

CHRISTOPHER BUECHLER

THE
BLOOD THAT BONDS

PART ONE OF THE I AM TRILOGY

The Blood That Bonds

Christopher Buecheler

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First Edition (eBook): October, 2009

Second Edition (Print): February, 2011

First Edition Cover Art by [Garry Brown](#)

Second Edition Cover Art by [Adrian Dadich](#)

The Blood That Bonds is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Dedication

Pour ma belle épouse Charlotte.

Acknowledgements

This book would not have been possible without the efforts and encouragements of the following people. I am deeply in their debt:

- My editors, Elise Vogel and [Lauren Vogelbaum](#), whose work helped me not only catch any number of typos, misspellings, and grammatical flaws, but also helped to shape the book into what it is today. If any error remains, the fault is mine, not theirs.
- [Caryn Vainio](#) and Josh (wherever you are), for comments and criticism that helped shape a rough first draft into a more polished product.
- Nora Fleming for her early interest in Two's adventures.
- [Adrian Dadich](#), for the excellent print cover illustration, and [Garry Brown](#), for the terrific illustrations for the eBook and website.
- [Diana Laurence](#), for the kind words, advice, and back-of-the-book quote.
- My parents, Bill and Leslie, who've supported me in this and all of my endeavors.
- My fans on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), who thrill me with their interest, enthusiasm and participation.
- And once again, my beautiful, brilliant wife [Charlotte](#). We met because of this book, and it is because of her encouragement and love that you hold it in your hands today.

Chapter 1

Darkness and Despair

Vermont Street. October.

Her name was Two, and she sometimes thought she could smell her death, blowing in from the cemetery that lay south of her building in East New York. Sometimes she even hoped for it. Stinking, muttering, moldering death. Cold and dark. On these occasions, she felt as if even the dirty embrace of the grave would be better for her than the squalor she lived in now. She thought, maybe, she might find some sort of peace that had been missing all her life.

Darren owned her building, like he owned the girls who occupied it. Three stories tall, four rooms to a floor. They lived two to a room, two bathrooms per floor, two kitchens in the building. Just over twenty girls, every single one of them selling her body each night at his command. In return for the money they brought him, he gave them food. He gave them shelter. He gave them drugs, and the drugs gave them escape.

Two was not supposed to be here. She reflected on that often, and if she'd ever believed in a God, she'd have cursed him now. Fickle, twisted fate had delivered her into Darren's arms. Promises of salvation, undercurrents of doubt, desire, desperation. The cold prick of a needle.

She tried not to think about it.

Darren held the plastic bag filled with heroin above her now, like a treat for a dog. Little better than a dog she was, really, down on her knees, eyes wet with tears ready to spill over. Angry, vengeful Darren, so filled with hate. Hate for his parents, who'd given him his gorgeous mulatto features and then abandoned him on the street. Hate for his ex-wife, who'd left him immediately upon discovering the nature of his business, but still found fit to take half of what it had earned him. Hate for the girls he had made his slaves, and who had made him rich. Hate for the very money they handed over to him every night.

Darren didn't know of his own hate, but it burned in him so brightly it scarred his features. Twisted, cruel lips. Pinched brow. Two might have understood this hate, seen reflected in it her own self-loathing, but Two spent most of her time thinking about the heroin now. She had no sympathy for Darren, or his girls, no sympathy for herself. Lucid existence was the time

between sleep and drug, drug and sex, sex and sleep. Short bursts of clarity, ever more painful, amid an otherwise blurred, waking dream.

“Beg for it, Two,” Darren snarled, and Two's mouth formed words of penitence against her will, pleading through tears without even realizing she'd meant to do it. She begged apology for some imagined slight, some invented twist in her voice that had caused this punishment.

“Darren, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry for what I said!” But what had she said? She'd only asked for her daily ration of the drug, in the same manner she had for the past four months. If Darren had detected any real change of inflection, it hadn't been intended. But here she was, on the floor, begging and pleading for something she didn't even want. Begging and pleading and dreaming of death.

* * *

Born Two Ashley Majors, her initials – substituting the number for her first name – worked out to the approximate time she had been conceived. Her parents had thought this terribly clever. Two would have gladly held it up as evidence before God that, whatever mistakes she had made in her life, never appreciating her parents was not one of them.

For her first fourteen years, she was Ashley, and no one was allowed to call her otherwise. Maturity had lent a different outlook, and she had begun to see the name as a sign of what was becoming a fierce individuality. She would never like it, perhaps, but she was most definitely not an Ashley.

She'd left her father at the age of sixteen, her mother long in the grave. Alcohol, and the overwhelming desire to fill the void Two's mother had left, had brought rage and lust into him when before he'd felt only apathy for the girl. He'd never touched her, either in punishment or in passion, but the tension and the fighting, starting around her twelfth birthday, had over the course of years grown unbearable. At times Two found herself wishing he would simply rape her, so she could have him arrested. She wondered if that was a healthy line of thought, and decided it likely was not.

She took with her very little when she finally left. She had very little to take. Trinkets, clothes, shoes ... these things meant nothing to her, as during life her mother could never be bothered to pass down any of the traditional, societal definitions of womanhood. Could never be bothered with her daughter at all, really, nor with her husband. Two had learned by herself about womanhood, in back alleys and cheap motels, years after her mother had died. Her education

handed down by what men told her to be, what they told her to do. Promises of love, drops of blood on the sheets.

When that didn't work, when she realized she could be more than this, it came as an epiphany. A rare glimpse of sunlight in an otherwise dark life. She'd left her father, apoplectic with desire and dismay and alcohol-fueled rage. She'd left behind their hole of an apartment. She could do better on her own.

And she had, for a time.

Pool was easy, the angles naturally making sense to her. Slipping into a bar even easier. New York City cops had far better things to worry about. Bouncers knew it, owners knew it, and a patron was a patron. Particularly short, pretty blondes with good legs and a cute face. The type of girl who could entice an entire crowd of rowdy young men to stick around for more drinks, dropping dollar after dollar into pool tournaments that, invariably, they lost.

She didn't go home with these men, though many had asked, and in the end this factored into her undoing. Descent and rebirth, and descent and rebirth again. These men could not understand her, or why she spurned them. She'd leave them with a knowing smile, standing dismayed in the street. Sometimes she kissed them lightly, thanked them for their interest, but always with that mischievous gleam in her eyes, that sardonic grin on her face. The look that proved that, regardless of pretty words, she took vicious pleasure in walking away.

It was power, and Two reveled in it. The ability to make men throw their money, their bodies, their hearts at her. Lots of men. Lots of bars. She walked away from every one ... walked away grinning her savage grin. For eight months Two lived, celibate as a nun, feeding on the hearts of men.

Eventually they tired of it. Patrons began complaining. Bouncers began carding. Bets around the pool table, even when Two could manage to enter the bar in the first place, dried up. People had heard of her. Two was forced to give up the pool earnings, and her tiny studio apartment with the mattress on the floor, the only piece of furniture she owned.

One bar remained, the only one at which she'd allowed herself to develop friends. The owner, Sid. The bouncer, Rhes. She didn't play her game here. She didn't taunt the men, break their hearts. It was here she went when she wanted a glass of beer and a conversation. It was here she turned now, desperate for somewhere to stay. Rhes offered the use of his apartment. Two didn't decline the offer.

Her relationship with Rhes was entirely platonic. This surprised her; surprised both of them. Two was attractive, young, charming. Rhes was in his

mid-twenties, with a powerful build and a handsome face. Two would have broken her celibacy for him, if he'd asked. Sometimes she wished he would. Rhes never did, and Two came to realize that he could not. He knew her age. He knew her past. It would have felt like taking advantage of her, regardless of her own willingness.

After nearly eighteen months of living with Two, Rhes had been forced to turn her out. He was in a new relationship with a young woman named Sarah, a blind girl he had met with her seeing-eye dog at a jazz club, and this new girlfriend worried about him sharing a studio apartment with a teenage runaway. Eventually Sarah warmed to Two, and would likely have accepted her as a roommate in a new, larger apartment, but by then it was too late. By then Darren, and the needle, had hold of Two. For better or for worse, it would change her life forever.

* * *

"Please, Darren ..." Two whimpered.

Darren, towering above her, the bag still in his hand, the sneer on his face half grin, half expression of disgust. She could see this excited him, plain as day. To her own surprise, she found that she couldn't blame him for it. Two knew the aphrodisiac of power. Hadn't she played with it for years before, outside of those dimly lit bars that lined the city streets?

"You were a bad girl," Darren growled. Two repeated his words, agreed with him, petulant, her breath hitching. But now the tears were drying. She thought she knew how best to resolve this. Was her lower limp trembling just a bit more than necessary? Were her eyes just a bit bigger?

"I was a bad girl," Two said again, and arched her back, drawing out the words like warm honey on her tongue.

Pain flashed across her face, sudden, explosive, unexpected. Two recoiled from the blow. Darren's expert delivery rarely left marks, but it hurt no less than any other slap.

"Don't play that shit with me, girl."

Two looked up at him, sniffing. The slap had brought fresh tears to her eyes, and she blinked them away.

"Say you're sorry, and mean it." Darren looked down at her like a dark king, and Two realized that this had been just another in a long series of lessons. Darren was in control. Darren was the boss. Darren was *God*, dispensing pleasure and pain at his whim.

"I'm sorry, Darren." Two meant it. No tears, now. No hysterics. Just rapid breathing, clenched teeth. The need was a tight ball in her stomach. She tried not to look at the heroin. She tried to look at the windows, the clock on the desk, anything else. Again and again her eyes returned to the bag.

"Take it and get out." Darren tossed the bag into a corner, and turned to his ledgers. Two scrambled after it on all fours, like the dog Darren had trained her to be. By the time she was out the door, shouting some hurried, half-meant words of appreciation after her, Darren had forgotten entirely about her.

Her roommate's name was Molly. The girl had been in the business for fourteen months, a fact that repulsed Two whenever she gave it even a moment's thought. Molly was a sweet, honest, quiet girl. She had become wrapped up with the wrong people. These people had led her to heroin, and heroin had led her to Darren. Darren had led her to the clients, of which there were many. Molly was an absolute premium, the Rolls Royce of Darren's line of whores. Even after fourteen months, she was still the youngest girl in his service; only twelve. Her work earned more in a weekend than most earned in a month.

Two believed she didn't think about this, but looking at the bags under Molly's eyes on a Sunday morning when the little girl returned, tired and often bruised, to shoot up and go to sleep, was like a physical force hammering on her. They'd shared a sister-like relationship at first, but Two had been forced to establish some distance after a nightmarish group-job they'd been ordered to perform. This had happened occasionally since, and perhaps the most horrifying thing about the events was the way in which Two had become inured to them.

She and Molly were popular, as individuals and as a group. Two, with her large eyes, upturned nose, and small breasts, could pass for much younger than she really was. She received the clients who *wanted* to fuck a twelve-year-old, but who still retained some sort of conscience, some semblance of a soul. Molly's clients, as far as Two could gather, had no soul at all.

Sweet lips, big blue eyes, long brown hair tucked back in a ponytail, Molly was swinging her legs over the edge of her bed, watching Two. Her client had backed out tonight, but as he'd pre-paid, Darren had treated Molly to a night off. She had absolutely nothing to do and this, compared to her normal nights, was bliss.

Two cooked the heroin, pulled down her pants, and pushed away her underwear, exposing the joint between thigh and pelvis. She still shot up here, a remnant of the days when she'd hoped to escape, the days when she was still concerned about needle tracks. She had no qualms about exposing herself in front of Molly. How could she? Molly, in turn, registered no expression of

disturbance or concern as Two slid the needle into her skin, pressed the plunger, set the syringe on the dresser.

The effect of the fix was near-instantaneous, as always. First the burst of pleasure, warm and pulsing like an orgasm. Vision blurred, muscles relaxing, Two seemed to float off into a cloud of euphoria. She lay back on the bed, hands crossed behind her head, and heard Molly speak as if from the end of a long tunnel.

“I saw the baggie in the trash. Did you steal Cindy’s shit again?”

Stupid bitch leaves it out, what does she expect? Two thought. She didn’t need to answer Molly. The question was rhetorical.

“You’re going to hurt yourself.” The concern in Molly’s voice was lovely in its innocence. Two drew in a shuddery breath, happy to let the drugs do their work. Caring was pain. Apathy was bliss.

“No one gonna miss me when I’m gone,” she told Molly, still looking up at the ceiling.

“I’ll miss you.”

Two smiled. Of course Molly would miss her ... until the drugs and the pain and the sheer horror of their life took her, too. Assuming Molly outlived her in the first place.

Two dozed.

* * *

Descent and rebirth. In April of the previous year, Two had decided to take a walk, an innocent enough beginning to this disgusting end. She was not a foolish girl. She knew better than to wander down the wrong streets at the wrong hour. Broad daylight and known streets seemed safe enough.

She had spent the last few months in a homeless shelter, unsure of what to do next. Slowly, though, she was learning new ways of making a living. She was not always proud of herself; there was no glory in shoplifting, no beauty in fishing wallets from people’s pockets, no redemption in breaking into apartments. But she survived, and as her skills in these areas grew, so did the sum of money Rhes held for her; deposit for a new apartment. He didn’t know where she obtained it, never asked, probably tried not to think about it. Two never volunteered the information. She was ashamed, though she had no real idea what shame was at the time. Real shame would come later.

Walking in the city, watching the men in the ethnic groceries unload their trucks, the women chattering in their exotic languages, children playing

hopscotch in the street. The sights, smells and sounds of New York were all about her, and Two enjoyed them as she always had. She felt no fear of the city, nor any of the constricting claustrophobia it inspired in so many others. Two loved New York, because it was like her. It made no excuses for itself, hid nothing of its nature. New York was the sum of its many, many components, and yet so much more.

A common, garden-variety mugging was all it had taken to send her spiraling down into a life of alternating horror and numbness. A grab from an alleyway, the click of a gun, a grunted threat. Two would have given them money, if she had money to give. Would have given it happily. She knew now she could live without it. She had no illusions of bravery. When someone pointed a gun at your head and demanded your money, you gave it to him.

She had nothing, not even pocket change. A pack of cigarettes, a lighter, a wallet with a wide selection of fake IDs ... these were her possessions. Her attackers were unenthusiastic. They decided that her body would serve as an acceptable form of currency.

If Two had known the eventual outcome, she would've let them ravage her. Would've simply lay back and let it happen. If she'd known where her cries for help would land her, she would've suffered this singular violation in silence. One night to salvage the rest of her life. She didn't know, couldn't know, and her cries brought her saviors, and her saviors brought damnation.

Two young girls, brandishing a gun they didn't even know how to use, successfully chased the two men away. Two lay in the alley, battered, bleeding, clothes torn from her body. She was slipping rapidly into unconsciousness, but she tried to tell them to take her to Sid's. Tried to tell them about Rhes and Sarah, her friends. They would help her.

Two couldn't make any sounds. She'd used up her voice calling for help. She heard a name: "Darren." Then, darkness.

Memories like crumpled Polaroids, floating in a muddy pool. Blackness, floating, a flash of light, a voice asking her name, asking about her parents. So gentle, this voice. She told the truth. Why shouldn't she? Her mother dead, her father gone. No parents for Two, only the street.

Sharp sting of a needle, and then gentle bliss, descending down, back into warm darkness.

By the time her wounds had healed, and she was capable of getting out of bed, Two was fully addicted to the heroin Darren brought her once a day.

Days passed. Escape. Why not? The heroin already held her in an iron grip, but heroin was in ready supply. She would not submit to Darren's

ownership, would not accept him as her source of the drug. She would not let him own her as he owned those other girls.

She left him in the subway. Sliding onto the train, darting out from between the doors just as they closed, laughing and cursing as his angry face slid away. People all around her not-looking, a New York practice perfected to an art form. Two stole food and drink from a news-stand, ran from subway cops, still laughing.

Withdrawal came, and Two was horrified by how quickly her willpower dissolved under that onslaught of pain and need. Unable to steal enough to get what she needed, she had found a dealer and paid for the heroin with the same currency Darren had initially proposed. The irony of this was not lost on her as she lay there, burning from fever, the pain of withdrawal lancing through her, and let this strange man thrust into her again and again.

When it was done, she felt sick and defiled, but could not stop herself from asking for a fix. The dealer gave her a needle, and disappeared to obtain the rest of what she had paid for. Two shot up, nodded, dozed, unaware that she was doing so.

Thumps on the stairs, the door kicked in, Darren's face, raging, screaming, dragging her by the hair down the stairs, naked, jagged splinters embedding themselves deep within her thighs. Wailing as the car sped back to the apartments, shrieking as she was dragged into them and thrown into Darren's office. There, Darren had beat her in a manner both savage and methodical, using a leather belt wrapped around his fist, beginning with her legs and moving up her naked body. Twice had Two managed to get to her feet and run for the door. Both times Darren had caught her, stronger and faster than this weak and strung-out girl. He had punched her in the stomach, threw her back into the corner, continued to hit her with the belt.

Finally, lying on the floor, naked and sobbing, unable to move, she'd learned what the small scar he'd burned into the webbing between her left thumb and forefinger meant. It was Darren's mark, known to the other pimps and dealers, and they understood that returning one of his girls would be worth more to them than keeping her for themselves.

Two was trapped, branded like cattle, and there was not a dealer in the world (or at least, the scope of that which made up her world) who would sell to her. If Two wanted the heroin – and within hours, she knew, the need inside of her would be a ball of fire racing through her veins – she would have to earn it.

She went out on the corner that very night, still bruised and aching, and stood on the corner with the other girls until one of the strange men in their dark

cars finally pointed at her, and she went with him to a nearby motel. Later, in the early hours of the morning, she lay on the floor of the shower, knees pulled nearly too her chin, arms wrapped around her calves, and let the hot water wash away salty, bitter tears.

* * *

“Get your ass up and get ready, Two!” Darren shouted from down the hall. He kept his office near his best earners, the dubious honor of which often went to Two or her roommate.

“Get ready for ... what?” Two questioned, yawning and trying to clear her head. The heroin had made her drowsy, and she had slept through the strongest part of the high. Now there was only the afterglow, and that was rapidly fading.

Molly was in the bathroom, probably getting high. She liked to use frequently but in small amounts, skin-popping or mixing the heroin with crack cocaine and smoking it. Two preferred larger doses injected directly into a vein.

“Didn’t I tell you? Must’ve. Your stupid ass just forgot.” Darren’s voice held a rare tone of uncertainty.

“Why is it, Darren, that every time you fuck up, it’s my stupid ass that just forgot?” Two muttered under her breath.

“Somethin’ to say, bitch?” The words startled Two. Darren had come down the hall as she’d been muttering to herself, and now stood in the door.

Two looked up at him, the fear passing. The high was already fading, but the drug was still calming her, keeping her from sustaining any strong emotions.

“No,” she told him. “Nothing.”

“Fuckin’ right. Listen, you got a client tonight. Weird motherfucker. I told him and told him, ‘Look, we got girls fuck you twice as good, and look better doin’ it too.’”

Two rolled her eyes. Despite her worth to him, Darren never let a chance go by to put her down.

“He was real particular though. Said he wanted you, and motherfucker gave me a whole list of shit you supposed to wear. Listening?”

“Sure.”

“Black panties, black socks, black pants, black shirt. Tie your hair back in a ponytail. Wear a gold chain. Make your pale-ass little white-girl face even paler. Black lipstick, dark eye-shadow, lots of liner. Shower first, and clean yourself well. One gold chain, no other jewelry. No deodorant, no perfume. He says it ‘disagrees with him.’ Don’t look at me like that, I’m just quoting him.”

“What ... the fuck?”

“Look, if he wants you to look like some strung-out addict—”

“I *am* an addict.” Two grumbled, her voice more insolent than was prudent. Darren looked at her for a moment.

“You’d do well not to mention that, or I could see some severe problems developing in your future,” he said, dropping the street dialect. This was a warning; Darren never adopted this manner of speaking with a girl unless she was perilously close to severe punishment. He’d cut a finger off the last girl. Cut her finger off and turned her out in the streets, bleeding and begging, in withdrawal, without a source of the drug. All alone.

“I’m sorry. Darren, I’m sorry!” Weak voice, heart pounding, Two was amazed that she still had this much capacity for fear in her.

Darren sneered at her and left. As soon as she heard the door shut, Molly peeked out from the bathroom. Seeing Darren gone, she moved back into the room.

“Even if you don’t hurt yourself, you’re going to make him hurt you sooner or later,” Molly said, and to this, Two found, she had no reply at all.

* * *

“You look wicked!” Molly clapped her hands and grinned. Even Two, preening before the mirror, had to admit that it was the truth. Her own predilection for black clothing had made dressing simple. The gold chain had been a bit harder, but it had been there, shoved into the back of a drawer. It would probably be broken; Men liked to tear them off in the heat of passion. But it had been requested, and Two knew Darren would inspect her before she left.

She was pale, her wavy blonde hair tied back with a simple piece of black rawhide. Big, green eyes now nearly luminous against her white face. Her silk blouse was low cut, her bra pushing her small breasts up and together. Her jeans were tight, emphasizing her legs, which Two had always thought the best part of her. She couldn’t claim they were long; she stood at just over 5’4”, but they were smooth and supple, shapely, the muscles not yet ravaged or wasted away by the drugs.

She had no black lipstick. Darren’s answer to this made her grimace. “Borrow some from Lisa.”

Molly arched an eyebrow. “This should be fun.”

Lisa had attacked Two in the kitchen a week ago, screaming something about Two’s using ‘her shower.’ Two, who had no idea that shower territoriality

was even of any significance, had been unprepared. She'd stood up, and Lisa had shoved her backwards against the table. Two had reacted instinctively, swinging back around and giving a shove of her own.

Lisa had fallen backwards, and the altercation might well have ended there. Two could see from the other girl's eyes that she was not accustomed to anyone putting up an actual fight. Lisa was used to simply commanding and being obeyed.

Two had thought then of an earlier incident: Out of sheer spite, Lisa had forced Molly to turn over all of her money, strip naked, and shove the clothes down one of the building's laundry chutes. She'd then stood at the top of the stairs and watched as Molly climbed down into the dank, spider-infested basement to retrieve them. The incident had given Molly nightmares for two weeks.

A circle of girls had formed, though, and before either Two or Lisa could walk away, they were shoved right back into the center. Lisa, deriving confidence from the crowd, began shrieking again.

Looking incredulous, Two drew back her fist and punched Lisa in the mouth.

All of the fight went out of the other girl in an instant, and she crumpled to her knees. The blow had cost Two the skin on her knuckles, but it had cost Lisa two teeth.

Darren had arrived to prevent any further damage from being done, though Two had no intention of pressing the attack. He'd grabbed Two, dragged her to his office, and slapped her twice across the face before grabbing her by the throat and forcing her up against the wall.

"Bitch had it coming," He'd conceded, "But now she can't work and she looks like a damn hillbilly. Who gonna pay for the dentist? Not me."

"I'll work extra," Two had gasped, barely able to breathe, and Darren had seemed to find this amenable. He had let her go, told her to get the fuck out, gone back to whatever it was he did during the day. Gasping and choking, Two had made her way out, and had taken multiple clients a night for the next three weeks.

Two and Lisa had not spoken since, but now Two had no choice. She took a deep breath, and knocked on the door. No response. Two knocked again, waited, grew angry. She hammered on the door. "Lisa! I know you're in there. Open the fucking door or the next time I see you, I swear to God I'm going to make a necklace out of the rest of your teeth."

Click of a lock being undone. The doorknob twisted in Two's hand and she let it go. Lisa's puffy, petulant face stared out at her.

"I was sleeping," she said, not a trace of it in her voice. The dentist Darren had hired to fix her teeth had been neither sober nor careful, and there was a large, dark space between the girl's two false front teeth.

"I don't care. Darren says you have to lend me your black lipstick."

Two had taken half a step into the room. Now she managed to move backward in time to keep the speeding door from hitting her in the face. She looked over at Molly, who was standing in their own doorway. Molly rolled her eyes. Two turned back, preparing to kick the door in, when it opened. Lisa hurled the lipstick at Two, who missed the catch. She heard it clatter against the wall behind her.

"Don't ever fucking ask me for anything again, cunt!" Lisa slammed the door closed again.

"You know, you really should get that gap in your teeth fixed, hon. Your S's whistle!" Two called, her voice all sunshine and sugar. Behind her, Molly burst into bright peals of laughter.

* * *

Her friends knew very little of Two's new life. Rhes, Sarah, Sid; light that she used sometimes to drive away the dark. Darren, the epitome of kindness, gave each girl two days of the month off. Two's were the first and third Sunday, and she typically spent them at Sid's. She would take the drug early, letting most of its effects wear off before arriving at the bar. She didn't want them to know. She didn't want anyone to know.

They still suspected. Her visits were too infrequent, yet too regular, for them to believe that she was "just busy." Yet whenever Rhes attempted to learn where she'd been, what she was doing for money, where the bags under her eyes had come from, the air went immediately cold. Two's expression would forbid further discussion, and Rhes, for all his kindness, could not stand to hurt. He wouldn't interrogate her.

Eventually, the questions stopped.

Two felt sure that they knew of her occupation. She thought that Sarah would have guessed by now, even if Rhes was busy trying to fool himself. What was the most logical way for a young girl to survive on the street? Why would she give no information about it?

She desperately hoped they didn't yet suspect the drugs, though she could feel her body beginning to break down under their onslaught. Of this, far more than giving strangers the use of her body, Two was ashamed. To be enslaved so fully by something so darkly and desperately evil. Horror masquerading as bliss, disease and decay and death hiding behind a porcelain visage of joy. When the drug ran new through her veins, Two felt as if all problems had ceased to exist. When it ebbed at its lowest, Two spent her time staring out of her window at the cemetery down the block, thinking of death.

Seeing Rhes and Sarah together depressed her. Seeing Sid, Tina the waitress, Dan the other bouncer, free to live their lives as they chose, slave only to their own whims and desires; it was terribly beautiful to Two, and she was beginning to abhor this beauty. She was beginning to hate those she so desperately wanted to love. Lately Two had begun skipping even these visits, choosing instead to spend the day in bliss and forgetfulness and floating white.

Rhes and Sarah did not let on how much they knew because they understood how badly it would hurt Two. They were sure about the profession, had strong suspicions about the drug. Were it within their means, they would gladly have lifted Two up and stolen her away from the life she had fallen into, but they could not. There was no money to support her withdrawal, or enter her into a clinic, particularly given that such an act would likely procure wrath from unknown sources.

So they observed, horrified, as Two began to fall apart in front of them. Her naturally light skin took on a sickly pallor, bags formed under her eyes, her voice fell to flat monotone. Worst by far was the expression of complete apathy. Two's body moved, her mouth formed sentences, but her eyes were dead.

Sarah wanted to confront her, at least to hear the truth. This was one of the few areas in which Rhes had ever denied her. He'd known Two far longer, lived with her, understood her. She was killing herself, but if they brought it up, he knew that she would only turn away, descend even further, let the drugs kill her that much faster. It was better to watch her die slowly, as they searched and hoped for a solution, than make it happen all at once. That was his line of thinking.

Two might have thought differently.

* * *

It took Darren a moment to remember to sneer when Two entered the room, a sure sign that she had impressed him. Two stood before him, letting him survey her appearance. This was customary for Darren's top-tier girls.

"Not too fuckin' bad. Lose the purse."

Two tilted her head, surprised. Darren was fond of purses, liked his girls to carry them even if they had nothing to carry. He said they were classy.

"Client wants you to leave it here. That shirt tight enough? It's starting to get cold out, and the client wants to *know* it's getting cold out."

Two rolled her eyes. "He'll see. He'll know."

"Good. Get. Smoke on your way to the corner, because he doesn't want to see a cigarette for the rest of the night."

"How does he know I—"

"Don't know, don't care. Probably been stalking you. So what?" Darren looked her in the eyes, a rare occurrence. "Look: You make this guy happy. Price he paid up front for you don't even make sense. He goes home satisfied, I may throw in an extra ration for you."

Two's eyes lit up. An extra ration was Christmas. Her birthday. The return of Jesus Christ himself. She grinned, turned, and left, tossing her purse into her room as she went by.

Outside it felt like Autumn: cool and dry. Dark. It had been a hot September, but edges of winter were lurking on the wind. The nights would be cold, before long.

Two lit a cigarette and glanced around. A girl with bright purple hair was leaning into the window of a police cruiser, smiling and snapping her gum. No trouble there. Across the street, a man was pretending not to look at the girls loitering around. Was this her guy? If it was, he was welcome to stay where he was, looking nervous, for as long as he wanted.

Two was still comfortably held in the afterglow of her heroin, but this had passed enough for her to feel a twinge of annoyance. The nervous ones were always a big pain in the ass. They needed constant reassurance. It was almost like babysitting, except it paid more, and you skipped right to the part where the father tries to cop a feel on the ride home.

But no, the guy across the street was heading toward another girl whose name Two didn't know, and who looked nothing like Two. The guy who had contacted Darren had known exactly who he was looking for. This couldn't be her man. Her client.

Darren insisted they call them "clients." Never "Johns" or, God forbid, "tricks." Two supposed he thought that girls who were forced to behave in a

professional manner when it came to the little things would do so instinctively for the big things.

Two leaned against a lamp-post, looking down the street at the glowing pink neon perched in the window of an adult bookstore, waiting for the night to begin.

* * *

Two dragged at her cigarette, blew smoke out into the October night. There was no hint of rain in the air, and barely a cloud in the sky. The moon was a bright sliver, not the bloody, bloated full October moon that would arrive later in the month.

