?"

"I'm not."

"Like hell. You're evading and you look like you're about to pass out. I don't think we're going back out there," Sean stated, as if he had already decided. Beck forced himself to remember that Sean had spent the night in the hospital with him, probably in fear of watching him die. He had every right to be protective, but only so far.

"Last time I checked, I was still the boss around here."

"This isn't a boss-employee thing. It's a boyfriend-boyfriend thing. You should go home and sleep. For a month. You're tired." Sean looked over at him and said it again, very distinctly, the clear green of his eyes piercing, his lips moving in slow motion: *You're tired*.

Later, Beck could never pinpoint exactly what changed in that moment, but suddenly he found himself looking at Sean and realized that a stranger stared back at him. The suggestion—*you're tired*—twanged on his senses like plucking on a badly-tuned string. The landscape rushing past the window decelerated to a sluggish pace, somber-colored worms crawling over the windows. Time slowed. Trees loomed in his view and passed, humped shadows of buildings, indecipherable monster shapes. Sean was speaking, but his words echoed deep and hollow, rolling and bouncing endlessly, reverberating and reinforcing.

Beck's ears began to ring loudly and he clapped his hands over them, squeezing his eyes shut as that instinct he was once so famous for at the FBI started going off like a fire alarm: *This is wrong!* 

"Stop the car," he moaned through his teeth. His fingers dug into his skull. He could feel his hands leaving bruises. "Stop it."

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"What's the matter?"
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"Now!"

Sean slid a curiously hard glance at him, but did not slow or turn the wheel.

Beck's lips felt numb. He dropped his hands from his ears, though they continued to ring with a sour, metallic dissonance. He reached over and seized the steering wheel, wrenching it hard to the right. Tires screeched and for a moment the car was weightless and sliding airborne on the ice, a sick, stomach-drop feeling. Sean pumped the brakes reflexively while fighting Beck for the wheel and they came to a nearly soundless, skidding halt. The stretch of road was devoid of traffic. Empty, snow-covered fields lined both sides of the highway.

Sean sat looking straight ahead, his hands knotted on the wheel. Beck looked at him, searching the rough profile, and wondered why he had never seen him—really seen him—until now. He continued to stare. Sean steadfastly would not look at him, and Beck scooted away from the man a little in his seat.

"Who the fuck are you?" Beck stared. The edges of his vision were going fuzzy. He realized he was breathing too fast and shallow, hyperventilating. The seatbelt was too tight on his chest, suffocating him.

"I knew it was going to change one day," Sean said thoughtfully, talking to himself more than Beck. "I just hadn't counted on it happening this soon. Mastema tends to vanish for long periods of time, decades perhaps. There's no predicting it and no warning. Once, he went for fifty-three years without hunting my Nephilim. I guess I thought we would have more time together before you began to remember. I'm not prepared." Sean laughed lowly. "Can you imagine that? I've waited six thousand years for you and now... I don't know what to say."

Sean turned to him and his eyes seemed to grow larger. Beck recoiled, slipping the seatbelt free and pressing his back against the door. Sean reached out to him. His big, handsome face was as gentle as it had always been, but Beck was seeing him now with a strange double vision that showed another face in time, an older visage, paler, with wide blue eyes and curling black hair. Now he knew why Tamiel, like Mastema, had seemed so very familiar.

"Why is it all so familiar?" Sean echoed.

Slowly, like a butterfly uncurling newfound wings, Sean's face folded wetly and pulled away from itself, changing, writhing into new lines. The hair went from neatly-combed blond to tousled black, the face from carved ridges to subtle arches. Then the body below it changed. Powerful, blunt lines altered into well-formed male elegance. The hands on the steering wheel changed, the fingers growing longer, paler.

Tamiel.

"Don't be afraid," Sean said.

Beck groped behind his back for the door handle. The door opened and he fell backwards into a snowdrift, ignoring Sean's cry of concern. Beck rolled and stumbled away from the car until he came to a low, barbed-wire fence beside the road. Then the car opened and it was Sean who came out and called his name, the form of Tamiel banished as easily as it had come. Beck jumped the fence and ran staggering out into the bleak field beyond, the snow around his knees, panting, panicking.

"Beck!"

Beck turned on him, an animal at bay. Sean was right on his heels. "Don't come any closer! I mean it, Sean!" Beck backed away awkwardly, the drifts dragging at his legs.

Sean held up steady hands. "Calm down."

"You're a liar!" he raged. "You lied about everything!" He paced, walking a short furrow into the snow, clenching and unclenching his fists.

Sean advanced a few steps more, still with his hands up, fingers spread to show Beck he was no threat. "You have nothing to fear from me."

"I'm not afraid of you. I'm trying to decide whether or not to kick your ass!"

Sean blew a short huff of amusement. Questions lay between them like chasms, easy to tumble into and be lost.

"You can try if it'll make you feel better, but you can't hurt me, Beck."

The wind blew ice crystals in a white shower across the small hills of snow, like sand across the desert, and Beck shivered, giving way step for step to Sean's advance.

Sean's achingly familiar green eyes implored him. "Do you remember me? Do you know my name?"

It seemed as if the snow were sand and that a flotsam of dead memories rode on its tide. He would drown in them if he wasn't careful. "How many names can one person have?" he said bitterly. "Sean... Claire... Tamiel."

Sean laid his hand across his stomach, as if shielding it from a blow. His smile held so much sadness that Beck felt the hurt of it in his own chest.

"Flesh is only a shell. Any flesh. You knew that much when you were a child. Now you know the rest of it." Beck wanted to speak, but he was caught in the whirlpool of memory, a confused jumble of images from another life.

A desert sky, a small procession to the white-domed temple, water lilies in Zefira's... in her hair, and the divine being that had chosen her for his own. A flush of pride in being chosen, though she knew that the union was a sin and forbidden by God. Then, another face, a cruel one, with blond hair and pale blue eyes like the winter sky. Only Zefira could peer behind Mastema's eyes to see the imprisoned soul beating its wings within. None of them could understand it, least of all herself. Poor Mastema, he never knew why he loved Zefira so much. They were all caught up in it, struggling helplessly against a tide of destiny, tiny fishes in a cosmic net.

The visions subsided, fading to a march of shifting emotions: anger, betrayal, terror, and finally, with a surge of forlorn regret, a little white dress of linen, made for a child. Zefira's child, long dead. The vision faded in a welter of blood.

Beck opened his eyes and the specters of the past dispersed. "No," he moaned.

"Beck..."

Sean was beside him, touching him. Beck balled his fists and shoved him away. "It's your fault!" Beck shouted. "All of it! Your fault! Why didn't you save us? Why didn't any of you try to save us?" His legs would no longer support him. He sank down in the cold cushion of snow, spent.

Sean knelt beside him again. "Zefira," he said. He grasped Beck's shoulders and wouldn't let go. "It's over. All these sorrows have passed. Now we are brought together again after all these centuries. *Anakhnu shavim*."

He tried to twist away from him, but Sean held on with frightening strength.

"You understand me, don't you?" Sean's voice climbed on a scale of rising desperation. "*Anakhnu shavim. Daber elai.* Language is no barrier to our kind. God has given you back to me and I will not lose you again. Not to *him*!"

Beck shouted incoherently, but it did not shut out the mental echo of Sean's words, the almost automatic translation from Hebrew to English. It was not Akkadian, not the language they had spoken in Hanoch, but it did not matter. *Anakhnu shavim:* We are one.

"Daber elai," Sean implored. Speak to me. His large, warm hands rose and cupped Beck's face between them. "Please, Beck."

He didn't want to hear, didn't want to be lied to or used or outsmarted or betrayed anymore. He walled himself off from Sean, gritting his teeth in rage. Sean grabbed his arms and shook him like a rag doll. Beck heard his teeth click.

"Do you know what Mastema really is?" Sean shouted, close to panic. "Can you even imagine it? He's shown you only a fraction of his power, Beck. He can't die. He cannot be destroyed and he never rests from the pursuit of what he desires. At the moment, he's entertaining himself with you. He lets you go and reels you back in, and when he's tired of playing with you, he'll bring all of his will to focus on you. You won't be able to resist him. Do you understand me? You'll be *lost*. And if he can't have you, he'll kill you." Sean took a deep, steeling breath. "You have to let me help you. I can protect you. Get in the car."

Beck summoned all his strength and threw him off. "Ani sone otkha!" he cried, shocking himself. I hate you.

He ran. His shoes punched holes into the crust of frozen snow as his own tortured breathing sighed in his ears. He ran until Sean and the car were dark specks against the landscape. Sean did not pursue him, but remained kneeling, stunned into silence.

The toe of his shoe caught on a rock and Beck tripped and fell, his breath ragged in his ears. All around him was the sleeping silence of the earth, the dry whisper of snow. He looked up at the gray sky above him, feeling weary and run out, strangely hollowed, like his veins had been sucked dry of blood.

I'm just going to lie down here. Not like it matters. I'm not going to freeze to death.

He collapsed on his back in the snow and stared up at the clouds passing by in a thick sheet. Please, please, for God's sake, tell me who I am. I used to know. I wish I could die now. I wish this ice under my body could kill me. But it can't, and you're making me live a life with no answers, making me watch everything I know be torn into shreds. What are you driving me to? Christ, what do you want?

No answer. He never expected one.

And hour passed. Beck watched the clouds and listened to the wind, felt the deathly cold under him and the snow falling impotently on his body. Useless. No power over him. He could lie here for a month and walk away from it.

At last he sat up. He got to his feet, feeling the wind snaking lonely fingers into his coat, blowing his hair back from his face. There was a small sound behind him, a light crunching of snow. He turned quickly and saw Mastema standing nearby, his hands nestled into the pockets of the familiar black cassock.

"Hello, angel."

Beck drew in a tattered breath. "Go. The Fuck. Away."

Mastema tilted his head at Beck curiously. "Are you well?"

"Sure. What could happen to me? It's only ten below zero out here."

"You don't sound well," Mastema sympathized. "Maybe you should come with me."

His voice was soft, so soft and reasonable. "I need you like I need a bullet in the head. Stay the hell away from me."

"Interesting phrase; stay the hell." Mastema came a few steps closer. "You think you can survive without me? You think you can go back to your little existence, knowing what you've learned, being what you are?"

Beck backed away from him. "I don't *know*!"

"Why prolong this pain? Why do you wait? You have the key. Use it."

"No!" Beck knew Mastema was goading him to explore his fledgling nature, to open that door in his mind and see what lurked within. Whatever it meant to be a Nephilim, Mastema seemed to believe it would convince him to abandon his humanity.

Mastema stopped and did not advance further. "You are not wise to deny me," he said, menace outlining every word in scarlet relief. "Are you really so eager to die?"

"You haven't killed me yet."

Mastema was silent for a long moment, as if considering the novelty of Beck's challenge. "I don't make idle threats, Beck."

"I won't do it." He shook his head, the wind whipping into his eyes. "You can't take it away from me." "Take what away?"

Beck refused to answer. He pressed his lips together and balled his fists as if he could fend him off that way, but Beck had already learned that Mastema's methods were more direct than that. When he struck, he went right for the soul.

Mastema looked amused but puzzled, as if he were having difficulty comprehending Beck's rejection. "You are not a human being. Why do you fear to come with me?"

"Because," Beck moaned, "you'll change me."

"How? You have no humanity to sacrifice."

"I do. I know I do. I feel it!"

Mastema held out his hand, curling the fingers to coax him closer. "Come," he whispered. "Come now. Be with me. You know it's useless to resist. Let me remove this pain. You endure it for nothing."

"No. I won't."

Mastema's hand dropped. "You will. I'll make you."

Beck looked at the tree line, the sky, anywhere but at Mastema. Driven by the wind, a stray shower of snowflakes whirled around them in a dervish. They blew into Beck's eyes and blurred Mastema's shape before him. He looked up at the indifferent sky again. "Help me," he whispered, wondering if anyone was listening at all.

Mastema laughed softly and Beck closed his eyes, wishing he could shut out the sound as easily as the sight of Mastema.

"I said that the next time we met, I would take what I want."

Beck shivered, steeling himself for a fight. "So what are you waiting for?"

Brightness bloomed through his closed eyelids, turning his vision red. When he looked, Mastema was gone. He had called the Veil and departed.

Time passed. Appealing as the idea was, he could not just stand there forever. Beck surveyed the landscape again. Beyond the flat expanse of the fields, to the south, a bare winter forest loomed. Hampered by the deepening snow, he moved toward it. He had no real intent, only a vague impulse to keep going.

And yet, it *had* seemed like an ordinary line of trees at first. Now there was a sparkle on the edges of the limbs and trunks, like sunlight reflecting on ice. Was there some other force moving him steadily toward those trees? Beck heard a twig snap and he froze in mid-step, suddenly afraid. A white owl burst from the copse and trilled as she climbed into the sky, trailing bits of snow in her wake. He watched her as she banked and turned. Her shadow crossed him as she spread her wings and vanished over the trees.

The pull from the forest became suddenly intense. Deep within the gloom, Beck caught a glimpse of a ghostly white arm waving like seaweed in the ocean. He thought he heard his name on the wind.

Becket...

Listen. Listen to the voice that is not a voice that calls from the trees. What is it? What is pulling, what's inside that echoing darkness?

Beck wanted to protest, to cry out for help, but there was no one to answer. He was alone and he was being lured, a fish enchanted by the worm, into the woods. A sand-dry rustle of a voice pursued him, like brittle leaves chased over the ground.

Becket...

It was only when he tried to stop moving that he realized he could not, and despite himself he entered haltingly into the arched, sterile-seeming palace of sleeping woods. As he passed within, he heard the brittle limbs of the trees lowering, as if a great weight was forcing them down. Bits of broken ice, clear as shattered glass, snow rained down from disturbed limbs that groaned and creaked as they stretched toward him, horribly alive and animate.

Becket... sweet Becket... how I have waited for thee...

Then he was allowed to stop as the writhing, ice-crusted branches clasped together and wove a domed prison of limbs that sealed him inside as tightly as a tomb.

It was oppressively quiet inside the trees. Beck looked up at the silver and brown latticework of branches over his head and saw a few snowflakes drifting into the enclave. Pale, bluish-gray light poked through the small gaps between the tree's interlocking fingers. Time itself seemed stilled, and Beck realized he was holding his breath and blew it out in a billowing of steam. Inside him was a creeping chill, and he trembled without feeling cold. He thought perhaps it was the truth of his soul slinking up on him.

The ground moved beneath Beck's shoes. He shifted his feet and looked down. The layer of brown autumn leaves beneath the snow crackled as they were pushed up and aside by a shaft of clear ice that rose from the ground. He stared at this new event, no longer interested in questioning the impossibilities he saw, but simply unsure how to react to them. This was different from what he felt inside the Veil, because this was happening to him here, in his waking world, as if the earth were coming alive to speak to him.

The shaft of ice grew to half his height, and then fanned out with a liquid suppleness to form a tall rectangle with jagged edges. Its form was disturbingly reminiscent of a large tombstone. The surface was smooth as glass, and Beck stared at the block of ice, seeing the network of trees behind it through a frosty panel. Slowly, the ice shimmered and became clouded, taking on the color of mercury. A leaden storm twisted in its depths and his image was reflected off the tumult like a mirror. Beck stared back at himself: a man of an average height, darkhaired, medium build, wrapped in a dark coat, snow dusting his hair. His eyes were different, but he could not pin down what had altered. He jumped with sudden fear as a face appeared in the mirror. In the mirror, a man was standing behind him with a face like his own. The features were crueler and black hair was wild and spiky above narrow, feral eyes as black as oil. The mirror-Beck grinned savagely at him, a death mask with sharp teeth, and laid his hand on Beck's shoulder. Beck whirled around, his heart pounding.

No one was there. He was alone inside the strange arbor. He turned back to the mirror, half-afraid that he would see his other self there, but it was a different vision that confronted him.

Show me the past, Beck.

Inside the mirror was an image of his bedroom in Alexandria, their bedroom as it had been three years ago. The room was dark save for the square patches of gauzy moonlight that poured through the neat boxes of pane windows. Beck recognized the decor with a bleak pang of things lost, Catherine's distinctive touch on the furnishings. The linen curtains with their tiny pattern of hand-embroidered roses, the ruffled bedcovers, and the silver candlesticks on the impossibly huge French armoire they had paid far too much for at an antique fair.

He looked down on Catherine as she slept, and his breath hitched as he recognized the familiar champagne nightgown.

The bedroom door opened and a shaft of light fell on the covers, and the mirror-image of himself entered the room. Beck moaned low in his throat.

Not this. Not this again. I don't want to see this.

He watched in shame as his image in the mirror woke Catherine and attempted to force himself on her, cringed as he hit her and intentionally obliterated all hope for the future of his marriage. Catherine wept and quietly walked out of the room, and the mirror-Beck exploded in rage and vented his fury on the oak and mahogany dresser until it was splintered into fragments. It was an impossible feat for a human. A human would have suffered broken hands and split, swollen flesh, would have been moaning in pain. There wasn't a mark on him.

He bit his mouth until it bled. She's better off. God, she will never know how much better off she is without me!

The mirror was changing, the vision of his past fading into mist. Beck stepped forward and lifted his hand to hover near the ice, wanting to hold on to that frail and torturous link to Catherine. And then, as if in answer, Catherine did appear to him. She was inside the shadow mirror. He recognized the hallway of the little bungalow around her, the butterflies on the bathroom wallpaper visible over her shoulder. She was nude and had a white towel wrapped around her hair, wet tendrils trailing down her slender neck. Steam rose from her skin and Beck saw she was just out of a hot bath. His throat tightened at the sight of her body.

"Catherine?"

She could not hear him. Her image rippled in a wave of mist and she was gone. Beck's own reflection stood in her place, the ice becoming a true mirror again. Dully, he noted the tears on his face and moved to wipe them away. Something white flashed by his right side. He looked again in the mirror, gasping at what he saw.

His reflection had wings. They were whiter than anything he had ever seen, a bright, perfect white that almost glowed. They were large, each of them easily twice the length of his arms, and they swept up to tower over his head in a graceful, curving arc. Beck's strength failed him and he sank to his knees.

Is this what I am?

No worship. Only despair. He had no idea who or what to revere anymore. Before his first Mass he had been spoiled, corrupted by human lust and hypocrisy. It was impossible that he could have become any better a man, but he could have become much, much worse. Impossibly, he could smell the close, heavy aroma of frankincense, and his gorge rose at the memories.

A painfully vivid hallucination tore through his brain, leaving searing imprints like a nuclear flash-fire. He saw a long, red carpet leading to an altar, but the carpet turned to rose petals, a trail of blood-red blossoms torn from their stems. The roses were bleeding. He felt their sticky blood between his toes as he plodded barefoot to the altar, a boy of fewer years than he had fingers, but with the experience of a jaded whore. Stinging pain made him stop. He looked down at his bloody feet and realized that the path was barbed with rose thorns and that the blood was his. A shadow fell across him and he looked up.