Normally Two used this time to prepare, strengthening herself mentally and emotionally to deal with whatever lay ahead. Tonight, though ... tonight was different. It was more than the simple promise of an extra ration. In truth, this was already slipping her mind. Tonight her heart was beating a little too fast. Her lungs pulled in air differently. The smoke from her cigarette, which had not bothered her in years, made her cough. She felt shaky, without shaking. Wound up tight in anticipation of something, but unable to determine what that something was.

Tonight felt new.

The client, whoever he was, was late. Two had been standing at her corner for nearly half an hour. Three cigarettes consumed, she loaded up on nicotine. She guessed it would do no good, that she'd be dying for one within a few hours, but the instinct was always to try. It never struck Two as odd that she was, and had been, as much a slave to these little white sticks as ever she would be to heroin. Two had not gone for more than a day without a cigarette since her eleventh birthday. They were as much a part of her life now as breathing, but they could be easily bought or stolen, and Two had never wanted for them like she had for heroin.

She'd give him five more minutes, and then she was going to her normal corner, to try to pick up some work. Coming home to Darren empty-handed was beyond unacceptable; it was nearly suicide. This would not be a problem tonight; she looked good in what she was wearing. Two dragged at her cigarette, tasted flame hitting filter, threw the butt into the street.

It was at this moment that she became aware of the presence behind her. Before she could move, before even she could process this feeling, a hand gripped her shoulder.

“Hello Two,” said a voice, and behind it Two seemed to hear everything and nothing, now and forever, love and lust and hate. She drew in a gasp without meaning to, a surge of adrenaline bursting through her body. The touch of the hand scared her, and called to her, like driving by the scene of an accident.

Then it was over. The hand was a hand. The voice was a voice. She turned and looked at the man who stood behind her, wondering how he knew her name. In the momentary confusion that had swept over her, this was the question she’d clutched at to maintain her grip on reality. Darren never gave out his girls’ real names, nor allowed them to do so. It was forbidden. Clients had called her Ashley for the entire time she had been in his service. How did he know her name?

He towered over her. Maybe six feet, maybe more. Handsome face, tightened with what might be cruelty, what might simply be intensity. Jet black hair cropped close to his head, pale skin, oddly luminescent eyes that seemed tinged with yellow, the color of dust in a shaft of sunlight. He wore a black T-shirt, black jeans, black trench coat. His thin, lanky body seemed unaffected by the gusting wind, like he could not even feel it. He did not flinch as their eyes met, only stared calmly. Two couldn’t look away.

“I am Theroen.” It was a proclamation. It was the quiet whisper of a lover.

“Theroen.” Two was breathless, unable to proceed. *Oh, I’m drowning*, she thought, *I can’t breathe*.

She grasped again at her question. “Theroen. How did you know my name?”

Theroen smiled, looked away from her for the first time, glancing down the street to their left. Two followed his gaze, and felt again that surge of adrenaline, this time from excitement, and pleasure.

Not twenty yards away was a piece of art in chrome and fiberglass, black like his clothes, black like hers. Two’s father was an auto mechanic, and she knew her cars, but this was not a vehicle with which she was familiar. The lines of the car seemed Italian.

Without meaning to, without even thinking about it, she moved forward, looking over the car. Classic styling wrapped around a modern dash with air conditioning, an eight-speaker stereo, and scooped bucket seats. The prancing horse gave it away: Ferrari. It was immaculate. The convertible top was open, and she could smell the leather from six feet away.

“What kind is it?” Her voice was a whisper, and she realized that he couldn’t possibly hear her. She had moved away from him, and had not heard him follow.

Yet when she turned, he was behind her, and he smiled again, a predator's smile, beautiful and dangerous like his car.

"It's a Ferrari Five-Fifty Barchetta, or it was when I purchased it. I've made some upgrades." Theroen said. Two was again taken aback by the quality of his voice. She did not know the words tone or inflection, and might not have used them if she did. There was something inexplicably aged about the way he spoke, yet the man who stood before her could be no more than five or six years her senior.

"Barchetta," she echoed, peering at the tires, the lights, the smooth curves of the wheel wells and powerful side scoops of the doors, the reflection of the city lights in its flawless shine. She wanted to ride in it. Oh, yes. She thought at that moment she wanted this more than anything before in her life.

Theroen took her hand now, and again that flash of fear and desire. He led her around to the passenger side, opened the door, gestured for her to sit down. Two let out some sound of disbelief. Surely this was not right. She was a whore. A junkie. A thing to be used and discarded. This car was beyond her, above her, in some other world.

Theroen only pressed gently on her shoulder, still smiling his dark grin. Two sat down. The leather enveloped her like a second skin. Theroen shut her door, and Two took the seat belt in a daze, buckled herself in. Theroen sat down next to her, turned the key, glanced over at her as the engine roared to life.

"Are you ready to *leave*?" He asked. The finality in his voice caught Two's attention, the stress on this final word unmistakable. The words she had been about to say caught in her throat. She swallowed hard, unable to speak, an indescribable emotion welling up inside of her. Looking up at him, grinning, laughing though tears had sprung to her eyes. She nodded her head, emphatic. Yes, she was ready to leave. Yes, she wanted to leave. Yes.

Theroen's smile became a wide-toothed grin for one brief moment, and there was something strange about it, but it flashed and was gone too quickly for inspection. He put the car in gear and gently reversed, pulling out of his parking space and aligning the car. He revved the engine once.

Two glanced down the street and to the left, and saw that Molly had come outside to sit on the stoop and smoke a cigarette. The younger girl was watching Two and her client with interest.

Look at me, Molly, Two thought, *I'm ready to leave.* Molly seemed to sense this. She grinned and waved.

Theroen stomped on the gas pedal. Two was thrown back in her seat, unable to contain a laughing cry of fear and pleasure and joy, joy like she hadn't felt in years.

* * *

Theroen took her through Brooklyn.

He drove as if anticipating not only every traffic light, but every possible interaction with anything at all. Never braking, never needing to swerve, he cut through traffic, making every green light, changing lanes before it even became apparent that he needed to. He guided the car with preternatural ability, at speeds well above what should have been safe. Two enjoyed every moment of it.

"Where are we going?" she asked at last, unable to sit quietly. She was too excited, nervous, full of something approaching manic glee.

"Food." Theroen glanced at her. "Nice place. You'll like it."

"Food?" Two asked, bemused. At its core, she knew well that evening represented a business arrangement. Never before had a client taken her out for food first. Never before had a client done much of anything other than what was expected.

"Food." Theroen nodded, and smiled his strange smile.

Pulling away from East New York now, moving west. Four miles, maybe five, the neighborhood began to change. Brownstones replaced chop shops, the streets grew tree-lined. High-end restaurants, Italian and Japanese and Turkish, packed with young men and women, sprung up. Two watched them, jealous of these people out eating and drinking, going on dates, living their normal lives. Theroen made a left turn and continued down the street, the car drawing stares from everyone they passed. *They don't know who I am!* Two thought. *They don't know who I am! They just know I'm in this car.*

Not herself, not the whore, not the slave. Not the girl who fucked for money and to earn the drug she could no longer live without. Just an anonymous girl in an amazing car with a handsome young man. Was this who she was supposed to be? Was this what life was supposed to be like?

Sudden emotion, so strong it was nearly pain: here only a few miles from where she lived was a world just beyond her grasp, a world that she would never have. This night would end. This pleasure would not last. Two took a shuddery breath, fighting back the onslaught of depression, the coming of tears. Theroen slowed the car, looked over at her.

“Don’t.” Not a request, not a command. Almost a piece of advice. Two looked up at him.

“I can’t help it,” she said. “I’m not used to this.”

“Then you should focus on enjoying it.” There was no sense of emotion behind Theroen’s words. He continued to look at her with his casual, nearly disinterested smile.

“I can’t think like that.”

“No?”

“I’m just a—”

“Stop.” He cut her off, suddenly intense, the first time she’d seen his face animate, his expression change. He pulled the car over the side of the road and turned again to her. When she met his eyes, they seemed to pull at her, draw her in, command her entire attention. She felt her heart speed, her breathing deepen. Fear? Lust? She couldn’t be sure; she knew only that she could not look away.

“Who you were yesterday, this morning, two hours ago is immaterial. Understand that. Believe it. I do not choose to measure your worth by past actions. Of all of the women in this city that I could be with tonight, I am with you.”

Two considered this. “Why am I here, Theroen? You don’t need me. There’s no way you need to pay for what I’m selling.”

“Does it matter? Is it worth worrying about? Will it change what is?”

“No.” Two said, and was somewhat surprised to find she meant it. She felt the grip of despair loosen.

“Good. We’re here.” Theroen gestured to the right of the car. Two saw that they had stopped in front of a small Italian restaurant. There was a raised terrace in front, where people were dining under heaters, their tables covered with long white cloths, silverware resting beside china plates. Most of them had turned to stare in amazement at the Ferrari.

“Does it bother you that everyone is constantly staring at your car?” Two asked, stepping out onto the curb. Theroen grinned.

“No,” he said. “It keeps them from looking at me.”

* * *

The restaurant was dim, lit by small sconces on the wall and by candles flickering on each table. It was warm, and smelled like herbs, garlic, and oil. The woman at the door raised an eyebrow at Two’s appearance, but another woman behind her recognized Theroen and quickly ushered them to a table near the

back. Theroen requested a bottle of wine with an Italian name and watched Two as she studied her menu, seemingly uninterested in his own.

The waiter returned with their wine, and Two regarded it for a moment with a small amount of trepidation. Beer she knew, and hard liquor, but wine was a new experience, and she wasn't sure what to expect.

The drink, a Chianti, bit gently at her tongue and spread warmly over it. Two smiled, relaxed. Theroen nodded slightly at this, as if to himself.

"Good?" he questioned. Two nodded. He smiled, sipped at his own glass, watched her with his preternatural calm.

"You look lovely," he said at last. Two felt herself blushing, a reaction she would not normally have expected from herself. Compliments from clients were common, nothing to be surprised at. This, though, felt heartfelt. More to the point, it seemed as if Theroen was truly enjoying her as a person rather than an object. She smiled, lowered her eyes, took another sip of wine, unsure how to respond.

A waiter arrived, asking if they were ready to order. Theroen waved him away, saying he didn't want anything, directing the attention toward Two.

"Whatever you want," he replied to her questioning look. "Don't concern yourself with me, I'm not hungry."

Normally, Two would have demurred, insisted that she couldn't eat if he wasn't going to, that she would feel odd. Normally, that would be the truth. Tonight she was hungry, and felt at ease, as if she could do or say anything with Theroen. Around him, she felt both as odd and as completely natural as possible.

She ordered chicken with angel-hair pasta in a red-wine sauce. The waiter took their menus and left them alone. Theroen sipped again at his wine, his eyes glinting above the glass, never leaving Two.

They were quiet for nearly fifteen minutes. Looking, drinking, enjoying the air, the wine, each other's presence. Theroen did not prompt her for conversation, and Two did not volunteer. The silence was oddly comfortable, nearly intimate. She seemed to fall into Theroen's eyes, as if they need not talk, as if he knew what she would have said. Finally, Theroen broke the silence.

"Where are your parents?"

The question should have upset her, sudden and personal as it was, but Theroen had delivered it in a tone which belied any judgment. It was nothing but a simple question, and Two answered it as such.

"One's dead. The other might as well be."

“And this man who ... employs you? What of him?” a slight sneer, not directed at her. Two laughed slightly, turned her eyes down momentarily, not from embarrassment so much as because it seemed she should.

“I hate him.”

“Have you any friends?”

At this, Two looked momentarily pained. “A few. They’re ... We’re ...”

“Estranged?”

“Something like that.”

Theroen nodded, regarded her again with inscrutable calm.

“Why do you ask?” Two couldn’t help it. She wanted to hear it out loud, wanted to know if the intentions he seemed to be so clearly communicating were true. Theroen shook his head slightly, looked away for a moment, smiled his maddening smile.

“The food is here,” he said, glancing over her shoulder.

So it was, and it was very good. Theroen watched her eat, sipping at his wine. Two had subsisted for years on instant noodles, microwave burritos, and fast-food value meals. She relished the pasta, with its dark wine sauce, full of tomato and garlic, herbs and oil, tiny bites of chicken.

This was the best meal she had ever eaten, but she didn’t eat a lot, ever mindful of the fact that this evening had a predetermined end. Sex on a full stomach had never been something she enjoyed, and for once Two wanted to enjoy the act. She felt a connection with Theroen, too strong to ignore, and found herself looking forward to the rest of the night, whatever it might bring.

Dessert, a light pastry with exquisite dark chocolate hidden away inside, came all too quickly and with few words spoken, dinner was over. Two noticed that Theroen paid for his dinner in cash, and that the tip he left appeared extraordinarily large. Ferraris, fancy restaurants, gigantic tips. A life unlike anything she had ever experienced. It was fascinating.

“What do you do for a living?” she asked as they left.

Theroen smiled, said nothing, held the door open for her. Two sat down.

“Come on. I’m curious. Are you mafia or something? I won’t mind.”

Theroen laughed. “No, not that.”

“Then what?”

“Let’s just say that I’ve had a lot of good training on how to invest, from someone who’s done it for an awfully long time.”

Theroen backed the car out. Two mused for a moment, then laughed. “Will I get any straight answers from you tonight?”

Theroen’s eyes gleamed. “Anything’s possible.”

Whatever response Two might have had was swallowed by the rush of wind as the car roared into motion.

* * *

The road, again, and that same feeling of complete control emanating from Theroen. They moved west on Flatbush Avenue, crossing over the Manhattan bridge and into Chinatown. Theroen cut a haphazard course across the island, avoiding heavy traffic and eventually joining with the fast-moving, late-evening traffic on the island's western side. They passed Trinity Cemetery, and Two thought again about sitting at her window and looking out over the rows of gravestones, waiting for death. Right now those moments seemed far away.

They left the city and began the drive north through Westchester County along Route 87. This was further out of New York than Two had ever been before, and she supposed she should worry about how she would get back to Brooklyn, but found it difficult to care. She was racing along the highway in a Ferrari, the distance between her and her unsavory past widening at nearly a hundred miles per hour and, for the moment, everything felt right.

Theroen neither spoke, nor turned on the radio, but simply drove in silence. It seemed to Two that he was giving her this opportunity to enjoy the car, the ride, the night. A small idea, not unwelcome, began to grow within her mind: Two thought that he was also allowing her the time to say goodbye.

They were cutting over west, again, now on Route 17, following it along the lower border of New York State. Theroen left the highway sometime before Binghamton and raced off on a back road, through the woods, in the dark. The Ferrari was now the only car around, traveling fearlessly, speedometer hovering at more than double the posted fifty-five speed limit. Two, filled with fear, energy, and a strange excitement that had something to do with the car and even more to do with its driver, lay back, eyes closed, feeling the wind rush through her hair, dragging it out behind the seat.

"Faster?" Theroen questioned, and his voice was a whisper cutting through the noise of the wind, the sound of the engine.

"Yes!" Two cried, knuckles white against the hand-hold molded into the door. Theroen stepped on the clutch, shifted rapidly, stomped again on the gas pedal. The Ferrari's engine roared to life, throwing Two back in her seat. Terrified, unable to stop laughing, she tried to watch ahead for curves, deer, other obstacles, but couldn't help peering at the speedometer, watching it rise.

And rise. And rise. The needle moved past 150 miles per hour, and Two, still laughing, still terrified, shut her eyes. *We're going to die*, she thought. *We're going to die and I don't care, because I'll be in a beautiful Ferrari with good food and wine inside of me, and I'll be with Theroen. I'll die with him, and then it won't matter. No one will know. I'll just be the girl who died in the Ferrari.*

But they didn't die, and finally Two felt the car losing speed. Theroen was easing off the gas, bringing the car down to a normal level. No more danger, but the joy remained. Two wanted to kiss him. She felt warm in her belly, between her thighs, places she'd sometimes thought dead since starting to work for Darren. Theroen looked over at her, as if hearing these thoughts, and Two gave him a radiant grin.

Was he ready? She asked him with her eyes. Told him with her eyes: It didn't matter that he had paid for her. She *wanted* it, badly. Her clothes seemed hot and scratchy, cumbersome.

Theroen stopped the car at the side of the road, nothing visible for miles but trees and sky, and Two's first, confused thought was: *But ... there's no back seat?* Then she laughed at herself. Theroen was already getting out of the car. Whatever this was, the Ferrari was not a part of it.

* * *

The woods were pitch black. Two felt smooth ground under her feet: a path. She held Theroen's hand, and he led slightly, apparently unfazed by the total darkness. She could feel wind on her face, and now it seemed as though there was a faint glow up ahead, the trees ending. Another minute, maybe two, and the silhouette of the surrounding forest was visible, backlit by something up ahead.

Theroen stepped out and to one side, turned, beckoned to her.

"Oh my God," Two said under her breath, stunned. Before her, in sharp contrast to the urban cityscapes she'd looked at all of her life, was a massive valley, filled with trees, a small town marked only by a few illuminated windows at its center. They were standing hundreds of feet above this, fifteen feet from the edge of a steep cliff carved out of the Appalachian foothills by the force of passing glaciers, tens of thousands of years ago. It was a sight unlike anything she had ever seen, and Two took it all in with eyes wide like a child's. She could see forever, a universe of trees, stars clearer than she could possibly have believed.

“Theroen, this is beautiful,” Two whispered, looking around. She felt him shift behind her, closer, a hand on her shoulder, turning her. His eyes looked down at her, luminescent, catching the light from the moon and holding it.

“Did you enjoy the evening?”

Two nodded. “Oh, yes.”

Theroen studied her a moment. “I won’t make you do anything you don’t want to do.”

Two pressed herself against him. “Why don’t you go ahead and start, and I’ll let you know if we get to that point.”

Theroen smiled and kissed her. Two wrapped her arms around him, her breath and his breath twining together as one. It was an eternity, an instant, and seemingly over before it began. She took a deep breath, let out a shuddery sigh, head against his chest. They stood like that for a moment, and Two reflected that of all the possible directions this night could have taken, this might well have been the least expected, the most unlikely.

And then his fingers, gently under her chin, raising her lips to his again.

They lay together in the soft grass, clothes in a jumble to their sides, forgotten, his lips at her mouth, her throat, her breasts. Two felt on fire, out of breath, flashes of heat and cold, goose bumps running in rippling waves down her arms, legs, back. Theroen caressed, teased, her body registering the contact of his fingers, the touch too gentle to satisfy. She twisted her fingers into his hair, bringing his head forward, wanting once again to share breath with him, to be connected.

Hard, against her, and Two soft, ready, wanting. Open thighs, arched back. Theroen entered her and for a time her past ceased to exist. She was brand new, every nerve ending electrified, feeling everything for the first time. Two couldn’t have explained what had brought her to this state, nor did she care. She was content to live in the moment.

They found rhythm, moved against each other, soft on hard, delicious friction. Two gasped, strained, clutched her fingers into the skin of his back. It had never been like this, building to this pleasure so quickly. As they neared the height of their passion, Theroen bent his head as if to whisper into her ear, but instead, as Two took a deep, gasping breath, he drove the sharp points of his eye teeth into the soft flesh of her neck.

The pain was immediate, exquisite, the sensation so overwhelming that it seemed if anything to enhance the eroticism of the moment. Pleasure and pain indistinguishable. Two’s gasp locked in her throat – she was unable to breathe, unable to scream, unable to move. Theroen fastened himself to her, powerful

arms holding her in an embrace that Two could not have broken, even if she could have moved.

As the draining sensation began, as the pain receded, as the world began to fall into black, she realized that her passion had reached its apex. Her body clenched over and over again, in time with her heartbeat, in time with her hips, which still moved against his. The pleasure coursing now through Two's body was above and beyond anything she had ever before experienced. Her arms tightened momentarily around Theroen, and then fell away, her breath let loose in a soft sigh, muscles relaxing. Death, desire, acceptance.

And then, darkness.

* * *

Chapter 2

The World Within the World

Somewhere dark. Somewhere wet.

Two woke to the sound of water. Droplets formed; it seemed she could hear them expanding, growing to monstrous size before gravity inevitably trapped them in its hold, pulling them to the earth. Every tiny splash an explosion, a single drop becoming many, many becoming infinite. It was as if she could hear the impact of every molecule, and for a brief moment she believed her mind might split, trying to deal with the sound.

And then: just darkness. Just water dripping. Just her ragged breathing, the feel of cold, damp stone under her cheek. She could smell wetness and rot in the air, mold from the stones, the dim scent of sex still on her body. She was naked, cold, disoriented. Confusion gave way to fright, fright to panic, and Two scrambled into a sitting position, gasping.

Dim, not dark. A candle guttered somewhere to her left. She could make out the area around her in vague outlines. As her eyes adjusted, she saw her clothes in a jumble on the floor to her right. This was something to think about, something to take her mind off of the questions, the fear. She crawled to the clothes, picked them up. Panties, jeans, shirt.

Feeling more human, more herself, Two set about trying to remember how she might have arrived at this place. Slowly the events of the previous night pieced themselves together in her mind. The car, the restaurant, Theroen. Driving fast, taking her somewhere, doing something ... but that piece wouldn't come. In its place, everything was a dark red, filled with the noise of rushing water and the thud of some distant drum.

Brighter now, her eyes adjusting, able to make out details where before there were only silhouettes. Two saw a table, a chair, a simple bed off which she might have fallen during her sleep. A toilet in the corner, behind a screen. A small sink with a mirror above. The walls in front, behind, to her right made of stone.

And to her left, iron bars from ceiling to floor, forming the fourth wall of the cell in which she was being held.

Two stared at these bars, unable to gain control of her limbs, let alone make any pretense of moving. Cold shudders of fear ran down her back. *Trapped*, her mind repeated over and over, *I'm trapped*. At last, with an effort of will

greater, perhaps, than any she had ever made, she shoved these thoughts away. Forced herself to look around. Tried to find something to occupy her mind.

The mirror. The sink. Two stood on shaky legs, a newborn colt attempting to walk, steadying herself on the table. She could feel tear tracks drying and tightening her face, though she could not remember crying. She ran the faucet, splashed water on her face, looked into the mirror.

Terror. Recoiling with a cry, tripping over the chair, crashing to the floor, the skin on her palms shredding on the cold stone. The image in the mirror had been Two, and not Two. Her eyes, brilliant green to begin with, now glowed with that odd luminescence. Her pale skin had changed subtly, imperfections wiped away, bags under her eyes gone. Her teeth as she grimaced were sharper, more pronounced, particularly the canines.

But worse, worse by far, and that which had truly caused her to recoil in horror, was the entirety of the reflection itself. It was not *what* she was seeing that brought Two to a sudden and full understanding that something was simply not right. It was *how* she was seeing it – the details her eyes were able to pick out even in this dim light were somehow finer than anything that human eyes should be able to process. She could see *everything* about herself, in a way that she had never seen before, and it was this evidence that something within her had been changed so substantially, in such a short time, that broke down the last remaining walls she had constructed against her rising fear.

Two rolled back her head, let out a wail of utter horror and despair, and gave in to the panic that had been gnawing at the edges of her mind.

She called to Rhes and Sarah. Molly. Theroen and Darren and even to her mother and father. No help came for Two. No explanation, no escape. She wept, she screamed, she threw herself against the bars.

It was not until she saw the tears she was crying, wiped on her hands and tinted with red, that she regained any sort of composure. The sight was a harsh slap, stopping her in her tracks. Red tears. Bloody tears.

And with that, Two remembered it all, in minute detail. The car, the kiss, the sex. She remembered Theroen bringing her to the delicious moment before that final peak, and pressing his teeth against her neck. Her mind replayed the event in slow motion, those teeth hard against her flesh, nanoseconds of waiting spread out forever, the moment when the body tenses, begging for release. Waiting. And then her heart had throbbed, body climaxing, vein pulsing. Theroen's teeth split her flesh asunder, and all that was left was the rushing, draining sensation, timed to the throb of her heart.

Two let out a low, animal moan of terror and revulsion and lust as these memories flooded into her head, crowding out any concern for the present. The recollection was horrifying, the blinding white pain remembered all too well. Yet below, a dark fire awoke, a need she could not imagine existing in this time and place.

Two glanced at her hands. The skin had already healed, cuts and scrapes from the fall just a few moments ago already turned to new, white flesh. Intricate spider webs of veins stood out on those hands, more pronounced against the pale skin. Two understood now what she was, or was becoming. Her mind attempted to shove the thought aside, fill with rationality, fill with excuses. But what excuse could there be? What possible rational explanation existed for this?

When the hunger awoke inside of her, some time later, she knew instinctively that no ordinary food would cure it.

* * *

In the summer of her seventeenth year, Two and Rhes had taken a trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Two had never been, and it had been several years since the last time Rhes had been to the galleries. At his insistence she had gone along, not expecting to find anything of interest. To her surprise, Two had found herself absolutely captivated by nearly everything they had seen.

Here, laid out before her, was a visual history of the world. Her rapture with this idea came from two nearly conflicting angles. On the one hand, all of this work lead up to her own creation. On the other, all of this came from beyond her, outside of her, cared not whether she ever existed, would go on existing long after her own life had ceased. She was everything. She was insignificant.

Two had not been more profoundly impacted by anything in her life, save perhaps her decision to leave home. Rhes had finally been forced to drag her from the building, promising to return with her. She hadn't read everything on the Egyptians. She'd missed the entire Roman wing. They took the train home in near silence, Rhes astounded and deeply pleased with Two's appreciation of the museum. He did not ask her to explain, knowing that if she could, she most certainly would.

Two had struggled with it for some time, attempting to put her feelings into words, attempting to express to Rhes how she'd felt, how delicious the merger of those two viewpoints had been. Two was neither stupid nor unlettered – a love for books had served her, in truth, far better in this area than a city

school education probably could have – yet there was no word she knew, and perhaps no word at all, for how she felt.

Two had made many trips to the museum that year, with Rhes and alone, absorbing all she could see. Trips to the Museum of Modern Art followed, galleries of new work in Greenwich Village, street artists in SoHo. Never any desire to attempt to create the work herself, only to immerse herself in others' creations, to learn and experience what she could through them. To absorb some alternate view, as meaningful and inconsequential as her own.

Art had brought Two a deep, abiding love for the complexity and magnificence of human life. Even in utter disgrace, trapped in horror, she had still found some grim beauty in the structure of it all.

As the blood tears dried on her cheeks, her preternatural eyes staring out through darkness no human could have penetrated, Two felt truly and completely alone for the first time since Rhes had first brought her to the museum. That precious connection with the rest of humanity had been torn from her, and she had become something outside of the scope of those eons of art. Against her will she had been made an interloper, no longer welcome in the human world. It seemed as if those ties that she had found within the art had been severed.

Sitting on the stone floor in the darkness, listening to the drip of water, Two wondered when she might see Theroen again. Clearly, she had been put here to ensure that she would not run away in his absence. There was no reason for him to continue holding her in a cell once he returned. She had not protested, had not attempted any type of escape.

This, more than anything else, calmed her. If Theroen had intended simply to kill her, she would be dead. The altered physiology, the translucency in the mirror, the blood tears ... these things suggested some further plan, one in which she joined him among the ranks of the undead. He would not leave her here to rot. She would see him again.

But not that night.

* * *

Two rose from sleep in a manner entirely unfamiliar to her. Before, it had always been fuzzy, a gradual awakening. Now, she went from the deepest blackness to instant, total comprehension. It was startling. She sat up, looked around more from habit than from any need to clear her head. She was still in the cell, of course. Nothing had changed.

Almost nothing.

Before her was a bottle of water, and a note. Two took it, read it, crumpled it up and threw it out through the bars.

Two, please accept my apologies for my absence, and for the appalling conditions of this cell. It is the only place in which I can be assured you will neither flee, nor come to any harm while I am away. I will see you later this evening. If you are thirsty, it should still be within your capacity to drink water for now.

- Theroen

No apologies for the bite, though. No apologies for the lack of warning. No apologies for whatever he had done that had begun this process without her permission. No apologies for taking away her connection with humanity, for making her some sort of monster.

Two felt a crawling, tightening sensation in her spine, followed by sharp cramp in her abdomen and the muscles behind her shoulder blades. Her mouth felt dry, her skin hot, and a wave of panic flooded through her. She knew this feeling, and a small part of her brain was surprised that it had taken so long to come around. Her body had been without her drug for at least 24 hours now, and these pains she was feeling now were only a minor precursor to those on the horizon.

“Oh, God ...” Two fought against the panic, knowing it would only worsen the symptoms, and was able to push it back for the time being. The gnawing desire still sat in the back of her brain, and her muscles ached like she had the flu, but she was not yet in the horrible pain that she knew was the next stage.

She uncapped the water, drank, felt it run down the length of her chest. It seemed as if her senses were amplified at times, and yet this occurred without warning or pattern. If she could control it, she had not yet learned how.

Steps above her, the opening of some heavy door, and then Theroen was there. He looked paler still than he had the night before, and there were heavy bags under his eyes, but otherwise he was the same: the short dark hair and light brown eyes, the lanky body, the unnatural sense of stillness. She thought she could see the ghost of a smile at his lips.

“Hello Two.” He stared in through the bars at her.

Two, with a strength belying the shakiness inside her, replied, “Nice place you’ve got here, Theroen. *Love* the decor.”

Theroen grinned, reached out with a key, unlocked the door to her cell. Iron grating on iron. Squeal of rusty hinges. He stepped backward, gestured with his hand.

“You’d probably like a shower. Some new clothes?”

Two looked at him, eyebrows raised.

“You turned me into some kind of monster, Theroen.”

“Did I?”

“I can see in the dark. I was crying earlier, and my tears were pink. I scraped my hands, and they healed in a couple of minutes. What the fuck did you do to me?” Two could feel anger replacing fear, and welcomed it.