Behind the altar a tall statue loomed, a white body flung on a cross, one bloody path leading to another, and no room for his

life in between. He would have turned and fled, but pain held him there, the same pain that was sliced into the statue's face, cinching Christ's mouth into the ugly, familiar rictus of misery. The boy cried hopelessly, and suddenly Beck was lifted out of it, swept back into the cold arbor to find he was weeping in earnest.

He reached towards his reflection in the mirror. The image receded before him, wings gone, his face growing smaller and smaller until it faded from sight.

What had he been reaching for anyway? Comfort? Forgiveness?

Hope is a human quality, Beck. We must do without it, and accept.

Beck lay down and pressed his cheek against the cold leaves. What did it matter now? What did anything matter? He was not human. His life had been a lie; his job, his marriage, his self image. Nothing was real. He had been living inside an illusion since the day he was born. Perhaps among his own kind he could find peace. Perhaps Mastema was right and they deserved each another. Perhaps there was no redemption for him, no humanity inside himself to save, and his embrace of evil was already foretold.

Steeling himself, Beck prepared to call to Mastema, to signal his surrender and wish the angel to return and claim him.

"Beck."

He rose up and looked at the mirror. The image of Catherine had re-formed. She was at home again, standing by their bed as if waiting, the wet towel loose in her hands, her damp hair hanging over her bare shoulders. She gazed down at the rumpled sheets where he had once slept and passed her hand longingly over his pillow. Light winked off the tiny golden cross about her neck as she sank down on the bed and smoothed the covers. Her chin shook and tears spilled over her cheeks.

Did she whisper his name or did she say it out loud? "Beck."

Beck covered his face. *This is my fault.* I gave her this pain. No one else. He dropped his hands and wiped his nose on his sleeve, sniffling. Catherine's image shimmered. It took him a moment to realize that it was not the mirror that was changing, but the wall behind Catherine.

It was the Veil.

"No!" Beck surged up, his hands hooked into claws. But there was no one to fight. The ice was only ice. There was no way to reach her, no way to save her.

Mastema came out of the wall, leeching into the room from the Veil as Catherine wept. His feet made no sound as they touched the bedroom floor, slipping silently into her reality, his lips curled into a predatory, snarling smile.

Then his head turned and suddenly he was looking directly at Beck, cutting through the distance that separated them. Mastema laughed soundlessly and spoke, but Beck heard no words, and Mastema opened the malice of his thoughts to him. Beck recoiled in horror. The angel's mind was a pit of snakes. Nothing he had ever seen or read about could describe it. Beck had the terrifying feeling that his feet were sinking into a nightmare, like bubbling pond of reeking ichor that sucked at his toes with disgusting hunger. In a moment, it would swallow him whole.

I'll make you, Beck. I said I would make you.

"Catherine!" Beck screamed.

Mastema reached for her, tangling her hair in his fist. Beck shouted incoherently in terror and rage as Mastema hauled her backwards off the bed by her hair. Catherine shrieked and reached behind her, trying to strike her attacker, and her legs kicked for purchase as she was dragged across the floor to the bathroom, the towel slipping from her fingers. It was only when Beck saw that the tub was still filled with water from her bath that he knew what Mastema meant to do.

Mastema towed Catherine to the side of the bathtub. She tried to get her knees under her, a series of hoarse shrieks coming from her throat, nails clawing at his arms. Mastema changed his grip expertly and bent her body at a cruel angle backward over the enamel lip of the tub, shoving her head under the water, his fingers wound in the long hair at her temples. She kicked and beat at him as he held her, her nails finding his eyes and digging in, gouging, but with no effect. Mastema laughed and turned his head to lick her wrist. Her struggles weakened. "Stop!" Beck rose up and seized the mirror between his hands as if he would pry it from the ground like a rotten tooth. "*Stop*!"

The scene vanished and he faced himself, wide eye to wide eye, an instant before the mirror shattered between his hands with a loud report. Powdery shards sifting down to settle in a jagged heap.

One chance left to save her.

Beck conjured the Veil in his mind, frantically reaching for it, knowing the power was within him to make the jump between worlds and rescue Catherine. He balled his fists and concentrated, gritting his teeth. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead and ran down his face as he *reached*...

And lost it.

Fear and haste made him unsure, and for long, agonizing minutes he floundered, clumsy as a toddler taking his first steps, panicking that the faint spark in his mind would vanish and he would be left with nothing to cling to, no chance or miracle to change what he knew was happening. What he knew had happened already. How long had he stood here, reaching for the Veil as she drowned? How long did it take to drown? Two minutes, three? At the most, with the surge of adrenaline running through her blood, Catherine could have held out for three. It had been longer than that.

He said it in his mind; *Catherine is dead.* The words rang like distorted bells, a warped melody impossibly out of tune with the universe. The sun could not fall out of the sky, waters cannot flow upward, and Catherine could not be dead.

But she was. She had drowned. He felt it, a part of him sheared away and the bloody stump left hemorrhaging. An animal began to howl nearby. It was some time before he knew that the animal was himself, that he was screaming, blood dripping from his bitten tongue, as the sun arced swiftly down to the horizon.

He raved inside the cage of trees. Insane images of gore and fury ran like a red flood through his brain: Mastema's face torn into shreds, skinned, eviscerated, pounded to pulp beneath his fists. Beck ripped at the cold bark of the trees until his hands were red, trying to escape. He beat on the rough boles until his hands bled, craving Mastema's flesh between his teeth so that he could rend and tear and leech this thing inside dry, bleed it all away.

Dulled by pain, he dropped to hands and knees and tore at the frozen ground, trying to dig his way out. Bloody fingers scrabbled against rock-hard ice, nails shredding away. No escape.

His mind left him. Like the tide, it flowed away and away, a kite with a cut string rising in the sky, abandoning him. His soul tried to go with it, a ragged, wailing thing with frayed ends, but in the end it would not leave him. Voice and strength gave out at the same time. Unable to scream, he stretched out in the snow and whimpered.

## *୶*ଡ଼୶ୠଡ଼

Darkness cradled him. Beck drifted through a long river of blackness on a bed of silken nightfall, warmed by a source that cradled him as he lay on the frozen ground, his bleeding, dirtcaked hands curled to his chest.

His head was in someone's lap. That *someone* breathed ardently on his cheek as he floated slowly upward to consciousness. He lay still, eyes closed, and listened to his breath and the other's for a long time.

Show me the past, Beck.

"Zefira," he heard a man say, and a trail of ragged images followed the name. A woman with a mane of hair black as soot, clad in a gown of crude, homely linen, her feet bare and her hands and face streaked with yellow dust. She was gazing into a plate of brass as tall as a man, beaten and polished into a mirror. Apart from the apricot haze of the metal, her reflection was as fine as leaning over crystal waters. She had tears on her smooth cheeks.

I was Zefira, daughter of Silili, wife of a Sephir, the Light Ones. Three Nephilim children have I borne to my Sephir, but now the Other has come, and there is no denying him...

Tamiel was pleading with her.

Beck heard no words, only the impression of their meaning. Tamiel had reminded Zefira of her pious duty, of their children, sworn his eternal love, and brought her the gift of the brass mirror in a desperate attempt to bind her to honor her promise. If this last effort failed, she knew he would resort to the use of his power to keep her with him. Unless Mastema restrained him, it would work, for she was only mortal. It should have made her angry that Tamiel would betray their memory with such tactics—and she did have blameless memories of him but all she could feel was pity. Had Tamiel known that pity was the cause of her tears, he would have been enraged.

He hates Mastema so.

Tamiel's smooth brow was lined in sorrow.

"Why him? Why always him? What is there in me so terrible that you must turn away from your husband and go to him?"

"It is nothing to do with you," she said, honesty being her last shield. "But we are bound together, he and I, and in his eyes there is a call I must answer. I do not want it. I do not understand it, but I cannot resist it."

Tamiel touched her, and in Beck's dream Zefira drew gently away from her husband. His sleeping self also felt a touch, fingertips pressing on his temples, seeming to painlessly penetrate his skin, reading flesh like Braille to probe deeper for the madness that consumed his brain. Trying to snatch it out and fling it away. Stubbornly, he resisted. He held onto it, to the madness. He would not let go.

Beck.

Not "Zefira," but Beck, his own name. Who was this presence next to him? Was she trying to tell him something? A soft mouth descended hungrily on his lips, gently tugging on his mouth during a long kiss, as if she would drink from him. Never before had he felt this power in another's hands, a caress like a thunderstorm. A raw pulsing that surged through his blood like ocean waves. Her warmth was all around him, seeping inside him. She stroked his neck, fingers plucking notes of delight, a musician drawing arpeggios of pleasure from his blood to his skin, touch singing his bones down to honey

Beck, wake up.

Oh God, when was a kiss ever like this? Only Sean could make him forget himself like this. Sean could make him speak in tongues. Coaxed awake once more by the mouth pulling at his. Warm hands massaged his face, his arms, chafing his palms. Gently being seduced back to consciousness. Beck opened his eyes. The sun had fallen below the horizon and the sky wore a robe of fickle heather that would soon change to indigo.

His voice was a croak. "Sean?"

"Caligo numquam perit."

It was a rotted, green thing with seaweed for hair and a scum of green mold around the mouth, nose clotted with mud from the bottom of Lake George.

"Darkness never dies." It smiled a harrowed grin with black mildew on its teeth.

He fainted.

## *~*???

Beck lay in the snow and endured many awakenings, some of nightmare, some more mundane, making the bad dreams all the more intense in contrast. He saw Claire murdering Father Calvert in the church, and relived his boyhood through the depraved filter of the priest's desires. He saw a woman tenderly cuddling and kissing an infant and realized it was his mother, a fragile, dark-haired girl barely into womanhood.

"Becket," she sang, and covered her eyes. "Peek-a-boo, Becket!"

The baby gurgled and laughed, and the image faded to a child left on snow-covered steps. The girl was around the corner, listening for the doors of the church to open. She covered her mouth when the baby cried, smothering her sobs with her fist, then turned and hurried away. Beck tried to follow her in his mind, but her image became more shadowy the further she walked out of his life. She finally vanished, unable to maintain a link to his world, and he lost her in the mist. "Wait!" Beck called after her, jerking himself upright, breaking the invisible chains that held him down. He ran towards her, chasing, his shoes slapping on a ghost-pavement. "Wait! Wait for..."

His voice died. He was in a yard of some kind, a back lawn or...

Father Calvert's garden.

Beck felt as if all the air had been siphoned from his lungs. What instinct had delivered him here? It was the last thing he wanted to see, the last place he would have chosen to return to. Why had the Veil brought him back here? Beck had a terrible suspicion that she had not, and that it was his own hidden shades and monsters that had dragged him here.

Angel...

The garden was just as he remembered it. Beck looked around slowly and discovered he was sitting on a patch of soft grass, and that the color of the sun in the sheltered garden looked like sunset. He had forgotten how very green the South could be. Everywhere he looked he was surrounded by boxwoods with their tiny oval leaves shading from lime to dark jade, twisting ropes of honeysuckle with their soft-furred vines and white tongues of petals. Beneath him the grass was starred with clover and Confederate violets. He knew it was spring because fat, purple rolls of wisteria hung from the oaks ringing the garden, and the clover was flowering with burgundy tufts.

Beck rose and flexed his hands. The fading sunlight was ocher and sifted through the canopy of leaves in a scattering of greenish-gold. He looked down and saw his legs were bare and he wore faded, torn sneakers, the same kind of shoes he had worn for a year when he was seven.

A sound caught his attention. It seemed like a human moan, but muffled and short, as if something had cut it off. Beck began to move, his sneakers sinking into the green loam of moss and clover, and he knew the lush soil beneath it would be black and crumbling, like sugar and molasses.

"Beck." Someone was crooning his name, soft as sin, seductive as a lie.

Beck moved through the fertile gloom, thinking how much it resembled a cave. Anything could happen here, like it could happen in any secret place. Anything *had* happened here. A spark of anger made him curl his hands into fists. Someone should have known. They should have known and they should have saved him.

"I saved you, Beck."

He came upon the source of the sound. It was a tableau that made his heart miss a beat. There, on the deep grass, cloaked by

a recessed curve of foliage, were three figures locked together. Beck's eyes were wide and round as he watched a naked man with the head of a goat rear up over the prone body of a young male. The male was not him, he saw with immense relief. The boy was blond, sweet-faced and beardless, but not him. Not at any age. The goat-headed man seized the boy's hips and flipped him over to his belly. The creature had polished ivory horns curving high over the top of his head, and soft, pointed ears of brown and white. His eyes were gold and black, with that rectangular pupil that so many found frightening.

The boy had skin so smooth and pale that it almost seemed to glow. Beck saw the blond hair spilling over the boy's shoulders and the fine curves of his slender hips and buttocks, and then the goat-headed man, the satyr or whatever he was, grabbed the boy's hips and impaled him on his phallus. The boy's head went back, the pale throat bared and convulsing in agony or pleasure, and then a furred paw was on the boy's blond head, pushing it down between the legs of the second man.

Beck seemed not to be able to see the second man. There was a caul between them, some slimy, dripping thing of shifting colors that prevented him from seeing the man clearly. If he went just a little closer, perhaps he could see who it was.

He'd barely moved his foot when a pair of strong arms circled him from behind. A warm hand clapped over his eyes, cutting the vision off.

"No, Beck." It was Sean's voice, urgent and commanding. "Don't look at this. Leave it."

He was uncertain now, and his body shook. "I want to see it!"

"No, you don't. I have pulled you inside the Veil. She can't make you see a lie, but only you can bring your nightmares to life here. Don't do this to yourself."

"The Veil?" Sean's body was strong and warm, pressed against his back, the arms so comforting and his grip so sure. "I never saw this when I was a boy."

"You read about it. Father's Calvert's forbidden books, remember? Pagan tales, Pan seducing the moon."

Beck heard the sounds of rutting close by, the rhythmic slaps of flesh on flesh and the low voicing of pleasure and pain. He could still see, clearly and with his eyes closed, the image of the satyr driving into the young man's body. "I never read this."

"Not exactly this." Sean's big hand rubbed his arm in a soothing touch. He smelled sweet, like crushed leaves and honey. "This is just the way your mind interpreted it. So much happened here that wasn't supposed to. I was too late. Leave it, Beck. Make it go away."

Sean's voice was cajoling and so very certain. When he took his hand away, they were alone in the garden and twilight had fallen. Beck let his head fall back onto Sean's shoulder.

"You see?" Sean smiled down on him, green eyes glinting in warmth and love, and his arms came up again, pulling Beck close in an enfolding embrace.

Beck wanted so much to respond to him, but his grief was too fresh. "Catherine," he said hoarsely.

"Hush," Sean murmured, and then Sean's mouth was on his.

Beck turned in Sean's arms, breaking the kiss. "Why didn't you come for me sooner?" he demanded, unable to stop staring at Sean's mouth, full and slightly wet from their kiss.

Sean looked wounded. "I lost track of time," he said. His hands came up to frame Beck's face. "I'm so sorry, Beck. So very sorry. The truth is that I blinked and nearly a decade passed me by. Time isn't the same for us. You'll learn that one day."

Beck wondered if Mastema would allow him to live that long. The world seemed bathed in emerald, as if he were sunk beneath a bottle-green sea. Sean's eyes were jade coral in that sea, staring Beck down, giving his reasons. If it were not for the pain in them, Beck thought he could be very angry with Sean.

"You sent me here."

Sean nodded, letting the backs of his fingers brush Beck's cheekbones. "To keep you hidden. I'm sorry it wasn't safe for you. If you must be angry with someone for it, be angry with me, not at God. He never intended that for you, I'm sure."

"But He let it happen."

Sean nodded sadly. He didn't need to say that God allowed all manner of horrors to occur in the world. Beck knew that too well.

"If I start asking *why* again I'll never get to the end of it," Beck said softly. Sean's hands felt so good on his face, so soothing. He heard the chirrup and sigh of small insects in the brush, the minute flitting of wings as something flew by his ear. Fireflies rose from the ground in waving golden lines of light, slow and lazy. A warm breeze stroked Beck's skin.

"Stop asking, then." Sean's lips hovered over his. "Be with me."

Mastema had asked the same thing, and Beck had refused him. He had no thought of denying Sean, no hesitation or doubts.

"Yes," he whispered, closing the distance between them.

Beck pressed his mouth to Sean's and kissed him, and a moment later when he felt Sean's tongue fluttering against his lips, he opened to it, suckling it softly, drawing it inside him. No nightmares now. No terror-dreams or hallucinations. He wanted Sean inside him for real, in any way possible, in all ways. He didn't imagine for a moment it would be the other way around, that he could take Sean like that. Their roles had been defined long, long ago. Sean was his protector, his lover, his mate. He belonged with Sean.

As if he heard, Sean moaned against Beck's lips, and his hands dipped lower to begin unbuttoning Beck's shirt, stripping him.

They took their time, sliding out of their clothes and letting them drift to the grass. Time slowed to an endless, hazy crawl broken by groans of pleasure and the wet sounds of kissing. They sank to their knees, their hands urgent on one other, pulling layers of clothing away, aching for the touch of skin.

Finally, Sean pressed him back and Beck felt the shock of Sean's bare, broad chest pressed against his, the muscled belly against his abdomen, the long legs against his own. Beck could think of nothing that matched more perfectly, and his head swam with desire stronger than the hardest liquor. He felt drunk with it, yes. That was it exactly. The ground seemed to heave and sigh under them in waves as Sean's mouth teased him, pressing kisses to his neck, licking his collarbone, going lower to tongue his nipples. Beck's back arched at the electric contact. He hissed and wound his fingers hard into Sean's blond hair, tugging him closer, wanting to feel more of Sean's mouth. Sean's lips closed on the tight, hard bud of his nipple and Beck cried out, his dick hard and slick between them, and he humped awkwardly against Sean's belly like a teenager trying to rub out an orgasm against the bedcovers.

He heard Sean's low chuckle. The angel looked up and met Beck's gaze. Beck wondered if this would all turn to a nightmare now, but no, Sean was smiling, the deep laugh-lines around his eyes crinkling.

"Sweet lover," Sean said in a low, erotic tone that sent a shiver straight down his belly to Beck's cock. "Fear nothing. I've got you, Beck. I've got you."

Sean lowered his mouth again and kissed his way down to Beck's navel, tonguing and teasing. Beck moaned and pulled fitfully at Sean's hair, reduced to begging now.

"Please, oh please, *ah!*" Beck shouted as Sean slipped the tight, wet warmth of his mouth over the head of his cock. An instant later, he was surrounded by soft, sucking heat and he thought he might lose his mind. Swirls of incandescent light spun out before his sight as he stared upward at the canopy of leaves that blocked out most of the sky. *Fireflies,* Beck thought. The canopy dripped green raindrops onto them. He watched them soak into his skin.

He was afraid of hurting Sean, so he let go of Sean's hair and allowed his fingers to dig deep into the earth, tearing up tufts of moss and grass, the raw, moist smell of dirt growing strong around them.

"Sean... Tamiel... more," he begged, looking down. The sight of Sean's blond head bobbing up and down on him almost made him lose control, and he longed to feel his hands on the back of Sean's head, pushing him down, gorging him with lust.

Beck wrapped his legs around Sean's waist. With a broken groan, Sean spat into his hand and slicked the moisture onto his cock before he pulled Beck's legs up roughly and prepared to enter him. *No nightmares,* Beck reminded himself. This was real and happening. It didn't matter where they were, if the place truly existed or not. What mattered is that he was with Sean.

Sean cupped the side of Beck's face with one long hand and breathed onto his lips as their bodies met. Beck's breath rushed past Sean's lined palm as he panted, anxious and excited, and felt the first push of Sean's sex against him.

Beck's breath caught and his eyes narrowed. His earth-caked nails dug into the skin of Sean's back, slick with sweat.

"More," he pleaded. "I've waited so long." He tossed his head like a skittish colt when Sean eased inside him slowly, so very slowly and carefully. Beck's black hair stuck to his forehead in soaked, curling tendrils. He bit his lip bloody and cinched his legs around Sean's waist. "*Tamiel*," he begged.

It was the key to breaking Sean's control. Sean shuddered from head to toe and clasped his arms around Beck convulsively.

"My love," Sean gasped into Beck's ear, and pushed deep.

Beck thought for a moment that the sun was rising. A slow flood of light crept across his vision. Sullen heat throbbed in his groin as Sean moved inside of him, their mouths locked together. He felt the voluptuous surrender of penetration and refused to protest against it, even when Sean thrust inside him so hard that his breath seized in his throat.

"Oh God," Beck gasped. His voice was an intoxicated slur. "Don't stop. Please never stop."

Sean coiled and thrust. Beck cried out in ecstasy and the cry echoed around them, a wild thing beating its wings for release in the subterranean gloom of the garden. Beck felt Sean's strong hand on the back of his neck, caressing his skin in circles, drawing him in for another deep kiss, a moist tongue chasing his before stabbing home possessively. Sean's hands caressed his body endlessly, slid up the curve of his hip, over the tingling, aching points of his nipples and down again between his legs, fingers wrapping tight. Beck moaned and whined, pushing desperately into Sean's hand, feeling caught between those two points of pleasure, his dick and his ass, and his helpless body thrumming like a live wire between them. The sparks behind Beck's eyes turned to flares as a white-hot coal began in his spine, in the small of his back, burning a path to his brain, whip-snapping his head back as he gritted his teeth and came and came...

## *୶*ଡ଼୶ୠଡ଼

It seemed like hours before he could think again. Sean was a warm presence at his side, like sleeping next to a banked fire. He felt Sean's hands on his face, felt the brief kiss pressed to his cheek and the whispered *I love you*.

"Be strong, Beck. You'll know what to do."

Beck's eyes snapped opened. "Sean?"

He was alone inside the Veil. The garden seemed only a garden now. Whatever magic or wickedness it had represented to him, he had exorcised it with Sean, as if they had hallowed the ground with their shared fluids, purifying it. He had a premonition that he was seeing it for the last time.

Beck stood up, feeling a faint ache deep in his body that threatened to evoke ugly memories, but he resolutely pushed them aside. He had a thought to get dressed, and suddenly he was fully clothed. He looked at the neatly pressed sleeves of his shirt in amazement. But of course, clothes aren't necessarily real here, are they? No more than goat-men or fireflies.

The garden seemed dead now, its enchantment broken. He wondered where he should go or if he should wait here for Sean to return, but he had a feeling Sean wasn't coming back. For some reason, he didn't feel abandoned. Sean had always let him make his own mistakes.

But where could he go? Could he even leave at all?

He wondered if he could make the Veil take him somewhere else, or call it to do his bidding like Mastema was able to do, and suddenly, as if in answer, a deep fog began to roll into the garden.

Beck watched the fog curl from under the bushes and snake across the grass in long, nebulous ropes, rising from the cooling ground in waving arms and thin spires, reaching out to brush his ankles like a cat. He breathed it in deep, watching it enter his mouth like hungry fingers of mist. It felt alive inside him, clammy and warm. He imagined he could feel the moisture atoms contained in the fog entering his bloodstream through his lungs, swimming up to his brain and infecting his mind, swaddling his synapses in illusions, half-truths, and dreams colored by bias and past pain. He saw Sean walking away from him in the alley behind the bar, leaving him in the snow with a broken neck, only Sean had Tamiel's black hair. When Beck called after him in anguish, Sean turned, drew his gun, and shot him. He saw himself taking Catherine out onto Lake George, but instead of trying to rescue her, he tipped the boat over and pushed her to the bottom, locking his hands around her throat as she drowned. Reality itself wobbled, poised teetering on the spike of his own construct, ready to topple into madness or evil. Beck dropped to his knees and pressed his fists to his temples, squeezing his eyes shut.

"It isn't real," he got out, his teeth clenched so hard that his jaw ached. They had banished the evil from this place like expelling a demon from a human child, but typically, once the parasite has left the host, the host often dies with it. Father Calvert's garden was dying, and it was trying to take Beck with it.

He had to leave this place, but how, which way? More nightmare images poured into his consciousness, and his mind threatened to break, a piano string tightened to an agonizing pitch, until he felt a hand as cool as the mists settle on his cheek. A sweet-soft voice whispered to him. "Wake, Becket."

Beck opened his eyes.

He was no longer in the arbor, but standing in the gloom of a silent world on the banks of a dark, misty lake. It was late twilight, those last few moments before night fully descends on the earth. A wall of cloudy, white vapor obscured the center of the lake, and the air was wet and heavy. Waves lapped steadily on a shore of pebbled rock.

Beck inhaled and felt droplets of moisture form in the back of his throat. He could taste it there, the musk of damp, fecund earth. The wall of vapor rested upon the water, and standing in front of it was a tall figure swathed in a misty robe, the features hidden by a deep cowl. The robe rippled about the figure as if it were made of vapor, eerily billowing and clinging with a life of its own. The arms rose slowly to the dark sky, and the sleeves skittered downwards, revealing curved, bronzed limbs. Suddenly, he knew. "Sophia?"

She turned and threw back the cowl. It fluttered around her face in wispy tendrils before coalescing again to settle on her back, and she smiled at him. Sophia's face was gentle and round and unremarkable, her coarse hair dark brown with a touch of red, but her eyes made him stop in his tracks. He swallowed in a dry throat. Her eyes were completely filled with quicksilver. Like her robe, her eyes changed and moved, shades of lucent mercury swirling like boiling lead. He waited, both frightened and drawn to her.

"As you are both frightened and drawn to evil," she said, plucking his thoughts out of the air. "Do not measure me against either of those cloths, Beck. I will disappoint you." She smiled again, a surprisingly gentle expression. "Why are you so sad? You will forget your mortal woman, who was only flesh after all, and take other brides. You shall be a giant upon the earth, and a lion among sheep. It is your nature."

Beck bit his lip hard. "I don't want to forget her."

"You prefer to be in pain?" she asked archly. "Had Tamiel taken you as a child and raised you himself, you would be more content today, yet you feel superior to your brethren, the *bene anak*, the Nephilim, the children of the Watchers. You feel you have attained a quality they lack."

He resented her accusation. "Attained, or born with?"

"Only the Maker of all things knows."

Slowly, he began to approach Sophia. When he was near, she turned from him and knelt down to look out over the water.

"El Nefesh," she intoned in her musical voice, all gentleness. The hem of her protean robe trailed in the lake's edge, and a murky stain spread up its length as if the shallows were blood and not water. She dipped her long fingers in the still liquid. Instantly the barrier of mist swirled as if blown by a gale, then recoiled from them and rolled back in a solid wall. Something emerged from the mist, as a corpse will float inevitably up from the depths.

In the center of the lake, raised on a low, cinereal island, was a tree that would have dwarfed a giant Sequoia. Its trunk was improbably thick, more than forty feet wide from his vantage point. He could not begin to guess the diameter. The bark was light grey, rough and deeply grooved, and the great, stout limbs spread out above the trunk in an immense, godlike crown. Its boughs were heavy and full with leaves, tens of thousands of them, millions. The leaves were large and fleshy, each one fully the size of his hand, their surfaces dark green, their silver backs deep-veined with crimson. He felt no breeze, but the leaves moved as if blown by a wind. They flagged light and dark like a school of fish, scintillated in movement, synchronized color passing in waves over the boughs. It looked alive.

"What is that?" he whispered.

"It represents that which man knows as the World Tree," Sophia said. "It has many names, but to me it is *Ilaina Chaim*. Come."

"Where?"

She drew an object from the folds of her sleeve. In her hand was a small round mirror, dimly shining. She held it up before him.

He hardly recognized himself. His face was bruised and haggard, long lines under his eyes, his hair wild.

*"Shaddai el Chai. Ruah,"* she murmured, and breathed on the mirror. The mirror steamed and clouded. When it cleared, Beck was looking at a roundel of transparent amethyst.

Sophia held it up to his eyes and motioned for him to gaze through the amethyst at the Tree. He did, and discerned the Tree through a violet haze. Within the roundel, superimposed and reflected on the Tree, was his reflection.

"Man is a microcosm," she breathed into his ear. He felt a red flush creep up his neck at her nearness and he suddenly became aware of her body under the loose confines of her robe. Mother and not mother, lover and sister and all relationships between. Sophia represented all women, all wisdom.

"The universe in miniature. All that has ever been can be found within you. Mastema is there, and I, and even the Tree. To ascend the steps of the *sephira* is to discover us all, but most of all there will be you."

She pointed at the Tree. "You exist now in the sephira of Yesod, the Foundation. You are at the place where all things begin. Everything in your life that has happened up to this moment has led you here. Here is where your life begins. Here you must choose not good or evil—for there are no such things here—but the light or the darkness, and your choice will affect us all. The tides of the world have turned. Come," she held out her hand. "I will show you."

Her hand gleamed, hard as carved bronze in the twilight, suddenly resembling an iron claw shot with veins of blue. He drew back from her. A sound like a sigh emerged from her lips.

"Nephilim, if I wanted to hurt you, I could. If I wanted you dead, you would be dead. Do not be afraid." She reached out again. "Sometimes there is no place left to run, and all that remains is to embrace your terrors."

Beck put his hand in hers. Her skin was more real and solid than he anticipated, warm but not yielding, and she drew him forward and stepped down into the lake. He pulled back hard. She glanced up, perplexed at his resistance.

"It is not water, but it cannot harm you of itself. Come." Her hand turned steely. Beck put his foot into the lake.

The liquid rose up to his calves. It was blood-heat. He could barely feel its temperature on his skin. It was thick and viscous, difficult to move through, like slogging through thick mud or quicksand. The nearer they came to the Tree, the more it stank. He smelled rotten cabbage and fertilizer, open sewers and putrescent flesh. Beck coughed and gagged.

"Wait," he said, then, choking, "God."

"It will pass," she said, and continued to draw him through the liquid to the island. "Creation cannot spring from sterility. Did you think to smell flowers?"

They came to the raised shore and stepped on the island. The earth under his feet was soft like dust, powdery and fine as ash. There were no grass or rocks, nothing except the Tree. They moved toward it.

Up close, the Tree was even more intimidating. It was beyond belief that this was an actual tree, a living thing. The rough, buttressed trunk was a solid wall, and its roots, curling above the ground like cypress knees, twisted and curled to fan out, spider-like, in an enormous ring. Beck bent his neck backwards to look up at the spreading branches, and then swayed in dizziness. The trunk rose up hundreds of feet and the very top of the crown pierced the darkness, becoming lost beyond sight. The tree seemed to give off a fragrance like rust, a smell that got between his teeth and set his nerves on edge.

A smell like blood.

He stopped. Sophia pulled gently on his hand. "No, wait," he said.

"You are afraid of it. Why?"

"It doesn't feel... safe."

He sensed, rather than heard, her amusement. "It is not. But some risk is necessary in order live life completely. Did you not come for the truth of yourself?"

He didn't answer, but she took the emotions from his mind, his uncertainly and confusion.

"Is it God you seek?"

"I don't know how much faith I have left."

"Do you not? It was with blind faith that your mind hurled itself into the Veil. Blind faith that led you to make the attempt. Faith is your sword, Beck."

Her reasoning disturbed him.

"These are not the days of Babylon, when Yahweh came often to Man. Now He is seldom heard, yet He will come at times to those who believe and have never seen. Those who have true faith bask in Yahweh's favor, but they also attract His attention, which never bodes well for the unfortunate creature. Like you." Her voice held endless mirth. "The Moabites had an ancient curse: *May God notice you.*"

"I don't believe God is like that."

"Last week you did not believe in God at all." He heard a muffled noise and wondered if she was laughing at him. "Your belief or disbelief does not make it any less true. Only in fairy tales does belief alone bring life to a thing. The time has come for you to put aside childish things. Yahweh planned your purpose and sealed your fate long ago."

But I don't believe in fate either, he remembered.

Now she did laugh, a short bark of derision as she pointed at the broad wall of bark. "Touch the Tree," she commanded.

He drew back. "I can't."

"Cannot, or will not?"

"I don't know!"

"Beck, you came into The Veil seeking the truth of yourself. It stands before you. Will you take it, or will you fall as the Watchers fell?"

Decide. I could end it now. Maybe Sean could protect me. Maybe I could just go back and live the time I have left before Mastema finally kills me.

One last moment of hesitation, then he stepped up to the tree and laid his palm flat against the warm rubble of bark.

Calm. At first, the tree radiated only peace and serenity. Timeless, stolid patience, capable of withstanding the onslaught of eons. Then, as he lost his fear of it, an impression of wonder, of seeking, as if it knew who he was, recognized and welcomed him. Seized him. Brought him in.

Beck's vision began to narrow. A dark tunnel extended before him, like staring into the wide end of a telescope. Sophia, the lake, and the sky began to fade. He saw a far distant point of light that pulsed and beat with cardiac regularity. The throbbing, blue-white orb grew. It began to move toward him. He watched as it accelerated, faster and faster until it shattered and burst against him. Heat splashed in his face, blinding him. He could feel his eyes burning and melting in their sockets. The light chewed into him. The world shuddered around him. Movement. He was traveling again.

Even blind and scared, Beck knew he was in a different place, that he had been taken beyond the Tree. Light pulsed against his eyelids, and he gathered his will and touched his face. He wasn't burned, though the searing pain lingered. He tentatively forced his eyes open. Darkness. The light flashed again, briefly illuminating his surroundings, then it was gone, then back again; a flash-bulb repetition. Light and darkness, light and darkness. His world was vivid and then oblivion.

The lake and the Tree had vanished. Or perhaps they had merely been transformed. He was in a rock-walled pit, a deep, round well in the earth. Cloudy light filtered in from above, thick and clotted. Beck looked around as a wave of nausea rolled over him, suddenly disoriented from the alternating light and the false sensation of movement. He seemed to be alone in the pit. The floor was simple earth, and the walls, from what he could see from his position in the center, were hewn granite and reached perhaps thirty feet over his head. There seemed to be no way out. He bent over for a moment and put his hands on his knees, breathing deeply, waiting for the queasiness to pass. It did and he straightened his back to face the practicalities of exit or escape.

A hissing sound echoed around him in the pit.

Beck froze instinctively and breathed as quietly as possible, the shallow breath of sudden and unreasonable terror. He was not alone in the pit. He did the irrational thing, the foolish thing, the *human* thing—he called out.

"Sophia?"

A thundering hiss shook the floor of the pit. His chest squeezed in frigid terror and he backed away until rock was at his back. A vision was swimming to him, slow as a boat gliding on still water.

"Becket" a sibilant voice seethed, soft as a feather, icy as a needle.

The voice was male, so delicate and passive. Beck felt that there could be no harm concealed in such a voice. His heart slowed, but it was a deceptive calm, like a man who realizes too late that the piece of rope he is stepping on is really a rattlesnake, that the log in the water is a dead body.

The floor of the pit was writhing.

His feet sank into the new surface as cold things slithered past his ankles. Beck cried out and kicked wildly. The floor was awash in pale snakes. He smelled the dry, corrupt stench of their bodies, felt the scratching of their scales as they looped past him. Their eyes were flat, black pits, like Mastema's, and they regarded him with stale interest as they slid by, their pale bodies gleaming like worms.

A new sound like distant pipes set up a din in the pit, the sound of lonely heights and desolate space, the winter wind through bone-bare trees, a desert sirocco through a world of sand-blasted rock. It was the sound of the living consciousness of this place, a tragic hymn of the terrible and solitary knowledge that it housed.

"I am a part of you," the voice seethed against his brain. "You will never be rid of me. Not ever, ever..."

Something cold touched his face and he shouted incoherently and thrashed to the other side of the pit, serpents curling around his ankles to hinder him, winding up his legs like creeper vines. Lost was his knowledge of the Veil, the door in his mind firmly shut by his own panic.

"Becket."

He looked around wildly. "Let me out! I want out!" "Becket!"

He tried to calm himself. "Who are you?"

"Serpents... Seraphim .... "

The ground beneath suddenly grew pliable and gave way. Beck sank up to his thighs in dry, crawling, slithering bodies. He shouted and beat the heaving mass with his fists, casting wildly for purchase, anything to halt the slide, but he only sank faster.

Oh God, oh God!

The writhing mass touched his chest, and with his last breath before his head went under, he shrieked without shame.

"We have touched you. Knowledge has touched you. The serpent has touched you..."

The snakes touched him and everywhere they touched he could feel them, inside them, in their brains, in the minds that were not quite reptilian, but much older and wiser and infinitely more malignant. And as they touched him they spoke, and in each utterance they imparted something to him that he thrust away violently, screaming in that dry, wriggling hole, bodies sliding past his lips, through his hair, until finally their knowledge burst through the thin, untrained barriers of his mind, and washed over him, flooded and consumed.

I have seen. I know. I know what it is He wants me to do. But I'm afraid. I'm so afraid.

His throat grunted sounds of torment. It went on for a measureless amount of time. Then, unbelievably, he felt a gentle, feminine presence, a wash of cool, clear water in all that filth.

The future has not yet been written, Beck, Sophia spoke. That way lies hope. All of the future is hope.

I know what He wants me to do, he answered piteously. But I can't... I don't know how.

The Aeon wrapped the wings of her warding consciousness around him in that coiling abomination and soothed him, pushing everything away from him except herself. She was boundless love, ineffable tenderness. She seemed to want to cradle and shelter him. To carry him home. She pulled him from the pit and bore him far away, and then, blessedly, everything went dark.

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Beck woke up on the ground inside the arbor, his hair frozen into cold spikes, trails of ice on his cheeks that were lately tears.