“Something for which you will one day thank me. Two, you have to trust me.”

“I don’t have to do anything! You bought my time for a night, Theroen, not my life.”

“I’ve given you a gift.”

“Take it back!” Two shouted. “I didn’t ask for your gift.”

“You wanted to be with me, yes?”

Two was quiet. Theroen continued.

“You did, and not because I made you, either. No drugs, no magic. I gave you a taste of freedom, that’s all. A look at what it might be like to be with me. And now you can be. Forever.”

A shiver ran down Two’s spine. She continued her silence, holding on to her anger.

“I’ve given you immortality, Two ... or at least the path to it. I’ve given you a way to be free of your addictions, free of your life on the streets, free of that pimp selling you every night.”

“If you were offering that, I wouldn’t feel like there are shards of glass in my spine. I need to go, Theroen. Now. I need that pimp. I need my fix. I never asked for any of this.”

“You asked with your eyes. You asked with your body.”

“I asked for your love. Not your ... your ...”

“Blood?”

“Blood! I don’t want this, Theroen. I don’t.”

“You don’t know what this is.” Theroen gestured at her, then at himself. “At least let me show you.”

Two considered, shivering. Was this a fair request? Was this man, so little the monster she’d seen portrayed in movies, read about in books, honestly giving

her the chance to make her own decisions? She had perhaps another 12 hours before the withdrawal became unbearable.

“If you trust me, Two, I will show you a way to break from the world in which you are trapped. I will give you escape.”

Two shook her head. She couldn't see it.

Theroen sighed, lifted his finger to his lips and without hesitation bit down. Blood immediately welled, and Two felt a sudden surge of adrenaline and terrible hunger. She took an involuntary step forward, before catching herself.

Theroen held his finger out. Two took another step, stopped herself.

“I don't want it!”

“Yes you do, and not only because of your new nature. Two, I'm sorry for this ...”

Theroen moved suddenly, so fast that Two could not even react to it. Before she could even take in a breath to scream, he had grasped her, pressed his finger against her lips, and released her. Two licked them instinctively, and the blood was like fiery liquor on her tongue, hot and sweet. Ambrosia. It left her breathless. She sat down on the small bed, dazed.

“Jesus,” she said.

Theroen smiled. “No, Two. Jesus has nothing to do with this.”

Two looked up at him. The aches in her joints, the chills, the craving for the drug; all had faded far into the background. Two or three drops of Theroen's blood had pushed the symptoms of withdrawal away almost completely.

“Let me show you what can be. Will you trust me?”

Two stood, stretched, marveling at the sudden strength in her limbs. She looked again at Theroen, and saw in his eyes the same man for whom she had felt such strong feelings the previous night. Two made her decision.

“No, Theroen, I don't trust you. Not yet ...”

Theroen looked crestfallen. He opened his mouth to protest, and Two held up her hand, smiling slightly.

“But I'll let you show me.”

* * *

The dungeon was in the basement of what must have been a mansion. Two had never seen rooms of this size, rooms that seemed to stretch out forever and ever. The decor was stunning in its complexity, if not necessarily its artistry. Gorgeous, sixteenth-century paintings hung over gaudy, lacquer-glass statues of naked, sexless elves. It appeared as if anything that had – ever – grabbed the

owner's fancy had been purchased and pushed into a corner. The mansion was over-decorated, over-filled, over-furnished.

Yet within minutes, Two was absolutely spellbound. Her eyes wanted to move everywhere at once, taking it all in. Luxury like she had never seen. The ability to buy and buy and buy until, finally, all sense of aesthetics was lost. Here a massive oak table, glowing as if with its own inner light from countless centuries of oiling and finishing. There, a black velvet painting of dogs playing poker, that look as if it might have been bought from a vendor standing outside of a gas station. It was overwhelming.

Theroen guided her through each room, pointing out certain objects, but it was clear from his face, his voice, his expressions, that these possessions were not his. It was obvious that he thought little of them, and perhaps viewed most with some level of derision. Two knew very little about Theroen, but she sensed that if he had not been around this clutter for quite some time, he would have actively disdained it.

Indeed, Theroen was hurrying her through the rooms; quickly pointing out things he thought would be of interest to her, ignoring the rest. He was not trying to tempt her with luxury, and said as much.

"Everything in the world is yours for the taking, but that's not important. You know it's not important, I think, the same as I do. What's important is the life that can be lived. Hundreds of years, Two, and there's still so much to see! So much to do!"

Thereon didn't seem like the emotional type. Two wondered if this was a rare outburst that she should be appreciating. She tried her best, but all the while that same nagging thought pulled at the back of her mind like the ebb and flow of the tide. Not human. Not human. No longer connected to that beautiful web of grief and love and death and striving, striving to find some meaning in what must, by definition, be an empty universe.

But there was temptation here, as well. Wasn't there a spark of excitement in her, brought on by his words? The scope of what she had seen in that moment in the Ferrari when she had nearly lost herself in despair was minimal next to what Theroen was now proposing.

Two had never felt so torn in her life. Humanity. Immortality. The spirit. The soul. She shut her eyes, breathed deeply, pushed it away. She'd told Theroen she would let him show her. She meant to keep her words.

They came at last to a set of oak doors that seemed too massive even for Theroen to open. Solid in a way that modern creations simply weren't, they stood

before her at the end of a long hallway. Theroen paused, looked momentarily pained, turned to Two.

“Abraham.”

It was a threat, a warning, an invitation, an explanation. The quality of Theroen’s voice as he spoke the word was indefinable. Two repeated it, forming the word as a question, looking for detail.

“My father. My ... he runs this household. He does not interfere with my daily life, usually, but I owe my allegiance to him. Or I did. Now ...”

His words trailed off, and for a moment his eyes, normally so clear and focused, were distant. Cloudy.

“Theroen?”

“It’s hard, now. I’m too strong. It’s too soon.”

She didn’t understand a word of it. She began to say this, and he shook his head as if in answer.

“It doesn’t matter. Tonight, we are sticking to basics, and it is not fundamental that you understand this right now.”

“Do you all talk in riddles all of the goddamn time?” Two was somewhat exasperated despite her desire to understand. Or perhaps because of it. Theroen surprised her with a bright grin.

“You will enjoy meeting Melissa,” he laughed.

“Will she tell me what’s going on?”

“In more detail than you could possibly want.”

“What about Abraham?”

“If you experience anything less than abject terror, I’ll be amazed.”

Two raised her eyebrows. “That bad?”

“And worse. Abraham is ... eternal. He is not like others of my kind, not even like myself or Melissa. He never was. You’ll, well ... no, you won’t understand, but you’ll feel it. If it gets too bad, I’ll know, and I’ll do my best to keep you from harm.”

Two looked at the door with renewed concern. This didn’t sound like anything she had any interest in experiencing. Melissa sounded fun. Abraham sounded dark at best, deadly at worst. Theroen looked at her, smiled again, touched her cheek.

“You’ll be fine. He may even like you. I don’t think you’re like anyone else he’s met.”

“Couldn’t that work out just the opposite?” Two questioned. She felt like crying, and didn’t know why. It seemed as if she could find nothing but despair

inside herself, as if the duality of her human persona, light and dark, had been half-erased.

“It might.” Theroen’s voice was curiously gently. “I wonder the same.”

Two took a deep, shuddery breath, looked down the hall, steeled herself.

“Okay. Well, let’s go meet Abraham.”

Her voice trembled only the slightest bit.

* * *

The room was pitch black. The doors, which Theroen had opened with remarkable ease, did not make a sound as they swung backward into a blackness that the light from the hallway could not begin to penetrate. They stood on the threshold like archeologists at some newly unearthed tomb, waiting to see what might spring forth from the darkness within.

When the voice came, it was all Two could do not to turn and run, screaming, down the hallway. It was like rotting graves; gravel grinding at the bottom of some blackened abyss; the howl of wind through a cemetery in October. Age beyond age, depth beyond depth, darkness beyond darkness.

“You visit me, my son. You bring something? A treat? A taste for Abraham? So long since you last brought me some lovely treat.”

“Hello, father.” Theroen’s voice was low, subdued, respectful. Two could not detect fear, there, at least nothing akin to the terror currently sitting unsteady in her belly.

The thing in the room chuckled, a low grating sound that sent squirms of revulsion up Two’s spine. She fought them off, gripped Theroen’s hand instinctively.

“But so bravely she stands!” the creature said. “It should please you, my dear. Others have been unable to stand even long enough to hear my voice. Such bravery, yet such fear. Do the legs tremble, my dear? Does the heart beat and beat? Does the blood run thin?”

This struck the creature as uproariously funny, and he howled out at them from the darkness. Two felt what little grip she retained on her composure slipping rapidly away. Theroen sensed this, spoke up, cut off the laughter.

“This is the one of which I spoke, Abraham. This is Two.”

A momentary pause. Two felt herself being considered by the thing, the sensation like worms crawling sluggishly across her skin.

“She is still young,” Abraham said at last.

“Yes.”

"*You* are still young!" he roared suddenly at Theroen, and Two was unable to keep from cringing, making some small cry. Her face paled, then reddened with embarrassment. Theroen appeared not to notice. He stared into the darkness. Nodded.

"You knew, when you made me, what I was to be," he said after a moment.

A sigh, like the shuffle of old papers.

"Light a candle, my son," Abraham said. "I would see you as a mortal does."

"No mortal sees like we do, father," Theroen replied, but he produced a match from a pocket, struck it against the granite table directly to the right of the door, lit the wick of the massive candle that stood atop it. The room seemed to swallow this light and then, perhaps finding it unpleasant to the taste, grudgingly released it.

A gleam at the far corner. Eyes.

"Handsome, handsome boy," said Abraham, and Two could barely perceive a slight shaking of the head. "Why do you insist on looking such? Why cut your beautiful hair? Why dress in these ridiculous clothes?"

"*Those who do not change wither. Those who do not change die,*" Theroen recited.

"Speak not such things to me!" Abraham leapt forward suddenly, slightly further into the light, leaning over his massive wooden desk, white-knuckled grip on the far edge, powerful shoulders supporting his torso as he stared in fury at Theroen. Two shrank back, managing to hold in her cry this time. The light helped. Theroen's apparent fearlessness in the face of a being multitudes more powerful than himself helped more.

"Speak not in such a manner, from the scrolls of Eresh, to him who has given you *everything*!"

"Everything and nothing, father. Ashes and dust. Life in death."

"Impertinence in youth," Abraham grumbled. He sat back down, and Two found that she could barely recall his image, as if her mind had blotted it out. She remembered a heavy head of hair, complemented by large eyebrows and a beard. Had he been young? Old? She couldn't tell. Only that he was huge. Taller and broader than Theroen, thick through the shoulders, muscular. A dangerous man even as a human, let alone what he had become.

"I speak only what you have taught, father," Theroen said. He took a step forward into the room, gently pulling Two with him. Abraham chuckled. The sound was bitter, cynical. There was no humor in it.

“Ahh. ‘*My first thought was, he lied in every word.*’ It does not suit you, Theroen.”

“I am no liar, father. No cripple.”

“Oh, yes? Well. No cripple, anyway, as well you prove out there, traipsing about in the mortal world, driving your fast cars, laying with your women in patches of grass.” He looked at Two with a raised eyebrow. Two made an effort to return the gaze, succeeded. The vampire laughed again.

“So brave,” his voice was quiet, contemplative. “Why is she not finished?”

Thereon paused a moment, and Two sensed that the next few moments were critical.

“Her previous ... employer. He forced things upon her against her will. Many things, one of which was a drug.”

“She is impure?”

“The change will cleanse her.”

“And what drug is this?”

“Heroin, father. Do you know it?”

“Opium, yes?”

“Processed chemically, but yes.”

“She is unclean.”

“She is pure in heart, father. She is pure in soul. The blood will strip her of mortal needs, mortal addictions, mortal weaknesses.”

“So sure?” There was dark humor in the old vampire’s voice.

Theroen said nothing.

“No, you are not sure. Not sure at all, my impetuous fledgling. Yet you do not answer my question. Why is she not finished?”

“I did not know we were susceptible to such things. The drug is still too recent in her veins. It ... It made me quite ill.”

The elder vampire screamed laughter at this, rocking back in his chair. Two wanted to cover her ears with her hands. The sound went on and on, madness and hate and anger disguised as humor, as anything so remotely human.

And then, abruptly, stopped.

“Oh, my. ‘Quite ill’ indeed, I’ve no doubt. That drug, Theroen, more than any other, is poison to our kind. It would likely have killed a lesser creation. You are *Eresh-Chen*, though. You seem to have recovered.”

Theroen nodded.

Abraham turned his attention to Two, caught her in his eyes. “Come to me, my dear.”

Two felt her feet moving, almost against her own will. She heard Theroen draw in a breath, but he said nothing. Two understood now that Theroen felt no fear for himself, held no question of his own safety, but that he feared for hers very greatly. The final moment of the interview had come, judgment was to be handed down, and what Abraham might deem proper was as unfathomable as his deep, black eyes.

Two stood next to him at the chair, terrified, gasping for breath but unable to move away. Unable to look away. Abraham reached out, touched his finger to her forehead. The contact brought with it a jolt like electricity. Two gasped, nipples instantly hard, warmth between her legs once more awake and throbbing.

"You enjoy?" The vampire laughed at her. Two felt dizzy. She was hyperventilating.

"A taste, Theroen, of this tainted blood?" he questioned, and his voice mocked Theroen, mocked them both. She was his for the taking, all three knew it, but he found the formality deliciously, darkly entertaining.

"If you must, father." Theroen's voice was strained. Abraham seemed to smile at this, as if he approved of both the acceptance and the clear hatred in the voice of his creation.

"You will understand in time, my son, when this day comes for you, when she takes another and breaks your heart."

"Get it over with," Theroen said, and Abraham grinned broadly. He touched his finger lightly to Two's shoulder, and her knees buckled. She fell to the floor, looking up, enraptured, terrified. His fingers now under her chin, like those of a lover, raising, exposing the pale neck below.

Two gasped, panted, black spots appearing before her eyes. She was dimly aware that she was weeping, and the warmth below her waist had become a roaring blaze. Closing her eyes, she pictured Theroen and thought, *Let it be him, and not this monster.*

The vampire leaned his head down, settled the points of his teeth against her neck, waited. Just as before, the moment stretched out into eternity. The world became surreal, painted in shades of grey and yet more vibrant than anything Two had ever witnessed. She felt a tear grow on a single eyelash, fatten, drop. It hit her face, warmth of her body fading quickly as it cooled, leaving a track down her cheek. Her heart throbbed. The vampire tore through the flesh of her neck in an instant, seeking the blood forced through her veins by that thudding organ.

Pain again, like glass, exquisite, blinding, maddening, and a spike of sheer ecstasy running through her like before, like with Theroen, this caused only be

Abraham's touch, Abraham's teeth. Such power. Two leaned her head back, wailing in terror, in pleasure, in fear. It was death, it was birth, it was the coalescence of the entire universe in a single moment.

And then it was gone. The vampire pulled back, Two fell to the floor, gasping, weeping. Her eyes fluttered open and shut, trying to make sense of the myriad images before her. Theroen, looking away, unable to watch what was transpiring before him. Abraham, eyes closed, head tilted back, enjoying her blood like a man tasting fine wine. The flickering candle on the table cast light on the door, and now it seemed the flame itself was a door as well, light from inside spilling out, like a hole in the fabric of reality. Two wept at its beauty.

"It makes me lightheaded," Abraham said. "The blood is tainted indeed, and yet so strong. So delightful, ah, she will be a good daughter for you. Daughter, sister, lover ... whatever you choose to make of her. It will be many years before she finds the strength to leave you."

"It ... may be many years before she ... finds the strength to stand up." Two heard herself as if from down a long hall, and was aghast at her own blasphemy. To speak, and so impertinently, in front of this creature who had given her such pain, such pleasure. Surely now he would strike her down.

But Abraham only roared his horrible, mocking laughter, clapping his hands together. Theroen snarled something, moved towards her, and Two understood in that instant the hatred burning between master and pupil, father and son. Was it like this for all of them? Would it be like this for her? No, Two realized. Not for her and Theroen. There was no hatred there.

"Or perhaps I am wrong!" Abraham cackled. "Perhaps I am very wrong indeed!"

And then Theroen had her in his arms, and she was resting her head against his chest, neck throbbing, wanting only to sleep. She tried to speak, tried to tell him that she did not feel defiled, that even as pleasure and pain had torn through her body, she had thought of Theroen, and it had been clean. She could not say so much, her eyelids so heavy, sleep forcing itself upon her with clumsy, brutal hands.

She forced herself awake, took her hand, held it to her neck. Fingers bloody, Theroen striding rapidly down the hall, not running, only leaving, his fear lost in his anger. The oak doors shut behind them and Two wondered if Abraham had moved from his desk or closed them with only a thought. She pressed her bloody fingers to Theroen's lips, and he stopped, looked down at her in surprise.

"Not like that." Two's voice was a whisper, and she was crying again. "Not like he says."

An expression of powerful emotion passed over Theroen's usually unreadable face. He made a sound, smiled at her, kissed her fingers. Bloody white lips, bloody white teeth.

Two slept.

* * *

The bed held softness unlike anything she had ever experienced. Or perhaps it was her skin, newly remade, that made it feel that way. Silk sheets and pillow covers, heavy down blankets enveloping her, warming her, giving her a sense of comfort she had never before experienced.

Waking was as it had been before, instantaneous, frightening almost in the sudden intensity of consciousness. One moment, blackness; the next, total lucidity. Two woke with Theroen's name on her lips, a soft whisper, and she smiled against the silk.

Had there been dreams? Visions of her life as an immortal? Had she dreamt of who she might be, what she might do? Two's heart raced as her mind pondered these things. There was time, now. Time enough to see all of the art that ever she could desire. Who cared if she was no longer a part of the web of humanity that produced it? Could one not stand outside a house and still admire the decor within? Was it not possible to appreciate certain strains of music that the ear could not, in truth, even process into a coherent whole?

I'm falling in love with him, she thought, *and in love with what he is*.

Though she sensed the tragedy in this thought, as if some instinctive part of her warned against so seemingly easy an answer, she could not deny the truth of it. Abraham be damned; Theroen was not like him, never would be. She was sure of this. She'd seen Theroen's face as she pressed her blood to his mouth. Not greed or hate, not even hunger, but only overwhelming desire.

Love? Or at least the beginnings of it, as she was now feeling herself? Two thought so, yes, and that was enough.

The click of a latch. Two felt no fear. Not Abraham, then. Theroen, of course. She turned, sitting up before he could speak. She didn't want him to speak. Not now. Catching him in her bright green eyes, now luminescent from the vampire blood in her veins, trying to hold him there.

An interminable moment, but sweet, as they looked into each other's eyes. Theroen's face held that same gentle smile with which he seemed always to look upon her. *You are all I have wanted*, his eyes told her, *since the first time I beheld you*. Two felt this echo in her own soul, and she broke out into a grin.

She let the sheets pool in her lap. Bare skin, bare breasts, not embarrassed. She laughed as his eyes flicked down momentarily, and back again to her face. It did not anger her, this look. It brought her only the joy that comes with being desired.

“Lovely,” he said through his smile, and she knew he meant not only her breasts, but everything else. Filled with warmth, she closed her eyes, lay back, enjoyed the feeling of silk on skin.

Theroen sat next to her in a large wooden chair with a padded cloth back, as relaxed as ever she had seen him, and yet so still. So composed. She wondered aloud if it was the effect of immortality.

He smiled, shook his head. “No.”

“Just you?”

“Just me.”

She looked up at him from the bed, let her eyes tell him that if the chair was uncomfortable, other arrangements could be made. Theroen laughed out loud.

“Oh, if only I could, Two. But I haven’t the time that I’d like to spend.”

Two frowned in disappointment, but accepted this without comment. They had forever, perhaps.

“Perhaps?”

“Are you reading my mind?” She questioned, a mischievous grin surfacing, pretending to be offended. “Is that another crazy thing you can do?”

Theroen smiled. “Your mind is a fascinating place. I find it hard to draw away.”

“Where are you going? Why can’t you stay with me?” She had meant it as another playful question; the spurned, jealous lover. Another game, nothing more, but she saw a momentary flick of something on Theroen’s face.

Frustration? Anger?

He sighed, examined his fingernails. “Abraham requires my services. I would must do ask he asks, particularly now.”

“Why?”

Theroen looked up at her, the expression of one in love stamped clearly on his face, eyes locked again with hers.

“He didn’t kill you.”

“Did you think he would?”

“I did not know.”

Theroen looked away from her, ran a hand through his hair. It seemed that this admission, more than any other, hurt him. Two tried to understand the

reason for his pain. She reached out, touched his hand, drew it between her breasts, held it against her heart.

"I did not know. Two. I have not feared anything, at all, in centuries. Not even Abraham. Nothing alive, nothing undead. Not until we approached his chamber. And to see you in his arms? Under his spell? Terror. Terror."

"He couldn't hurt me, in the end, you know. That's what he wanted, and I didn't give it to him. I wasn't thinking of *him* at all."

"No?"

"No." She sat up, leaned forward, kissed his lips. "I was thinking about someone else."

Theroen touched her cheek, touched her hair, held her head in his hands, kissed the skin of her forehead.

"That comforts me," he said at last, "and you make me regret heeding Abraham's summons this night. There is much else I would rather be doing."

Two smiled at this. It echoed her own thoughts.

"Go, then. Do what he wants and come back soon."

"So quick to dismiss me?" It was Theroen's turn, mock hurt in his voice, a grin on his lips.

"I'm afraid if I don't, I'm going to jump you whether you like it or not."

Theroen laughed, deep and rich, and stood up to go. But Two called him back. One last kiss, long and deep this time, and during, Two bit deep into her own lip, felt the blood seep from the wound, shared it with him. The taste of it was like fire, like nectar, like life and death and dreams.

And oh, how those mental ties to humanity seemed like candles in a strong wind, blinking out of existence, one after the other.

* * *

Pain lanced through Two's midsection, stomach knotting, muscles cramping. She sat up, doubled over, gasped. In the depths of her body, a need that had nothing to do with blood, nothing to do with her new nature, reawakened.

Heroin, the pain cried out to her, and Two felt tears standing out against her eyes, thought these themselves felt dry and burned. No. This was over. This was her past. She had left this behind.

Another spasm. Another cramp. Two cried out, arms wrapped around her stomach, Abraham's words coming back to her.

"She is unclean."

Theroen's protest, that the change, her rebirth into immortality, would cleanse this need from her. Abraham's deceptive chuckle.

Suppose it didn't? Suppose now she would be trapped in this addiction for the duration of her immortal life? Two thought that if this were the case, such a life would end more quickly than expected.

And so it went. Two could not remember when Theroen had left her, could not remember how long it had been, had no conception of time. She cursed herself for not remembering to ask for his blood. She cursed Darren for ever giving her the drug. She cursed God for putting her on this earth. Pain and thirst ravaged her. At times it seemed she burned, at others chills wracked her body like physical blows. She did not call for Theroen, though she wanted to. She was afraid only the thing she had met last night would answer.

Just as it seemed she could take it no longer, that she would leap from her bed, dress, return to the city, return to Darren, return to it all in exchange for the syringe which would numb this pain, she felt a presence in the room with her. Her fear gave her a momentary respite from the pain, but this was not the abject terror that she had experienced in Abraham's presence, nor the quiet awe that Theroen inspired. It was something in between.

"Who?" She asked the darkness at the end of the room.

"Melissa," said a voice from the shadows. Two could make out a pair of gleaming eyes observing her. She tried to think of an adequate greeting. Words failed her. *Hi, I'm Two. I need some heroin.* It was almost enough to make her laugh out loud.

Melissa came forward into the light. She was a study in contrast. Her hair was jet black, long and straight. Her brown eyes had not been lightened by vampirism, only intensified into deep black pools. Her skin was white porcelain, her lips a deep, sensual red. She was beautiful, taller than Two and well built, wearing a pair of black jeans and a cream-colored blouse. She appeared concerned.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but you look terrible," she said, sitting in the same chair that Theroen had previously occupied.

"I'm not ... doing too good," Two admitted.

"Sick?"

"Withdrawal." Two felt a slight flush of shame at this admission, but what did it matter now?

"Withdra—Oh!" Melissa's eyes grew large as she realized what Two meant. She pushed her hair back behind her shoulders unconsciously, bending over Two, seeming equally curious and worried.

"Theroen?" Two asked, trying not to let her voice sound as weak as she felt.

"I don't know. I'm sorry. I wish I did. I'd get him."

Two sobbed once, got control of herself, looked again at Melissa.

"Can I have my clothes?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Sure." Melissa handed them to Two, who pulled them on underneath the covers.

"Sorry," Two said. She fought against the pain, sat up, forehead rested against her palms, elbows against her knees.

"It's okay. I guess it's weird, having some chick you've never met staring at you while you're all sick and naked and everything."

Two laughed a little, wiped tears from her eyes.

"What kind of drug?" Melissa asked. There was a faint accent to her voice. Two couldn't place it.

Two did not look up. "Can't you read it? It's sort of been on my mind."

"I'm not like Theroen. I mean, I might be someday, but not now. His powers are way beyond mine. I just pick up things once in a while."

"Heroin."

"Oh, ouch. That's not good. I mean ... you know. Pot, E, maybe even a little coke, sure. But Heroin's bad shit."

Two shuddered, looked up at Melissa, eyes watery.

"No kidding." Her voice was a hoarse whisper.

"Hey, hey ... sorry," Melissa said, that expression of concern coming to her features again. "I'm not trying to be rude. Seriously. I'm a little scatterbrained right now myself. Always like this when I oversleep, and the girl last night had *so much* wine in her."

Two raised her eyebrows, confused.

Melissa rolled her eyes. "And now I'm rambling. I can't control it. I'm sorry. Can I do anything to help you?"

Theroen was right; Two did like Melissa. She was the polar opposite of the calm, collected vampire who'd brought Two to this world, but Two liked her just the same. She smiled, trying to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

"Unless you've got a fix in that purse, I don't know if there's much you can do."

Melissa shook her head, her expression almost sad, as if it was indeed a travesty that she was not carrying the drug.

"No. Just some makeup and Kleenex and," she looked around as if confirming that no one was listening, "maybe some weed."

Two laughed, wincing at the pain this brought. A vampire carrying ganja. Wonders never ceased. Melissa grinned as well, maybe seeing the humor, maybe just happy to see Two smile.

"You can smoke that?" Two asked.

"Sure."

"And it's, like, the same as for a human?"

"Beats me. It does something, though. Everything does. What we find palatable, though, may differ a lot from humans. I think heroin would probably be too much for me."

"When Theroen, uh ... started me, he said that it made him really sick, just getting it from my blood."

"Theroen's a wuss!" Melissa laughed. "I mean, I'm sure it did ... and if it was that bad for him I'm sure it'd be awful for me, too. But he's also pretty picky. He doesn't even like it when there's a little alcohol in the mix. Just all that serious 'no, only blood, nothing else' stuff."

"Maybe that's not such a bad thing?"

"Maybe. I don't know. Does it matter?"

"How old are you, Melissa? How old is Theroen?"

"Ooh, hmmm," she mused, "I don't know. He might want to tell you that himself."

"What about you, then?"

"One hundred and forty eight ... and three days. Or twenty-two, depending on how you look at it."

"You don't look a day over one-twenty."

Melissa laughed, and then looked again in concern as Two doubled over. Hot and cold flashes were running through her, and she was bathed in a cold sweat.

"Oh, fuck. I think I'm going to puke."

"Are you sure there's nothing I can do?"

"Theroen's blood stops it. I don't know. Would yours?" Two spoke slowly, through clenched teeth, trying to fight against the sudden onset of nausea.

Melissa shrugged. "Beats me. Worth a shot. I don't mind. I probably shouldn't let you just go at my neck or whatever, though."

"Theroen bit his finger."

"Sure." Melissa's teeth made a tiny clicking sound, like the noise of a stapler, and she held her finger out to Two, blood welling up from two tears in the skin. "Hurry up, before it heals."

Two looked up at her. "Sorry. This is some fucked up, bizarre shit."

“Live a hundred and fifty years, and you’ll see things that make this seem pretty tame. Do it, if you think it’ll help you. I don’t mind.”

Two put her lips on Melissa’s finger and let the blood roll on to her tongue. The effect of the blood was immediate, energizing her, and it was all she could do not to clamp down with her teeth. Melissa seemed to sense this, and grinned. “Yummy. Vampire blood is awesome. Hard to get, though.”

Two swallowed twice, forced herself to pull away. Her nausea disappeared, along with the cold sweat and the chills. Some of the pain remained, still, but it was distant.

“Better?” Melissa asked, and Two nodded.

“Yes. Not perfect, but much better. Thank you.”

Melissa licked the last few drops of her blood off her fingers and smiled.

“No problem. What’s your name?”

“Two.”

“Like the number?”

“Yes, like the number.”

Melissa laughed and clapped her hands. “That’s so cool! That’s much better than Jennifer or Betty or Melissa.”

Two shrugged. “I guess?”

“People with cool names never appreciate them. Now then. What you need is a bath. That’ll take your mind off of this withdrawal stuff until Theroen gets back, and then I’m sure he’ll know what to do.”

Two crossed her arms, scratched her shoulders. A bath sounded wonderful.

“You can use mine. The one in here sucks. Theroen doesn’t know anything.” Melissa helped her up. Two stood on shaky legs, looked around, took a breath.

“How far is it?”

“Not far. Can you walk a bit?”

Two nodded. Melissa went to the door, opened it, held it for her. In the hallway, the vampire took the lead, and Two followed.

* * *

The bath was heaven on earth. Giant marble slabs, green and black and grey patterns tracing themselves out across what seemed, at first, to be miles of stone. The basin had to be twelve feet long, three feet deep. Sitting straight up,

Two saw, the water could easily have covered her head. The faucet was enormous. The water steamed as Melissa turned it on.

“I like flowers. Do you like flowers?”

Two had no idea what Melissa meant. She shrugged. “Sure?”

“In the bath, silly.”

“Oh.” Two honestly didn’t know. She’d never tried it. “Why not?”

Melissa laughed, took a basket from the shelf above, dropped hundreds upon hundreds of blossoms into the bath water. Their fragrance filled the room immediately, cherry blossoms, rose petals, the sweet smell of citrus.

Melissa lit candles, turned off the lights, stood in front of Two, unbuttoned her blouse. Two shrugged it off. Melissa’s blood seemed to have imbued her with a sense of great calm, and Two found herself unconcerned about being naked in front of the vampire girl. Melissa, for her part, seemed entirely unfazed. She helped Two out of the rest of her garments, held her arm out for balance as Two climbed the steps to the bath and stepped in. Two descended into the petals, felt the warmth embrace her, and sighed. Melissa sat on the step, played with the water at her fingertips, smiled at Two.

“Good?”

“Oh, yes.”

Melissa handed her a gigantic sponge, craggy and twisted and obviously natural, and some sort of perfumed bath lotion. Two cleaned herself slowly. Melissa chattered, behind her and to the right, about all sorts of things. New pop music she was enamored with, the wonderful lights and throbbing beats of the raves she attended, the new interpretation of Shakespeare running on Broadway. Her tastes were more varied than anyone Two had met. She kept the conversation casual.

Eventually, Two was as clean as she was going to get. She lingered, relaxed, the withdrawal back in some dark corner, brooding, not yet ready to return. Melissa ran water, filled a clay jug, ancient glaze cracked along its contours, and wet Two’s hair. Two leaned back, eyes closed, as Melissa’s fingers worked shampoo through her blonde curls. It was like a supernatural visit to a salon, Two reflected, and laughed slightly. Melissa seemed to catch this thought, and smiled as well.

She helped Two from the bath, dried her, helped her choose perfumes Theroen might like, helped her dress in a long, flowing gown. Green, like her eyes. It was a bit too long, but otherwise fit well.

“He’ll say he prefers black, if you ask him, but he’s just buying into the whole vampire thing. You look like a goddess, and he’ll know it.”

Two looked at herself in the mirror, amazed at the change. White skin, green dress, green eyes, golden hair. The gown was of an older style, *décolleté*, leaving little to the imagination, pushing her breasts upward and making them seem fuller. She looked like a lady at court. Two smiled, giggled like a little girl, touched her own hair as if not believing. In her nineteen years, she had never seen herself like this. Two had always understood that she possessed some level of beauty, and knew also that the vampirism was enhancing this even more, but still would never have believed she could look like this.

Behind her stood Melissa, still in her simple jeans and blouse and yet radiating supernatural beauty as well. Smiling, she touched Two's neck, and Two turned. A small, sweet kiss on the lips, and Melissa peered into her eyes, beaming.

"Soon we'll be sisters! Or nearly enough. You and Theroen will be together, and we can all hunt and live and see and do! Won't it be wonderful?"

Two thought it might, indeed.

* * *

"I don't care for all of this antique crap."

Melissa's directness, something Two realized now was as innate to her as Theroen's composure was to him, was sometimes surprising. Two raised her eyebrows.

"No?"

They were sitting on the back terrace, looking out at the woods. The moon was huge tonight, reaching the bloated, red fullness she had seen promised not three nights ago. It hung low over the sky. The night was still young. Two's earlier pain had made the time seem much longer than it had actually been.

"No. It's pointless. Abraham buys the stuff without any thought, at least that I can tell. Mostly he doesn't even do the buying. Theroen does, though Theroen *detests* a lot of it. That might be what Abraham has him doing tonight. Or it might be that he's retrieving dinner for Abraham. He doesn't hunt for himself anymore, you know, just relies on Theroen. Doesn't even have to drink more than every once in a while. I think maybe the little blood he took from you, like you said? That might have woken up the thirst."

"How does Theroen feel about bringing him victims?"

"Better than about buying him stupid furniture." Melissa's eyes gleamed. She grinned.

"It doesn't bother him, then? Picking out a life to take like he was going to the grocery store?"

Melissa looked at Two, shook her head, smiling.

"That's not how it is ... not for Theroen or even for me. We don't have to kill, anymore. We don't need that much blood. Abraham kills because he likes to, that's all.

"But even if we still had to ... you don't understand. You were asleep for the only real drink you've ever had. You don't know how it is yet. You think a couple of drops from a finger are good? Wait until you're a full vampire."

Two remembered the taste of Melissa's blood, of Theroen's, of her own. It had been sweet on her lips, hot and powerful. It had left her breathless.

"You have to kill at the start. You won't be able to stop yourself, but you get over it," Melissa continued. "Mortals die all the time. That's what makes them so beautiful. They get all into their art and their music and their careers and everything, and then they get old and die. Or they die young. If we don't bring them death, something else will, some other time. We are predators among them. And most of them? In that last instant before death? Most of them love us."

Two shook her head, not in disagreement but confusion. It all seemed deceptively easy. It all seemed so right, and yet here she was sitting with a young woman talking casually about the slaughter of human beings.

"You're only half. When he makes you full, Two, these things won't concern you. Or at least, I doubt they will. Not past the first kill."

"You said we'd be sisters. Did Theroen make you, then?"

Melissa laughed, not at Two's ignorance, but at the idea itself, as if the very thought were absurd.

"No, my father is Abraham. My blood is Abraham's blood. I only meant sisters in that our bodies are of similar ages. And both of us will have been reborn into darkness, as the poets put it."

Darkness. Two could feel darkness at the back of her mind, beginning to gnaw at her again. The idea of a fix right now, after the nice warm bath, out on the patio with a friend, seemed dangerously appealing. Melissa cocked her head.

"You're thinking about drugs."

Two felt her face reddening, nodded. "Yeah. Sorry."

"It's okay. I imagine it's hard not to. I wonder if it's like the thirst. If it's like when we're forced not to drink for a few days. It burns in us, Two. It's all I can think about. Sometimes it's like that even on normal days. Sometimes I'll feed two ... even three times a night."

Two didn't know. Of the thirst she knew only a vague desire, not a desperate need. Of the heroin, she knew nothing else.

Time passed. Several times Two was on the verge of asking Melissa for more blood, but stopped herself. She didn't want to seem that weak. She could handle it until Theroen returned. Light shakes and a dry mouth. No worse than getting the flu, really, for the moment.

In the distance, in the trees, a howling. Two looked up, eyes widening. Melissa's reaction was immediate. She stood and peered out into the forest.

"Oh, shit. I have to go, Two."

Two felt fear flood through her, fear of being alone, of the pain returning. Two turned to Melissa with pleading eyes.

"Why? What is it?"

"I have to. And you have to go back inside." Apology implicit in her voice, but Melissa offered no explanation. Two looked at her, mute. She wanted to ask for more blood, if Melissa was going to leave her alone, but the vampire seemed agitated and nervous.

"I'll take you back up to your bedroom, if you want. Then I have to go."

Two nodded, biting her lower lip, trying to suppress the fear and depression that wanted to engulf her.

Lying in the dark. Hard to breathe, hard to think, conscious thought slipping in and out like the tide. Sometimes there was only pain, sometimes she could hear herself sobbing. Chills, nausea, and the maddening craving for the drug. God, all she wanted was to get high. Was it so wrong? Thoughts of Darren, Molly, the drug, the needle. Two wanted to leave this mansion, return to her pimp, beg for his apology and for her ration. But she couldn't walk. She knew that soon she would try to crawl, crawl back to New York, back to Darren, on her hands and knees. She had no choice.

More howling from the outside, and then quiet. Just the wind, the rustling of leaves, the sound of grass shivering under its assault. Two's eyes were wide open in the dark, not seeing the room around her. Instead she saw the forest. She heard light, quiet breathing. Gasps from further away. Was this her body? Golden hair at the sides of her vision, hanging in long, loose curls like hers. Yet her chest felt heavier, the breasts larger, the body lankier. She moved across the ground in a manner completely unfamiliar to her. This was not Two.

The pain cut through the vision. Two gasped, moaned, lay back, and again the seeing overtook her. No, not Two. Not her eyes. Not her body. Someone else. Some other.

Ahead, a silhouette, something struggling its way through the forest. Something that Two could barely see was moving in lumbering steps, gasping, weeping, praying in some nameless language to some nameless god. The prayer of the victim. The prayer of the hunted. Two's heart raced, adrenaline flooding her body, excitement and lust and terrible, terrible hunger. The prey was at hand, the hunt over.

Speed, now, overtaking the victim, warmth flooding through her body as dull excitement awakened between her thighs. Was it always like this? Would she never grow used to this, never lose that throbbing heat? She tasted the man's sweat, salty, as her teeth and tongue caressed the surface of his neck. He lay there, caught by her powerful arms, unable to move, unable to breathe.

The attack was not a clean bite, not the civilized piercing Theroen's teeth had made in her own vein, barely noticeable afterward. Two felt her head move forward, felt her jaws clench like powerful machines, felt bone and muscle and cartilage crush between her teeth. A tearing sound, like wet cloth, resistance giving way as she jerked and twisted her head. Two screamed out loud at this sensation, in her bedroom in the mansion.

The blood sprayed, coating her face in warmth. Below her, the man was jerking, seizing, pain and pleasure overtaking him even as his death throes began. Great draughts of blood, they seemed to never end, pumping and pumping from his ruined throat.

Two closed her eyes, driving this vision away, descending into pain. The pain was better than this. The pain would help her forget, help her erase this memory of brutal, violent death. Yet these things did not happen. Two could not forget, and in the depths of pain she found she could admit to herself the truth, somehow more bearable amidst the cramps and chills ravaging her body.

Hadn't she wanted it? To rip, to tear, to feed? Had her body not peaked as those awful teeth began their assault, as it had with Theroen? As it had with Abraham? Had it not reacted to this horror with pulsing ecstasy, calling for more, calling for the blood?

Had she not loved it?

* * *

Two was sitting up in her bed, pressing against the wall, knees to her chest, arms wrapped around them, shuddering. It took several seconds for the sound of the door opening to register with her. She looked up. Theroen, standing before

her, concern and love and sorrow on his face, watching her with his unearthly composure. Two put her head down on her arms and began to sob.

He was holding her, powerful arms, gentle touch. He lay next to her on the bed, and she wept into his chest. He whispered into her ear, calming, soothing, and his fingers touched her lips, and Two tasted blood there. She licked it greedily.

"I am sorry, Two. It was foolish of me to leave without giving you this. It is my fault. I'll not leave you again now. We will be together until this is done, and then forever."

The pain receded. Gone, not forever, but for the moment, and for the moment that was enough. Two twisted in Theroen's arms, sobbing, crushed her body against his, kissed his neck, kissed his lips. Theroen kissed her tears from her face.

"I am so sorry, Two. I would never have left you if I'd know it would get that bad, that fast."

She shook her head. She didn't care. She didn't blame him. He was here, now, and the rest was unimportant.

"Has it been this way since I left?"

"No." A whisper. It was all she could manage.

Theroen sat up, seemed to notice her clothes for the first time. Two smiled sadly as he looked her over, shrugged her shoulders, looked at him in apology.

"It looked a lot better ... before."

"You look radiant. How strong you must be, to look so, and in such pain."

Two lowered her eyes. Was this strength? Theroen ran his hand through her hair, seemed awed by its softness.

"Melissa helped me."

Theroen nodded, as if expecting this.

"I thought she might show herself. She's incorrigibly curious. Good that it was Melissa, and not Missy."

"There are two of them?"

Theroen sighed, shook his head.

"No."

"I don't understand."

"Someday soon, I'll tell you much more of Abraham, and myself, and Melissa ... and why we are who we are. You are lucky, Two."

His smile, though, was bitter.

"Why?"

"We are unlike any other clan of vampires I have ever come across. We are as unique in our makeup as any mortal. Abraham, myself, Melissa ... sweet Melissa, cruel Missy; sometimes she is both in a single night. Abraham was old when he made me. It gave me power beyond any of a normal fledgling. He was ancient when he chose to make Melissa, yet rather than bestow power upon her as it had me, the infusion of his blood broke her mind."

Two thought again of the howling in the woods, and Melissa's immediate departure. She began to ask Theroen of this, but he was looking away, lost in thought.

"Melissa is my sister, and I have loved her as much as many mortal brother might. I fear for her. I fear for what may happen when I leave."

"Leave?"

"I cannot stay here much longer. Twenty years, maybe less. Abraham and I ..."

He trailed off, eyes clouding again. She saw sorrow there, and anger. Finally he sighed, shrugged, looked away.

"You don't like each other, do you?" Two's voice was soft.

"We *despise* each other." Theroen turned to face her again.

"Why?"

"You felt his evil. You know it does not reside in me. He assumed the blood would convert me, change me as it had him. It did not. For four hundred years I have been his errand boy, slave to the whims of a depraved fiend whose lust for power and dark knowledge know no bounds. I have seen him murder dozens in a single night, solely to try, and fail, to read the future in their steaming entrails."

Two shuddered. Theroen looked at her, nodded grimly.

"I am no knight in shining armor, Two. I have killed, many times, without repentance, and I would have you do the same. You must understand this. But I am not evil in the manner that Abraham is evil: active, conscious, focused. I am evil like a hurricane. A force of nature, nothing more.

"There's no evil in that."

"Isn't there? But it doesn't matter. I am the creature I have been for nearly half a millennium. Any moral dilemma that might once have existed has long since been washed from me. But I still hold the rest. I still hold love for human life, and I take it only when necessary. I loathe Abraham for his inability to feel these things."

"Why haven't you left already?"

"It's the blood that bonds. It keeps me here. But the link grows weak as my powers increase. They are already well beyond what they should be for my age.

This, too, is a source of frustration for Abraham. Most *Eresh* fledglings are not ready to leave their masters until well past their fifth century."

His eyes flashed suddenly, a look of disgust crossing his features.

"Yet it is *his own fault!*" Theroen snarled. "He waited too long to make his children. He knew that age makes the blood unpredictable. He knew that if I was not driven mad by it, I would wield power unlike any ordinary fledgling."

"But he keeps you here anyway ..."

"Out of spite, yes, and malice. Abraham hates me, perhaps more than I hate him, but he would not be rid of me. I am *his*, do you understand? Or so he feels."

Two took his hand, kissed the fingertips.

"This is the world within the world, Two." Theroen's voice was gentle now. He looked again into her eyes. "This is a secret life unknown to those who walk during the daylight. Humans have their legends and rumors, movies, television, comic books ... but they do not believe."

Two was kissing his face now. Chin, cheek, lips. Theroen kissed back absently, his mind still on their discussion. Two moved her lips to his neck, felt the pulse of his blood buried beneath the flesh, and was overwhelmed with sudden desire. She pressed her new, sharp teeth against the flesh, waited for his acknowledgement. Apprehension. Would he deny her this gift? Would her yearning go unfulfilled?

She heard the smile in his voice. Satisfaction. He understood now; she wanted what he offered.

"It is yours for the taking, Two. It always has been."

Two, unfamiliar with the mechanics of her own body now, pressed too hard, tore instead of pierced. The blood flowed out around her lips, dripped down her chin. Theroen, his unearthly calm never leaving him, lifted his hand to her head, pressed her against him. Two wrapped her arms about him, fastened herself securely to his neck. Drank. Swallowed.

Warmth unlike anything she had ever known. Dizziness, desire. The blood coursed over her tongue, down her throat, hot and wet and alive. Two moaned, her arms tightening, and here it seemed was everything she had ever wanted. Thoughts of heroin were cleared from her mind. This was freedom. This was love. The full, rich liquid of life which Theroen now gave her freely was beyond anything in the scope of her experience.

She dropped backwards, satiated in only moments. She lay on the bed, Theroen next to her, gasping, reeling. Weeping again? It seemed she had wept more in the past two days than ever before in her life. Joy, pain, fear, desire.

“I understand,” Theroen whispered into her ear. “Ah, Two. There will be so much for us after. Soon, my love. Soon.”

Soon, Two thought. *Soon and then forever*. She held on to Theroen, lost in the blood, lost in the ecstasy of it all. Small kisses now, lover’s kisses, and the joy she felt was too real to be wrong, too powerful to be denied. The moment it was safe for him to do so, Two was prepared to beg for Theroen to drain her, and fill her with his blood, and finish her transformation.

Immortality beckoned.

* * *

Chapter 3

The Priest, the Seamstress, the Student

The Mansion. November.

Her half-vampire nature was affecting the withdrawal. The symptoms had persisted for several weeks before finally ceasing. Two had been forced to endure them, as she and Theroen realized feeding from him delayed her recovery. This was not made any easier by the hunger. Even if Two had been able to stand up to the heroin, she could not go for more than a day or two without feeding.

She found it frustrating. Theroen was more patient.

"A few weeks, Two, that is all. You are fighting it well. The symptoms are lessening. Soon you will be free of this entirely."

Two knew this was true. Yes, she was fighting hard against the withdrawal, spending much of her time in bed with Theroen at her side. Yes, the symptoms were lessening. Yes, she would soon be free of it. It didn't dampen her anger, her sense that it was profoundly unfair that she should have to go through this at all.

After a few weeks, Two had grown curious as to why her transformation was not progressing. She drank from Theroen routinely. Shouldn't she be a full vampire by now? She had asked Theroen one night after drinking, sitting with him in a small parlor on the western edge of the mansion's first floor. The room was dimly lit, the walls lined with leather-bound books, furnished with couches of crushed red velvet and dark mahogany. Theroen had explained that he considered the room 'his' and had cleared most of Abraham's clutter from it long ago.

"No. Right now, I am only replacing the blood your body uses to power itself. Think of it like trying to gain weight. If you burn every calorie you take in, there is no change. When you take in my blood, your body converts it to a compatible form with its own. Right now, your blood is not complete.

"When I finish you, I will drain you as far as you can go, nearly to death. Then you will drink from me. Your body will be so desperate for the blood that it will absorb it without conversion. You will effectively replace your blood with mine. Over time, and with repeated feedings, that blood will work within you, changing you. Some of the effects will be immediate, but most will only be a shadow of the abilities you will one day possess."

Two raised her eyebrows. "Repeated feedings?"

“Our strain of vampire is very powerful. The ruling class, effectively. But the nature of the blood differs from the other strains. Our fledglings must drink, periodically, from their masters, or risk reversion.”

“I can be human again?”

“You can.”

Two contemplated this.

“You’ll need to explain this all to me some day, Theroen. How vampire bodies work.”

“What I know, I will tell you. Unfortunately, Abraham has limited my access to writings on the subject, so there may be questions I cannot answer. I will try my best, though, and there will be many years in which we can learn, after you are complete.”

If I let you complete me, Two thought, but she found that this carried little weight. The idea that she could return to humanity was intellectually interesting, but she no longer held the belief that vampires were monsters. Not all of them, at any rate. She was no longer terrified by the prospect of becoming one.

If Theroen heard any of these thoughts, he gave no indication.

Two was not prepared for a lecture on vampire physiology at the moment. She was still too warm and content from the blood. It would put her to sleep. She changed the subject.

“Where is Melissa?”

She had seen the perky young vampire here and there throughout the past few weeks. Melissa would stop by periodically to say hello, although she seemed to have knack for catching Two at a bad time, and her visits were usually restricted to a greeting, a short expression of sympathy, perhaps a few questions. After “let me know if there’s anything I can do for you” (which Two believed to be genuine sentiment), Melissa would leave to hunt. For the past few days, though, she had been simply gone.

“Melissa stays in the city sometimes, if she’s in the mood. She will return eventually.”

“Ah.” Two lounged on her couch, happy to be where she was. Thoughts of drugs and needles, pimps and hookers were far from her mind. That life was gone. Dead. The last remnants of it had largely left her this week, with the end of the withdrawal. Her mind instead looked toward the future: a life of luxury and power. It seemed miraculous how quickly her life had changed.

Change: Two was wearing a pink dress and a diamond necklace that must have cost more than she had earned in her entire life. She had not put on a pair of jeans since her bath with Melissa, only a series of gowns and robes. Theroen had

not forced these things on her. Two had chosen them. She enjoyed it, this expression of femininity, so rare in her previous life. She knew it wouldn't last. She liked wearing jeans and a t-shirt, liked pulling her hair back into a ponytail and forgetting about it. But for now, she was content with the dresses.

Theroen rarely left her side. When he left, usually to feed, he was rarely gone for more than an hour, and he spent most of his time doing his best to make her comfortable. The withdrawal, it seemed, sometimes pained him more than it did her. His sorrow at seeing her suffer filled Two with an odd happiness. It proved that he cared.

"Is there anything specific you would like to know, Two?"

Two considered this question. For days now, she and Theroen had hardly uttered a word to each other. There had been little need. He could read her mind. His expressions, his touches, these were enough for Two. They had forever for talking, and in the time before forever she wished only to enjoy his presence.

Now, though, she was curious. "There's a lot I'd like to know, Theroen. Where should I start?"

"It doesn't matter."

"How very Zen."

Theroen smiled, nodded, continued to look at Two in his direct manner. From anyone else, this would have set her slightly on edge. With Theroen it was simply natural.

"Who are you?" Two asked, smiling slightly.

Theroen nodded, as if he approved of the question.

"I am Theroen Anders. I was born in Norway, in the late 16th century. My family immigrated to Great Britain while I was still very young. It was there I met Abraham, there I felt the temptation of immortal life and succumbed to it. I haunted London like a bloodthirsty ghoul for more than a hundred years. The new world called, we answered, and have been here since."

He raised his eyebrows, as if questioning whether this would suffice. Two smiled, shook her head.

"No, Theroen. Who *are* you?"

He grinned, expecting this.

"You'd have me condense four hundred years into an evening?"

"Four hundred years are four hundred years. A story's a story, Theroen. It will take as long as it has to."

Theroen looked into her eyes, and Two felt herself swimming suddenly. She gasped.

"Don't fight." Theroen's voice, next to her yet distant. "Don't fight, Two."

Two breathed deeply. Stopped fighting. Floated. Descended.

* * *

His belief in God was unshakeable, impossible to destroy. It was the glowing light that directed his every action, his every thought.

Theroen had been a priest for less than half a decade, and he still loved God in the pure, glorious, righteous way reserved even in the clergy only for the very young. His black robes were only clothes; his faith was his armor, and Theroen cut through the sea of unbelievers around him without a fear in the world.

Two resisted this vision, incredulous. Theroen, a priest? It was impossible, this being who seemed so utterly comfortable with his vampire nature. Theroen reminded her again not to fight the trance. Sit, watch, understand.

His parents. Mother, hair blonde, eyes blue, tall and broad through the shoulders. Lithe but full at the bust and hips, she was a picture of beauty standing at the window in Theroen's tiny room, singing lullabies, whispering softly to her young child where they might someday go, what they might someday see.

Father, dark in hair, dark in eyes, like Theroen himself. Grecian in ancestry, but without the wiry curls, which had been ironed from his head by the passing of generations.

Theroen, child of no more than a year, black hair, brown eyes, his mother's pale skin, the face a combination of features that would someday serve to make him a handsome young man. His face would make women shake their heads behind his back. A priest? Looking like that? A waste.

Theroen did not know if his memories of this time were accurate, or fabricated from stories and assumptions. He believed them to be honest recollection, but would never truly know. In these memories, mother and father fight sometimes. Living is difficult. The house is small, drafty, uncomfortable. The theatre has not called in weeks. They have no roles.

In London, though, there is work. Father makes trips there, auditions repeatedly, desperate, despairing. The alcohol is beginning to take hold of him even now.

He is granted reprieve when the notice finally arrives. An actor is needed. He has been called. At three years of age, Theroen said goodbye to the land of his birth, a land he would never see again.

Never? Two asked, pulling back from the vision momentarily, *never in so many years?*

Never has there been time, nor any great desire, Theroen answered.

It was a happy childhood. London before the industrial revolution, a thriving metropolis, dirty to be certain but still possessed of a remarkable charm. Two could find no words to describe. Theroen, age nine, running through the streets ahead of his mother and father. Running to see the players in the square, the Italian entertainers with their puppets and music and dancing. Laughing and running, never seeing the horse bearing down on him, its rider as distracted by the sights and sounds as Theroen himself.

The horse tried to clear him, but failed. Theroen remembered the sharp crack of its hoof against his forehead, the blooming brightness in front of his vision. He remembered the second hit, coming as the back of his head connected with the cobblestones. The force of the impact was tremendous. He imagined that everyone in the world must have heard the sound of it.

All of this was clear in his mind, but Theroen remembered no pain. Only the flat, hard cracking sound and then rolling, horrified faces rushing toward him, the world graying, fading. His mother, tears pouring from her eyes, pulling at her own hair as if somehow in injuring herself she might heal her son. *It's all right, mamma,* he wanted to say. *It doesn't hurt.*

Darkness, then. The clip-clop noise of horse hooves, but this time he moved along with them. There were rushed, babbling voices, more weeping, a rough hand holding his.

Even Theroen could not entirely piece together the events that followed. Vast blank spaces lay in his memory, interrupted by photo-flashes of consciousness. A bed somewhere, his father sitting in a chair, looking out into cold London rain and weeping without realizing it. Rough shadow of a beard, unkempt hair. Staring and weeping. It was the most frightening vision Theroen could recall, worse even than when the bottle finally took hold of the man for good. Theroen had never seen the man looking so forlorn, would never see him so again.

Another period of blankness, and then his mother, leaning over him, wiping his forehead with a damp cloth. She was singing to him, those old lullabies. He'd asked for the songs to stop some years ago, a young man in a child's body, no longer needing the comfort they brought. But now? Oh, now they were comfort eternal. He was so frightened. These periods of blankness terrified him. There was nothing, except the knowledge of nothing, and he thought for the first time in his mortal life that he might be coming to understand what death was.

Ah, if he could have cried out, he would have wailed. Little heart racing at the thought that there was nothing more, that there was no heaven, no God waiting for him at the gates, ready to embrace him and comfort him and help him to understand what it all meant, this mortal life.

More grey. Then the vision.

A doctor, a nurse, and his mother. She was arguing, fighting, weeping again. The doctor looked sympathetic, but firm.

“There is nothing we can do. We have bled him, tried every potent tonic known to raise one from unconsciousness. There is nothing we can do. He will drink broth, if we pour it down his throat, but he does not awaken. There is nothing we can do.” Over and over. A litany, a chant, a curse.

Behind them, like the coming of the dawn, a light was growing, so bright it burned his eyes. How could they not notice this? How could they go on squabbling with each other when faced with such a thing?

Through their arguing, he heard the sound, building and building. A rushing, driving sound that seemed to swell until it was near unbearable, as if all of the voices in the world whispered at once. The light throbbed and pulsed. Theroen wept. Fear, awe, confusion. Was this death, then? Perhaps his acceptance into heaven after his stay in grey purgatory?

Is that what you wish, then? It was all voices, no voices, a whisper on the wind, a chorus of screams. Theroen’s temples throbbed with it.

He tried to shake his head. No. No, this was not what he wanted. Death? He was nine years old. There was still so much to do, to explore, to see, to know.

You would live?

Thereon found he could answer the voice, could have spoken to it all along.

Yes. I would live. Until I am dragged, kicking and screaming, to my death, I would live.

So be it. Speak, Theroen. Call to them.

I cannot.

But he could, and did, opening his mouth, stretching his throat, peering desperate from his bed as the light and the noise receded.

“Mother ...”

The word cut across the room, stopping his mother mid-sentence. She turned, the doctor and nurse staring with frank disbelief. There were tears again, now, welling in his mother’s eyes, but not those of anger and frustration and sorrow shed just moments ago. Theroen sat up, blinked, tried his voice again. He looked his mother in her eyes, took in her joyful weeping with that same calm that would be with him for all his life. He spoke from his bed, spoke for the first

time since the horse had hit him, spoke for the first time since he had descended into the depths of coma, five months before.

“Mother, I wish to go to church.”

* * *

“From that day forward, there was no question in my mind what I was meant to do. I was meant to live, yes, but more than that; I was meant to communicate what I had seen to others. I had been sent a vision from God. A reprieve from death. You ask how I could be a priest? I ask you ... how could I not?”

Two looked at him, somewhat astounded. A vision from God? She knew how it would be considered in this modern era: a vision from the subconscious. Nothing more.

Thereon grinned, picking this thought from her mind as he so frequently did.

“Is there any real difference? I woke. I moved. I spoke. Are these things not miraculous?” He paused, looked out the window, seemed to ponder for a moment. He looked back at Two and shrugged.

“People do not survive comas of that duration unfazed. There is brain damage, if not death. Yet I was fine. More than fine; I awoke with the clearest sense of purpose I was ever to feel, until the moment I first laid eyes on you. Ten years old, I began my studies. Three years younger than any before accepted to the clergy. Such was my fervor, so substantial my knowledge of the Bible within only a few months from when I awakened, that there was no reason to deny me.”

“And oh, how my father despised it ...” The words trailed off, a bitter smile at his lips.

Two was about to speak when the howling began. She jerked around instinctively, knocking a pretty crystal ballerina off the table by her couch. It thumped into the plush oriental carpet, unhurt. Two stared out the window. In the reflection of the lamplight she saw Theroen shake his head. He reached down to pick up the figurine, studied it for a moment, set it back on the table. More howling, and Theroen looked toward the window again, his eyes full of remorse and pity.

“What is it, Theroen? I’ve heard it before.”