Catherine was dead.

"Darkness never dies," he whispered.

The madness was gone. He had wanted the truth of himself, and Knowledge—the ultimate understanding of the interdependence of good and evil abiding within the great Tree—had given it to him.

He examined his unmarked hands. Not a demon, then. Not an abomination or a mistake. There were others like him in the world, and he was not singly unique. Rare, yes, but not alone, and now he knew what was expected of him, even if his guts went cold in fear of it. Even if it were possible, which he still doubted very much.

I'm an instrument, he realized. Balance.

He stood stiffly, hearing his limbs creak, and stepped to the wall of interlaced trees holding him captive. There was no longer any reason to run from Mastema. Life had taken on the landscape of a nightmare, with no place to hide, no friendly corner to pull himself into. Horror was in every crevice of his being, leaving no sanctuary for his soul. All he had left was to face it.

Beck took a deep breath and laid his hand flat against the interlocked branches and pushed, feeling the unyielding strength of the cold limbs. *Hopeless.* Or was it? He became very still.

Use the key.

No panic to cloud his mind. Panic had gone, along with Catherine's life and the voice that spoke to him from the pit, leaving this steely, macabre precision. He could leave the forest if he chose. The power was within him. He had only to reach out and it would be there. Waiting. Dormant. He closed his eyes and mentally cast about, searching for the talents he knew were within him.

Time passed. He stood there for a full quarter of an hour, teeth clenched and sweat gathering on his forehead, before he gave it up. He sagged to the ground and began to puzzle his way through it.

Open the door and look within, he commanded himself. Call her. Call to the Veil. Mastema did it. Enter her and... what? He hesitated. That inward eye glared dispassionately back at him. Beck withdrew from the domain of his soul and considered.

How was it done? And even if he could call the Veil, what then?

It was dusk outside the trees, the rim of the sun a silver band on the horizon, shielded behind heavy clouds. He watched the weightless snow drift down from the sky as the arbor became filled with long bars of shadow, the last kiss of the sun behind the winter-stripped bodies of the trees. Long shadowtrails of snowflakes dropped like rain from the small open spaces in the mesh above him. He was distracted by a small, chiming sound that rang intermittently and wondered if there was a church nearby. Then he realized the sound was coming from inside the arbor. Beck stopped and watched the snowflakes drift down, taken suddenly by their languid grace and the impermanence of their beauty, by the crystalline geometry of each. If he listened closely enough, each falling snowflake sounded like the pealing of far-away bells.

He watched them fall in slow-motion, his sight narrowed and magnified so that they filled his field of vision, snowflakes as big as house, crashing on white mountains. He watched as they rang and chimed and somehow *spoke* as well, a voice unlike anything he had ever heard, indescribable and faint but perfectly in tune with the bell-like peals that rang louder and louder...

A snowflake crashed against the ground: listen.

Another, and it said, listen.

Listen within. Listen. No sound and yet many things can be heard. The falling of snowflakes to the ground, too minor to be detected by any other human (you are not human remember dear God not human never human!). Listen to the barely-conscious spirits that live in the deep hearts of the trees. The essence without intellect that threads through the branches and flows with the sap and joins them to the roots of the earth, where sleeps a primordial consciousness as ancient as the stars. Feel the chain of life spiraling through all of this, pulsing like a network of veins.

Beck listened, and out of his silence came the knowledge he sought.

Mastema had spoken of a power within him. He began to suspect it had nothing to do with the Veil or Heaven and everything to do with Earth.

Close your eyes. Push outside the illusion. Don't pay attention to how confining it feels, how solid and material the wood feels, because it's not solid after all, but fluid with sap and alive. It can't hold you. Listen to the wind, which isn't just oxygen, which is alive with scent and living organism. Look and see with more clarity and understanding than you ever dreamed. Listen and let go. Stop trying and just do it.

Sightless, guided only by his inner vision, he rose and placed his hands against the lattice of trees. The wood hindered him momentarily before giving way like smoke.

Beck suddenly *knew* he could do the same with any material. Whether scattered on a shore or molten and pressed into glass, sand was still sand, boards were trees, and metal bars only iron. No prison on earth could hold him.

He passed through that natural matter, atoms shifting aside like thin mist, slithering his corporeal body through them like rainwater down a pipe.

For the first time, Beck felt a hint of his true power, the power of the natural world, over all things not removed from their basic earthly form. It was a staggering ascendancy; from blind, impotent humanity, wriggling about like a sightless worm, to this lofty omnipotence. He grappled with it.

Cold. Snow and twilight. The glacial air touched him, then went through and past his body as Beck remembered that it had no authority over him. He was not human. Cold was of no importance. Earth, water, fire, wind, snow, rain, weather, all elements, all animals, all objects of natural origin, he was their master. This was the power that Mastema had spoken of.

It was so much more than he could have imagined.

The earth was his birthright by virtue of his human blood, the power to control every aspect of it, a gift from his angelic half. This was what it meant to be a Nephilim. This was why Yahweh had flooded a world and cast down the Watchers, to destroy their numbers and forever prevent any possibility of the Nephilim enslaving the human race. But Yahweh had not counted on the persistence of the Watchers, nor had He foreseen a second rising of the Nephilim.

A church bell was ringing.

Beck heard it on the night wind but did not care enough to speculate where it came from or what the bell portended, if anything. Cold wind curled around him like a cat, slipping icy fingers under his shirt, lover-like, to count his ribs. He gave it no response, and soon, like a lover, it ceased its efforts and left him alone.

Beck found himself standing in front of the carillon gates of Desolo. The lonely wind, assured at least of a response from this quarter, went to playing with the gate, and the sound of pipes joined the bells.

On the hill behind him, near the stand of birches, was a patrol car. He knew without looking that Joss and Frank were inside it, torn to shreds and slowly freezing over.

Poor Joss. And poor Frank, you stupid son of a bitch. I told you to leave it alone, but that's my fault, too. You can lay that charge on my soul with all the rest of it. I knew Mastema would make others pay if I refused him. He told me he would.

So many things were clear now, especially the riddle of Desolo: the domed gatehouse with the minaret, the gates of transition, the fortress in a low place, housing the fallen. How had he not seen it?

He halted at the invisible girder of power that had been created to repel one of the most powerful creatures that ever lived, and felt...

Unimpressed.

The warding-seals were meant to keep Mastema out. Their power was not directed at him or at any of the Nephilim. He had passed them before. He could do it again. Or he could destroy them.

A man approached Beck from the long driveway leading up from the mansion, striding effortlessly through the deep snow. He wore a black sweater and had hair like water-polished brass. Nicolo. When Nicolo reached the gates, he halted there and curled his pale fingers around the bars, staying within the boundary of Desolo. He regarded Beck with intense interest. "It is our brother returned to us. Why have you come again, sweet brother?"

Beck touched the raised surface of one of the bronze seals as the scent of apples drifted to him reassuringly. Mastema could not pass the seals. Inside Desolo, Beck would be safe from him forever, but he would be a prisoner. Like Nicolo.

"To choose."

"Ah, choice. I must confess, I was curious about the outcome. Would you pass into Desolo and be safe from all that lies outside these walls, or would you have the strength to destroy this sanctuary not only for yourself, but for all who are left of your kind?" Nicolo scrutinized him deeply, staring into his eyes as those long fingers stroked the iron bars of the gates. "We call the angels the Neverborn, because they never were. They were created for a purpose, unlike us. We're either accidents of design or blurts of lust, and they love us, but they can't *be* us, you see? When we were born they began to know envy, and envy is downfall." Nicolo paused. "Was Mastema right about you? Are you incapable of love?"

Had Mastema been right? Would he have let Catherine die to save himself? Would he save himself now and leave her murderer unpunished, content so long as he preserved his own precious skin? Why had he been given the choice at all? Was it his—Zefira's—last chance at redemption, or was he just playing the part assigned to him?

Decide. You know what He wants you to do. Run from it and you run into Hell.

He had seen Nicolo's familiarity with Tamiel, the sense of loyalty like a faithful dog. "Are you going to try to stop me?"

Nicolo shook his head and beckoned him closer, an invitation. "Anakhnu shavim," he said. We are one.

Beck took this unknown brother's measure up and down, wondering how far he could trust him as an ally. "How old are you?"

"Oh," Nicolo smiled, showing very white teeth and a magnetic smile. "Older than any Nephilim you will ever meet. I

was one of the first to be born after Hanoch. My name isn't really Nicolo, but a name is power, as you have learned. One day, I may share it with you."

To have survived all this time... there has to be some reason he thinks I can do this. Some reason he would allow me to take away his only safety. Unless he's just suicidal.

Far from frightening Beck, this thought gave him a rush of fatalistic giddiness. Dead or alive, at least he would be done with running. He was so tired, just so fucking tired, of being scared.

"I know why he killed Catherine, but why Frank and the others?"

"He intends to destroy your human life, or what he believes it contains, anyway. He is removing you from your past in order to remove you from your humanity. It is that—your human heart—he wants to die."

"Why?"

"So that he can possess you forever."

Beck swayed a little in the wind, weighed down by all the deaths, his heart thumping a wild rhythm. Nicolo reached through the bars and braced him with a warm, firm hand on his shoulder.

"I love Sean," Beck whispered, realizing only then how true it was. How true it had always been. Whatever had driven him in the past to be with Mastema, it hadn't been love. How could he love a man who murdered everything dear to him? A greater power had always pushed him in Mastema's direction, only now Beck was resolved to fight it.

"His name is not Sean."

"I know," Beck answered. "It doesn't matter. I think he's the only person I *can* love. But I don't want to lose him again. If I win, won't I lose Sean, too?"

"If you do not fight, you will certainly lose him," Nicolo answered. "You can do this. I lost a brother I had loved for four hundred years. He played piano, did you know? Even Mozart liked him. He was brilliant and beautiful, and Mastema butchered him. Fear matters very little to me now." Nicolo retreated and let him stand on his own. "You were born for this purpose. You will not fail." Beck laughed a little, but his tongue tasted of bile. "You're so certain of that."

Nicolo gave a small laugh of his own. "I'm certain of nothing. In fact, I warned Tamiel not to place his trust in you, but you've come to us at a time when we are all losing hope, and you've made it this far. And Mastema has not killed you yet, though he's had ample opportunity. That must mean something."

Nicolo smiled at him, and Beck was struck anew by the flawless texture of his marble skin, by how *perfect* he was. Suddenly, Nicolo did not even look real. Some of what he felt must have shown, because Nicolo smiled and help up his hands in a passive gesture.

"I am no threat to you, brother. I want you to succeed. Remember, when you finally face Mastema, do not hesitate. Though incapable of mercy himself, there is much that is tragic about him. Mastema is an instrument of fate, and that's never a kind path. We've all felt his despair. Do not pity him. Not even at the end."

Beck's eyes were hard. "Don't worry. I won't."

Nicolo stepped back from the gates. "Do what you came to do."

Bronze is not as soft as copper, but the seals were old and brittle. The first one snapped between Beck's hands like balsa wood.

Nicolo shivered from head to toe and his hands clenched. "Yes," he hissed. "Oh yes." Nicolo tilted his head back and his tongue flicked to taste the air.

Beck watched the gates as a translucent, filmy caul, pale as milk, sloughed like hot wax off the iron. It started in the middle, at the seals, and pulled away all along the periphery of the estate, and dissipated to nothing.

"They are broken," Nicolo whispered. His eyes were huge. "The virtue is sundered."

Impossibly, a warm, salt-tasting wind sprang up and fled down the deserted roadway. Beck sensed other eyes on him as he pushed open the gates and entered.

Now Beck could see the last of the Nephilim gathered in a loose cluster at the bottom of the hill, waiting patiently for him

to make the next move. There were more than fifty of them, all youthful, all beautiful. Some were tall and fair like Mastema, others were dark or olive-skinned, and many had red hair like Nicolo, but they were all male. There were no female Nephilim.

There was a sameness to the way they stared at him, yet when Beck stared back as the wind howled on the lonely hill, he realized that none of them really looked like brothers. What they shared with each other was not a hue of skin or the shape of a nose. It was the stamp on their souls that set them apart. Non-human. Children of the Watchers, the First Ones. Nephilim.

They did not move to come up the hill to greet him. They made no demands, asked no questions. Like Nicolo, they waited to see what he would do next. Perhaps they hoped for a miracle.

The broken seals lay at Beck's feet. Nicolo gave him a look that was both fierce and terrified.

"Now we are on the path of thorns and the Angel of Hatred will come to us." Nicolo said. "There is no road back."

Mastema came through the wall, never intending that Catherine should see him, but the strength of his jealousy betrayed his form. She spied him and let out a high scream as he seized her by the hair. He dragged her off the bed and towed her behind him to the bathroom.

Drowning. Beck's worst fear had been to see her drown.

Mastema wrapped his arms around her and forced her to her knees beside the tub. They were face to face as he bent her spine backward into a bow, pushing her head under the water as he crouched over her. Her fear rushed at him with that cloying, ecstatic smell, red spikes of terror blooming in her aura, her warm heart leaping in her chest.

The photograph he had taken from Beck fluttered into the churning water, floating like a leaf beside her face. Two pairs of eyes staring up at him, and below them her little honey-colored breasts with their peaks of dusty rose jutted up at him in offering. A golden cross lay in the hollow of her throat, so slender it might have been painted on. Mastema lowered his head and licked the valley between her breasts, took the golden cross between his teeth and pulled until the flimsy links of the chain parted. He spat it onto the floor. His eyes stung as they turned black and the Destroyer took over his brain. Through it all, she fought him bravely for her life.

Mastema lifted her head from the water enough to allow her a single whooping breath. She used the air to shriek as he nudged her thighs farther apart with his knees and bent before her. His hips pushed against hers and a new longing rose in him, a subtler passion than the desire to kill.

The extreme posture of her body thrust her hips forward at Mastema. She opened her mouth to scream under the water as he pushed aside his clothing and entered her. Even here he found the aftertaste of Beck, the residue of his aura that Beck had unwillingly shared with Mastema during their coupling. A haze seemed to fall over his vision, clouding the reality of the woman. Catherine's lungs filled with water as he rutted inside of her, the psychic remnants of Beck's aura marking her with a livid brand so that *his* was the flesh he grasped, *his* body Mastema possessed, as much as Catherine's, and it was *good*, so good...

## I will have you. I will not be denied.

She did not struggle long. Mastema shuddered as he spent inside her, closing his eyes to conjure another image, another face, framed not against water but yellow sand, the sound of Beck's voice pleading with him not to stop.

Satisfied, he dropped Catherine's body. She draped like an amber flower over the white rim of the tub, her long, slender arms flung out, her open eyes round and empty of all but her final terror. Mastema reached down and plucked up the thin cross from the puddle of water on the tiles, already envisioning Beck's face when he presented him with it, his last link to the past. Now there were no more obstacles.

I said I would do it, Beck. Zefira. My own. I said I would make you. I do not make idle threats.

He called the Veil and left.

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Mastema hesitated at the gates of Desolo, halting at the greatly weakened wall of power that had once barred him from entering, wondering who had done this. Uncertain, he listened for counsel from the divine guiding Will that had always been there for him. Mastema reached out, then drew back, stunned.

He had touched only silence.

It puzzled him, and above all it frightened him. Where was the will of Yahweh, the surety in his mind that guided him like a steady hand all these thousands of years? He had never doubted that voice, never thought to question it. All his life he had obeyed. He had followed orders and never balked at them, no matter how difficult, no matter how bloody. He had been loyal. Why then, when he needed Him the most, did the voice of God desert him?

Is the end of the Nephilim left up to me? Is this act my decision?

Mastema turned the concept over, tasting it slowly. Free will. He had never had it. He had never understood it. He had never wanted it until he saw Beck.

At first it had been only obedience. Yahweh had commanded him to destroy Hanoch and the Nephilim, and so he did. At Yahweh's command, he had killed his only love without hesitation, left Zefira bleeding in the sand and walked away.

But he had not left Hanoch unscarred, His wounds did not show, true, and down through the ages the dark, ragged mark had bled afresh whenever he killed a Nephilim. He had cut the festering wound open a thousand times since Hanoch, and yet each death was a little less satisfying. Mastema had wanted to murder Beck when he first saw him, then he discovered what Beck was, who he had been, and it had become so much more than death and revenge.

For the first time since Zefira had died, Mastema knew what it was to *want*.

Rivalry. Revenge. He taunted Tamiel and killed his beloved Nephilim because he had hated his brother from the moment he had killed Zefira. He killed Catherine, a human and a believer, not solely to sever Beck from his human life, but with jealousy and spite in his heart. He let Beck live, disobeying the ancient order to slaughter the Nephilim wherever they were found, because he desired Beck. None of it came by the order of God. They were things that *he*, Mastema, wanted.

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all your heart and mind and soul. Thou shalt have no other love before me...

If he killed Beck today, he could go back to serving the Divine Will, but the wound would still be there. He would rub it under his fingers, worrying it open over and over, until finally he began searching for Zefira once more and then it would begin all over again, until Yahweh had his final answer.

There is corruption in every soul, however small the seed. Once it was exposed, the origin flayed open and bare, Mastema's master asked but one question of him; whom do you love more than Me?

Did I ever stop searching for her? Did I ever for one moment forget her? And Yahweh knew. All this time, He knew. Yet, even now he served Yahweh. *I am still Mastema!* He wanted to howl it across the landscape. Instead, he pushed the intransigent wall aside like cobwebs, and Desolo was opened. It was not true. Yahweh would not betray him.

The seals of Sophia lay in the snow, the brittle bronze plaques snapped in two like bone china. He called silently to Tamiel.

*Come then,* was Tamiel's answer from the depths of the estate. *Come and let us end this.* 

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Mastema found Tamiel sitting on a stone bench beneath a snow-laced hemlock pine, looking up at something hidden in the branches of the tree.

He descended the steps into the deep snow. Tamiel did not look immediately at him, Mastema was almost glad of it. That striking, incongruous match of black hair and blue eyes had always been a rugged, masculine mirror of Zefira.

The stone court was a low, sturdy wall of rough granite block encircling the sunken garden. Tamiel did not have to tell him its purpose. Mastema recognized the mathematics of the thing, the subtle watchtowers placed in the appropriate quadrants, the four avenues leading in from the cross-quarters. It was a place of deadly ritual, constructed by an angel of the High Order. Mastema wondered what rites he performed there, what strange and primitive spirits he conjured up to cull their wisdom, or else to destroy them.

The gray sky, eerily backlit by a full winter moon hidden behind clouds, hovered above them. Lamps from the manor house cast great slashes of light on the landscape, giving the shadows a razor edge.