“I am Abraham’s son. Melissa his daughter. That? That is nothing more than a diabolical experiment. Daughter? How could she be? To say so denotes some sort of humanity, and all of that has been lost.”

Two looked at him, confused. "There's another vampire?"

"There are many others. Of Abraham's line, though, there is only one more to tell of. One more you have not met. An attempt that should never have occurred. His arrogance ..." Theroen trailed off. Two had rarely seen him truly angry, but he appeared so now. He shook his head again.

"Her name was Tori. She seems still to respond to that, so that is what we call her. Aside from the shape of her body, this is the last piece of humanity she retains. I do not know why Abraham chose to make her. After Melissa ... how he could possibly have expected a normal fledgling, I do not know. I don't think he really did. I think he simply wanted to know what would happen.

"I took the girl from her school. I brought her to him. I did not ask any questions of Abraham, and am not sure I would have even if I had known what he planned. Not then. Now? Who knows?

"His blood is too powerful. The curse of our line ... We make few fledglings, and have a limited window in which to do it. Abraham was nearly too old when he made me. Yet even after Melissa, he gave his blood to this girl. He gave it to her very quickly, nearly drowned her in it, and it destroyed her mind. She is, in some respects, the perfect vampire. Alert, aware, incredibly fast, stronger even than Melissa, who is many years her senior."

Theroen glanced again out the window, then back at Two, smiling without humor. "Tori can be counted on for three things. She loves to hunt, she loves to kill, and she loves to – as mortals so callously put it – fuck. It is appropriate terminology. There is no love involved for her."

"Another vampire with an active sex life ..." Two raised an eyebrow.

"It's an uncommon strain, even among our type, but it seems to have lain dormant in Abraham. He himself is incapable of that mortal act of love. Yet his children, all three of us, are very much alive below the waist. These pleasures pale, of course, to that of feeding, but when mixed together appropriately ..." and here he glanced at Two, "they can be quite pleasurable indeed."

"Will I get to meet Tori?"

Theroen grimaced. "Yes. At some point, I suppose, it's inevitable."

Two was contemplating Theroen's description of Tori, neither speaking, when she sensed a third presence in the room. She looked up at Theroen, who closed his eyes and sighed. His expression was grim.

At the door stood Melissa, and yet not Melissa. She looked different, somehow. It wasn't the style of clothes, or the hairstyle. These remained the same. The set of the body, perhaps? There was darkness behind her eyes.

"Hello Missy," Theroen said without opening his eyes.

"Theroen. Come hunting with me?"

"I've already gone."

"Would it have mattered?"

Theroen shook his head. "No."

"You never hunt with me." Missy's tone was dry, emotionless. She was only stating a fact.

Theroen glanced up at her. "I never do."

"But you'll hunt with that perky, jabbering bitch, when she's got control of my body."

Theroen nodded.

"And you'll hunt with this ... half-mortal ... thing. Someday."

"Enough, Missy. Watch your tongue."

"Or what? You'll hurt me? I'll let *her* back in while you're doing it, Theroen. She won't understand. She'll cry."

Two watched all of this, fascinated and amazed by the change in the vampire girl. Even the tone of Melissa's voice was different. The vampire turned to her suddenly.

"Quit staring at me, or I'll rip your eyes out with my teeth," The words were almost casual. Two looked down at the floor, her pale face coloring slightly. She was not afraid, exactly, but aware that vampire society seemed hierarchal, and not wanting to break any codes of conduct. She assumed it was the right thing to do.

The air in the room seemed to go cold. Theroen's anger was palpable. He stood slowly, and Missy immediately moved backward a step, glaring, defiant.

"I would no sooner do physical violence to you, Missy, than I would to Melissa. Or Tori. Or Two. I do not enjoy causing harm to others of my own kind. To anyone. But you will not threaten her, at all, let alone in my presence."

"Who are you to command me, brother?"

"I am not your brother, Missy. You are an aberration. A mistake. A product of powerful blood on an unsuspecting brain. That body belongs to Melissa. You are merely a parasite that refuses to die."

Missy made a snarling cry of outrage and threw herself at Theroen. Two leapt off of her couch, pushing herself into the corner. She didn't want to be watching this. Surely blood would be spilled.

Yet Theroen merely caught Missy's arms, dragged them to her sides, pulled her face up to his, locked her with his eyes.

“Does *that* hurt, Missy? Do I even need to lay a finger on you, when the truth will do so well?” Theroen’s voice was still calm, still collected. He seemed almost disinterested.

Missy had no answer to his question. Theroen let her go, and she slunk back to the doorway.

“Go. Hunt.” Theroen’s tone implied that the dismissal was beyond argument.

Missy opened her mouth to say something, thought better of it, whirled on her heel, and departed.

Theroen took a deep breath. “And now you’ve met Missy. What do you think?”

Two shrugged. She returned to her couch, sat down, smiled slightly. “I think she’s a bitch.”

Theroen laughed. “Yes, a bitch. That’s exactly what she is. Such a shame. Melissa could have been an incredible vampire. I’ve never met another whose essential goodness was so utterly untouched by the transformation. In my darker moments, I almost believe Abraham made her solely to attempt to destroy some of that goodness.”

“She doesn’t seem like his type. Neither of them do, really. I’m not sure anyone is.” It still seemed foreign to Two, speaking of “them” when referring to a single body, but she had seen more than enough proof of Melissa’s dual personalities.

“No, no one truly is, but Missy is certainly much closer than Melissa. I can’t claim to fathom Abraham, and I’ve served him for nearly half a century. No, Melissa is not what I would have expected from Abraham. Perhaps he saw in her the potential of Missy, and expected the change to bring it out completely. Perhaps it would have, if his blood was not so strong.”

Howling again. Two looked out the window into the night.

“I think I want to meet Tori,” she said. “It’s weird, knowing she’s out there but never seeing her.”

Theroen smiled at this, shook his head. “No you don’t.”

Two raised her eyebrows, leaned forward, set her elbows on her knees – giving Theroen as ample a view as her chest could provide in the process – and smiled, batting her eyelashes.

“You’re not going to let me?”

“No, and if you insist on trying anyway, I will have to stop you.”

Two considered this. It was unlike Theroen to deny her a requested indulgence.

“Why?”

“Tori is not friendly.” No elaboration. No change in Theroen’s expression that might have helped to explain his unwillingness to expose Two to this woman. Two pressed on.

“I know what she’s like. I told you about the dream. I can handle it.”

“That was not a dream, Two. Tori throws off mental images like sparks from a fire. That was very much a real event that you witnessed that night, and I can assure you she’s even less pleasant in person.”

“I can handle it!”

Theroen sighed. “It’s not your ability to handle it that I’m concerned with. It’s my ability to handle Tori. She doesn’t like vampires, other than Melissa ... or Missy, she doesn’t seem to know the difference. She tolerates me only because it is clear that Melissa likes me. She will not set foot near Abraham, although he is the only thing I am currently aware of that she fears.”

“So, she may not like me.” Two was unfazed. She had dealt with women who didn’t like her before, had knocked out teeth when necessary.

“You do not understand, Two. Tori is a machine; an engine of destruction. She is built to kill, and she is remarkably capable. If she decides not to tolerate you, she will attempt to kill you. Previous experience has taught me, quite harshly, that even I am not necessarily fast enough to prevent her from doing so. Abraham’s visitors were ... quite upset.”

Theroen pressed his palms against his eyes momentarily, sighed, shrugged. The gesture was oddly human, oddly endearing. Two smiled.

“Okay, Theroen.”

“Someday soon, Two. I promise. But not out in the woods and not unless she’s fed. I want her to see you through a window first or, better, a set of bars, before you come face to face.”

“Would you cage her?”

Theroen laughed. “I don’t know if I would. I doubt that I could. Trying to force an ordinary vampire into a cage is hard enough. Tori ...” He shrugged, letting the thought carry.

Two got up, walked to the couch he sat on, and reclined against him. He traced the pink silk of her gown from shoulder to neck with a finger, placed his hand under her chin, and brought her lips to his for a small kiss.

Two sighed. “I feel so ... *girly* around you,” she said at last, laughing at herself. Theroen grinned, said nothing, traced the contour of her breast with his fingertips. He was not looking at her, but rather at her reflection in the window,

blurred and indistinct. She watched him watching her, and considered the life they might lead together.

I'm ready, she thought.

Two took a deep breath, asked what she wanted to ask. "Finish me?" The words seemed to hang in the air for a moment before sinking, given weight by their implication.

"I would not have offered you a choice," Theroen said after a moment, "had I been able to do so on the first night. I was ... rather arrogant, really, in my desire. Now? Two, you must mean it with all of your heart and soul."

How can I ever be sure? Two thought to herself. *How could anyone ever be sure?*

But what was it that she was leaving behind? Drugs and prostitution, beatings, the constant humiliation heaped upon her by her desperate life. Even if she was free of the drug, now, what else did she have to go back to? There was no home, no money, no support save that which Rhes and Sarah might offer out of pity. Did she want to return to a life of picking pockets, shoplifting, breaking into cars? Theroen was offering her escape.

She was not tempted by the money, the clothes, the fast cars, the expensive furniture. These things mattered little to Two. Here though was a chance for love and redemption. Everything she could possibly desire was here in this mansion, on this couch. The blood was here, and if it held power over her now, half-complete and unable truly to taste it as a vampire might, then what might it be like once the transformation was complete?

"Love and lust, passion, need ... it is all things, Two. Yet it is nothing more than another drug in the end. It is not the blood you need to accept. The blood pushes itself upon you regardless, and you *will* do whatever is necessary to acquire it.

"You ask me to make you a destructive force. A tornado. A fire. A flood. A thing beyond the scope of mortal comprehension, who kills at her whim, because it is her nature to do so."

Still quiet, but wasn't she now simply giving Theroen the chance to say his piece? She could feel the desire growing within her. The taste of what he offered: the blood, the escape, the strength to put her past behind her, the possibility of all this and more was intoxicating. Theroen's words of caution seemed weak by comparison.

"You will have to kill," Theroen said. "Oh, Two, you'd be such a vampire. Lover, fighter, mother, killer. It's all in you. I sense it. Yet I can no longer blindly force you down this path. You must lead yourself. You ..."

Two put her fingers on his mouth, turned her head, locked her eyes with his.

“Theroen. Finish me.”

He paused a moment longer, looking into her eyes as if searching for some fear she might be hiding. Two knew that all he would find there was truth. Indeed, Theroen smiled at her, and nodded.

Strong arms, lifting her, carrying her toward the bedroom. Her arms were around his neck. In this short moment, Two bid her mortal life farewell. Pain, anguish, hatred and despair; these were the hallmarks of this life, a dark void lit only by the occasional candle of friendship, an almost nonexistent light. What chains bound her to these things? Two fled without moving, fled on Theroen’s feet, toward the bedroom and away from the darkness that had oppressed her since her first memory.

* * *

There was pain, but not like before. Theroen’s teeth pierced the flesh of her neck, but to Two it seemed minor. Far away. The pain was a vehicle to an end result that she truly craved.

“Ah ...” the slightest sound as she felt her blood begin to flow. No pulsing climax this time, only a bittersweet ache of desire. This act was no culmination of lust, but rather a final act of love. Two sighed, feeling tension leave her. The draining sensation increased, seemed to swallow her. The thudding of her heart, the deep rush of her breath, these things soon brought her to a state of near hypnosis. Theroen held her gently in her swoon, drinking, his lips against her neck, judging her pulse. Waiting. At last pulling away.

Two looked up, eyes half-lidded. Breathing seemed difficult, but the sensation was so far removed she could not be sure. The world was grey and dim. Theroen’s eyes alone seemed to shine out at her. She heard herself say something, the words lost instantly. She would have to remember to ask Theroen later what it was, what she’d said.

Is this death? She had time to think. *This apathy, this dimness?* Her heart pumped in her chest for what felt like the first time in minutes. Weak. Two could not keep her eyes open.

A voice, whispering. Drink. Drink. And there was pressure at her lips, and warmth, and a deep rushing sound which seemed to swell in her ears until it vibrated through her entire body.

Theroen felt Two's arms tighten around him and breathed a sigh of relief. For a moment he had been in mortal terror that he'd killed her before she had a chance to drink. Her words to him had shaken him quite badly, more so for the fact that she clearly had not heard them herself.

He'd made the cut at his throat immediately following her declaration, and pressed her lips to it, imploring her to drink. He felt now the force of those lips, burning like heated iron, felt the draining of blood, enough now that her change was assured. He was dizzy. Trace amounts of the drug must still have remained in her. It was no worse than dining on a young woman filled with red wine, or warm brandy, though, and he had done both.

Melissa's voice at the door. A gasp of surprise.

"Oh!"

Theroen gestured to the chair beside the bed, careful not to disturb Two, now locked so tightly to his neck that he would have to pry her off. She was gasping for breath here and there, whimpering slightly, still lost in swoon. Her thirst would be far greater than ever before. It would take time to satiate her. He heard Melissa sit down, felt her take his hand and press it to her cheek.

"I'm so happy for you, Theroen." He felt her muscles stretch as she smiled.

But he could feel tears there, too.

* * *

Darkness, my love. All I see for us is darkness.

Two's voice, Lisette's words. Had she not whispered this exact prophecy more than three hundred years ago, tears coursing down her cheeks, reflecting the moonlight like rivers of silver? Bare skin, sharp fangs, joined at the waist, joined at the neck. Dull throbbing, dull roaring, the blood, the skin, the tears, and then that whisper.

And all that had followed.

Tears at his fingertips. Melissa weeping, he knew, for the beginning of the end. Theroen had betrayed her at last, as they both had known he would someday do. How was she to live as Abraham's servant? What was left for her now that Theroen had Two? Only Tori, and the darkness at the end of the hall; madness on either side greater even than her own.

Tears at his throat. Two's? Lisette's? Theroen drifted between New York of the 21st century, and London of the 17th, and heard again those words. Darkness. Darkness.

Who better to speak of darkness than those forsaken by the sun? Who better to voice those words than a vampire?

"I would make her my bride."

"You will do no such thing."

"You cannot hold me forever, father."

Theroen felt himself reaching the limit of his strength. Two had drained him as much as he dared allow. He unwound her arms from his neck, pushed her lips from his wound, pushed her words from his mind.

* * *

Consciousness came to Two like layers of red gauze being lifted from her eyes.

She could feel Theroen's arms around her, holding her safe, as the blood rushed and roared. It burned her veins, as her empty body sought to replenish itself, but the hurt was far away. Unimportant.

She spoke his name, forced her eyes to focus, looked around. Melissa, too, was here now. Not Missy. Two could tell solely from the expression on the face. Melancholy, and yet filled with happiness. Tear tracks were drying on her cheeks. Missy could not have looked like that if her life had depended on it. Two coughed. "I'm thirsty, Theroen."

Melissa laughed at this. Two felt Theroen take a deep breath.

Two put her arms behind her, took her weight away from Theroen, and glanced around. The light, previously dim, now seemed much brighter. It was not overwhelming, but the change was drastic. Melissa stood in a corner now, smiling in a way that said she knew precisely what Two was experiencing. Two flexed the muscles of her arms. Theroen watched her, his uncanny calm returning once again to mask whatever he might be feeling.

"How do you feel?" Melissa asked. Her grin said she knew.

"Thirsty. Hungry. Strong."

A pretty laugh, and Melissa glanced at Theroen. "I think the young lady's in need of a drive, Theroen. Time to show her what she really is."

Theroen stirred as if waking from deep contemplation. He turned to Melissa. "And what are we, really, sister?"

Melissa's smile didn't waver, nor did it turn bitter or cynical. She raised her eyebrows a bit, eyes gleaming. "I believe we are predators, brother."

"Ah. Yes. That we are. Do you understand this, Two?"

Two considered. "Does it matter who I drink from?"

“Not so long as their blood is untainted.”

“Or relatively so,” Melissa chimed in. Theroen sighed, and her smile widened momentarily. Two looked out the window, thinking. One name came immediately to mind.

“Not tonight.” Theroen’s voice was flat. Two turned to him.

“Why not?”

“He’ll wait. There will be time to avenge the wrongs of your past, Two. Tonight is about your future.”

“Who would you have me kill then, Theroen?”

“There are twelve million people sleeping in that city, Two, and several hundred thousand between us and them. Pick one.”

Two mused, looking frustrated. Melissa watched, obviously confused, but not yet ready to interrupt with questions.

“You confuse the mortal desire for revenge with some sort of higher purpose, Two. You will have it, but not tonight.” Theroen’s voice carried no judgment. He was simply stating the facts.

Two looked over at him, swallowed, closed her eyes momentarily. This was not what she had expected, exactly. Theroen’s calm description of vampirism had seemed so clear, so easy to accept. She had expected to come through to the other side believing in it as thoroughly as she had when she asked him to finish her. She had not expected this nervousness, this concern.

“How do you mentally prepare yourself to kill someone?” Two’s voice was plaintive. “I thought that ... when I was finished, that I’d just want it. That I wouldn’t care.”

Theroen shook his head. “No, not at first anyway. Eventually you will come to understand, or to rationalize ... it depends to whom you talk. At first it will likely be hard for you. I do not think, though, that your current thirst will let you wait, and that is perhaps for the best.”

A moment passed. Two sighed. He was right.

“There was a town, in a little valley, surrounded by trees. I saw it on the night when this all started. You took me there.”

Theroen nodded.

“There, then. If we’re ending what was started that night, we might as well do it there.”

Theroen stood and grinned. It was like sun breaking through on a grey morning. “A good idea. We shall go there. As beautiful as you look in that gown though, Two, I think you may find your old dressing habits more suitable to this line of activity. I will meet you in the garage.”

He departed. Melissa remained.

“Who did you want to start with, Two? Who were you talking about?”

“Someone I should probably just forget.” Two opened the closet and peered at the clothes within. “Someone who maybe deserves worse than even I can give him.”

Melissa raised her eyebrows, then shrugged. If Two didn’t want to talk about it, that was okay. She turned to leave.

“Will I see you there, Melissa?” Two did not turn to look, but her voice betrayed more nerves, more fear, than perhaps she had intended.

“Do you want me there, Two?”

“I’m going to cry, when ... I hate crying. Theroen’s been doing this for so long, I don’t know if he understands anymore. He’s ...”

“He’s above it all.” Melissa understood. Two could hear it in her voice.

“Are you?”

“Nearly so, but I still remember. Two, I’ll be there if you want me to be there.”

“Theroen’s car won’t fit us.”

Melissa smiled. “I have cars of my own. A pretty little turquoise BMW, for one. I know where you’re going.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Is it hard for you to ask, Two?”

Two nodded.

“Then I’ll ask. May I come with you, Two? I’d like to be there, but I thought you might want only Theroen.”

Two turned to her, smiled, clearly fighting against tears. “Yes. Thanks. I’m scared, Melissa.”

“It will be beautiful, Two. You’ll understand soon. I’ll see you in town.”

It was only after Melissa had departed that Two thought again of that look of melancholy, those tear tracks on her cheeks.

* * *

Theroen leaned against the edge of the Ferrari, staring out into the night beyond the light spilling from the mansion’s garage. On the perimeter of their land, a twelve-foot wrought-iron fence served to dissuade most random visitors. The persistent few found the yard patrolled, during daytime hours, by a pack of vicious Rottweilers, mammoth dogs with jaws capable of crushing human bones to powder. Those who chose to leap the fence at night rarely made it to the front door before Tori found them.

The mansion was not without human visitors, though. Abraham maintained contact with men in high places, mortal and immortal alike, though for those of the former type he disguised his own nature with both costumes and hypnosis.

There were the servants, as well – Men and women who arrived once or twice a week during daylight hours to clean the house and tend the grounds. The Rottweilers knew them, and allowed them entry. They were unaware of the nature of their employers, and knew only that some rooms were off limits, locked to them. They were paid very well for their discretion, and Theroen had never had any dealings with them that were not pleasant. He met with them periodically, during the early morning hours, fighting off the sleep and the pain of the sunlight, in order to read their minds and be certain of their loyalty.

Some vampires kept servants – slaves essentially – in thrall to them, bound by drops of blood and convinced that someday, if they behaved properly, they too could become vampires. Absurd, of course: the vampires of all but the Burilgi line were very picky in their choice of fledglings. Having become a servant to another creature in itself made these thralls the most unlikely choice for an heir.

“Hypocrite.” The tiniest whisper of his own voice, a bitter smile. Was he not a servant to Abraham? Had Two not been a servant to her pimp? Was she not, now, his own servant, dependent upon him for instruction and for blood?

This last he doubted, and this gave him satisfaction. Two had been the proper choice. She was with him out of desire, not desperation, and would remain so for as long as such desire continued. This might be a decade, might be a millennium. Regardless, it was more pure than the bond that held him to Abraham.

He believe that, with luck, it might last half a millennium or more. Long enough, perhaps, to finally bury Lisette.

* * *

The dresses had made Two aware of her own femininity. These clothes made her aware again of the raw physical appeal of her own body. Tight, slate colored jeans; a stretchy, white shirt showing off the slimmest crescent of her abdomen; a black leather jacket. She felt strong, comfortable, desirable. Theroen’s double-take as she entered the garage reinforced this.

“Be still my heart,” he said as she slipped into the leather interior of the Ferrari. Two smiled. He sat down beside her and started the car. “Is Melissa coming?”

Two nodded, then bit her lip. “I asked her to. Or she asked me, but I wanted ... I’m scared, Theroen.”

“I understand. You need not fear, Two. We will be there to help you.”

Two’s newly enhanced senses were better able to cope with the speed of the Ferrari, but still the world was a blur. The car glided along the dark roads, top down, the sound of the wind like the crashing of a waterfall. Two’s hair streamed out behind her. She felt the big, stupid grin back on her face despite the evening’s forthcoming events, and was glad for it.

Behind them, now and then, there was a flash of lights. Melissa’s roadster could not hope to compete with Theroen’s, but it was by no means a slow car either, and she drove it with an abandon that concerned even Theroen. At one point he slowed somewhat, and she caught up with them immediately, pulling alongside, grinning wildly, barely watching the road. Theroen stomped on the gas pedal, flying ahead of her, and slowed again. Melissa pulled back to their side, middle finger extended, laughing.

His words, made audible by the force of his thought, cut through the wind. “Please do not feel we’re making light of this, Two. It is just that we are both excited nearly beyond containment. We cannot help being joyful. We know very well what you are soon to experience.”

Two, who felt that the closest Theroen might approach to “excitement beyond containment” was mild enthusiasm, remained skeptical. She was not offended, though. Quite the contrary, Theroen’s games with Melissa helped to ease her mood. These beings had been doing this thing for hundreds of years. If they could take it so lightly, perhaps their words about the effect of the blood were true.

* * *

They covered the fifty miles to the small town in less than half an hour, came to a stop in the parking lot of a small park just outside its boundaries, shut off their engines, got out of the cars. Melissa was giggling like a little girl, perched on the hood of her BMW, looking at the two of them.

“I love this century! We don’t do that nearly enough, Theroen.”

For his part, Theroen was smiling broadly. He nodded.

“I don’t know how the hell you guys do it.” Two was also smiling. She felt out of breath. “I couldn’t see a thing.”

“You will continue to change as the blood works on you body, Two. In a few decades, you may be able to drive like Melissa.”

“No one drives like me!” Melissa laughed, leapt to her feet, twirled circles on the road in the moonlight, staring upward at the stars.

“Well, perhaps not exactly like Melissa,” Theroen conceded.

“I’m thirsty. Who’s going first, here? Two? Theroen?”

“What about you, Melissa?” Two questioned.

“Nah. I’ll wait and go into Manhattan. I might take an appetizer up here, but what I really want is to find some cute little sixteen year old thing with big boobs and too much makeup. I’m going to get her all drunk and seduce her.” Melissa’s smile had a wicked edge to it. Two looked at her, eyebrows raised. Melissa laughed at the expression.

“What? All vampires have to be like mister ‘no, heterosexual food only, please’ over there? I’m equal opportunity, bed and blood. Whatever strikes my fancy.”

Theroen put a hand to his brow and shook his head, but Two could see humor warring with, and eventually winning out over, the look of disapproval he was attempting.

“I guess I’ll go first.” Two sighed. Theroen touched her cheek lightly, smiled, turned and began to walk down the road. Two and Melissa followed. They moved toward the town, and the unsuspecting humans who slept there.

* * *

“This reminds me of my first time,” said Melissa as they walked. “I mean, not with a guy but, you know, like drinking blood and everything. After Abraham made me, he sent me out with Theroen, and said he could teach me everything I needed to know.”

“I am more your patron, in most ways, than that ancient—” Theroen began. Melissa interrupted him.

“We know how you feel about Abraham, Theroen. Shut up and let me tell my story!”

Two laughed. The expression on Theroen’s face was typical of an older brother: exasperated, and yet she saw a great deal of love there as well.

“As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, Theroen took me to the city, took me to a brownstone. Hmmm ... maybe I should start at the beginning?”

“Will it lessen the deluge of words you no doubt have prepared, if you structure your thoughts first, I wonder?” Theroen’s voice was wistful as he looked up at the stars. Two laughed, then clapped a hand over her mouth, looking at Melissa with bright eyes.

“You’re no better than he is.” Melissa tossed her hair playfully. “Fine, fine. If you don’t want to hear my story, we’ll just walk in silence. Or maybe Theroen could think of something more structured. Accounting, or law, or something.”

“I want to hear the story, Melissa. Honestly.” Two tried to look apologetic, succeeded only in half-stifling another burst of laughter.

“I don’t know how Abraham found me. Neither does Theroen. Or if he does, he won’t tell me. I don’t know why he made me what I am. I was twenty-three, working in a garment shop, making clothes. I was a seamstress. It was eighteen-seventy-two, and they paid me two dollars a week. Can you believe that?”

“A *week*?”

“A week. I lived in that dirty, rat-infested pile of bricks in Brooklyn, and I worked for two dollars a week. My whole family worked there, except my father. He died when I was just a little girl.

“When I said I loved this century, I meant it. It’s so *clean* now! Even Manhattan. Even the dirty parts. The streets aren’t filled with mud and manure. I can drive my pretty little car wherever I want to go. I can buy perfume and beautiful clothes and, if I want, I can walk around in nothing but a bikini, and no one will even say anything. Girls do it in the summer all the time.”

Two found it fascinating, this new take on what seemed to be such mundane aspects of life. She realized that even given her love of art, she had remained wholly grounded in her 21st-century world. Melissa was not of this time, and her amazement at things Two had always taken for granted was refreshing.

“One evening as I left the building, there was Theroen, standing in front of me. He said that my presence was urgently requested by a great lord, and beckoned toward a carriage. Even then, he had a taste for fast vehicles. There were six *huge* horses tied to that carriage, each of them worth more than I would ever earn in my life. Big wheels with wooden padding on the axles to remove some of the shock.

“It still bounced and jostled something awful, but he drove it like a madman anyway. Oh, of course I went. There was no doubt that he did represent

some wealthy lord. The carriage alone proved it. And when the rich beckoned, well ... it was always wise to follow.

"I was totally unaware of what was going on right up until he put his fangs into me."

She looked at Two and shook her head, her smile sad. "It was pretty disgusting, but it didn't stop me from, you know ... like right then and there."

Two nodded, glanced up at Theroen, her face coloring slightly. Theroen seemed absorbed in contemplating the moon.

"He drained me all the way, and then gave me some of his blood. I didn't wake up like you did, though. No, his blood was ... it hurt me. Really badly, actually, even though he gave it in three or four doses. I remember I was screaming, and then it was dark, and then it was four days later, and I don't remember any of them."

Melissa's voice, normally so happy, now trembled.

"I can't even *feel* her!" She cried, then bit her lip in frustration. "I only know she's there because Theroen tells me about her, and because sometimes I wake up and I know it's been more than one day. I'll wake up in new clothes. I'll wake up and find horrible pictures spread out on the bed. She likes terrible things. Things with needles and knives and hooks. I'm only glad I can't remember how she eats. I don't want to know."

"She is not a part of you, Melissa." Theroen's voice was soothing. He was still looking at the moon.

"Really, Theroen? She cut me, the other day. She cut me from the back of my wrist up to my shoulder, half an inch deep, and then ... went back. Let me in. I woke up all of a sudden, standing outside in the woods, with my whole arm feeling like it was on fire, pouring blood. Poor Tori was having *conniptions*. I don't know what I was being punished for.

"She hates me. She hates me because she can't escape from me, and if she can't escape from me, then she must be a part of me."

Theroen was quiet. He turned away from the moon, looked down at the road. He seemed to have no answer to this.

Two spoke up. "If she's a part of you, Melissa, she's a part that was supposed to be buried. Abraham's blood woke her up, but she's not a part of you that was ever supposed to ... to function. She's like a set of wisdom teeth that never come in, but never need to be pulled, except Abraham pushed them forward. She's like a benign tumor, except Abraham made it malignant. You see?

“We’ve all got parts of us that are dormant. They don’t affect us, even subconsciously. But I guess the right shock can wake them up. But she’s not a part of you, she’s a wrongful *addition*. You were already complete to begin with.”

Melissa seemed to take some consolation in this. She stopped, hugged Two, and kissed her cheek. “Thanks. I thought I was supposed to be tagging along to comfort *you*!”

Two smiled. “You are. Glad I could return the favor.”

* * *

The trio crested a hill, stopped for a moment, looked down upon the town below them. Melissa turned to Two.

“I swear to God, I don’t know why Abraham makes us live so far outside of the city. Look at this. It’s eleven o’clock and almost every light in the town is out!”

Two shrugged. Behind her, Theroen laughed.

“That is precisely why he has us live so far outside of the city, Melissa. It allows us some privacy, away from prying eyes. We lived in Manhattan during the first century we spent here, and it caused us nothing but trouble. I personally had to dispatch four intrepid vampire hunters, and one priest.”

“Priest.” Two looked up at him. “You never finished telling me about how you became a vampire, Theroen.”

“Did you tell her about Father Leopold?” Melissa laughed, peals of silver in the night.

“Father Leopold.” Theroen’s voice held a smile as well. “No, I don’t believe we reached that point in the story. Father Leopold is almost personally responsible for my vampirism. I say almost because modern science and psychology have helped me to understand that his actions were probably not entirely under his control.

Two looked at Theroen, head tilted, saying nothing. Melissa sat down on the curb under a streetlight, leaned back on her arms, stretched.

“We have time, Theroen,” she said.

“Are you that anxious to hear it again, Melissa? I recall – only a few years ago – you shouting something along the lines of ‘forget that dead pope’ at me.”

“That’s only because you were in one of your theological phases, with all the questioning about God and all that crap. I was tired of it.” Melissa’s teeth gleamed, her smile having returned from its earlier departure.

“Ah. Yes. God and all that crap. Exactly what I was obsessed with at the time Abraham brought me into darkness.”

“He talks like some Goth poet wannabe. Have you heard him talk about sex?” Melissa’s tone was conspiratorial, but Two knew Theroen had heard it, despite appearing not to notice. She covered a smile with her hand.

“Father Leopold had one outstanding flaw that put him somewhat at odds with the church, though he had gone to great pains to make sure the church was unaware of it. I would likely have been his undoing, if not for my encounter with Abraham. Father Leopold, it turns out, was very fond of young men with a fervent belief in God.”

“Oh, no ...” Two was smiling, shaking her head.

“It took five years. I was under his tutelage for that long, from the age of eighteen to twenty-three. I can honestly say I never knew, and never saw it coming. We were closing up the cathedral for the night. It was dark. Empty and warm. I have the suspicion that Leopold may also have been availing himself of some drink that night.” Theroen paused, rolled his eyes. “I assure you, there are few things more surprising in life than an unexpected kiss from a middle-aged priest. One of those things, though, would be the feel of his hand pressing against your groin.”

Melissa exploded into laughter. Theroen coughed, seemed to be holding back laughter of his own. He shook his head. Two grinned, nodded. “I imagine that’s the case.”

“The vampires I know are sexual creatures, barring Abraham, and they don’t necessarily adhere to traditional sexual values.” Theroen glanced at Melissa, who waved at him, still giggling. “Learning more about sexuality since my days as a priest has ... opened my eyes significantly. I would not be bothered at all, at this stage of my life, though I can’t claim to have any particular attraction to men of any age. But then? I was horrified. Here was the man who had taken me under his wing, taught me many things about the good book, solidified in me my belief that I wanted to be ordained and helped me see it through ...”

“And there he was trying to cop a feel in the middle of a fucking *church*!” Melissa rolled backwards in the grass, clutching her knees to her chest, laughter renewed. “It’s not that I care, I just ... I can picture Theroen’s face. Oh my god, I’m going to die.”

“I was actually so startled that, in my confusion, I asked him if he was hurt. As absurd as it was, my brain had decided that he was perhaps having a stroke or heart attack, and had simply fallen against me.”

Melissa howled laughter at the moon. “Stop it, Theroen! My stomach hurts!”

Her laughter was contagious, and Two found herself joining, although she did not find the scene that Theroen described to be nearly as amusing as Melissa. Funny, sure, but perhaps the age she had lived in had inured her to these things.

Finally, Melissa's laughter died down. She lay on the grass, looking up at the night sky, gasping for air and breaking into giggles here and there.

"May I continue?" There was a half-smile on Theroen's lips.

"Yes, please." Two looked back to him.

"I'm sorry, Two. Really. I mean, it's *Theroen*. Anyone else, it wouldn't be that funny. You know?"

Two smiled. Nodded. She knew.

"When I was finally able to accept what had happened – and no one had moved, mind you. We both seemed frozen after I had stepped away – I shouted something about God's wrath and stormed from the church. I could hear Father Leopold stammering, shuffling behind me, calling me back, but it was far too late for that. I was in the London streets, the night was still early, and I let the crowd swallow me."

"I walked for some time without really thinking of anything other than the punishments God would surely hurl down upon Leopold. Plague, a rain of fire and brimstone ... something. And yet, the longer I walked, the more I came to realize that this, of course, could not have been some spontaneous conversion on Leopold's part. He must have been fighting his urges for quite some time before at last giving in, and for all I knew, I was not the first he had approached.

"How was it possible? How could God permit it? How could He let this man, filled with such impurity, become not only His servant, but the head of a large cathedral. It was impossible. Yet it had happened."

Theroen was looking at the moon again. He smiled.

"Eventually my wandering led me to a graveyard. Chance? Fate? I don't know. I could not remember the path I had taken to get there, but it mattered little. I sat with my head bowed on a stone bench for some time, until finally I implored God to deliver me from this confusion, and light my path before me.

"God did not answer, but from the darkness beyond the graves a voice whispered to me. Abraham's voice."

Two shuddered. Her brief meeting with Abraham was still crystal-clear in her mind. She wondered if it would ever fade.

"Unlikely," Theroen said. "He has that effect on people. I remember this first meeting with him like it was yesterday."

"You remember everything like it was yesterday, and stop reading her mind. That's not fair." Melissa was sitting up again, leaning her elbows against her knees, chin resting on her palms, grinning at them.

"My apologies, Melissa."

"You're just a big showoff! You know Abraham has to be close to people to do it, and you know I can't do it much at all."

Theroen shrugged. "It is a gift I am thankful for. I will be curious to see if I have passed it on to Two."

"He got all the good genes," Melissa said. "I'd be jealous, but I don't have to talk to Abraham, so I figure it's a fair trade."

"What did Abraham say to you, Theroen?" Two was filled with curiosity. She could not imagine Theroen, or at least the young priest he had been, willingly accepting the vampire life.

* * *

"If ever your God was listening, little sheep, he has long since gone deaf."

The voice was no more than a whisper, but it cut through Theroen like a white-hot blade. He sat up, thoughts of Leopold's actions forgotten, hair on the back of his neck standing on end, adrenaline surging through his veins. The depth of the voice, the malice it contained, was unlike anything Theroen had heard before. He groped at the edge of the bench instinctively, searching desperately for defense against this sudden assault on his courage.

After a moment, he found his shield: anger at the words themselves. Theroen stood, eyes burning into the darkness.

"What creature might speak so to a man of the cloth? Show yourself!"

A chuckle. Unearthly. Theroen was gripped with an animal urge to turn and flee, to simply run as fast as he could in a straight line away from this spot. He resisted.

"Show myself? Would that you knew what you ask, mortal fool."

"I ask not. I command. I command with the word of the Lord."

"That word means nothing to me, even should He make such demands of me in person. Run, little priest. Why don't you run? You lie in mortal peril, and you know it."

"I shall fear no evil."

More laughter. "No? We shall see. I answer your demand, priest."

In the shadows there was movement, red eyes opening in the dark. Theroen took an involuntary step backward. His knees hit the bench, forcing him

to a sitting position. Before he could regain his footing, the creature was upon him. Theroen saw only blurred flashes, so quickly did the thing move. Talons now stretching to him, and then an iron grip around his midsection. Red eyes. Gaping mouth. Sharp white fangs. He beat at the creature with his fists, and it seemed he beat upon the stone of the cathedral walls themselves.

Warm breath against his ear, sharp points against his neck.

"I shall fear no evil!" Theroen cried, terrified and desperate. "Save me, oh Lord!"

The creature paused, and that horrible laughter came again.

"Your Lord is busy, perhaps? I bring you death, Theroen Anders. You gave your life to your church, and what has it given you back? Betrayal. It is the way with all such institutes of faith. The Pope in his Vatican stronghold sells indulgences to his people; they buy salvation with gold and diamonds. The English navy is little more than a band of pirates, licensed by the Church. The man to whom you entrusted your soul preaches the evils of debauchery and lust, and yet has spent these last years lusting only for his disciple. For you.

"The church has failed you. It has taught you nothing that you did not already know for yourself. Man is corrupt. Man is evil. And if man, Theroen, is created in God's image, then is not your God corrupt? Is not your God evil? Do you not, in the depths of your heart, know this?"

Theroen felt hot, angry tears on his cheeks. In this, his last moment, he felt he knew it very well. Father Leopold, the sinner, safe in his church under the eyes of God. Theroen, the faithful servant, trapped here by a creature from the very graves in which soon he was destined to lie.

The vampire caressed the contours of Theroen's face, grinning above him, seeming to delight in his sorrow. "You are young and strong and beautiful, little priest, and I am in need of an heir. I offer you the only chance for true salvation you will ever receive. I offer you the opportunity to defy your God, to renounce Him and His image. Renounce your humanity and be reborn, remade, in my own image. Become immortal, and escape the black hand of death."

Thereon was gasping for breath. He tried to force his mind to think rationally, tried to find the faith which had once powered him so completely. He would let this faith guide him into the afterlife, secure in his knowledge that God waited there for him.

He found instead only a memory: the light and sound of eternity from that hospital bed long ago, and his words, spoken not by his mouth but his mind.

Yes. I would live. Until I am dragged, kicking and screaming, to my death, I would live.

Here then was his death, and it would take him regardless. Faith or no faith, acceptance or denial, death held him now and offered only one way of escape.

The young are rash. Theroen, twenty-three, with little practical experience outside the world of the church, found his faith tested, and found it lacking. He leaned his head back, bearing his neck to the creature that held him. Let it happen. Let his body be remade in this image, and so chase away the specter of death forever. What more evil could it bring than had been allowed within the sanctified doors of his very church?

“So be it,” Abraham whispered. His neck arched, teeth bared, and there was pain ... pain like Theroen had never before felt. He screamed into the night, but his voice drained away with his blood.

* * *

“For ten years I raged in my hatred against humanity with tooth and claw and mind. I took women in pairs, quartets, more. Half a dozen a night I would drain to the last, that I might drown my hate in blood. I was the very image of Satan himself, presiding over heights of debauchery that Father Leopold could never have conceived. They bathed in each other’s blood, and I lapped it from their bodies, to the tune of their cries of passion. They loved it. Oh, they loved it.”

They were walking again. Theroen looked straight, down the road, unable to meet Two’s eyes. His hands were clenched into fists, his lips pursed into a thin white line. “They loved it, and I hated them for it. And I hated myself even more.”

“Theroen.” Two touched his arm.

“Do these things surprise you, Two?” He took her hand, tightened his own around it for a moment, let it drop.

“No. Not that you hated yourself for it. That’s no surprise at all. That’s not you, Theroen.”

“Is it not? Abraham did not instruct me in these things. His first attempt was a dismal failure. The very next night I awakened, horrified to discover myself on a stone slab in a mausoleum, and Abraham was there, with a human. He forced the man’s neck to my teeth, laughing at my screams, my prayers, my promises of atonement and reasoning with a God I had forever left behind.

“Oh, and his sweat was rank. Bitter. Disgusting. His screams mingled with my own, but I drank ... and drank. I felt him pass into death, and I wept. Abraham looked upon me in disgust and left me there weeping, returning only

near dawn to drag me back to the crypt where the coming sun paralyzed my limbs, battered me into sleep.

“It was four days before I drank again. I starved. The thirst raged until I could bear it no longer. I took another human, this time away from Abraham, who had once again left me to my own devices, appalled at my inability to accept the gift he had given me. There was a young woman, kneeling at the grave of her father, whispering, grieving.”

Theroen shook his head, his eyes distant.

“I took her like a storm, unfamiliar with my strength, desperate in my hunger. I broke her spine shoving her head backward, tore away the heavy garments at her neck, ripped most of her throat out with my teeth ... all of this before she could even have been aware of what was happening. And when it was done, I was glad. I was glad to take something from these creatures of God, and leave them nothing in return.”

Two watched him, saying nothing. Theroen’s face was grim. There was no reminiscence in this tale, only the memory of events he would sooner have forgotten.

“It’s all rather sordid, really.” Melissa came up behind Two, touched her shoulder, looked at Theroen. “Sort of surprising, given your nature, Theroen. My first time was so cut and dried. You brought me to that nice man’s house in Brooklyn. His wife had passed away earlier that year and he *wanted* to die. We sat and talked, kissed a little, and then I took him. He died smiling.”

“You know less of my nature than you might think, Melissa. I’ve had four hundred years to study it, and learn it for myself.”

“Well, what I know of it is that you’re way too conservative to be a vampire, and you’re really good at getting Two all nerved up on her first night as one!” Melissa touched Two’s shoulder again, smiling, impish, unwilling to allow Theroen any more time in his melancholy.

Two laughed. “Actually, I sort of figure that this can’t possibly be as bad as what Theroen just described.”

“I assure you it won’t be.” Theroen at last looked at her, then glanced down the street again. They were approaching the first houses on the outskirts of the small town, windows dark and dead. Two supposed that in the day the town must look quaint and picturesque. She wondered when she would see daylight again, how long it would take before her body was equipped to cope with it, as Theroen had told her it would be. For now, she supposed it didn’t matter. Theroen and Melissa had adjusted to life under the moon. So would she.

Strains of music in the air. Two listened, but couldn't pinpoint the source.
"Where's that music coming from?"

"You owe me fifty dollars." Theroen was grinning at Melissa.

"Shit. *Fuck!* I totally thought it'd be at least another half mile."

"What are you talking about?" Two questioned, bemused.

"I heard it about a mile ago. Theroen, probably back by the cars. We made a bet on when you'd hear it, while you were thinking about Theroen's story and not paying attention. I didn't think your ears would get that good, that quick." Melissa shrugged.

"There is a bar. It is the only place you'll find anyone awake at this hour, without invading homes." Theroen gestured down the road, toward the center of town. "I think there you will find a suitable—"

"Client," Two muttered. Theroen raised an eyebrow, and she shook her head. "Never mind, Theroen. Old memories."

"I know those well. This man ... you'll know him. You'll sense him. Trust me."

"And why is he suitable?"

"You wanted someone who deserves death, yes?"

Two nodded.

"He beat his wife to death, two years ago, for breaking a glass while cleaning the kitchen. She was six months pregnant with their first child. He beat her to death with a chair leg, and then drove across three states to dispose of her body. He lied his way through the investigation and came out clean. She is still considered a missing person."

"How do you know this?"

"I read the paper, and I read minds. I was curious. I parked my Ferrari, walked through the woods, stood in the shadows outside his home and concentrated until I had all of the information I wanted."

"Why didn't you kill him yourself?"

Theroen shrugged. "They are mortals. What does it matter to me? Besides, as Melissa mentioned previously, I prefer to drink from women."

"Is this the wrong way to start, Theroen?"

"There is no wrong way. There is only the thirst and the blood. Is this what you wanted, Two? If it is not, I can happily lead you elsewhere, but I thought here you might find some respite from guilt."

Two nodded. "This will work, Theroen. Are you sure I'll know him?"

"You will sense that darkness in him, I believe. For me it shines out like a beacon."

Two took a deep breath, steeled herself. “Okay, then.”
She headed for the bar alone.

* * *

The bar was everything Two would have expected from this small, old-fashioned town. Yellow wood glowed mellow in the dim lights, dented and scarred and shined by decades of service. A television in the corner, above the heads of the customers, was attached with screws that were two years – maybe three – away from pulling out of the water-stained plasterboard. It was playing old reruns of *Sanford and Son* with the volume turned down. A few ailing tables were scattered near the far end of the building, most empty. Someone was asleep at one of the wall booths, and three or four men were clustered near one end of the bar.

The reaction to Two’s entrance was immediate, their stares like a physical force pressing against her. The sensation reminded her of her pool hustling days. She grinned, glanced around, moved toward the bar, away from the cluster of men.

“Help you?” The bartender looked to be in his late fifties. His voice was all Jim Beam and Camels. Dark, scraggly hair, three days of stubble. Not the one.

“What’s your best red wine?”

“Nothing you’d probably consider good.” At least he was honest. Two smiled at him, looked to the beer taps.

“Just a Molson, then, please.”

“Do I need to card you?”

“Don’t know. Do you?”

The bartender turned away, grinning. She watched the glass fill with the amber liquid. The idea of actually drinking it seemed a foreign concept to her now. After the blood, everything else had lost its appeal. Two doubted she would be able to stomach it, even if she were to try.

But she wasn’t going to try.

By the time the glass arrived in front of her, she’d found the one. Dark, quiet, withdrawn. His thoughts were black things, and she could feel them on the air like tendrils of wet mist. Theroen was right. The violence of which he had spoken seemed to exude from this man in waves, and with it something else – an undefined ease that told her the rest of what she needed to know. There was no guilt here. No remorse. This man had murdered his own wife and child in cold blood over the breaking of a glass, and sat here now feeling justified.

He looked at her now, and Two could see the beginning of desire in his eyes. She stretched, her nipples outlined against the white cotton of her shirt, navel exposed, and glanced at him with smoky eyes. She could hear the blood pounding faster in his veins.

The glance had been perfected during her time with Darren. She tossed it out, caught her prey, and began to reel him in. Phantom images seemed to dance across her mind: a woman's horrified eyes, terror becoming distant and detached in death. A shovel. His breath in the cold moonlight. Two smiled at him as he moved toward her, hand on the bar, drunk and unsteady.

"Hello." Her voice was sweet sugar, long and slow and husky, full of promise. He nodded to her, sat down on the stool next to her, glanced at her untouched beer.

"One for the road?" he asked. Two smiled.

"Something like that. I didn't come here for beer."

"Oh no?"

"I've been on a trip, and now I'm headed back into the city. Back to my boyfriend. But I couldn't go without one last stop. I couldn't go without ..." Two let her eyes flick down, just briefly, then return. She could see his eyes darken as his brain, or perhaps another organ, completed the thought.

"Do you have a wife?" she asked him.

"No. Not ... no."

"A house?"

"Yes."

"I'd like to see it."

She left a fifty on the bar.

* * *

Theroen and Melissa were not there, but Two knew that they had not gone far. She could not sense them, but she wasn't trying too hard. They had no reason to leave, only to keep their presence unknown to this man. She was sure they wanted to watch. This was her first true moment as a vampire.

They walked along the road that, only minutes ago, Two had traveled in the opposite direction. They didn't talk. Two was nervous, shuddery, trying hard not to show it. The thirst was growing in her by the moment. She could smell the blood now, so close to his skin.

"What was her name?" she asked.

"Who?"

“The wife that you told me you didn’t have. The one you lied about.”

The man was momentarily taken aback. He paused in his step, looked at her, eyes wide. Two glanced back, the playfulness gone from her eyes.

“What was her name?”

“Look, I don’t know who you think I am. I’m Sean ...”

“I didn’t ask who you were. I asked what her name was.”

Sean swallowed hard, shoved his tousled brown hair back from his forehead. Two stepped toward him, touched a stubbly cheek, smiled again.

“It’s a simple question, Sean.” She moved her lips over his, barely touching, pressed the tip of her tongue to the center of his upper lip. He opened his mouth instinctively, and the touch became a kiss, long and damp. She touched below his waist, and what she found there was rock hard, despite his concerns.

The nerves were gone. They’d slipped off as the moment approached, and Two was cold now. She played her lips about his neck, tasting his salty sweat, not yet bitter from fear. Sean’s hands were limp at his sides, his breath speeding. With one hand she touched his hair. The other unbuttoned his pants, navigated beyond his boxers, touched skin to skin. He shivered.

“Were you hard like this when you did it, Sean? Tell me her name.”

Sean moaned. Fear? Lust? Two’s hand quickened. She smiled, sharp teeth against his neck.

“Tell me her name, you fucking murdering piece of shit.”

“Th—Theresa. Her name was Theresa. Oh, *God* ...”

Two pressed her teeth against the flesh, pressed hard, waited for the pulse. She had been here before, on the receiving end, and found the wait now even more interminable than it had been then. That instant before release had seemed to her unbearable, but waiting for the moment when she could take the blood proved worse.

Sean stiffened. His heart pulsed. Two bit down. What began as a cry of passion became a scream of pain, trailed into a moan somewhere between horror and ecstasy. Sean sagged. Two followed him to the ground, attached at the neck, lost in the blood.

Ambrosia. Red and throbbing. Tears at her eyes, carving hot little tracks down her cheeks. The heart stopped, the flow of blood ceased, and Two pulled back, gasping. Crying. She looked at the body before her, limp organ hanging from open pants, the neck a still shot from a horror film. She stood, staggered backward, felt her heels bump the curb, felt her knees trying to buckle.

Two sat down at the side of the road with his seed on her hands and his blood in her mouth, arms across her knees, head down, sobbing.

* * *

Chapter 4

Life in Shadow

Curbside. Sometime later.

She felt Theroen's hand on her shoulder, heard Melissa sigh beside her, felt a cloth cleaning her hands. Two made some sound, pressed herself against Theroen, couldn't stop crying. He ran a hand through her hair, kissed the top of her head.

"Was it what you thought it would be?" he asked at last.

"No," she said into his chest, miserable. Theroen waited. At last, Two was able to stop crying. She leaned against Theroen, sniffing, eyes closed. Melissa was still holding her hand.

"What was it then?"

"It was horrible. It was beautiful."

She didn't see Melissa glance at Theroen, to exchange with him a tiny smile. Two loosened her grip around Theroen, sitting up and looking at him.

"How can someone so awful contain all of that beauty?"

"The blood doesn't care about the vessel. Some vampires are like vigilantes. They take only from murderers, rapists and the like. Others take only from sixteen-year-old virgins. The truth? It doesn't matter. The blood is the same regardless."

Melissa nodded. "It's why we make our choices the way we do. It's not worth worrying about. Someone catches my eye, and that's that. I guess Theroen started you off with this guy because you were already looking for some kind of revenge?"

"Yeah." Two was trying not to look at Sean's corpse. Revenge against anyone seemed to be the furthest thing from her mind.

"It doesn't matter though, Two. You need to learn that. It's mortal sentiment."

"Sorry. Never done this before." Two ran a hand across her eyes. The liquid was pink. She stared at it for a moment, laughed incredulously.

"There is nothing to be sorry for. It is understandable. But as you can see, Two, you are not human anymore." Theroen stood, glancing toward the body. He reached down and helped Two to her feet. She followed his glance and grimaced.

"I don't even know why I did ... that." She gestured toward the unbuttoned pants, the piece of meat hanging out of them.

"Part and parcel of the thirst, Two. It's a desire. A lust. They're tied together, particularly for those of us lucky enough to retain our sexual capabilities."

"You're a natural, to be honest. Not many new vampires could have pulled off simultaneously grilling the guy about his wife *and* keeping him mesmerized at the same time. Theroen and I were impressed." Melissa leaned down and, with an air of complete indifference, put the offending item back where it belonged. She hefted the body up on one shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"What do we do with that? With him?" The expression on Sean's face, a mixture of horror and pleasure, made Two queasy. She looked away.

"Good question. After a while, maybe ten, fifteen years, there's not a 'that' to deal with. Eventually you won't need that much blood," Melissa said.

"For the Ay'Araf and Burilgi vampire strains, that's almost immediate. Their fledglings stop needing to kill within a week or two. Ashayt vampires ... within a few months. Ersh vampires go into a deeper trance and take much longer to learn how to break it. Years. Melissa still kills sometimes."

"No. I don't. *She* does." Melissa's voice was quiet.

"My apologies, Melissa."

"S'okay. It's weird, Two, but the stronger we get, the less we need. You'll learn how to control that mesmerism stuff. Then you can keep them from remembering. They wake up feeling kind of crappy, figure it's the flu ... end of story."

"You can purposely do that?"

"Oh, sure. One time I was with these two guys and this other girl, and we were all getting pretty into it, you know? And I was all hot and I started biting without even really thinking about it, and then the girl started *freaking* out, because this guy was, like, dripping blood on her, but he had his eyes closed and thought she was, you know ... just getting off. So he keeps right on banging away at her, and I—"

Theroen cleared his throat. "Melissa, do you have any stories that might illustrate your point without requiring a detailed description of your various acts of debauchery?"

Melissa tilted her head, thinking. "No."

Two laughed. "It's okay. Sounds sort of fun, before the screaming anyway. But that only tells me what to do with something alive. Sean has, uh ... moved on."

Two tried to feel bad about this, but found herself unable to manufacture any guilt. The truth was simple: this man was as much a killer as she was, and it was difficult to be remorseful about what she had done.

“Well, we could just leave him. The bite marks fade. Abraham says it’s something in our saliva.” Melissa shrugged, an odd gesture with a body slung over her shoulder. “Don’t know. I’m no biologist.”

“There were others in the bar,” Theroen said. “No investigation will find us, but it’s best to take reasonable precautions. We can take him into the woods and bury him.”

“With what?” Two asked.

Theroen and Melissa exchanged another glance.

“You’ll see,” Melissa said, and began moving up the road toward the edge of town.

* * *

The lack of shovels proved to be of little concern. Digging by hand is not, for a vampire, the difficult task that it is for a human being. Fingernails do not break, flesh does not cut or wear, strength does not flag.

Work proceeded rapidly. Melissa chattered away at them. Two and Theroen were mostly silent, half-listening, absorbed in the work.

“This is good for you to learn, anyway, Two. If you ever get caught away from someplace safe, and the sun’s coming up, you can actually dig down and go into the earth if you have to. It’s not the most pleasant way to spend the day, but it works. I had to do it once when I pissed off Theroen and he left me in the city. I was halfway through walking back when I realized that I wasn’t going to make it in time.”

At this, Theroen glanced up. “I have never left you anywhere you did not wish to be left, Melissa.”

A moment’s pause, and she shrugged. “Must be remembering it wrong. Anyway, it’s sort of funny. It’s not really the bugs or worms that bothered me, or even the difficulty breathing. It was the scent. I could smell everything rotting. It was pretty disgusting.”

Melissa stopped working for a minute, a far-off, quizzical expression on her face. “What the hell was I doing out there anyway? I could have sworn we had a fight, Theroen. You don’t remember anything like that?”

Theroen shook his head.

“Guess I’ll have to trust you. You remember everything.”

“Largely, yes. It’s of no real concern, Melissa.”

“I suppose.”

Theroen stood, brushed off the knees of his pants. The hole was done.

Melissa dumped Sean in with no more reverence than if she were a farmer dropping a sack of grain. Two felt as if she should say something, shook it off. Human sentiment. She was no longer human. It was a waste of time, and Theroen and Melissa were no doubt hungry. She joined them, tossing the dirt back over the body with her hands.

Finished. Less than an hour, and they’d managed to camouflage the hole quite well. Two’s watch said it was nearly two in the morning.

“Do you guys need to, uh ... eat?”

Theroen grinned. Melissa laughed, brushing her hands together, trying to rid them of dirt.

“Yes,” Theroen said, turning and walking away from the grave. “But that doesn’t have to take long.”

“Ooh, are we going to get to watch the master at work?” Melissa’s voice was merry as they tramped through the woods.

“If you’d like, though I’ve never claimed to have mastered this particular aspect of our lives. We can return to the town.”

“We’re pretty deep into the woods. Should we get the cars?” Two asked. She didn’t really mind one way or the other, but it seemed impractical.

“None of this is, or particularly needs to be, practical, Two,” Theroen said. “It’s for your edification mainly, and now is an opportunity for another lesson. Keep up!”

Theroen turned, grinning, and took off like a shot through the woods, moving faster than seemed possible. Two felt her jaw hanging open, and closed it with a snap. Melissa laughed and ran after Theroen, crying out for Two to follow her. Two took a deep breath, and started to run.

* * *

The sensation was like nothing Two had ever before experienced. She had no idea how fast she was moving, but it seemed faster than even a trained sprinter could accomplish. And such agility! It was as if she ran not through moonlit forest, but on solid pavement. Her feet seemed to cope with the imperfections of the ground by themselves, no longer requiring any conscious effort. Theroen was far ahead, Melissa roughly halfway between him and Two.

Both of the older vampires occasionally turned their head back, making sure they hadn't outdistanced Two.

They reached the outskirts of the town in less than ten minutes, slowing as they approached, and Two found that she wasn't even winded. Melissa was laughing, the noise pretty and bright in the quiet streets, and Two joined her.

"That was amazing!"

"Only the tip of the iceberg, Two. I'll take you through a vampire obstacle course sometime. You can't imagine what it feels like to take a five-story jump." Melissa sat down on the curb and looked at Theroen. "You find one yet?"

"Yes, that one." Theroen pointed to a small white ranch home to their left.

"What's special about that one?" Two was confused.

"When I don't have the time or inclination to be choosy about my food, I go with something easy to attract. Young women, usually. Normally I would spend some ... how should I put it? Quality time with her, and then feed."

"I'm not sure if that should offend me." Two was smiling when she said it. Theroen returned the grin.

"Another thing I've learned from other vampires: Sex is sex. Love is love. The first is a raw biological process, the latter is something more."

Two considered this. "But love makes sex something more."

"Certainly. Which is why the sex without love is merely gratification. Insignificant in its implications. That much more pleasure, in addition to the blood. Sex is sex. Love is love. I love *you*, Two."

"Oh, and how many guys would like to be able to say *that* to their girlfriends, I wonder?" Melissa had taken out a compact and was checking her eye shadow.

Two sat down next to Melissa. "A lot, I think. How many girlfriends would be okay with it? I don't know. Probably not many."

"So are you okay with it?"

Two looked at Theroen, who returned her glance with the same cool grin that had so intrigued her on the night she had first met him. She felt herself warming. The memory of Sean was fading, and thoughts of how she might spend the rest of the night were cropping up in her mind. Theroen, sensing this, laughed slightly.

"Yes," Two said. "I'm okay with it. He just watched me give the world's deadliest hand-job, after all ..."