Mastema reached to touch Tamiel's mind in that unique pathway shared only by their kind, and he saw Tamiel's thoughts traveling back to the ancient past. He saw Zefira walking at Tamiel's side; saw her through Tamiel's eyes and Tamiel's love, so that she seemed more beautiful than she had ever been in reality. He even smelled her perfume, mixed with the sharp, flinty aroma of the city of Hanoch. Now dust. Dust and ruin, bones beaten into sand and long since borne away by the desert. Zefira, her lily-petal skin shining with scented oil, now torn to bloody shreds, fly-blown, maggot-ridden, at last desiccated and shriveled by the fierce heat and finally... nothing at all.

He stayed with Tamiel's memories and saw Beck as Tamiel saw him, through a patina of grief and love that was still fresh after the passage of centuries. Beck's dark, cynical humor, the hunted blue eyes that hid a pain he refused to share. The secrets and the guilt, the love that Beck believed was so polluted that he did not dare to offer it fully to anyone, except perhaps to Sean. And then Mastema saw Hanoch again and the faces of Tamiel's dead sons, hacked to tattered pieces in the sand.

The stab of grief was so sharp that he nearly staggered. He marveled that it still held such power over Tamiel.

"We are not humans," Tamiel said quietly. "Emotions do not fade for us. Time heals nothing."

A chill brushed his arm and Mastema moved his fingers to sketch a banishing gesture. Desolo was riddled with shades, invisible things that bowed and moved out of his way when he approached, no doubt because of the Nephilim housed there, who attract them.

Tamiel looked at him for a long time. He felt Tamiel's thoughts rushing from one alternative to another, yet always back to the same conclusion; that this reckoning could be put off no longer. Delay and prevarication were Tamiel's wiles. He had used them to create the Nephilim and to build Hanoch, and later to avoid Yahweh's wrath for decades. Tamiel's nature was to avoid a battle, to skirt the edge of ruin to live and plan for tomorrow. He was a survivor.

"You're out of time," Mastema answered. "Your fortress is broken and the Nephilim are again without protection."

Mastema saw Tamiel gazing back at him speculatively, probing for a weakness in his oldest of enemies. Mastema wondered if Tamiel knew how much the rules had changed. Tamiel could no longer play for time or hide from him. As in Hanoch, there was no place left to run.

Grief pricked him. For an instant, the world shifted. A wave of disorientation and light crested and he was back in the desert, in Hanoch. Tamiel was wearing a red robe, the color of sorrow, and at his back was the gritty mural of a patchwork sky of ocher and rust as the sun set on a younger world. Tamiel's eyes were spiritless, dead. Mastema tasted blood and knew that he was covered in it, and he was offering Tamiel a bronze knife with a hilt carved from bone.

Let this be your last defiance.

Mastema blinked and was returned to the cold northern night. Again, Tamiel avoided his eyes, and Mastema knew that Tamiel had shared the discontinuity of time with him. He saw that it had wounded Tamiel deeply.

"If you had remained obedient, you would not have had to suffer this guilt for so long," Mastema said.

Tamiel gave him a weary glance. "Like you, brother?"

Mastema ignored that and tapped the bronze seal on the bench, testing it for any residual power. Very little. Beck had made a very thorough job of sundering Desolo's defenses.

"Your wards are destroyed and your power broken, Tamiel."

Tamiel idly brushed a space beside him on the bench free of snow. "Yes."

"Your Nephilim helped him."

"Yes," Tamiel said again. "Apparently they have loyalties other than to me. I never pretended to understand them fully. She... my wife always did have a strong effect on people." He sighed and looked up at the sky. "I was afraid Beck would do something like this. Tell me, does the Veil still ask you to show her the past? Why does she do that?"

Mastema's lips felt glued together. It was his turn to confess, but it galled him. "I have never known."

"Surely she can see farther than you. The past is hers to sift as easily as it is mine or yours, and many things that are hidden to us are plain to her. Perhaps," Tamiel shifted closer to Mastema and lowered his voice. "Perhaps it's her way of giving you one route of escape. All good hunters allow that for their prey. Did it never occur to you to question the Veil? Ages ago, she revealed that one day a Nephilim would hold your fate in his hands. She never told you his name, never told you when he would come. She did that so you would never stop killing them, never bury your hatred for them, never forget or forgive. Yet she knew that one day a Nephilim would be born whom you could not bear to kill. Becket Merriday, who was once Zefira."

There. It was said, the dread name invoked, the floodgates opened. Tamiel lowered his voice to a bare whisper, as if words had acquired the power to shatter bones.

"God knows it, too, and ultimately it is *He* who controls the Veil."

Mastema heard a noise in the branches and glanced up. *Had* he walked into a trap? The large eyes of a white owl stared down at him, her merciless yellow gaze fixed on him. The goddess takes strange forms.

A little coal of anger began to burn in him, charring every memory it touched. The possibility that he had been deceived was unthinkable. Monstrous. Impossible.

"This is another one of your tricks, Tamiel," Mastema said. "You are losing and you're trying to delay me, to distract me from my purpose. It will not work. I will have Zefira again."

"And death to all who stand in your way?" Tamiel shook his head in grave reproof. "You should not have killed Catherine."

"Beck refused me. I warned him."

"And now? If you force him to go with you, he will no longer be Beck. You will take an empty prize with you."

"But still mine."

Tamiel's mouth pursed. "Fool," he scorned. "Thrice a fool, Mastema, father of lies. I never knew you could lie to yourself. Beware."

He means it, Mastema realized. He really does mean to warn me.

He suddenly wished that he could see Tamiel's true heart, the one he had known so well, perhaps had even loved, before jealousy and envy had twisted it to something else, something dark and ugly that they had put off addressing for far too long. Now that path was closed to him, as were so many others. Mastema looked up at the nebulous sky, the cold and chaste landscape, seeing everything.

The knife in my hand.

He stood up. "Perhaps—" he began, but what he would have said or decided then was forever lost, for at that instant the white owl burst from the tree and Beck came hurtling at him. Beck crashed into Mastema and threw him headfirst into the snow. Fists pummeled his body, a knee kicked him in the back, and teeth sank into his neck. Pain battered him. Pain! Mastema was so overcome by amazement that for several moments he did not even try to defend himself.

#### It hurt!

Pain. *He could feel pain*. When had that happened? When he entered Desolo? Or before, with Beck in the desert, when he realized he loved Zefira more than God?

Mastema tried to throw his attacker off, but Beck was clearly berserk, in his element, reveling in his new-found powers, and Mastema was weakened. By what? The Veil's desertion? *God's*?

Because he coveted?

... Oh my God I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee-

Mastema pitched Beck over his shoulder and threw him several feet to the edge of the court. Beck's head crashed nastily into a stone pylon and he rolled away from it, stunned, shaking snow from his hair like an angry bull. Tamiel ran to him.

The light sleet had changed to fat, fluffy lumps of snow falling straight down in a cold shower, and a white zephyr began dancing its whirling rite in the middle of the circle as Beck rolled over in the snow and came up on the balls of his feet, arms loose and ready. He shook off Tamiel's arm when the angel would have held Beck back.

"Beck!" Tamiel shouted, his voice drawn and tight with fear.

"Stay out of this!" Beck shouted. Tamiel would not listen. They both knew he wouldn't. Beck gave Tamiel a grim, stormy look.

"This isn't your fight, Sean."

"Where you go, I go."

With a bitter throb of misery, Mastema realized that, no matter how much Zefira had cared for him in her past life, she had also loved Tamiel. She had shared a home with Tamiel, married him and bore him children. Ultimately she had betrayed Tamiel, but even that had not broken their bond. Now, here, their bond was manifesting itself again. Beck had connected with a man named Sean Logan on a *human* level, a place Mastema could not go, and thus Zefira and Tamiel forged an even stronger link.

Mastema could feel the wild sorrow radiating from Beck and the answering dread coming off Tamiel in sick waves. The snow fell between them. Mastema looked down, distracted by a stinging sensation in his right hand. *Pain?* The strangeness of applying that word to himself made him grow calm. He unhurriedly opened his hand and looked. Catherine's golden crucifix was in his palm, stained with blood.

Mastema took a deep, shaking breath and stared. The base of the cross was painted with a thin line of red where it had been driven into his skin. A drop of blood beaded up as he looked, welled over the shining gold and spread out into a stain on his skin. He examined it wonderingly, marveling at it, for never before had his flesh been injured. Snowflakes fell on his hand and melted, running into the injury, forming a small, bright pool on his lined palm. He turned his hand, watching bloody tears roll across his skin and fall.

Vengeance is mine.

When had he forgotten that? A gust of freezing air billowed around him and his long coat flapped around his body, a restless crow beating its wings, fighting to escape gravity. He breathed in the scents ushered to him on the air and shuddered at that one particular smell, like biting into a sun-warmed apple. *Nephilim.* 

Beck's gaze was riveted on the gold cross, and his eyes changed to blue slits of spitting rage. Mastema felt the warm smoke of Beck's hatred bathe him and even then—in the middle of the battle that must end in Beck's death or his own he felt the ancient obsession return, the urge to touch and claim. His skin grew warm with a rosy flush as his blood rose to the surface and his chest constricted in desire.

Beck felt it. His upper lip lifted in revulsion and he bared his teeth in a snarl. "Never! You disgust me."

Mastema's pride was stung. "These were not the words you used in the desert. You begged me that night."

"Not as much as you begged me."

Beck didn't say it, but Mastema heard it anyway: Not as much as you would beg me now.

Oh yes, Beck knew he was wanted. He would have to know, would he not? But Mastema was mortified that he had become

so transparent, at how badly he still desired the soul of Zefira. He had suffered so much at her loss, at the loss of one paltry mortal life. One of the most powerful angels ever created, an agent of judgment and temptation, an immortal being to be feared and dreaded by humanity, yet this insignificant creature brought him low. He had mourned for Zefira all throughout the long and dreadful ages, and Beck had refused him as easily as Mastema had refused a thousand human slaves over time, worshipers of the dark who would have fought among them for the honor of crawling to him on their knees. This mongrel Nephilim had dared to spurn him.

"Pride," Mastema said aloud. "Now there is a dear and deadly sin. But unlike Job, my understanding comes too late."

Mastema understood it now. He knew Beck believed that he was the one being tested, that God was taking the measure of his humanity, but he was wrong. It was Mastema who was in God's focus.

He never knew that he was the one being tested, though he should have guessed it would happen someday. Who else could tempt the tempter? Who else would *dare*? If he chose to take Beck for himself, he revealed that serving Yahweh was not the sum of his existence. Disobedience is the cardinal sin of angels, the only sin which they can commit. He was damned now, and Beck was to blame. Tamiel too, for their ancient, sour rivalry had finally poisoned Mastema's heart against obedience.

When did this struggle become my epiphany?

Whatever else, Mastema was not without courage. "So be it," he said heavily. He held out his hand to Beck in a gesture more command than entreaty. "Love can exist even in Hell. If I am to be damned, at least I will not be alone. Come here, Beck. Come with me." Beck stood facing Mastema, his mind threshing the truth like new cut hay. It was his fault. All of it. He had abandoned Catherine to save her, but it turned out that he had killed her the moment they met. Joss was dead, Frank was dead, and Cat...

It took all of his strength to keep the wail of anguish behind his teeth. Catherine was dead. He would never see her again. Beck trembled as Mastema extended his hand. Beck remembered what those arms felt like, how the scent of Mastema's skin seemed to creep into his brain, what that silken tongue felt like in his mouth. He shuddered in disgust and would have rushed to attack Mastema again, but Sean seized his arm and held him back.

Sean's aura scorched Beck as rage and sorrow blazed up around them in visible waves. Sean's deep violet aura flared to pure white and burned through a prism of colors. Discharged energy crackled from the ground around their feet, rising in purple wisps as bits of ice were hurled at them from the darkness. His form as Tamiel was black-haired and taller, and Beck had never seen such strength in anyone, such controlled, harnessed power. Sean's white face was nearly gray with anguish, and something in his eyes, a hopeless, fatalistic rage, touched Beck more deeply than any words could have. It reached inside the hurt, bleeding lump of Beck's heart and let him know that, whatever else, they were still friends.

"You're still protecting her," Mastema growled, glaring at Sean. "When will you learn? Her soul is mine. I have forsaken even God to have it!"

Sean drew the knife he had been hiding under his coat, a wicked blade twice the length of a man's hand with a bone grip incised with the serpent of wisdom. With a little start of pure horror, Beck recognized it as the execution blade of Hanoch. Mastema's purple aura shimmered and Beck caught the mental backlash of their silent communication.

Let this be your last defiance...

Sean moved so fast that he was a flashing blur. He ripped the bronze seal from the bench and rushed at Mastema. "E'lo-i!"

He watched as Sean rammed full-tilt into Mastema and plunged the long blade into the angel's broad chest.

"Sean, no!"

In the next instant Sean raised the bronze seal like an axe and with both hands brought it down into Mastema's neck. Blood spurted up in a red gush so dark it was nearly black, spraying them both.

Mastema roared like a bull, his face scarlet and crazed. Sean turned on Beck, and for an instant, his old friend glared at him from strange blue eyes. "Follow!"

Mastema shrieked in mindless fury and the Veil appeared at his summons, a giant, grotesque white flower blossoming inside the court. Mastema hurled Sean off him and fled into the Veil. Sean dove in after him. They were gone, but Sean's last command echoed in Beck's ears: *Follow!* 

He could do it now. He knew he could. Beck set his teeth and *reached* outward with every cell and atom, almost too shocked to react when the Veil actually did appear. When he found he could move, he vaulted from the court into the shimmer of light and found himself in the familiar corridor of opalescent limbo. It was the null plane, the place where Mastema had first dragged him into from the hospital room, a neutral zone where the Aeon of the Veil awaited direction. Beck concentrated, but he had no clear direction in mind, so he sent her only the thought of *Tamiel*. The world dropped out from beneath him.

Beck landed on his feet on cobblestones. He was in the old section of Irenic, the downtown Stockade near the Garrison bar. He heard a noise, a loud sighing like the wind moving high through the trees. It grew louder and the Veil flared bright and very near. Mastema leapt through the portal, his chest covered in dark blood, eyes bulging and black.

Mastema charged at Beck. Beck had no time to react or gather his strength. He threw his arms up to protect himself and felt a rush of air, something solid yet soft, swat him like a giant pillow. He fell back and landed in a drift of unpacked snow. A slashing shape darted in front of him and he got a glimpse of an arm raised in command, the hand pointed at Mastema.

Tamiel shouted a word in a dead language that rolled and echoed against Beck's ears like a deep drum, and the Veil's intense light appeared behind Mastema.

Mastema vanished, engulfed and pulled away against his will, his aborted shout of rage cut off with the closing of the portal.

Sean held his hand out for Beck to grasp. "That won't hold him long. Come with me."

"This isn't what *He* wants," Beck blurted in a rush. "God wants me to—"

"I know, but I'm not leaving you. Come on, Beck!"

They ran together.

### *୶*ଡ଼୶ୠଡ଼

Beck didn't know what Sean intended, but he felt something pulling him to the river like an invisible rope towing him to shore. They ran for several blocks through the antiquated streets, until Beck could make out the wide, beehive shape of the stone charnel house against the sky, but he felt it before he saw it. It shimmered in the faint light with an aura that told his fledgling senses that it was more than just a structure of mortar and rock. Though the charnel house and the crumbling remains of the church that stood beside it were less than three hundred years old, the ground beneath it, holy and far older than the church, had been sacred long before Europeans had placed the first stones there.

Beck and Sean stopped in the little graveyard with its worn, ice-draped tombstones of marble and quartz, and Beck saw that the ground below them glowed with a faint white aura. He had no time to marvel at it. A great, tearing sound gouged the silence and the wind roared as the Veil deposited Mastema in the cemetery.

He went for Beck first.

Mastema threw himself forward and slammed Beck to the ground, pressing his knee into Beck's chest and wrapping steely fingers around his throat. He squeezed so hard that Beck's ears popped and he choked and flailed, twisting beneath Mastema's weight. Nails dug into his neck, drawing blood, and Beck could only tear at the knotted fingers as his eyes streamed tears and the world began to grow dark. Somewhere in the dark, Sean screamed in rage.

Heat splashed on his face, thick and brassy. Mastema shouted and suddenly the weight from Beck's chest was gone. He coughed and sucked air into his lungs as he rolled over, holding his throat. There was a fury of movement in the graveyard as Sean and Mastema fought.

Sean had pulled Mastema off of him. Beck watched Sean stab Mastema wildly with the Hanoch knife, plunging the blade into the dark middle of Mastema's chest, his neck, his shoulder. Beck wiped at his face and saw his fingers painted with Mastema's blood. He tried to get up and fell coughing to his knees. His throat felt like it had been crushed.

"Sean!" he croaked. The name was lost in the wind.

A stabbing flare of white light sliced the night in two as the Veil was summoned, yet he sensed Sean willing the Veil away, using a great deal of his power to prevent the Veil from coming through, and the flash of summoning became an undecided strobe-light in the dark.

Sean became distracted, glancing at the Veil's half-formed radiance. "No! Away!"

Beck braced his weight on a tombstone to struggle to his feet. Darkness swallowed the edges of his vision and his lungs burned with the effort of pulling air into his starved tissues. Sean and Mastema battled, tearing stone and earth up in great clods as they raged, arms straining against each other, teeth bared like wolves. Mastema lunged for the knife with his bare hands and wrested it away from Sean. The blade bit deep into his palms, coaxing fresh blood to spray them both. They struggled, straying beneath the light of the Veil, dancing in and out of reality, shifting almost into the other plane before they reappeared. As Beck watched, too weak and helpless to intervene, they began to transform.

As the angels battled just inside the doorway of corporeality, their forms began to strip away. Mastema grew taller and his hair was absorbed into a scaly skull. Great, black-feathered wings sprouted from his back as his face melted into flat, reptilian contours. The true appearance of the Destroyer. Sean grew larger, the cloak of fleshly existence fading away, revealing a male body like a column of carved white marble. White wings fanned out in an immense span and a sword of blue fire formed out of air and grew from Sean's hand. Sean swept the blue sword in a long, sizzling arc and struck out at Mastema, who deflected him with the bloody knife. The light of the Veil began to grow smaller and fade, and then, abruptly as it appeared, it vanished, plunging the graveyard into shadow.

The angels raged through the cemetery, destroying everything in their path. Tombstones erupted into ashen powder and long, black furrows were gouged into the frozen earth. A slender tree was devoured, leaving behind a shattered trunk and splinters littering the ground. In the end, Mastema was the better fighter. He forced Sean to retreat until his back was to a stout tree in the center of the graveyard.

Beck called out in shock—*Sean!*"—as Mastema pinned Sean against the tree and rammed the bone-handled blade straight into his chest. The sword of fire in Sean's hand guttered and died as the blade exited through his back, impaling him against the trunk.

"No!" Beck screamed.

Sean hung on the tree, eyes narrowed to slits of pain. He did not cry out, but only forced his eyes open to find Beck and deliver a last, silent plea.

Go.

Beck had no thought of obeying. He rushed toward Sean, his hands stretched out in pity and fear at the massive open wound in his chest. He expected Mastema to kill them both then, but Mastema turned and staggered back. The angel was half transformed, patches of hair and skin poking through his scales, half of his clothing gone, clawed feet gripping the icy ground beneath him. The thing lumbered forward several steps, its breath rattling wetly in his ruptured chest.

"Sean," Beck whispered. "God... Sean." He put his hands on Sean's chest and tried to stop the bleeding, pressing hard. Sean moaned in torment.

Beck saw a flash of red hair and wide, terrified eyes, and Nicolo appeared out of the darkness. Nicolo seized the haft of the long blade and wrenched it out of Sean's chest. He threw it aside, hissing in dismay at the great, ragged wound. Sean's blood painted a red line down the trunk of the tree as Nicolo put his arms around Sean and they sagged together to the ground.

Nicolo pushed the black hair out of Sean's face. Tears spilled from Nicolo's eyes and his voice trembled. "You can't leave us. You will *not*."

Even through his pain, Sean touched Nicolo's cheek in mild reproof. "Everything ends, Nicolo."

Nicolo buried his face in Sean's neck, weeping, and behind them the winter-bare tree began to blossom. The dark bole of the tree was painted bright red with Sean's blood. Above it, green shoots sprouted from bare branches as bright pink dogwood blossoms unfolded in the space of seconds, flourished to maturity, and then took flight with the wind. Translucent petals rained down in a shower and covered the pair under the tree, settling on Nicolo's brass hair. Sean stirred.

Nicolo braced Sean in his arms. "I won't let you go," he said fiercely. "Not yet." He raised his head and closed his eyes, concentrating.

Calling the Veil, Beck realized. They were leaving.

Sean tried to struggle out of Nicolo's embrace. "I can't leave him to die again," he whispered, regret and guilt clawing out of every word. He looked imploringly at Beck.

Beck gripped Nicolo's shoulder, hating himself for the decision he was about to make, hating the shamed penitence he could feel radiating off Sean. What would it do to Sean if Mastema killed him again? *Fuck that, and fuck all the guilt, too,* he thought. *This is my fight now. Sean had his chance a long time ago.* "Take him home," he told Nicolo.

"I will." Nicolo nodded with, something like respect in his voice. "May God go with you, Beck."

Then the Veil swallowed them. Beck turned, his skin going cold. He was alone with Mastema, who meant to imprison him, to drag him into whatever abyss God had devised for him and hold his soul captive forever. If death alone could have saved Beck from that threat, he would have found a way to kill himself immediately. Instead, death was his nemesis.

Beck held fast to his last sight of Sean and turned. He ran for the small wooded grove west beyond the cemetery, sheer instinct guiding him. The shelter of the trees loomed and he threw himself towards them, his feet clumsy on the rocky, uneven ground beneath the snowfall. A few scattered tombstones were near the wood's edge, strewn over the ground like broken teeth. Beck tripped over a child's small marker and fell headlong, sprawling face-first, snow and dirt in his mouth, the sound of Mastema's heavy, crashing steps behind him.

The woods were very near. He scrambled to his feet, not daring to look back at the half-transformed thing gaining on him, and thrashed into the grove. A stinging pain whipped across his cheek, slicing his skin open. He was in a copse of thorn brambles girding the grove, their long, hooked barbs reaching out to pierce and snare him.

Mastema tore into the woods after him, and suddenly, Beck was inspired. He had power of his own, didn't he?

Sharp thorns wrenched apart from their branches and hurtled towards Mastema. The stinging rain punctured Mastema's skin, a legion of acid hornets finding their mark. Several thorns went wide and impaled Beck's arm as a loud and terrifying roar blasted through the still woods.

The path disappeared into a steep, tangled incline. Beck ran, Mastema close on his heels, never more than a few paces behind. For one appalling moment, he heard Mastema's panting breath close to his ear and it pushed him to new strength. Branches lashed against his face, clawing his hair, slowing him down as he pushed his muscles to one more burst of speed. He was drawing away from his pursuer when the ground gave way completely and he went tumbling headfirst down the incline.

Beck crashed heavily into a rotted tree stump at the bottom of the ravine and lay stunned. *Get up get up get up!* His brain shrieked danger to his sluggish limbs and his arms and legs shook as they tried to obey. Then Mastema was over him, on top of him. He was dragged up by his hair, his mind spinning with the effort to stay conscious as Mastema pulled him to his feet and growled, shook him like a wolf with a very small and frightened mouse. Beck knew that if he did not fight back now, he was done.

Beck's hand snaked out. His fingers touched the rotted stump. A low rumble came from the earth beneath them and

Mastema looked down as the decaying roots of the tree stirred from their underground seclusion and broke the surface. The massive roots writhed like serpents as they whipped around Mastema's ankles, binding him.

Beck broke away as Mastema snarled and kicked at the roots clinging to him. The supple roots cringed back but did not loosen their grip. Shadows rushed over the ground as Mastema tore at the branches with his hate, withering them to brown scrawls of dust. Beck quailed at this new power Mastema displayed. He would never have guessed an angel could kill that way, even Mastema.

Beck spotted a dead branch on the ground near the stump and crawled away to grab it, lurching to his feet. Mastema was almost loose from the tree roots. Beck came at Mastema, swinging the branch like a baseball bat. He slammed the frozen wood into Mastema's temple, gashing his skin open. When Mastema reeled backward, Beck swung hard again, connecting with a sickening *thunk*, and blood poured from the wound.

Beck watched the crimson life spurt out in a daze. If he can bleed, he can die. Perhaps Mastema had begun to lose his power when Sean cut him with the seal at Desolo, or perhaps the power had never been his own. Perhaps it was God's, and God was deserting Mastema?

"You're bleeding," he said, not surprised to hear triumph in his own voice. "How can you be bleeding?"

Yet even as he spoke, Beck remembered that Mastema could not be killed. Sean had said so. Sean's low voice seemed to echo through his brain, so alive that for a moment he felt he was actually there:

He can't die. He cannot be destroyed and he never rests from the pursuit of what he desires. When he's tired of playing with you, he'll bring all of his will to focus on you. You won't be able to resist him. Do you understand me? You'll be lost. And if he can't have you, he'll kill you.

*He'll have to kill me*, Beck decided. Death was not death to a Nephilim. Could it be so much worse to live?

He drew back to hit Mastema again, to press what little advantage fate had tossed his way, but then that invisible towrope that had led him to the cemetery began plucking at him again, pulling him back to the graveyard. He paused, the makeshift club upraised.

Mastema surged forward and caught the branch, trying to wrest it from him. Beck held onto it desperately and sent a surge of power through the dead wood, which was not dead at all but alive with cells and spores and the faint memory of the body of the ancient tree. The branch sprouted monstrous, misshapen thorns with points like spikes. They burst through the flesh of Mastema's palms with a horrid, wet popping noise.

Mastema hissed and twisted his punctured hands away. Beck dropped the branch and fled back to the incline, his feet nightmarishly slow, struggling up the hill to the narrow path. He reached the graveyard where Nicolo had rescued Sean. Beyond the cemetery was only the deserted cobblestone road, no help and nowhere to hide. Mastema was only seconds behind him. He looked around wildly, searching for somewhere *anywherel*—to go, and his gaze fell on the timbered doors, the ones that looked so much like the doors of a church. Church had never been a sanctuary to him; Beck turned towards them.

Mastema knocked him down. Beck moaned, his spine in agony as stabs of fire lanced through his back. It felt broken. He gasped for breath as clawed hands gripped his arms and turned him over. Mastema was bending over him, his bloodied face swollen with rage. Those inhuman hands curled around his neck, and Beck expected Mastema to squeeze and squeeze until there was nothing left in him, until his neck was severed like Paul's on the boat, but instead he was picked up and pitched into the air.

Beck knew a moment of sheer astonishment as the stone wall of the charnel dome came flying at him, then closed his eyes as the world wheeled around him and the thick wooden doors hit his back. He crashed through, scattering rubble and mortar from the broken hinges, and landed on the refuse piled on the cement floor inside. Beck heard the high tinkle of broken glass, beer bottles maybe, and felt something sharp slicing into his thigh. He lay there in dull amazement, his ears ringing loudly, then rolled and dragged himself up. Shaking violently, bleeding, his strength gone, Beck faced Mastema defiantly. He opened his mouth to use his last breath to curse him, and then, impossibly, he smelled a cloying citron fragrance permeating the charnel house. Frankincense. It hit him in a wave and his stomach heaved.

Fear. Hiding. Squirming his body into tight spaces to conceal it. Sparing it from the hot, greedy touches he did not understand. A shape following him in the dark. Pain.

Sudden nausea washed over him as Mastema advanced, picking up the psychic emanations of disgust and dread emanating from Beck as he came.

Mastema kicked a shattered chair out of his way. "What's that, my love?" He seized something shining—a bottle?—and hurled it at the wall. Beck ducked and the bottle shattered by his ear into a hundred razor-edged missiles that sliced his skin. "Who were you thinking of? Not me. Why does that smell remind you of him?"

Beck felt something reach into his mind, a spidery touch skittering over his brain. He gritted his teeth and threw a broken board at Mastema.

"Stay out of my mind, bastard!"

Mastema cocked his head, licking his lips as if tasting the stolen memory. "A priest? So, Mother Church has not changed. Still a haven for pederasts. Did he like that perfect, inhuman skin of yours, Beck? Did he call you *angel*?"

Beck seized a shard of brown glass from the floor and hurled it. "Shut up!"

The glass went wide and shattered on the wall beside Mastema's head. "How could he not love you? Look at you. *Bene anak*. Demigod. I'm surprised there weren't more, or were there?"

"Fight, you son of a bitch!" Beck pitched a broken chair leg at him. Mastema dodged the missile easily.

"Fight, is it?" Mastema grinned wolfishly and slammed his fist against the stone wall. The timbers shook and a cannon-like *boom* resounded in the dome. Mortar dust and chips of rock rained down on them. "Do you think you can fight me, child? With what, rocks and glass? You can't destroy an immortal, Beck." Mastema's face changed and his hands curled into hooks. He dove forward and crashed into Beck with bone-shattering force. Beck felt every particle of air being forced out of his lungs and heard the sickening crunch of his ribs fracturing. He tried to scream and had no voice. Then Mastema was on top of him, seated on his broken ribs, and he could no longer breathe.

He writhed, unable to cry out, as Mastema seized his wrists in one hand and pinned him to the floor. A shadow of black wings covered them and began to grow.

"I killed her," Mastema hissed, his face swollen and misshapen and far too close. "I found her in your room, in your bed, and she was pristine and perfect and everything I could want. The bath was filled with water and I held her head down as I fucked her. She died with me inside her, Beck! I was coming inside her while her lungs were filling!"

Beck roared in pure fury and bucked to throw Mastema off, but Mastema clung like a leech, immensely strong. Rage lent Beck enough strength to get one arm free and Mastema immediately smashed his wrist back. He felt the bone shatter and held back a moan between his teeth as sickness washed over him.

Impossible. He's too strong. I can't do it. It's finished. Beck tasted blood in his mouth, and Mastema's eyes were growing so large, filling the world with black pits. They were going to swallow him up, those big holes, swallow him and keep him down there forever, and he could scream and scream and no one would ever come...

"Come with me," Mastema whispered. "I will give you the world."

Beck fought for air. "Go to hell," he croaked.

Mastema's hands tightened, grinding Beck's bones together. "Women fall in love with killers. They marry them in prison and write poetry of their great love." His lips twisted as he said it: *great love.* "Think of snakes and sharks and tigers and spiders. Why is beauty so often deadly? Death can be as beautiful as life. Evil can be as clear and simple as good. As matchless. As pure."

As he spoke, Mastema's face began to transform back into the sensual and subtly cruel features Beck recognized; the deepbronzed skin, the full mouth and long, ice-blue eyes. His beauty bore testimony to his words as the intense, hypnotic tones rolled on and he bent Beck's wrist back nearly double, pouring liquid agony into the broken bone.

Mastema's other hand quested across the floor to a shard of glass shining dim and deadly in the light. He took it up and poised for a second with the gleaming razor edge of it aimed at Beck's face, then brought it down hard and impaled Beck's hand, striking through the weak, crumbly concrete below them. Beck clamped his mouth shut and stubbornly refused to scream, biting his lips bloody. Pain was a song he knew Mastema enjoyed too much, and he loved the music of Beck's blood especially well. The vise on Beck's other wrist tightened and ground the bones together, snapping them like twigs, teaching him a new lyric. So many melodies of pain; the short verse and the sharp and the long aria of torture.

The wind drove a flurry of snowflakes into the interior. Beck watched through a bitter, throbbing fog as they danced above Mastema's bright hair like white moths attracted to a great flame. The river of pouring words slowed.

"The Lord hath made all things for Himself," Mastema intoned. "Yea, even the wicked, for the day of evil."

Mastema was on his chest, heavy, cutting off his air. Beck felt the first wave of death terror batter his senses and it gave him new strength. He turned his hand under the glass spike, ignoring the blood-slick shard cutting deeper into him. Blood ran down his wrist and made it slippery for Mastema to hold, enough for Beck to again free his hand in a crescendo of agony and seize a long, jagged shard on the floor. He raised it to stab through that hated face, to put the light in those black eyes out forever.

Then he saw the unholy triumph in Mastema's eyes, and Beck froze and cried out in understanding. Something was swelling inside him, some bestial thing of appalling power that grew with every second that panic ruled his brain. It waxed full like the moon in his breast, a black, poisonous cloud that expanded outward, cancerous, consuming everything in its path.

And the parts of him that it was eating away were the things that made him feel human. Mastema was right. He did have such a beast inside him. All the Nephilim did. He knew that if he ever let the beast out, it would be beyond his control. Now he understood the triumph in Mastema's eyes. If Mastema ever freed that inner demon, Beck would belong to it—and to him—forever. Mastema was the master of all evil things.

Yet, to Mastema's everlasting disappointment and wrath, he had never really been the master of Zefira.

That truth held Beck back, stilled his panic between one frantic heartbeat and the next. There was a puzzle here, a reason why Mastema pursued Zefira so compulsively, so desperately. Why? What was it that kept bringing him back, except that he could not bear to be denied?

Had she ever denied him?

Beck turned his head as he lay there and saw his blood flowing away from his broken hands, painting long banners of dark red across the floor that branched off into sandy rivulets and found cracks in the floor to drip through.

"Look at me, Beck," Mastema commanded.

He did. A glint of gold caught his eye, and he saw the familiar outline of his talisman dangling from a chain around Mastema's neck, the delicate snake twining around the tree of fire, that fire spinning before his eyes, the sun in his eyes... Beck sobbed, feeling an ancient, guarded wall in himself split and give way, and through it poured in the most complete, lucid memory of Zefira he would ever know.

#### He remembered the sun.

The sun baked his lips to parchment as the last of his life drained out of him and pooled onto the sand to dry in rusty cakes. It was a miracle that he had survived so long. The white wings had filled the sky hours ago, and the slaughter had begun. The screams still echoed in his ears. Mastema had struck Zefira a killing blow. Just one; a merciful knife-thrust to the chest, and she had fallen. But the blade had missed her heart and she lay there, near death, dying but never quite dead, through the whole day as the bronze sun marched across the washed sky and the sounds of the massacre filled her brain. Dying, but still aware. Unmercifully aware. As she died and the long, black road stretched out before her mind, Zefira became aware of a choice being offered to her. A last chance for atonement, to make right all that she—that *they*—had done wrong. Because of them, Yahweh would bring the Flood, and Hanoch would bear the blame of a world destroyed. They were all guilty.

The brazen light was cut off by a shadow. It was Mastema bending over her, his white robe soaked with crimson. He gripped the bone-handled knife and dropped to his knees, his voice breaking. "You live?"

"Il-abum..." she whispered, her voice a dry, feather-light scraping, like the movements of her fingers upon the sand. "Il-abum, ellum Il-abum... sibu, räbiS u..."

She was praying to die, praying for God to witness her agony and release her from life. Her children were dead. Her parents, her neighbors, friends she had known all her life. Tamiel had abandoned her. Mastema had betrayed her and murdered her. She waited only for oblivion and it stubbornly would not come.

"Zefira, Zefira..." Mastema chanted her name, his head bowed. He took her hand and kissed it.

If she could have summoned the strength, she would have spat in his face, but her body was mute and unresponsive. She lived, but not for much longer. Her blood was all around her. She had bled herself dry into the sand.

"Aprus," she whispered. I have decided.

Mastema's eyes, as he looked down on Zefira, were like shattered glass, stark, ruined. She did not care. His bloody act had closed her heart to him for eternity. Yahweh had made Mastema what he was. Let Yahweh comfort him, then. She was done.

"I reject you," she managed to say. "Beast... clothed in human skin. Both of you. All of you. God forgive me..."

The wall broke inside Beck, crashing down, and whatever power there had been behind it fluttered and died, silenced forever. The tide of memories stopped and he opened his eyes to the sketchy, blurred scrawls of the charnel house. So. Zefira had turned away from Mastema in the end. She had turned away from disobedience, from the Watchers and all their kind. Why, then, had God done this to him?

Why did He bring me back?

So much pain. His hands were burning with it, his lungs coming apart to shreds in his chest as the sunlight faded and the real world reformed around him.

He moaned as the answer came like a rush of cold water. He had been brought back to prove Zefira's repentance, to redeem her sins in Hanoch by removing another great evil from the world. He had been brought back to earn the power to destroy Mastema and restore the balance between good and evil, the battle that good had been losing for centuries. Perhaps it had been planned that way since the beginning of time.

Mastema leaned over him, his mouth curled into a leering grin, and in a bizarre twist of double-vision, Beck saw him through the filtered haze of both the present and the long-dead past. Once, he had loved that face. Understanding coursed through him and he nearly wept. He could not win by defeating Mastema, but only by losing.

Sacrifice.

Was it really that simple? Surely not. Surely—in a universe so complex that God must wrench himself in two and wage combat continually against the stunted black shadow of his extant twin—surely, a thing so simple was worthless?

Darkness never dies.

No weapon on earth had the power to kill Mastema. In the end, even God did not have the power to destroy him with impunity. Mastema's fate was in his own hands, and Beck's will was free.

Above Beck, Mastema wavered, a glimmer of doubt in his eyes.

Beck understood.

Like Mastema and Tamiel and all those who had lived in Hanoch, an angel must be the cause of his own downfall. Trapped, all of them. Actors in a scene, players in a play. But ultimately only they could decide the outcome of the final act. Beck, too, had free will. The choice was his.

Decide.

He closed his eyes, fighting terror, the enormous, primal instinct to struggle and resist. To live at all costs. He swallowed in a dry throat, his lips moving without sound. Mastema leaned close to hear.

"Kill me."