Melissa burst into surprised laughter before pressing her mouth into one arm to muffle the noise. Theroen shook his head, grinning. Two smiled, stood up, reached out on tiptoe to give Theroen a brief kiss.

“Let’s do this and go,” she said.

Theroen nodded, closed his eyes, breathed deeply. In a moment, the front door of the house opened, and a young woman in her early twenties stepped out onto the porch. She looked around, caught sight of the trio, and made her way toward them. Dark hair, dark eyes, she was generously proportioned under her nightgown. Two felt a momentary twinge of jealousy as the moonlight caught the swell of the girl’s ample breasts, but fought it down.

She stopped in front of them, seeing and not seeing, swaying slightly. Theroen was standing in front of her but off to the left. When he touched her cheek, tilted her head, moved the hair from her neck, she sighed. Her nipples grew hard under the cotton of the nightgown.

Two watched, fascinated. Theroen could kill this woman, if he wanted to, and she would go to her death happily; might even go in the throes of ecstasy, under the right conditions. It was amazing.

It happened so quickly that Two almost missed it. One moment, Theroen was lightly caressing her cheek. The next, he had latched on to her neck. The woman gave a slight cry, her hips bucked once, and then she slumped. Theroen held her, drained her, and was done. He took a deep breath.

“Is she dead?” Two asked. He shook his head, and indeed, the girl’s eyelids were fluttering now as she fought her way back to consciousness. Theroen waited until she could stand, then looked into her eyes.

“Go back to your bed and sleep, my dear. This was a dream, and when the sun rises you’ll realize that.”

The girl turned and made her way unsteadily back to the house. The door clicked shut behind her.

“Quick, clean – not a drop spilled, and you made her want it in like three seconds. Like I said: the Master at work.” Melissa was smiling in approval.

“Thank you for your warm appraisal of my work, Melissa.” There was the slightest hint of sarcasm in his voice as Theroen turned to face them.

“Welcome! Shall we go? I’m going to skip the appetizer and head for the city. Find me an all-night rave, go rolling and have dinner. Well, first I want to wash my hands, but after that.”

“Will you be able to get back to the mansion in time?” Two asked.

“I’ll find some place to crash in the city. No big deal. Worst-case scenario, New York’s full of little graveyards.” Melissa shrugged, stretched, began walking up the street. Theroen followed and, after a moment of considering how she might feel about sleeping in a graveyard, Two did as well.

* * *

A brief moment by the cars where Two thanked Melissa for coming with them, and for being there for her. Melissa smiled, leaned in low, whispered, "I can see why he loves you." Two was surprised to feel her heart well up at this. She'd known Melissa for so short a time, known Theroen, the man she felt she loved, for no longer. Was such depth of emotion and attachment really possible?

Theroen, who could pluck these questions from her mind if he felt inclined, said nothing. He left it up to Two to find her answers, and Two loved him all the more for it.

The ride back was uneventful, if careening through the back roads of southern New York at speeds over double the posted limit could be considered as such. Two felt warm and pleasant, satiated, but without feeling full. She seemed caught in a sort of afterglow, so like the effects of heroin, but clearheaded and awake. Better in every way.

They reached the mansion well before sunrise. Theroen returned the Ferrari to the garage, and Two left the vehicle with regret. She stood on the driveway, an asphalt circle surrounding a topiary display.

"I can see my breath."

Theroen walked up beside her, nodded. "It's November, Two."

"So why am I not cold?" She glanced down at herself. A pair of thin jeans, cotton shirt, leather jacket; it was not enough to keep a human warm.

"You won't feel the elements as much, particularly after you've fed. I barely feel them at all anymore."

"So I suppose the old 'I'm cold, let's go inside and get warm' line would be pretty transparent then, right?"

Theroen's ever-present smile widened to a grin.

* * *

He bit her as they joined, tiny pinpricks of pain high up on the neck, away from the main vein, followed by a surge of overwhelming pleasure. It was electric, reaching out from below her waist to touch every extremity of her body. Two moaned, arched her hips, thrust forward. Theroen moved, changed angle, allowing her teeth access to his own neck. Two touched her tongue to the skin, tasted the hint of the blood in his sweat, and bit down. The blood began to flow, and she felt the throb within redouble in intensity.

Death, life, time. They lay for millennia, for seconds. Two didn't know, only that she felt herself building and building, always a steady ascent toward some unknown peak. Theroen's blood was fire in her mouth, waves of power and ecstasy roaring through her in a torrent.

Her orgasm, when it finally came, was like nothing she had experienced as a human being. Unending, it left her without control of her limbs, powerless and lost against the force of it. Black spots danced before her eyes, and she struggled not to lose consciousness. Theroen seemed gripped by a similar power, body straining against hers for an interminable moment. The pleasure faded slowly, echoed by small jolts that Two thought of as aftershocks.

She pulled her teeth from Theroen's neck and fell backwards, gasping for breath. The muscles of her inner thighs were trembling. Her arms felt weak. Theroen lay down beside her, equally exhausted. Two flicked a lock of hair from her eyes and glanced over at him. He was gazing calmly at her, but still panting from exertion. Two smiled.

"Was it good for you?" she asked, no malice in her sarcasm. Theroen laughed, leaned in, licked the last of the blood from her lips with the tip of his tongue. Two moved closer to him, let that brief touch turn into a longer kiss. She sighed as his hand caressed the swell of her breast.

"If humans knew it could be like that, Theroen, they'd be lining up in the street to make the change," she said after they broke apart.

"You may well be right."

Two felt a sudden heaviness in her eyelids and glanced at the window. The sky had begun to show the slightest sign of light.

"Draw the curtains, Theroen? I won't be able to keep awake much longer. Will you stay with me?"

"Of course."

Her room, like all of the rooms in the mansion, was equipped with a dual layer of heavy blackout curtains. Theroen stood, unashamed of his body, and pulled the cords. The room went immediately dark. Even Two, with her new eyes, was only able to discern vague shapes, dark forms on a black backdrop, outlined only by the slightest hint of light filtering in from the crack under the door. She felt Theroen return to the bed with her. Another kiss, the aftertaste of blood on his tongue. She lay with her head on his chest.

"Will I need to feed again tomorrow?"

"I've little doubt. Melissa still feeds daily, and it is relatively rare that I skip an evening."

"I want to do it early, then. Get it out of the way."

“All right.”

“Can I get pregnant?”

“No.”

“You’re sure? No baby vampire Theroens and Twos crawling around?”

Theroen yawned, played with a lock of her hair absently. “Yes, quite sure. It’s been tried, by others of our kind and by myself. Mortal women, half-vampire women, vampire women. None ever conceive. Vampire men, even those still blessed with this ability, don’t create seed. We don’t make children with our bodies, Two. We make them with our blood.”

“So you’re saying that we’re participating in incest, then? Willing participants, at that?”

“I try not to think of it like that.” Theroen’s voice was dry, but Two could hear the smile there. She laughed.

Quiet, for a moment. Two felt sleep nearing; a rolling blackness on the horizon that would soon blot out all consciousness. She fought it. There were so many questions.

“Who’d you try it with?”

“A woman. A vampire. I ... she’s dead, now.”

“I thought vampires couldn’t die?”

“They can’t die. They *can* be killed.”

Two wanted to ask more. Wanted to know who this woman was, how she had died, why there was so much pain in Theroen’s voice. Sleep denied her the chance.

* * *

In the darkness, Theroen sighed and closed his eyes. The woman next to him, breathing soft and warm against his skin, couldn’t know how hard it was to answer her questions. How difficult it was to think of Lisette.

It had been nearly three hundred years since he had been with another vampire like this. Mortals, surely. He enjoyed making love to the women he took for nourishment nearly as much as Melissa enjoyed sex with her victims. But another vampire? The feel of her skin, the sinewy strong muscles beneath it, the smell of the blood in her sweat, in her kiss, in her sex. Two was everything Lisette had been, and more perhaps, because it was his role to be her teacher. Lisette had been hundreds of years old when Theroen had met her. He had been the student, then.

His love for Two, and the differences that separated her from Lisette in his mind, did little to ease the pain, little to dampen the sorrow, little to drown out the screams.

* * *

Theroen was not there when Two awoke. As probably would be the case forever, she suspected, he arose earlier, was forced into sleep later. Two could hear the shower running in the attached bathroom, a mundane sound that made her feel comfortable. At home.

Two sat up, shivering a bit. The warmth of the blood was long gone, and she longed for it. She understood now what Theroen and Melissa had said. Some of the concepts behind vampirism were perhaps distasteful, but the actual experience was quite the opposite. The blood was all that mattered, and it was beautiful.

Two got out of bed, opened the heavy maple doors of the wardrobe on the far side of the room, found a nightgown and slippers. She heard a door close outside the room. Curious, Two opened her bedroom door and looked out. The bedrooms opened on the grand chamber, overlooking the main foyer of the mansion. A crystal chandelier, easily twenty feet in diameter, illuminated the area. Below it stood Melissa, pulling her hair back into a ponytail.

“Hi Melissa!” Two called, waving. The dark-haired vampire looked up and bared her teeth.

“Call me by that bitch’s name again, and I’ll find you some time when your superhero’s not around to protect you. I’ll cut your fucking tits off.”

Missy, then. Two fought the anger that was rising inside of her. She tried to think of the other woman who occupied the body, the one whose company she had enjoyed the previous night. “Sorry, Missy.”

Missy stared up at her, an expression of frank disgust on her face. It took Two a moment to realize that it was her nightgown that Melissa was studying. Pink, with lace trim, it was hardly the type of outfit Missy probably preferred.

“I’m going out to eat and to find something for Tori. Tell Theroen that Abraham wants him. He’ll probably know, but tell him anyway, or I’ll get into deep shit.”

“Wouldn’t that be a shame,” Two commented under her breath.

“Keep it up with the attitude, whore. See how far it gets you.”

Missy was gone before Two could respond. The shower was no longer running, and she felt Theroen’s presence behind her before he spoke.

"It's best not to approach Melissa, unless you're positive it's her." He pulled on a pair of black cargo pants and a white t-shirt.

"No kidding. Did you hear? About Abraham?"

"Yes."

"What does he want with you?"

"I couldn't even attempt to guess. It could be something as simple as moving a piece of artwork he has decided is no longer to his taste."

Two thought of the elder vampire, whom she had met only briefly, and shuddered. During the time she had been near him, his strength had been undeniable, rolling off him in waves. Even had this not been the case, she had seen his broad shoulders and strong arms. Certainly he didn't need Theroen to take care of such things for him.

"Abraham needs no one. He has me do these tasks because it amuses him. It proves I am still loyal to him. It proves I still serve him."

"What will he do when you leave him?"

Theroen looked at her for a moment, as if the question had never occurred to him. "Survive. Perhaps he'll attempt to make Melissa do his bidding. I doubt he'll have much success."

"Would she stand up to him? If she can, why don't you?"

Theroen smiled, shook his head. "No. Melissa is no more capable of standing up to Abraham than I am. But she is afraid of him, and has less of a stomach for certain tasks he might ask of her. Dealing with her would be more frustration for him than it's worth. Half of her, anyway. The other half is almost wholly Abraham's child."

"Why doesn't he use Missy, then?"

"She is his child, but not his favored child. Their relationship is strained at best, and made all the worse by the fact that she does not own that body. No, Abraham does not favor her." Theroen grimaced. "That particular honor goes to me."

"Is that why you stay with him? Do you owe him? Or is it fear? Can he hurt you?" Two's questions were not barbed. Theroen heard only honest curiosity in her voice.

"It's integral that you understand something: Abraham is more than capable of slaughtering every creature that walks these grounds without even exerting himself. I am powerful. Abraham ... is something closer to a god."

"But you're not afraid of him." This was not a question.

"No. Not afraid of him and not afraid of what he might do to me. I am afraid, Two, of what he may choose to do to you, should I offend him. That is, to

the best of my knowledge, the first thing that has truly frightened me in several hundred years.”

Two was quiet a moment, head down, considering. She looked up at Theroen. “Who is Lisette?”

Theroen visibly flinched away from her, eyes widening. He turned his head, but not before Two read what she needed from his expression.

“Oh,” Two said. “Who *was* Lisette?”

“Not now, Two.”

“Theroen ...”

“*Please*,” he turned his eyes back toward her, and the look on his face made Two want to take it all back. She wished she had never mentioned the name, wished it had not flashed into her brain in that moment before sleep.

“Okay, Theroen. I ...” She stopped. Theroen sat on the foot of the bed with his elbows on his knees, back bent, hands laced behind his head, staring at the floor. His expression was dark and miserable. Two felt adrenaline flood her system, then depart, leaving her shaky and scared. She had never expected anything like this. She crawled across the bed and stopped, unsure of how to proceed. She touched his shoulder.

“I’m not going to hurt you, Two.” Theroen sounded weary. He did not look up at her.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I didn’t know!” Two felt herself crying.

Theroen turned to her, wiped a tear from her cheek. “Don’t.”

“I can’t help it. I’m scared.”

Theroen smiled at this, kissed her briefly. “Scared?”

“I don’t understand everything. You haven’t told me everything, and now I hurt you. I don’t even know how I did it. I didn’t know I could. I didn’t think there was anything I could’ve done ...”

Theroen stood up, looked out the window, sighed.

“Lisette was a vampire. In a very real sense, you owe your present fortune – if you wish to consider it such – to her. She saw the good in me even as I spent my nights bathing in the blood of those I destroyed. She helped me to find the good in myself. And I loved her. I loved her like I love you. I loved her, and I couldn’t save her, and I’ll never forgive myself for it.”

* * *

The girl made the cut below the nipple on her left breast and stood, beckoning. Theroen lounged on overstuffed cushions of velvet, warm from the

first kill, ready for the second. She was white cream against the red fabric. Pouting lips, full breasts, dark hair on her head, between her legs. Theroen reached out, took her hand, brought her to him. The girl swooned, falling against him, panting, as he drank from the wound she had inflicted upon herself.

Her death came with a tiny gasp, and the girl went limp in his arms. Theroen shoved the body away, reclined, reflected. Two of them, and still he was unsatisfied. There could never be enough death. He could drown in a sea of human blood, and it would never be enough.

A walk, then, and perhaps another victim.

In the ten years that had passed since his rebirth into darkness, Theroen had learned little of his nature beyond that which was readily evident to him. He would not take instruction from Abraham, and the elder vampire in turn shunned his creation, leaving Theroen to his own devices.

Theroen knew he was strong. He knew he could read minds with a proficiency that seemed to enrage Abraham. He knew he could make women do terrible things to themselves, and in this last he sometimes took great pleasure.

There was no God, no devil, no heaven or hell. Lost in a sea of blackness, Theroen let his base instincts run wild. Women, always women. He would watch them, his powerful mind compelling them to perform acts of lust and passion upon themselves, upon each other. He would watch, but never join them. For the women from whom he drank, Theroen's touch meant only death.

Some went quietly, like the two tonight. Others laughed, wept, screamed, begged. It didn't matter. How could it? How could anything matter at all when God had so clearly forsaken him? Theroen reveled in debauchery worse than that which had driven him from the church, and it just didn't matter.

Someone was watching him. He could sense it, and this presence frightened him. Theroen was unaccustomed to being noticed. His speed and uncanny ability to manipulate the minds of those around him made it an infrequent occurrence. What concerned him most was that he could not throw off this feeling. It pursued him through streets, back alleys, parks, graveyards. He skipped the whorehouse from which he'd been planning to acquire another victim, moved onward, toward the townhouse. Toward Abraham. Toward safety.

There was something humorous in that concept, that he might turn to Abraham for sanctuary. The vampire elder had all but denounced him, yet blood bonded them. Theroen hated his master. Despised him. Loathed him.

And yet this fear ...

The presence shifted, and he realized that the feeling of being watched was more than a mere tingle at the back of the neck. It was spatial. It had depth. He

felt the presence overtake him at a frightening speed. There was a short moment of paralyzing terror, and then it moved onward, in front of him now, yet still focused on him in some way.

From the shadows there was laughter like silver bells on a sheet of glass. The woman stepped out from the doorway of a cathedral. Black hair, pale white skin and oceanic green eyes. Theroen felt himself lost and drowning in those eyes, and looked away, snarling.

“Do you fear everything you don’t understand?” Her accent was French.

“I fear nothing.” A lie, perhaps. His fright was replaced with the hot flush of humiliation. Theroen was glad for this. Of the two, he preferred the latter.

“You fear me.”

“You were trying to hypnotize me.”

“I was doing nothing of the sort.”

Theroen looked back, was pulled again into the depths of those eyes. He struggled to maintain focus, coherent thought, any semblance of composure.

She laughed again, but there was no trace of mockery in the sound.

Theroen’s spine knotted and he shivered. “Who are you?”

“Who I am would be a long tale indeed, my fallen priest. Your father knows me. Perhaps you could ask him.”

“Your name, at least?”

“You can call me Lisette. It is not the name I was born into, but the one I chose for myself later. After. It has a lovely sound to it, don’t you think?”

“Lisette. Madame. What do you want?” Theroen had regained some composure. His thoughts were more clear, the sense of fear not gone, but faded. The girl, and Theroen saw now that she was little more than such, laughed again.

“Ah, you are brave, child. But don’t make assumptions based on my appearance. I’ve walked this earth for far longer than you can currently conceive.”

Theroen looked again, trying to see past the facade. The eyes told him she spoke the truth. They were ancient and ageless, like Abraham’s, yet without the malice that forever darkened his. Lisette smiled at him and took a step forward. Theroen flinched, stumbled backward, immediately on the defensive. His fear seemed to leap forward, energizing his muscles. Lisette paused, shaking her head.

“Child, if I wanted to kill you, you would be very dead by now. Do you not understand this?”

Theroen shook his head, a guarded expression on his face. The woman before him was lithe, petite, nearly angelic in her beauty. A killer?

And then she was gone, and he felt the lightest touch of lips against his ear. Her voice was a whisper, heard as much in his mind as by his body. "That and more."

Theroen jerked to the side, flailing his arms for balance, losing it, falling.

Then he was sitting. Sitting on a stone bench, vaguely aware of some sort of movement too fast even for his vampire senses to track.

"Dear God," his voice was thick with fear and confusion. The vampire, now sitting beside him, smiled again.

"You speak to Him who has forsaken you, Theroen. Is this not the case? Or perhaps you have only forsaken Him?"

Theroen searched for something to hold on to in his confusion, and found his anger. "I know not of Him. Not anymore. I know of fallen priests, and I know of their sins."

Lisette clapped her hands together at this, laughing, merry, unperturbed by his blasphemy. Theroen turned to her, teeth clenched, angry. She looked at him with calm eyes, and shook her head.

"I am not mocking you, my young priest. Ah, has Abraham taught you *nothing*? No, of course not. Your goodness disgusts him."

"I've no goodness left in me, lady. You look upon a black hearted killer. A creature of evil."

More laughter. "I look upon nothing of the sort. I look only upon a man, and a vampire, who knows nothing of his own true nature. I look upon a man who was been led by others all his life, and knows not how to lead himself."

"I look," she said, "upon a fledgling in desperate need of answers."

Theroen said nothing, but turned away. Answers? Perhaps, yes. Certainly Abraham had provided him with little in the way of understanding. He felt movement: Lisette leaning in closer. This time he did not shy away. He was instead suddenly, acutely aware of the woman next to him. She smelled of lilacs and blood, and he felt a wave of desire wash over him. When she laughed this time, it did not bother him so much.

"You *must* learn to guard your thoughts, my child. Such impure images from a man of the cloth ..."

"I beg your pardon, Madame." He could think of no other response.

Lisette moved her lips to his neck, held them above the vein. "Is that all you beg for?" Her breath set the tiny hairs below her lips standing on edge.

"Milady ..." Theroen felt out of breath. No mortal woman had ever had this effect on him as a vampire, not even the victims he made perform for him. Before

that, as a virgin for all of his twenty-three years, he had steadfastly disallowed any such thoughts. Now, they swamped him, overwhelmed him, swept him up.

Half-focused images, potent, carnal, flashed through his mind. Her open bodice beckoned, the white breasts luminescent in the moonlight. Skin like porcelain. Hair like ebony. Lips like blood. He sensed, or thought he sensed, some dull fire from between her legs. Theroen moaned slightly. Her lips never touched his skin, yet they burned there like hot iron.

“Alive below the waist,” she commented in a whisper. “How curious. Your father is possessed of no such blessing.”

She touched him there, ever so gently, and Theroen made some sound, some choked sob. He began to turn toward her, desire overwhelming him.

As suddenly as it had begun, it was over. Lisette sat up, and the feeling, which had been like a building explosion, drained suddenly away. Theroen drew in a shuddery breath. Lisette laughed.

“I like you, Theroen Anders. I shall visit you again.”

And she was gone.

* * *

“So she’s the one who taught you that you could ... you know?” Two asked.

“Yes, that and much more. I wish I could tell you the whole story, Two. I haven’t the time, right now. I have to go and find out what Abraham wants.”

“I’m hungry. Should I wait?”

“If I’m not back in a few hours, then you can go yourself. Just be smart about it. I’m sure you’ll do fine. Otherwise, I’d certainly enjoy your company. I thought we might go into the city tonight.” Theroen glanced in the direction of Abraham’s quarters, his expression of exasperation surprisingly human. Two laughed.

“Go. I’ll take a shower, and wait for you.”

She watched him leave, then stripped off her nightgown and made her way into the bathroom. It was not as luxurious as Melissa’s, but it was quite enough for Two, who had spent the last year showering in a cold tile room with seven other women.

She thought of Darren. Molly. Janice. Rhes and Sarah. Would she see them again? Her desire for revenge against Darren was already fading. It was difficult to maintain any concern. Her connection with those mortal lives had been severed. She didn’t need the drug, didn’t really care if Darren’s crimes went unpunished. The thought of Molly still hurt, but what could she do for Molly?

Killing Darren would only put the girl out on the street with no immediate source of the drug.

More pressing, and more troublesome, was the story Theroen had begun. Lisette. An elder vampire and a previous lover. Two wondered what had happened to her, and knew it couldn't have been pleasant. The expression on Theroen's face had been heart-breaking.

There was still so little she knew about her lover. Centuries of life that remained dark to her, stories untold. Theroen was a creature beyond the scope of time Two was capable of visualizing. She could not imagine living for nearly half a millennia. The thought filled her both with fear and a fierce, fluttering excitement. So much to see and do, side by side with the one she loved.

Two turned off the shower, brushed her hair, pulled on clothes. There was a plush armchair against the wall, and Theroen had left a collection of Dickinson's poetry on the nightstand. Two sat down, picking up the book and beginning to read.

The transition that began on the night she had met Theroen was still happening, the blood working on Two in ways both subtle and obvious. Beyond the strength, and the speed, it seemed also to be shaping her mind, maximizing it, bringing it to its full potential. She was now able to read far more quickly, comprehend on many more levels. The work, which would once have left her confused and frustrated, now fascinated her. She continued to read, glancing occasionally at the door, waiting for Theroen.

* * *

Two's ears picked up the noises several minutes before her brain truly became aware of them. Shuffling from down the hall. Heavy breathing. They came not from the direction of Abraham's chambers, but from Melissa's.

She glanced at her watch. It had been more than ninety minutes since Theroen had left. If he did not return soon, Two would have to go hunting without him. She stood, set the book on the table, crept out the door, edging toward Melissa's room. She hoped to determine which of the two women inhabited the body before making her presence known.

The cry startled her not only because it was unexpected, but because the voice belonged neither to Melissa, nor Missy. It was a woman's voice, gasping for air and begging. Two heard fear in the voice, but also pleasure, longing, desire.

"No. Please wait!"

Two crept toward the door, curiosity overwhelming her. Light shone from the interior of Melissa's room, spilling gold and amber onto the carpeting of the hall. Two glanced through the crack, into the room, eyes wide. On Melissa's bed lay a girl about Two's age, naked and sweaty, bleeding from a wound on her neck, and another near her navel. She had straight dark hair and brown skin, broad hips, heavy breasts. Melissa, or Missy, was straddling her, unclothed as well. There was blood on her lips and chin.

"Wait?" It was obviously Missy. The tone of the voice was enough. "Do you *really* want me to wait?"

The girl was stammering, panting, staring up at Missy with huge, confused eyes. Missy didn't give her a chance to form a coherent answer, but reached instead behind her, between the girl's legs. The girl cried out, arched her back, immediately matched the movement of her hips to the rhythm of Missy's hand. She leaned her head back, gasping, baring her throat. Missy moved her head down without hesitation, feeding. Two felt her own hunger roar to life despite her horror. The blood, the sex; she could smell them on the air. Missy pulled away again, licking her lips.

"I can't finish you tonight, but I can start you. Theroen thinks he can leave me here by myself. Fuck him. You're mine, Samantha."

Samantha looked up at her, semi-conscious, dazed from passion and lack of blood. Her nipples were dark, engorged with blood, standing hard, and Two noticed that there were bite marks on her breasts, too. A gold chain hung around her neck, its small crucifix pendant currently shoved aside, dangling in Samantha's left armpit.

"Drink," Missy said, and ran a sharp fingernail across her own breast. She lowered it to Samantha's open mouth. The girl latched on to it like a child intent on feeding. Missy gasped, turned her head, and caught sight of Two. Their eyes seemed locked. Missy smiled, but in those eyes there was only malice.

"Mine," she said.

Two turned and walked back to her room on legs that felt numb.

* * *

Three and a half hours had passed since Theroen's departure. The hunger was gnawing at Two, but she was afraid to leave her room. Afraid that Missy might be waiting for her, might be looking to show off the awful progeny she was creating. Would her blood taint the girl's mind? Would she and Theroen find themselves now the only sane beings in an even larger brood of vampires?

The door to her room opened. Two whirled, expecting Missy, unsure of what she might do to avoid confrontation. Theroen stood there instead, looking at her, calm as ever. "You waited."

"You ... we ... there's a problem, Theroen. It's bad. Really bad. Something really bad is happening."

Theroen nodded. His expression didn't change. "I am aware of it."

"But you didn't stop it?"

"I wasn't able to. I was with Abraham. I believe he knew."

He came into the room, sat down in a chair, looked out the window. Two waited for him to explain.

"There is nothing to explain," Theroen said after a while. "Abraham knew, yes. I'm sure of it. He knew where Missy was, and what she was doing, and now there's another half-vampire lying unconscious in a cell in the basement, and Melissa's been crying for the past hour."

"Melissa?"

"Missy let her back in, as soon as she'd done it. Melissa woke up naked, lying next to the girl. It didn't take her long to figure out what had happened, but she couldn't make herself kill the girl. Perhaps it's maternal instinct. Perhaps it is Missy exerting her will. I do not know, but Samantha is her child now."

"Couldn't she just leave? You said that half-vampires eventually revert."

"They do. It doesn't matter. They are bonded now. What will the girl do, if we take her somewhere and leave her lying unconscious? She will wake up and return home. Missy will eventually wrest control of the body away from Melissa. When she does, she will go to the area of the city where the girl lives. Tracking her from there will be simple."

"So what do we do?"

Theroen laughed. There was little humor in the sound. "Yes. What do we do? We go hunting. Then I go to Abraham and tell him what he already knows, and find out how he wishes me to proceed."

"Would he care?"

"I do not know. The possibility exists that this is some sort of test, or lesson, or final parting gift. He might tell me to do nothing. He might tell me to slaughter the girl. To be honest, I'm not sure what the best course of action is. He may have arranged this entire event, that he might exercise one last bit of control over me before I abandon him forever."

"Would you do it?"

Theroen's gaze did not leave the window. He shrugged. "She might well be better off. Melissa would certainly be better off. In truth, it might be better for all

involved if my parting gift to Abraham was to slaughter those of his descendants whom I am not taking with me.”

“Theroen, no! Melissa? She ...”

“She shares her mind with something that has become progressively stronger with each passing day. Something evil that was never meant to be. Something that is slowly taking over the body that once was hers.”

He turned to Two. “The question is not whether Melissa will die, Two. It is whether she will die by my hand, or Abraham’s, or Missy’s. She will eventually be absorbed. This leaves Tori, who is almost certainly better off dead, and the half-vampire in the basement, whose name I do not even know.”

“Samantha.” Two’s lips felt numb.

Theroen looked at her, and there was a momentary dizziness. Two’s vision swam, and images of the events with Melissa seemed to flicker past behind her eyelids. Then it was over.

“Yes, Samantha. My apologies, Two. I should have asked before doing that.”

“Doing what?”

“Normally I receive thoughts passively. I shut most of it out, in fact, for a variety of reasons. Occasionally though I harvest. In this instance, I’m now aware of what you saw and heard.”

“How do you do this stuff, Theroen?”

Theroen shrugged. “All thought is energy. All energy can be harnessed. I do not know how my mind does it, only that it can.”

“Theroen ... what do we do?”

He sighed. “My largest concern is not determining Abraham’s desire, but whether I should carry out those actions regardless of his wishes. The people who will be left in this mansion, Two, are largely better off dead. Melissa knows this. She’s known it for years.”

“That’s why she cried last night. When you finished me.” Two felt cold and frightened. She felt as if some momentous event was taking place, something beyond her ability to control.

Theroen nodded. “Your birth into darkness was the beginning of the end. It was the beginning of the end of everything she has ever known.”

* * *

Two could hear muffled sobbing as they left her room. She turned instinctively toward the sound, but Theroen's hand guided her back toward the staircase.

"There's little we could do for her right now, Two."

Two looked up at him, angry. "You're talking about your *sister*, Theroen."

He closed his eyes; put his hand on his forehead. "I know exactly whom I am talking about, Two."

"The person you've shared a hundred and forty years with."

"I know, Two."

"The least you could do is ..."