Mastema released him in stunned shock. Emotions raced across his features. Anger, denial, bewilderment. At last, Beck saw true vulnerability in Mastema. He pressed the advantage. The shard of glass dropped from Beck's fingers. Beck ceased straining against the pressure, relaxed his body and opened the palms of his broken hands in a gesture of complete surrender.

"I will not embrace the darkness inside of me. I would rather die."

Mastema recoiled. "No!"

But Beck would not let him go. Now it was he who reached, he who clutched Mastema in a tight embrace and laid his cheek against Mastema's chest to hear his heart beating a frantic pace.

"This is my power, Mastema. Feel it."

And Beck let go of it. All of it. His hatred of himself, of the selfishness that would have let Catherine die, his fear of his nature, his loathing, his hatred of mankind and the world they had made: a world where beauty disguised evil, where the weak were butchered by the wicked, and where children must hide from lust in dark corners behind a holy altar. The human world. And as he dropped that weight from his soul, he could suddenly feel again.

He could feel again.

Beck gagged back a cry as he realized it, knowing that nothing less than *this* could have brought him back to himself. Emotions flared through his veins like molten silver. Every desire, every longing he had ever had to be different, to be kind and gentle, to be a good husband to Catherine, every wish not to be the kind of person he knew he was. Every time he had pushed away the knowledge of his marred and incomplete soul. Every time he had tried to force pity and compassion from his heart and found it empty. All the love he had tried to feel for Catherine and the true love he felt for Sean, liar that he was. Most of all, all the pity he felt for Mastema, and Zefira's dim and faded love for the Angel of Hatred that Beck tasted from a world dead for millennia. He felt it enclose the malignant thing inside him with steel chains and bind it into impotence.

"Darkness never dies," Beck whispered. "But I consign you away from this world. You're no longer needed here. Your purpose is over. Mankind doesn't need tempting anymore. You taught them well."

Mastema's mouth opened and a howl ripped from him. The tormented cry took flight and resounded amid the dome like a crashing bell; all of Mastema's suffering and pain since the world began. In the sky above them a long, low rumble began that vibrated the ground. Someone—Beck or Mastema, he was never that sure afterward—cried out as a sheet of white lightning blazed up between them, parting them, throwing Beck away from Mastema. The wind rushed in and over their bodies, driving something dark away, pulling it from Beck...

He held nothing in his hands.

There was a stink in the air like burnt bones and a thin wail that quickly faded to silence. Cold, it had grown so cold. Dazed, he blinked in the darkness and looked about, his hands groping to pull himself to his knees. He shuffled back, his fingers hooking into the stone of the wall, forcing his leaden body to stand up.

Mastema was standing against the far wall, hands flat on the stone as he breathed in huge, terrified gasps. The angel watched the floor with something approaching fear or horror, and Beck, speechless with the enormity that anything could affect Mastema so, looked down.

A mist was rising from the floor. It was a pure, unrelieved black and rose in threads like soot or ink, seeming to surge from beneath the earth, bleeding through the concrete like oil through paper, spreading wide. A high-tension hum began to throb in the air as the darkness ascended in twisted ropes to the ceiling, tentacles forming out of the night like searching fingers, seeking. It sought the crevices of the charnel house, rooting out every little crack, and suddenly Beck felt the focus of this mindless force turn to him as it suddenly changed direction, turning inward to the center of the dome.

"Oh, God." There was time enough to realize what was happening, to take one petrified breath before the mist boiled like tar and dove toward him, the curves of fog sharpened to arrows of jet. He tried to get away. Beck kicked his heels against the floor for purchase, trying to feel along the curved wall to escape, scuttling away from it. Too late. He was impaled, pierced in a thousand places by hot nails. They burrowed into his skin, past muscle and bone, spiraling around his heart and deep into the base of his brain, seeking for an anchor in his soul.

But he had already made his choice. A scream bubbled past his lips as Beck flung out his arms. The charnel house filled with a black and stinking fog as the ceiling fragmented and broke, the scent of rot filling the air. Black vapor rushed away from him and toward Mastema, where it seized him and tore at him as it has done to Beck, thrust through him in a hundred places, punctured his body and beat at his skin from the inside. For a moment, Mastema was a jerking, twitching puppet on black strings, blackness streaming from his face, his eyes, his heart. Then it was over. The mist rushed away from Mastema and descended through the stone and into the floor, the cracks in the doorway, dissipating. He collapsed.

They were alone again, just the two of them. The baleful mist had gone as abruptly as it had come. Beck shivered and rolled over on the floor, wrapping his arms around his chest as he fought to take *one* breath *just one deep breath and he'd never ask* for anything else, God. Just one.

He found himself staring up through the collapsed dome of the roof. When he could move, he groped to the broken doors, crawling, heedless of Mastema. His limbs were like water as he crawled and pushed across the rough floor, finally crossing the threshold out into the clean snow. He buried his face in it, his lips against the crisp, powdery crystals.

Get up, Beck. One last thing, and then you can rest. Sleep. Die. Do whatever. Just finish this. Get it over with.

The knife was where Nicolo had thrown it under the winterblossoming tree. Beck bent and wrapped his fingers around the cold edge and brought it up to eye-level. Sean's blood was painted all along the length of the metal. To think that this weapon had killed him in another life filled Beck with inexpressible emotion, an ache he could never reach far enough into himself to examine or soothe. It would be with him forever.

Mastema was still huddled against the rough, blackened wall when Beck returned. Beck looked at him sadly. Mastema seemed shrunken somehow. Smaller.

"You could run," Beck said.

"Where?" Mastema did not look up. "Name one inch of this earth where His eye is not upon, and I will go there. I'm done." He rose up and glass crunched under his shoes. He kicked at it and sent it skidding away into another clump of garbage. A dry series of sounds came from his throat. Laughter. "A fitting end, yes? Love always dies thus."

As pathetic as he looked, Beck found he still wanted to hurt Mastema. "All love, or only yours?" Beck said, and saw the barb hit home.

Mastema lifted his chin. "Beyond God, I have never loved anything or anyone except you."

Beck's eternal curiosity won out. "And it's so forbidden for your kind to love that He would punish you this much?"

A rush of air like a sigh came from Mastema. "Love is never forbidden. Only... that I loved you more than Him. That is a sin He has never forgiven in my kind. My time is over. The punishment is just." He looked at Beck tiredly. "Finish it. My grace has left me. I am nothing."

"You're the same as everyone else now."

"Precisely," Mastema spat with his old venom. "Nothing."

Beck's fingers clenched on the haft of the knife. Then, despite everything, he hesitated. Nicolo had warned that he might be tempted to feel compassion for Mastema. Beck had wanted to laugh at him then, but now that it was over... he *did* feel it.

Mastema's lip curled. "What are you waiting for? It is done like this." He indicated the left side of his ribs. "Here. This place. Angle the blade upward and the tip enters the heart. It's very quick."

Beck fought against the surge of sickening pity rising in him. "You think you deserve quick?"

"I am Mastema."

"You were Mastema."

A bone-white smile. "Yes, just so."

Dust continued to drift down and settle in thin ribbons of powdered mortar that streamed from the broken edges of the roof. The pale ribbons reminded Beck of sand. *So much sand here, sand in the water, in the bread, but no... I'm not there now, am I?* 

Mastema's eyes were fixed on the knife. "This will not sever us. I do not know where I will go or in what manner I will exist, but I will see you again."

"I know." Beck steeled himself and took another step. Then, thinly, "I don't think I can do this."

"No? You must."

"Help me." No answer, only silence from that dark recess where the world waited to change. "For god's sake, I'm not a murderer! I can't... can't you see that I..."

The thing was done before he fully knew what happened. Mastema rose and took one swift stride with his hand outstretched. He seized Beck's arm, snapping him forward. There was a jolt and the sharp knife was buried to the hilt.

All the breath went out of Mastema in a soundless *oh!* and he staggered against Beck, gripping his shoulder hard. Beck gasped and twisted, his face slack in shock, trying to pull away and succeeding only in worming the blade deeper.

Mastema toppled to his knees, dragging Beck with him. Mastema gave Beck a bleak and labored smile. "All the times... I have done this..." he panted. "You'd think I would know how much it hurt."

Beck cringed, fighting to free his hand as Mastema changed his grip and ripped the knife upward. The cut tore Mastema open from sternum to collarbone, and Beck gave a hoarse shout of horror and pity as the blood spilled thick over their arms, Mastema's hand clasped over his, still wrapped around the hilt of the knife.

There was no need for it, the act was done, but Beck shouted a second time, a cry that held no loss, but only the pure pain of ending. There was nothing left of him that been before. All of it had burned away when the knife entered Mastema. Beck wept coldly as the heavy body slumped against him. He gripped the fabric of Mastema's cassock between his fingers as if he would shake him or throw him off. He did neither, but embraced Mastema closer and cried as if his heart would break.

If he could have had a wish just then, it would have been to go out completely, as Mastema had done. Die, faint, go insane, just go numb. It seemed as if they stayed braced against each other for hours, unmoving in the newborn silence and the slow, drifting snow that came in through the demolished ceiling.

I've won.

Not only victory, but salvation, for he sensed that they, both Zefira and Beck, were forgiven. He had won more than he could have dreamed for.

Beck glimpsed then the full scope of the flawless, complex pattern: Zefira's inexplicable attraction for Mastema that she had never been able to resist or explain, the seed of doubt sown in the disobedient Watcher who had lost his mortal wife, the enmity bred between the two angels over the woman and the passage of years during which Tamiel repented and transformed. The hatred resurrected because of the rebirth of the slain mortal woman in the form of a Nephilim, the return of Mastema, and the rivalry begun anew. A great battle fought between the light and the dark, and humanity, save for the blood in Beck's veins and his memories from another life, had never lifted a finger. Apocalypse in miniature, gone in the space of three days, and the world would never know.

*Flawless?* Only if you don't count the dead. Next time, God could do his own damn dirty work.

Shudders wracked Beck, and he pushed Mastema away and laid him gently on the floor, his fingers chancing a curious caress to the angel's face. Mastema's beauty was still there, stamped coldly on hard features. Mercifully, Mastema's eyes were closed, and Beck was grateful that he would not have to remember what they looked like without the immortal life blazing in them. Even though Beck had learned that the pity and attraction he had felt for Mastema was beyond his control, he was already carding the events in his mind, worrying at them, pulling them apart to dissect his mistakes and marvel at his motives. Carefully, Beck removed his talisman from Mastema's neck and placed it around his own. It felt heavier against his skin. The warmth of it was gone.

Beck got up stiffly, hugging his fractured hands over his ribs. He was cold, that particular power over the elements having temporarily deserted him, and he trembled in the empty ossuary. The air tasted like stale ice and the sky seemed too vast above him, too seeing. Beck's life was his own again and the world was free of Mastema, at least for a time, or until God hatched another plan and sent a new and worse demon. It was a beautifully flawed world, one with more memory of evil than good, but a gift nonetheless. No sound but the wind, though he had suddenly begun to listen as he looked up and searched the sky.

He felt he should say something, knowing that now, perhaps for the first and only time in his life, that *someone* was listening. That he would be heard.

"I wish there'd been another way," he whispered. He felt he should add something else to it, something profound, but that was all he had.

Beck limped to the doorway, then stopped and looked back at the ruined charnel house and the still, so very still, figure crumpled on the floor. The brief glimpse of bright gold hair in the darkness filled Beck with nameless despair, and he almost turned and ran.

It shouldn't remain, he decided. There should be no trace left of Mastema's place of trial, no crucible to become a focal point for new evils.

Beck crossed the threshold into cleaner air, walking fifty paces or so away from the place, and then turned and raised his hand in command.

Fire.

The jagged bolt of flame leapt from his hand and flashed through the fractured doors to land amid the shattered wooden beams and garbage. Within seconds the unnatural heat ignited the dry wood of the broad, ancient beams. In two minutes it was an inferno. Beck watched the fire expectantly for a short time, but there was nothing. When he heard the sound of sirens on the air, he disappeared quietly into the harboring woods.

### ୖ୶ଡ଼୶ୠ

I've been asleep all my life. No... all of my lives I've been asleep.

Beck walked all the way back. He passed through icy, empty fields and dense forest, finding Desolo by instinct alone. He passed the open gates at dawn, feet moving like lead weights as he forced his body to keep moving. It was still snowing in a powdery fall. The grounds were silent and deserted, and he wondered if Sean had died after all. That thought sent a shock of new fear racing through him, and he realized there were some things he was not ready to lose again.

He hurried down the hill to the manor and saw that the Nephilim were gathered together, waiting for him in front of the house. He spotted Sean among them. Sean was still in Tamiel's form, the black hair and beautiful pale skin that Beck realized now was just another mirror of Tamiel's desire. He was beginning to believe he would be able to recognize Sean no matter what form he took now. Sean stood at Nicolo's side with the other Nephilim behind him; a warrior-guardian who clutched the bloody edges of his coat together over his chest.

"Neverborn," Beck said numbly.

"Come inside," Sean pleaded. "You need to rest."

"Do I?" Beck wasn't so sure.

It was very odd to hear Sean's voice coming from that unfamiliar mouth, to look into a stranger's face and sense his best friend's persona behind the eyes. Beck pulled Sean's hand away and parted the stained halves of his coat. A wide, red patch of blood smeared his chest. Beck touched it and looked with anxiety at his reddened fingers, but Sean shook his head.

"You've nothing to fear. I'll live. Of course I'll live."

Beck got the feeling that Sean would have hugged him if they'd been alone. There were a dozen of the Nephilim present. *My brothers,* Beck thought. Some were fair with broad features and piercing eyes, some were black haired and pale, others with copper hair like Nicolo, who had been the first to welcome him to Desolo: all tall, beautiful, and forever young. They were all who were left of the half-angel Nephilim that Tamiel had hidden and protected from Mastema. They were the aloof demigods of the earth, and if they were not wholly good, neither were they the evil that Beck had feared. They watched him with their fierce and knowing eyes that revealed nothing.

Soft-spoken Nicolo was beside Beck, touching his arm. "Anakhnu shavim," he whispered. We are one.

Beck wondered if he fully understood the offer of brotherhood Nicolo was offering him, and what it might mean for his future. "Are we?"

"You know it's true," Nicolo answered.

"I don't know anything anymore."

"And you never will if you run away again. Stay with us, Beck."

There was an aching lump in Beck's throat. He glanced around him at the snowy landscape of the estate, picturing how it would look in spring. In the summer, the rolling bottom-land would be filled with misty swales and night-singing birds. Frogs would croak in the low ponds and the air would be sweet with flowers. He imagined the Nephilim roaming their sanctuary without fear in the warm months.

"I read a story once, when I was little," Beck said. "It said that all the demons of the earth originated from the corpse of a single Nephilim. I remember wondering why God allowed such a thing to be created, what thoughts it might harbor, what allegiances it might have."

Nicolo watched him with interest. "And what did you decide, little brother?"

"I think I hoped there was a purpose to it."

Nicolo nodded. "So do we, but we don't know what it is. Perhaps that's why you were sent to us, to help us find our purpose."

Beck was too weary to smile. *Tired, I'm so damned tired.* "It's a nice thing to hope for, but I don't think so."

You are more hope than we've had in centuries, Nicolo sent directly to Beck's mind, startling him.

To experience the sound of another's voice plainly in his head was... disturbing. Frankly, it made him feel like a spider had landed in his hair, and he brushed his fingers over his neck, trying to push that alien voice away. "We will have this conversation again. I am not so easily discouraged." Nicolo grinned and slapped Beck's arm before he backed away.

Beck walked by with their eyes on him and entered the manor house. He didn't know what he was planning, whether he would ever attempt to know the Nephilim or whether he would flee from them as he had fled from so much in his life. He couldn't think clearly. All he wanted just then was a warm blanket in front of a heater.

Why shouldn't I stay?

After all, there was no place left for him in the human world. He was free of his past, but what was he to do with freedom? If he could have been with Catherine he might have tried again, but she was dead. To return to being Becket Merriday seemed pointless. He had nowhere to go.

Beck wandered until he found the dove-gray room with the plastered fantasy walls. Dim morning light illuminated the raised plasterwork, and their story held meaning for him now. He sat on a narrow bed and stared at the ash cross-beams of the ceiling, feeling bereft. Sean entered the room and moved stiffly to sit beside him, his face drawn into tired lines, older. Though Tamiel's form was strange to him, Beck still found him very beautiful.

He also knew how much a person could age in a day. His own body was covered in bloody welts and bruises that were slow to heal. Wordlessly, Sean laid his hand on Beck's shoulder where the fabric was ripped and blood was slowly seeping through. He felt deep warmth as Sean's hand moved over the wound, healing him.

"You should save some of that for yourself," Beck mumbled.

"My wounds will take care of themselves in time. I'm in no danger."

Beck stared at the floor, not knowing where to begin, and soon enough Sean removed his hand. They sat in silence for a moment, and then Beck glanced at Sean's folded hands. A fragile gold chain was twined around Sean's fingers. Beck's hand trembled as he reached over to unwind the chain from Sean's fingers and saw that a slender golden cross was attached to it. It was Catherine's necklace. He spilled the chain into his palm, resisting the urge to press it close to his heart and weep over it.

"He killed my wife."

Sean put his hand over Beck's, hiding the necklace from sight. "He killed mine, too."

Minutes passed as Beck thought about the long, contorted path that had begun in blood so long ago, all brought down to this moment. His breath caught on a sob and he pressed his palms to his eyes until he saw stars, the gold cross digging hard into his brow.

"Don't," Sean begged. "It doesn't have to end this way. I won't have it end like this."

Beck shook his head from side to side, unable to speak. He brought his hands down with a slap and dug his nails into his thighs, hearing the material of his trousers rip. "I can't bear this," he gasped. "I can't bear it that she died because of me. I was supposed to make her safe. That's why I left her!"

Sean stood up. The pressure in the room changed as the Veil smoldered up from the far outer places and rushed over them. Disorientation. Resonance. Unformed sound beat at him, static and white noise. The air changed scent. All around him the contours of the room scattered, flowing and remolding themselves. Beck caught a glance of Sophia, her waving, luminescent arms closing like a starfish, before she was gone.

Sean was holding Catherine, her limp body draped in his arms like a length of silk.

Beck gaped at them, automatically reaching out to her. "Oh, God."

"Be silent," Sean hissed. "Do nothing."

Beck's eyes streamed tears and his breath struggled in his chest as he stared at Catherine's ashen corpse. Her lips were blue and her ruddy hair was twisted into ropes of dripping water. Again, he reached for her helplessly. Sean stepped around him and laid her on the bed, pulling the thin coverlet up to her breasts. Beck sagged on the floor beside the bed, his heart trying to thump out of his chest. He imagined it like a red fist, clenching and unclenching, squeezing blood into his veins.

Sean sat beside Catherine and studied her face. Without a word, he reached over and opened Beck's coat. He took the

bone-handled knife from Beck and held it thoughtfully in his hand.

"She's only flesh, but there are strengths to being mortal."

Sean swiftly cut a shallow gash in his palm. A line of blood welled up from the cut and spilled over his hand like a garnet ribbon. Scent wafted upward from the blood in a wave of perfume, like rainwater falling on new leaves. Green, so green, like bedding down in all the young leaves of a forest. Sean turned his hand to place his bleeding flesh against Catherine's skin.

Beck remembered the dogwood tree in the graveyard and how it had burst into bloom, and his hand shot out to capture Sean's wrist. "No!"

Sean stared at him, shocked. "But-"

The past is written in stone. Only the future is malleable. Mastema's words, and he had not lied. Beck knew he hadn't.

"Mastema said—"

"Mastema is the father of lies."

"But he didn't lie about this." Beck's voice was hard. "Did he?"

To erase the past, to change fate; the act that no angel will dare, fearing a wrath greater than any punishment ever visited upon them.

"If you do this," Beck said, holding onto Sean's wrist, "you risk destruction. Not just your own, but all of your kind and all your Nephilim. You don't know what will happen."

"And yet I would attempt it," Sean said steadily. "God would spare you, and you could be with her. If you release my hand, I will do it."

Choice, the ringing bell at the end of every sentence, every deed, every thought. The balance wheel between good and evil and indifference. Beck was under no more compulsion than Sean or Mastema or any human who had ever walked under the sun. His will was as free as it had ever been.

Beck's arm began to tremble.

Choice. Because it is the only tool Man has to select sin or salvation, once it is made it cannot be interfered with. As above, so below. As below, so above. No angel was permitted to change the past. No demon, no man, no Nephilim. Catherine's murder had damned Mastema. Bring her back and Mastema's sin would be wiped out. Mastema could return, rule the earth, murder and rape and destroy at will, start it all over again.

Beck did not dare look at Catherine as he twitched a corner of the sheet over her still face. He released Sean. "Let her go." Then he collapsed into Sean's arms and cried as if he were a heartbroken child.

#### Ten months later

An orange harvest sun squatted low on the horizon like a fat pumpkin. Beck watched the streamers of pink and tangerine that slashed the sky brighten and then fade with the sinking light. Behind him, Desolo was painted by the sunset in shifting colors that flared and quickly faded with the angle of the failing sun. It seemed to happen very fast these days. He could measure months by the length of his hair, which seemed to be forever in his eyes these days, tickling his nose and getting in the way. Once he would have cut it, now he saw no need.

The Nephilim, they who did not need heat, had kindled the enormous fireplaces within the mansion, and smoke wafted skyward in twining ropes from several chimneys. They traced fingers of shadow across the deep verdant colors of the blue fir and hemlock pine glowing darkly in the forest, clashing with the red and yellow of the elms and the riot of orange sugar maples. The wind had the promise of winter, that first, sharp nip of the dying year. The courtyard was filled with leaves of all colors.

Beck sat in a pile of them, buried up to his waist in a goddess robe of autumn, enjoying the feel of being surrounded by Change, that once unwelcome guest. He watched the carillon gates on the hill above him and thought about the seasons turning, the years that had passed before in his life, and all the years ahead for which he had no counsel.

Irenic had a new police chief, he heard, and a lively office with Britney running the front desk. Pietro had closed up his restaurant briefly for winter, but was back dishing out pasta when spring returned. Beck wondered if he called the new chief *chefe* or if that tradition had died out.

There had been no further investigation into the seven Christmas murders. No outside or federal agency had ever been called in, and the news never left Irenic. In the first days after the charnel house fire (which also consumed the church), when Beck could think clearly again, he had begun to worry about how they would explain all of this. Sean had told him it was taken care of, and Beck hadn't believed him. How could anyone cover up a serial killer on the loose, or prevent people from talking about it?

Then, about a week after the New Year had begun, he had woken up to find a long black limousine and two state patrol cars in the driveway of Desolo. Beck went downstairs cautiously, looking for Sean, and found him with several men he recognized. Two of the graying men were state senators, and two more, Beck realized with a sick jolt, were governors of neighboring states. He left hurriedly, and later Sean had sought him out to explain.

"No one sees us unless we want to be seen," Sean had said, his green eyes brilliant. He seemed more alive since Mastema had departed the earth, more willing to be patient and wait for Beck to come to him, and Beck felt much closer to Sean since then.

Through the window of the dove-gray room, Beck had watched the patrol cars flanking the limo as the politicians left. "So that's how you managed to hide here all this time? Do they know about us, these men?"

"Men of power have always known about us. There are many things we can do for them. If you were human, wouldn't you want an immortal on your side?"

"Maybe. Knowing what I know now, probably not. Is this how you hid Desolo all this time?"

Sean had nodded. "And certain powers that you'll come to know, the ability to turn men's minds away from things and places and people you don't want them to see. It will come to you, Beck. There's no hurry now."

And Sean had drawn Beck into his arms and kissed him, and there was no more talk of it that day, or for many days after.

Beck found he could spend months doing nothing, really. He talked to Nicolo a lot, who never seemed to get tired of hearing about places like Alexandria, and Beck thought it ironic that Nicolo had probably seen the first Alexandria in Cleopatra's time, yet he was fascinated by the modern namesake. Beck refused to tell any stories of Wystan Parish. He spent days in the big library room of Desolo, poring over old books and reading the ones he found interesting. There were very many. Sean, it turned out, was something of a collector. When he felt like it, he got fabulously drunk. Sometimes Sean joined him.

The only matter that had broken his self-imposed exile since last Christmas was selling his house. Sean had thoughtfully offered to handle it for him, to take care of moving Catherine's possessions, but Beck refused. One morning, he just called the Salvation Army and offered to let them clear out the house, provided they cleared out the *entire* house, right down to the light bulbs. They hadn't said no. The house had really been the worst of it. After that, he was numb for weeks and tried very hard to remain that way. It was Sean who literally pulled him out of it. He was drunk one afternoon and Sean had simply come into the bedroom, taken the bottle of tequila from his hand, and smashed it into the fireplace.

"There are better ways of forgetting," Sean said, dragging him up by his arms and kissing him hard. After that, Beck never held anything back from Sean again. He was done with denying the excitement and desire Sean stirred in him, and he found that once he stopped worrying about that, he couldn't keep his hands off Sean's body. They fucked often and as long as Beck could stay awake to do it. He still had not managed the Nephilim trick of needing no sleep.

Beck heard footsteps behind him in the crisp leaves. He didn't turn to see who it was, since he no longer had to rely on those methods to receive information about his environment. All of his ways were more direct, now.

"Hello."

The intruder knelt beside him and Beck finally turned to look. Blond hair and jade-green eyes, a rough face lined by sun and a hard line of mouth that could curve to startling sweetness.

"Well at least it's really *you* today," Beck said, moving his hand lazily through the pile of leaves, a blanched fish swimming through dry waters. "I like this face more than the other."

"The other is my truer form, and I've used it much longer," Sean said. "I'm sorry it doesn't please you." It's too much like mine, Beck wanted to say. The fish breached, turned into a whale taking a mouthful of flat oak leaves. Beck closed his hand, crackling the brittle stems between his fingers, imagining the bones of small fish. His mind took weird turns these days. "I didn't say that. I just like my old Sean better. I'm used to him."

"Like an old pair of socks."

"They're very hot socks."

"Big, blond, and butch, huh?"

"That's him," Beck quipped. "If you didn't want my tongue hanging out for him, you shouldn't have teased me so much when we worked together."

"Now you're addicted, right?"

"Right-o."

"Come into the house," Sean urged.

"I'm not cold."

"Of course not."

Beck glanced at the horizon. "The sun's about to set. I have to remember it."

"Why, Beck?"

"For all the things I can't remember. All the names I can't ever say again, or don't ever want to say again. Like Joss and Frank and Jane and Father Calvert." He slowly scanned Sean's face, looking to see how his answer affected him. "And Catherine and Mastema." Yes, he was mourning Mastema as much as any of them, but he didn't want to say that, either.

Sean bowed his head, and Beck thought he might have seen a flash of self-reproach. "There will be other sunsets. Too many to count."

"There will be, won't there?" Beck opened his hand, letting the fragments fall.

Sean's took Beck's hand, coaxing. "Come."

The house was warm and smelled of smoke and spice. Sean tried to lead him to the great, round hall on the top floor of the mansion where the low, scattered voices of the Nephilim could be heard, but Beck resisted, not wanting to share company with the Nephilim today. He didn't like how they looked at him, as if he had done something dazzling and heroic they could follow and learn from. As if he had answers. They stood in the chilly hall with the checkerboard floors, the clean scent of apples flowing along the paneled woodwork.

"Why couldn't you come to me as yourself years ago?" Beck asked suddenly. "Why did you let me fall in love with you as a human man?" Sean's sudden, bright grin disarmed him. "What?"

"You know that's the first time you've actually *said* you love me," Sean murmured.

"Oh." Beck looked sheepish. "Wow. Ah... that's a big omission, isn't it? I do, you know." He still held Sean's big hand, and he pressed it gently. "I do love you. I have for a long time."

"I know." Sean and pushed a tangled lock of Beck's dark hair out of his eyes. "And I—"

"You don't have to say it," Beck interrupted. "After all this, I'd have to be the stupidest man in the universe not to know how much you love me."

Sean was quiet for a moment, but Beck though he seemed pleased, even contented.

"So tell me... why didn't you come to me before?"

Sean shrugged like he was pushing blame off his wide shoulders. "It wasn't easy being human again, having to pretend. I was selfish and did it for myself mainly, to be near you without..."

"Without me remembering that you allowed me to die."

Sean sighed. "You cut so cleanly. I think you've been talking to Nicolo too much."

"Maybe." Beck tugged on Sean's hand. "Come on, let's fuck."

Sean snorted a laugh. "You weren't this foul-mouthed as a woman."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I like it."

He led Sean to a room with soft-spoken walls like parched ash and closed the mahogany door behind them. The wooden beams of the ceiling were dark and ancient, and they formed a cross that loomed above them oppressively. Beck's gaze went to a patch of gray sky that shimmered cold through the glass of an eastern window, but then Sean was pulling him to the bed and pressing his back against the mattress. Beck sighed deeply as Sean began to caress his face with slow, intimate touches. Sean always began this way, as if he were taking the time to learn Beck's shape all over again.

At last, Beck felt he could ask, "What would have happened if you brought Cat back to life?"

Sean never stopped what he was doing. His fingertips glided over Beck's smooth skin, over his cheeks and nose and finally his mouth, where Sean traced the curves of his lips.

"I only wanted to put right what Mastema had done. I hope... now that's a strange thing for one of my kind to say, isn't it? *Hope.* So many of us have none. I've been on a path of thorns for centuries, an alien in a foreign land without the voice of God to guide me. I felt it the day you were born. I almost decided to just leave you there in the parish, leave you to your fate, let Mastema find you himself one day and settle it all without risking myself further. I defied God's will once and paid for it with eternity."

Beck wanted to purr in pleasure as Sean's hands moved to his neck. Sean's long, powerful body was stretched out next to him. "Then why would you take that chance?"

"For you."

To risk so much and to lose. It's a kind of game that humans play every day, and so few of them take it seriously. But Sean, who knew exactly what he risked, had cavalierly stepped off that precipice. All for him.

Beck had difficulty taking it all in at once, a gift so great he had trouble grasping the concept. When it came to Beck, Sean's love knew no limits.

"This is why no angel in heaven would have dared to do what I've done," Sean went on. "This is the goodness of our kind. We will risk everything for what we believe in. One day that will be our redemption. I know it."

Sean's smile was so bright that it seemed to radiate joy from his skin. Beck knew he was seeing the great inner light and beauty he had read about, the beauty of angels.

But it was a light Beck could never really share. Even Catherine, being human, had always been just beyond his reach. He tried harder to love her than he had ever tried at anything, and it wasn't enough. Like all the Nephilim, he would everlastingly be caught between worlds, touched by both and belonging to neither. Belonging nowhere, really. A chimera caught in the spider web of life, God's nettlesome fly in the matrix. Perhaps that was his answer, that he belonged only to himself.

And that's enough, Beck decided. I can never feel truly human again, but it's not the worst of what I feared. And I have Sean.

"I was afraid of losing myself," Beck said. "Of turning into something I couldn't recognize or control. But that won't happen, will it?"

"Not today. Not this year or next. Perhaps when the decades draw on your skin like knives and time itself seems intent on driving you mad, then yes, you may begin to question if all you believed in was worth it. But it won't happen today. We propose nothing, Beck. The hand of God is on all things, upon the Nephilim and even upon Mastema. The truth is that Mastema's fear killed him. The end he sought to avoid he fulfilled, because his desire for you proved stronger than his love for God. Don't despair. You've banished a great evil from the earth. Isn't that worth something?"

"You answer that." Beck marveled that they could talk this way while he was arching his back and trying to hump Sean's leg, but it wasn't the first time. Sometimes they talked like this during sex, too, dissecting religion, God, and the universe in the nicest way possible. "Was it worth it for the Watchers to interfere with mankind, knowing the price you've paid? Is the banishing of evil worth the death of one woman? What is it worth to save an unworthy species and lose your own soul?"

"Have I lost my soul?" Sean teased, suddenly smiling again, mood as changeable as the sky. "Have you lost yours?" Sean pulled Beck's shirt apart and placed his palm against his heart. "Nope, still there."

Beck took Sean's hands and pressed them to his mouth in a kiss. "What do you want from me?"

"What did I ever want from you? No one on this earth or in Heaven can be to me what you are."

"I don't even know who I am."

"You are my love forever." Sean framed Beck's face in his big hands and stroked his thumbs over Beck's cheekbones. He leaned closed and placed his lips against Beck's forehead in a blessing kiss. "Forever, Zefira."

Beck felt Sean's arms going around him, pulling him closer with gentle insistence. One of Sean's hands gently carded his hair while the other slipped down to wrap around his waist and urge the line of their bodies close, hip to hip. Sean pressed his cheek to Beck's, and Beck felt the scratchy stubble abrading his skin as he inhaled Sean's achingly familiar scent.

"Sean," Beck whispered.

"Stay with me," Sean rumbled in that beloved voice. "We'll go wherever you want, but don't ever leave me again. I couldn't bear it."

There was hope alive in the world, out there. Beck felt it in the many voices of humanity pulling him away from Desolo, the very voice he so wanted to recapture in himself. It was useless to rage against his nature, but he had learned to control it. Now all he had to do was learn how to leave Desolo behind.

Not without Sean, though. Wanting to be with him was more than simple gratitude or desire. Between the two of them they formed a circle they could never close, forever incomplete, forever longing. Already, Beck could feel the ache of sorrow folding like a hand over Sean's heart. Sean feared he would be abandoned again. He had feared from the beginning that Beck would leave him, and that had not stopped Sean from risking everything to try to save Beck from Mastema. Sean lay there embracing Beck, already grieving for his loss, picturing him gone.

"I won't leave unless you come with me," Beck said. "How's that for a deal?"

Sean gave Beck a resigned look. "Be wary of this human realm you want so badly. You're immortal, not indestructible. This world has broken you before."

"For better or worse, it's my world. I've made my choice."

"That was the way we felt in Hanoch. You see what that brought us. I want you to stay."

"I can't."

Sean drew in a breath and held it. "Then yes, I'll come with you."

"You really would?"

"I told you. You are my love forever."

In his own way, Sean was stronger than any of them, even Mastema. "What about your Nephilim? Some of them are your own children, aren't they?"

"They are," Sean admitted. "But they'll have Nicolo. They're still not safe. There are too many people in the world who have proof that the Nephilim exist, but at least they're not hunted by Mastema. You gave them that. None of us deserved what you did for us," Sean said seriously.

Beck could feel Sean's heart twisting inside him, and for once, Beck knew that he was not to blame. Tamiel's path was no longer Beck's emblem of guilt; Zefira's guilt leftover from a lifetime ago.

"All these sorrows are passed, Tamiel," Beck whispered. "Don't grieve for me anymore."

Sean closed his eyes for a moment, and Beck saw that Sean was actually frightened. *I would be too*, Beck thought, *but we've stayed too long already*.

"Where will we go?" Sean asked.

"Away from here, for a start," Beck said. "After that..." He trailed off, undecided for a last moment, and then suddenly he *knew*, like a shining door opening inside him, that it was right. "I think I want to go back to the town where I grew up," he said, wondering at himself, at how he found the courage to stop running and turn back into the wind. "To Wystan Parish. I don't know, but I think my mother was from there, whoever she was. It was my human life Mastema tried to destroy. He thought if he killed everything in it, he could change me, twist me into him." There was a hard, bright shine in Beck's sapphire eyes. "I know what I am, but I still have a human life, and I might even have human family. I'd like a chance to live my life the way I always wanted to, the right way. And perhaps the way Zefira would have wanted."

Sean looked guarded. "That isn't all you're looking for."

"No," Beck confessed. He began unbuttoning Sean's shirt, wrapping his leg around Sean's. "If I have a mother, I must have a father somewhere."

Sean made a rude noise. "I'm sure you do, but you may not want to find him."

"Why not?"

"Not all of the Watchers are... agreeable to be around. I'm the exception."

"As long as he isn't you, I'm good."

Sean swatted his ass. "Not funny. I'm an uncle at best."

"I'm... not sure I'm comfortable with that."

"You started it." Sean turned his attention to the buttons of Beck's shirt. He got them undone to Beck's navel. "Your quest is mad, you know," Sean said conversationally. "I have no confidence in it."

"But you'll be with me."

"Was there ever any doubt?"

Beck did not have to see the smile that crossed Sean's features. He could feel it.

Hours later, the taste of Sean's skin rich on his tongue, Beck padded naked to the window and looked out over the rolling expanse of snowy lawn that climbed steadily into the surrounding ring of Desolo's concealing hollow. He could feel Sean watching him from the bed, wanting him to return. Beck's breath steamed the cold glass, and with his fingertip he drew a waving line through the mist like a snake.

From the line of evergreens, in the forgiving realm between earth and sky, there came a sharp cry from an owl, and the thick green branches bowed and sighed as high above them the clouds parted hands, heaven relented, and the light broke through. KIRBY CROW worked as an entertainment editor and ghostwriter for several years before giving it up to play more video games, read more yaoi, and write her own stories. She is the author of five published novels (with two more on the way) and is a Spectrum Awards nominee.

You can find more of her works at http://www.KirbyCrow.com

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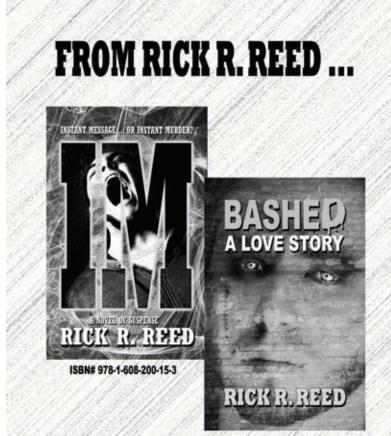
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