"Is what?" Theroen asked, looking up at her. There was anger in his eyes, and his voice was strained. "Sit next to her? Hold her hand? Tell her everything is going to be okay? Is that what I should do?"

Two was taken aback.

"I have hated myself, Two, for things broken that I could not repair, for three hundred and fifty years. *Hated* myself. I know now what I must do, and may God forgive me for it, because I will never forgive myself. Melissa knows I am to be her destruction. We were waiting only for the catalyst. The thing that would cause me to flee from Abraham's grasp. It was inevitable.

"You are that catalyst, Two. All I can think about is our life together. It is in my mind always. I want to take you away from this. From Abraham and Tori and Missy. I want to show you what we can truly be, as Lisette once showed me. This means leaving Melissa, and for that I am truly sorry, but I cannot help myself. I must go. The final act of this little farce that Abraham created has come.

"How can I give her any comfort? What is there to say? It is remarkable that Melissa does not hate us both."

Two was silent. She could feel her eyes going hard and wet the way they always did when tears threatened. Theroen could not meet her gaze. He kept trying, and was having no success. This somehow made it worse. When he spoke, there was sorrow in his voice. And regret. And defeat.

"I should have told you. I ... Two, I'm sorry. Living for so long, it's blinded me. I act as I wish without considering others. Even when I told you I was giving you a choice, I failed to tell you what it was you were choosing. I never even thought to do so, and I apologize. Your choice did not doom Melissa ... that had already happened. It did, though, set the end in motion.

"I will understand if this changes your opinion. You are *Eresh-Chen*. You can be human again if you wish. You can take that choice back. I will not stop you."

Two looked at him, angry and in love, horrified and filled with despair. At last she spoke.

“I want to meet Tori.”

Theroen turned and was finally able to meet her gaze. He seemed surprised. “Two, I explained—”

“Now, Theroen. I want to understand what I am.”

“Tori is nothing like—”

“Tori is *everything* like me! No, let me finish. You’ve given me this gift. I asked for it. I don’t want to give it back. You’ve let me see through vampire eyes, taste with a vampire’s tongue. You’ve let me run like a vampire, and feed like a vampire, and fuck like a vampire, and I *love* it, Theroen, but you haven’t shown me what I really am.

“Whatever’s inside me, it wants blood. Right now, it wants blood very badly. It wants to rip, and tear, and hate. That thing is the same thing inside of Tori, the most pure it’s ever going to be. I want to see her, Theroen. I want to know what’s inside of me. I want to see it all laid bare, and I want to see it *now*.”

Theroen contemplated this for a moment, shrugged, sighed.

“So be it.”

* * *

The moon was like daylight to her eyes. The forest, which might have seemed foreboding to a human, gave Two no pause. Forests in the night were filled with predators, and there were none out this night greater than she and Theroen. They had been walking the grounds for thirty minutes. Theroen did not call for Tori, and it was obvious he knew where he was going. At times he would pause, change direction, and move forward again.

“Tori doesn’t stay still, and she doesn’t know we’re looking for her yet,” he explained. “I could call, but it would do no good. I can sense her, though. We will catch up eventually.”

At length they reached a small clearing. Here, Two saw, were paths carved into the ground from the frequent passage of some creature, like a dog that runs patterns into its yard. From the woods not far away, Two heard growling. The sound was low and guttural, the noise of a large jungle cat.

“Tori. Come.” Theroen said, standing in the middle of the clearing. He gave off no palpable sense of fear, but Two thought she could hear some measure of concern in his voice.

The creature that stepped from the bank of trees in front of them moved in a manner unlike anything Two had ever seen. The changes that vampirism had brought to Tori manifested themselves in a far more physical manner than Two had expected. On all fours, the girl moved with feline grace, sliding slowly into the clearing, eyeing them cautiously and growling. She stopped perhaps twenty feet from them, staring, teeth bared. Two shivered.

"She's not pleasant to be around," Theroen commented. He put a hand on her shoulder. "Introduce yourself. Be polite."

"Hi, Tori ... I'm Two. It's, uh ... nice to meet you," Two said. She heard the nerves in her own voice, and hated herself for it. Tori stared at her, then suddenly opened her mouth and howled. Two flinched, but held her ground.

"She's testing you. Stand still. If she charges, I will take care of you." Theroen's voice was a whisper, or perhaps nothing more than a thought on the wind.

Tori moved in a wide arc around them, eyes never leaving Two. She was naked and filthy, her long hair – blonde like Two's – matted with dirt. Her teeth were more pronounced than in the other vampires Two had met, long and curved and deadly. She sat back on her haunches, watching Two. The eyes conveyed an intelligence and awareness far greater than Two might have guessed.

Two sat down in the grass without thinking, meeting Tori's gaze. She held her hands out, palms up, in front of her. "I don't want to hurt you, Tori. I want to meet you."

Tori cocked her head, rolled her body forward into her walking position, and moved a few feet toward Two.

"You're playing with fire," Theroen said from behind her. "She's very fast."

"If she kills me, she kills me. Maybe that's how it's supposed to go."

Theroen murmured something inaudible. Tori was now only a few paces away, looking curious. Theroen shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and Tori immediately backed up a pace, eyeing him with concern.

"Go sit on that rock, Theroen." Two indicated by tilting her head slightly to her left. The rock jutted from the ground near the edge of the woods, twenty meters away.

"Two ..."

"She's not scared of you, exactly, but you definitely make her edgy. I don't want that. Go."

Theroen again said something under his breath, but Two thought she could hear a smile in his voice, fighting against his concern. He moved toward the

rock. Tori took another step backward, watched him as he went, turned her attention back to Two.

“You’re nothing if not stubborn, my love,” Theroen said.

“Got that right. Now, Tori, do you want to say hello?”

Tori took a few steps forward. Two could see the muscles in her legs, tense, ready to spring or run if necessary. Two continued to hold her hands out, and Tori sniffed them, seeming to relax. She sat back, cocked her head again, appraising Two.

“Hello, Tori.”

Tori made a sound that started low in her throat and became a high-pitched whine. To Two, it sounded like a dog yawning.

“How does it feel, not having to worry, Tori? How does it feel to kill, and eat, and not think twice about it? No guilt. No sadness. No concern. How does that feel?”

Tori looked at her, unable to comprehend. She scratched behind her ear briefly, followed the flight of a bat with her eyes, then looked back at Two.

“Must feel pretty good, I bet. You hungry, Tori?”

Two brought her finger to her new, sharp teeth, and bit it. Blood welled immediately. She held her hands back out to Tori.

“You’re going to give me a heart attack, Two.” Theroen’s voice held more tension than she had heard at any time since her encounter with Abraham.

“Your heart’s strong, Theroen. You’ll survive. Go ahead, Tori.”

Tori moved her head forward, licked Two’s finger once, twice, and then abruptly moved her head away.

“You’re a killer, Tori. Take it. Take what you want. If you’re going to kill me, then kill me. I refuse to be afraid of you, so kill me now, or I guess we’re going to have to be friends.”

Tori looked again at Two’s outstretched hand, then reached up, bit her own finger, and held it out to Two.

“Okay, Tori.”

Two touched her lips to Tori’s outstretched hand and tasted blood, fire on her tongue. Her hunger leapt awake, but she too pulled her head away.

“Just a couple of killers out in the forest, that’s us, right Tori?” Two was smiling, but she could feel tears making cool tracks on her hot cheeks. “Just a couple of vampires getting to know each other ... getting to know who they really are.”

She felt Theroen beside her. Tori glanced at him briefly, but did not shy away. Theroen’s concern had dissipated, and in turn Tori no longer seemed to

regard him as a threat. He sat down in the grass next to Two, and she leaned against his shoulder, still looking at Tori.

“I wish I was like her.”

“Do you?”

“She’s perfect. She doesn’t care. Melissa, Missy ... they’re the same person to her. Who’ll take care of her when they’re gone?”

“I had thought she was not long for this earth, Two. Now? I am not so sure. She seems to have accepted you. Perhaps Abraham might permit us to take her.”

“Good. I understand her. I wish I was like her. Oh, God, Theroen, how do you stand it? Is it always this much ... tragedy?”

“No, not like this, but there is always some tragedy, Two, and always some joy, and I am sometimes thankful for both. It reminds me of what it was like to be a human. You want to know what you are, Two? You are a killer. You are a vampire. You are a force of nature, like the girl sitting before us. You are cursed, and you are blessed, just like Tori. She will never know the things we know, feel the things we feel. That is her blessing. That is her curse.”

Two smiled at Tori. Tori smiled back, then turned suddenly, loped off through the grass, making high yipping sounds. In seconds she was gone. After a moment more, Two stood. The cut on her finger had already healed, but the thirst still burned within her.

“Let’s go into the city, Theroen. I’m hungry.”

They left the clearing, moving back toward the mansion. Overhead, the moon looked down on them, cold and distant.

* * *

There was no need to find a criminal this time. Two was ravenous, and beyond caring. “I’m fucking starving. Whatever’s close. I’ll hate myself in the morning, but right now I don’t care if it’s a virgin girl about to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Force of nature, right?”

Theroen had nodded, and headed for the city, the Ferrari roaring beneath them. There was little said during the drive. Both were occupied with their own thoughts, reflecting on the recent events at the mansion. Was there any way to avoid the coming storm?

Eventually Two sighed, closing her eyes and leaning her head back against the seat. Theroen took her hand momentarily, squeezed it.

“This is going to drive me crazy, Theroen.”

“I’d rather you not let it. We have a surplus in that area already.”

Two let herself smile a little. “I don’t think Tori’s actually that nuts. She’s just ... stripped raw. I’m also not sure she’s as unaware of what’s going on as you guys think. That bit with the blood was pretty impressive.”

Theroen shrugged. “It is possible. Tonight is the longest she’s ever allowed me to be close to her.”

Two fed on an older woman returning from a late night at work. There was little ceremony, this time. She simply followed the woman into her building, attacked her in the stairwell, and she and Theroen pulled the body up and into the woman’s apartment, where they left it. Theroen fed from a neighbor, a woman in her mid-twenties whose cats were petrified of him, left her lying flushed and feverish in her bed, and they departed.

“Why did we come so far, if it was that easy?” Two asked.

“You will need to be careful with your eating habits for some time, Two. Most vampires do not stop killing out of some misguided sense of morality, but for personal protection. Sixty thousand people die every year in the city and the surrounding area. It makes for good cover. But even a small portion of vampires, killing a victim per night, would rapidly raise suspicion. Fortunately, like I said, those of our strain are the only vampires that need so much blood for so long. There are not many of us.”

“Why not?”

“We breed differently. Unfortunately, I do not know all of the specifics. There is very much that Abraham never bothered to teach me, and that Lisette did not have time to. I believe she may actually have withheld a great deal from me, in order to protect me until I had grown stronger.”

“Lisette.”

Theroen sighed, and nodded. “Lisette. Yes. I never did finish that story. There are nearly forty years I could talk about, but most of that is empty details. A lot of hunting. A lot of sex. Fond memories, but I wish we’d done more with the time.”

“I think just about everyone does, Theroen.”

“Yes, I think so, too. Where did I leave off?”

“She left you that first night, and you went home.”

“Ah. Home. Home to sleep. Home to wait. For night ... for Lisette.”

* * *

Theroen made his way back to the dwelling where he spent most of his time. Though he had started his life as a vampire living in tombs, this was simply

meant to be a lesson from Abraham. After a week or two of sleeping on cold slabs, Abraham had brought Theroen to his home, a large estate on the outskirts of the city. Theroen thought perhaps the lesson was that Abraham could provide better than what Theroen could manage on his own.

Theroen, already falling into the anger and hatred that would consume him for the next ten years, took from his sire only the knowledge that he did not need to live in the graveyard. Within six months he had left Abraham and acquired his own apartment in the city. Abraham was apoplectic. Theroen didn't care. "Kill me then," he had told the elder vampire. "Do what I now wish you had done that first night. I am damned now, so what does it matter?"

Abraham had not killed him, had let him go. "You will return, Theroen. Wait and see. Fledgling vampires need their masters more than they realize."

Thus far, Abraham had been wrong. Theroen saw him only occasionally, when he needed vampire blood. Abraham gave it, to Theroen's surprise, although not without complaint. He would insist that Theroen was being foolish, putting himself in needless danger. Theroen would simply listen in silence, waiting for the blood, and Abraham would eventually grow tired of sermonizing.

Theroen saw no reason for this to change. After the initial surprise and fear of this chance encounter with the vampire named Lisette, he had been unsure whether to continue on his path toward Abraham's home, or to turn back toward his own. Eventually he realized the truth of her words; if she had wanted Theroen dead, he would be dead by now.

With that realization, he found himself no longer concerned for his safety. He turned and moved back the way he had come, mulling over the events of the evening. Lisette's refusal to believe his claims of evil and darkness, the sudden awakening of his sexual appetite. Lost in a sea of thought, Theroen wandered. Contemplated.

Lisette was the polar opposite of the only other vampire he had known. Was it possible that there could be more to the afterlife than the pursuit of darkness? Was this why he resisted Abraham's tutelage? Was it his horror at his own, lost soul that made him lash out so at humanity?

It seemed he could smell her on the wind, but her presence was gone from his mind. Lisette. Her accent was French.

Theroen smiled a small smile, and looked up at the stars.

* * *

The next night saw no sign of her. Theroen fed lightly, a single girl. No performance, no sexuality. He found the girl in a darkened alley, took her before she was even aware of his presence, moved on. He wandered, waiting for Lisette, but Lisette did not come.

Two days. Three. His frustration mounted. Theroen began to wonder if he had simply hallucinated the entire event. It seemed unreal to him now, this visit from a creature of such power and beauty. Four days. Five. The anger began to rise again within him. The hate cried out to him. Let go. Give up. On the sixth day he took two women, watched them bring each other to the heights of pleasure, cut their throats like sacrificial lambs, and hated himself for it.

Seven, eight, and the memory of laughter like bells in the night was fading rapidly. A chance encounter, if it had happened at all.

He lost count, descending again into rage. Nights of red haze, lashing out against God and his creations. Had she been so close to him? Had he felt the touch of salvation?

She visited him again on a cold night in October, as he wandered through cobblestone alleys, searching for prey, seething. Cats in the background, wailing at the night. The occasional shout, the noise of breaking glass. Drunks stumbled through the alleys around him, but they were men. Theroen did not feed on men unless desperate. He found their scent disagreeable.

The presence overwhelmed Theroen, his step faltered, and he came to a stop. It was like before; the sense of being watched, so specific, as if he could pinpoint the source. Theroen turned, looked up. Lisette sat on a small stone bridge that arched over the alley. She was dressed in a black velvet gown. He could see the white silk of her underclothes.

"Madame." Theroen's breath had vanished. His heart pounded, staccato in his chest.

"Hello, my good Mr. Anders. How are you this fine night?"

"The better for seeing you, milady." Theroen had regained his composure. He did not want another display of helplessness.

"You're seeing a bit too much of me at the moment, if the blood in your cheeks is any indication," she laughed, and in one easy movement dropped to the pavement, standing in front of him. Her eyes caught the moonlight like bits of jade.

"You seek to fluster me, lady," he said.

"I seek nothing at all, Theroen, except to be in your presence. You are not like most of the others. You burn with goodness. It ... warms me."

Theroen felt anger. How could this woman see in him anything of value? He sought to shock her. "Lady, this night I watched as a woman writhed naked in a pool of her own blood, too caught up in sinful ecstasy even to notice."

Lisette raised an eyebrow, smiled, her expression amused. She touched his arm, and Theroen felt the warmth of the touch through his jacket. His anger, his fear, melted. He felt again a throb of desire for the creature standing before him.

"You could at least have invited me along."

Theroen felt his jaw drop, astonished at this suggestion. He tried to stop it from doing so, but could not. Lisette laughed. "Would you like to walk with me, Theroen?"

Theroen was not at all sure he had a choice, but it wouldn't have mattered. He took her arm, and they proceeded out of the alley, into the late evening crowds. Lisette chattered at his side, seemingly happy to be out and on the arm of a young man.

"It's a lovely evening, don't you think? So many beautiful ladies. So many debonair gentlemen." She paused, as if waiting for acknowledgement.

"And yet, what are they to us, lady? They are cattle."

"That is your master speaking." Lisette glanced up at him. "Or your father, perhaps. I am not yet sure that one such as yourself might ever have a master."

"Abraham commands me."

"You defy him. You maintain your own dwellings. You do not join in his politics. His black magic. His evil."

"Milady, I do not understand how you differentiate his evil from my own."

"Your evil is a fabrication, brought about by too many years taking the word of priests as the only truth. You have been trained to see yourself as evil, even as a mortal. When you become a hunter of mortals, can that be anything but worse?"

"Is the tiger evil, Theroen? The shark that swims in the oceans? They take mortal life as a force of nature. They take mortal life as it suits them. Their souls are clean."

"My church ... would have me believe those creatures have no soul, lady."

"Your church would also have you believe that a man and a priest tempted into making advances upon his student also has no soul, would it not? Or at least, no soul worthy of salvation."

Theroen grimaced. "That it would."

"You see the world, the church, Abraham and Father Leopold in black and white, Theroen. There are so very many shades you do not see. You have been trained to look past them. Did Leopold not do good in his life?"

Theroen considered this. After some time, he nodded. The man had, indeed, performed more good deeds than Theroen could possibly count.

“Is that good invalidated by his carnal desires?”

“Yes. No, I ... Madam, I do not know.”

“You may call me Lisette, Theroen.”

“We’ve only just met ...”

Lisette laughed again, held more tightly to his arm, looked at him with her green eyes. “My young priest, I have been watching you for two years.”

Theroen’s mind looked back over the things he had done, or made mortals do for him, in the past few years. He tried to push these thoughts away. Lisette’s lips brushed his ear. “Why fight? Accept. Understand. My dear, you’re a very creative vampire! You’ve exposed many young ladies to the true pleasures of the flesh ... something this horribly repressed society might never have allowed them. More amazing, you’ve done it without knowing those pleasures yourself. Is it so wrong that you’ve shown them these things?”

“I did it out of hate.”

“Hate for them?”

“No, not for them.”

“Then for whom?”

“For myself. For what I am, what I allowed myself to become.”

“There is no reason to hate yourself, Theroen. You must understand that.”

Theroen shook his head, bewildered. “Lady – Lisette – everything you say flies in the face of what I have known my entire life.”

“Are you listening to me?”

“Yes.”

“And do you understand?”

“I am trying.”

Lisette shrugged. “Then all is well. Rome was not built in a day.”

“That may be true. I ... where are we going?”

They had moved away from the crowded streets, toward a part of the city that lay mostly in darkness. Lisette guided him along the cobblestone pathways, unerring, sure of her destination.

“My home, naturally.”

“Why?”

A small smile, nothing more.

* * *

They were greeted at the door by a young girl, maybe sixteen, pale with honey-colored hair and large grey eyes. A small, upturned nose, pink bow lips. Not a vampire. Theroen raised his eyebrows at this, but Lisette simply smiled her little smile, and nodded to the girl.

“Naomi.”

“Welcome home, mistress. Welcome, good sir.” The girl stepped aside, and Lisette led Theroen into a small, comfortably furnished room. A fire burned in a marble hearth on one end. Small couches were arranged in a semicircle on the other. Through a door to his left, Theroen saw a doorway leading to a dining room. To his right, a hall, leading most likely to bedrooms.

“This is Theroen. Theroen, Naomi. She is my companion.”

“You keep a human companion?” Theroen asked. He was trying hard not to look at the girl, trying not to sense the blood in her veins.

“I do. It is not unusual for Ashayt vampires to spend their time with humans, or even to live with them. Naomi tends the house, and in exchange I drink from her, on occasion.”

Naomi, standing in the corner, said nothing, only smiled. Her eyes were on the floor. Theroen glanced at her, then back at Lisette. “You can do that?”

“Certainly. Human beings heal, Theroen. Have you never cut yourself?”

Theroen shrugged. It had never occurred to him. He turned and addressed Naomi directly. “You ... enjoy this?”

“I live to serve my mistress.” Naomi’s tone was questioning. She seemed surprised that Theroen found this unusual.

“Liar.” There was mischief in Lisette’s voice. She touched Theroen’s arm, gaining his attention. “She lives for the pleasure.”

“To serve my mistress ... and for the pleasure,” Naomi admitted after a moment, a light blush touching her cheeks.

“Naomi has never given blood to a man, Theroen. Would you like to drink from her?”

Theroen considered this. “I’m afraid I might kill her. I have never left prey alive.”

Naomi’s eyes widened. Lisette laughed. “You will do no such thing. Naomi is not your prey. She is my attendant. Or perhaps my soubrette. Sit down, Theroen.”

She beckoned to the couch. Theroen sat, feeling confused and out of place. Lisette, to his right, motioned for Naomi, and the girl sat down to his left. He could hear her heartbeat, quicker than normal.

“You’re frightened of me.”

“No, milord.”

“No lies, Naomi.” Lisette’s voice was soft. Naomi blushed again.

“A bit, perhaps.”

“He’ll not kill you, Naomi. You have my promise. Theroen is *Eresh-Chen*. He is perfectly capable of restraining himself. This is not so different from giving me the blood, though you may find it ... more immediately gratifying.”

“Are there differences?” Theroen asked Lisette.

She curled her hand around his, leaned her head in close. Theroen could feel the push of her breasts against his arm. “Are there differences in the pleasures men give women, and those that women give each other, Theroen?”

“I would not know, milady.”

“Lisette.”

“Lisette, I know not.”

“Ah, that is unfortunate, and we will change it soon enough, my young priest. Drink. There is no reason to get Naomi so excited for nothing.”

Theroen looked at the girl. Naomi breathed deeply, returning his gaze with eyes that betrayed both nervousness and a small, burning desire. She arched her head to the side, and Theroen could see the beat of her heart below the flesh of her neck and felt himself consumed by a sudden, tremendous need. He leaned his head in close, kissed the spot, felt her heat below his lips. Naomi sighed.

Theroen felt Lisette’s grip on his hand change, moving it to Naomi’s breast. He cradled it, moved his thumb across it, felt her erect nipple below the fabric of her gown. Naomi gasped, moved her head, put her lips on Theroen’s, wrapped her arms around him.

For the first time in his existence, Theroen Anders let himself kiss a woman in passion. He felt her warmth against him, beating heart, shared breath, fire in the touch of her lips. Her tongue, small and insistent, pressed, turned the kiss warm and damp. He responded instinctively, biting down slightly. Naomi winced a moment, then kissed harder, and Theroen tasted her blood, hot in his mouth.

Lisette’s hand guided his. Naomi’s legs lay slightly apart, and Theroen slid her skirts up. He found bare skin underneath, ran a finger along one smooth thigh. Naomi adjusted her position, mouth still locked to Theroen’s, opened herself to him. Theroen felt the brush of hair at his fingertips, and then only heat, and wet. Naomi made a noise in her throat, pushed her hips forward, continued their kiss. Lisette’s lips were at his ear, whispering for him to drink. Drink. Take her blood and give her release.

Theroen moved his mouth from Naomi's, licking traces of blood from her lips, and placed it against her neck.

"Drink." Lisette. A whisper.

"Drink." Naomi. A plea.

Theroen bit down, as gently as he could, and pressed his hand against the smooth, warm, wet flesh at his fingertips. Naomi's reaction was instantaneous, violent, enough so that Theroen wondered for a moment if perhaps he had hurt her much more than his bite should have. She cried out, thrust her hips forward into his touch, over and over. Her hands made claws against his back.

Theroen drank, making an effort to resist the trance that wanted to blanket him, that would make him unable to stop until the girl's heart gave its final beat. He succeeded, drank only a few swallows, and detached himself from the girl, gasping.

Naomi laid back in a semi-swoon, hand at her neck, breathing ragged, eyes far away. Lisette reached across Theroen and adjusted the girl's skirts. Her touch seemed to register with Naomi, who looked around, groggy but aware.

"Good?" Lisette's voice held the air almost of an indulgent parent. Naomi nodded, trying to catch her breath. Lisette turned to Theroen, took his hand in both of hers.

"Good?"

Theroen shook his head, not in denial but in an attempt to clear it, licking blood from his lips. He stared out at the fire. "Everything previous seems distant and uninteresting," he said at last. Lisette laughed her musical laugh, kissing his fingertips.

"Then all is very well, indeed! Are you tired, Naomi?"

"Tired, yes, mistress. But ... if master Theroen is not finished, I ... would not object to indulging him further."

Lisette laughed again, clapping her hands, delighted. "Ah, my dear, asking for seconds so soon? Theroen will think you of low character!"

Theroen glanced around at this and smiled slightly. "I assure you, he thinks no such thing."

"It matters not. Naomi knows her character very well indeed. She is also much more tired than she is letting on. There is no time for further entertainment tonight."

Naomi, understanding this to be a dismissal, stood. She was unsteady on her feet, so Lisette helped her down the hall toward the bedrooms. Theroen watched the girl disappear into darkness, returning her small wave. Lisette

moved back to the couches, sat again next to Theroen, and looked at him for a time with her sparkling eyes, saying nothing.

Finally she asked, "Was that evil, Theroen?"

"Mil—Lisette, I don't know *what* that was."

"Ah, but that I can answer for you. It was but a small taste of what a vampire like yourself might experience. We are both of us blessed, Theroen."

"How so?"

"What Naomi just experienced is but a shadow of what more skilled ministrations can bring her, and that but a hint of what a vampire lucky enough to retain such human abilities can feel. I possess that gift, Theroen, and so do you. Think of the fun we shall have!"

Theroen stared at her, smiling. "Lisette, I believe if I contemplate that possibility overmuch, I may well never leave your side again."

"Then don't."

"Abraham—"

"Abraham is a black-hearted fool who understands nothing more than death. All that was human in him died during the change. He erroneously assumed the same would be true of you, my priest."

"And you believe otherwise?"

Lisette again left him to decipher only her smile.

* * *

Two's eyes were wide. The mansion was not yet near. Theroen had paused momentarily to glance at her and gauge her reaction.

"Am I boring you?"

Two laughed, shaking her head. "No. God, no. This is great. It's like vampire porn. 'The Erotic Adventures of Theroen, Chapter 1.' "

Theroen laughed at this. "Four hundred years would add up to many chapters indeed, but the truth is that much of it would sound the same. Sex may not grow tiresome for those involved ... at least, if they're good at it. But listening to stories about it only lasts so long."

"It's not even the sex, really. I know what that's like. It's the idea of you not knowing, I think," Two said.

"The loss of innocence, yes. People often find that arousing."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Greatly."

"Did you sleep with Lisette?"

“Not that night.”

“But eventually?”

“Oh, yes.”

* * *

For several months, Theroen spent every waking moment of his time with Lisette and Naomi. It took little time for Lisette to coax Theroen into the fullness of his own sexuality, and evenings frequently began with feeding, perhaps a show, and ended in lengthy stretches of passion. His early teachings came from Naomi, and with Lisette's guidance the two learned rapidly. Naomi took his virginity from him, gave him her own, in a bed of satin, Lisette's soft whispers a soothing backdrop to the heat of passion, the heat of blood.

After this, their lovemaking was frequent, spontaneous, shared. Theroen and Naomi, Theroen and Lisette, Lisette and Naomi, the three together. Naomi would be a fledgling someday, Lisette explained. Her body was young, yet, but the time was nearing. Naomi, for her part, was content for now with the ministrations of her vampire lovers.

Days blurred into weeks, weeks into months. Theroen saw nothing of Abraham, delved no further into the darkness that had held his soul for the past decade. Mental, physical, spiritual, Lisette was his teacher in all things, and found Theroen a most willing pupil.

A year. Another. A third. When Lisette brought Naomi to darkness, Theroen was there, watching like a proud father. The process was more difficult for her than it had been for Theroen, and Lisette explained that this was due to differences between the vampire strains. There was pain, but Naomi bore it, and in the end was nearly unchanged by the transformation. She gained strength, speed, the ability to see in the dark, but no evil touched her, and she did not lose her sexual abilities. She remained their constant companion, a fledgling learning from her mistress, and from her friend.

They made quite the trio, strolling the streets of London after dark, dressed in the latest fashions, hunting as it pleased them. There were events to attend. The theatre, the symphony, the opera. Time passed, as it does during the good times, in what seemed a blur.

In her third year of vampire life, Naomi discovered the pleasures of coupling with her victims before she fed. This was a bittersweet occurrence. Her time with both Theroen and Lisette became less frequent, much to their disappointment. She still lived with them, still enjoyed their company, but now

hunted alone, and most of her lovemaking was with humans. Simultaneously, this left more time for Theroen and Lisette to be alone together. They used it, growing ever more skillful in the pleasures they brought to one another. Naomi was a welcome addition when she wished to be, a companion otherwise.

More years. Five became ten, ten became twenty, twenty became forty. Abraham was a distant memory. Lisette, Naomi, they were reality. Theroen's companions. He had come to love his immortal life with them, to cherish it more than he could have thought possible.

But in the forty-first year of his new life, Theroen found these things he cherished, his entire world, shattered beyond repair.

* * *

It started in a grove of trees, under a full spring moon. Lisette and Theroen, walking in the park, talking quietly, warm from the kill. They entered a small grove, away from prying eyes. The glint in Theroen's eyes had made Lisette laugh. "Someone will call the constable!"

"Let them."

Skin against skin, lips at each other's necks, warmth flowing between them, growing to a fire. No one had called the constable. When it was through, they lay in each other's arms, saying nothing. Lisette stared at the moon.

When she sighed, there was melancholy in it, to Theroen's surprise.

"What is it, Lisette?"

"Theroen, sometimes I think I can see the future."

Theroen was unsure of how to respond. Lisette sighed again, put her forehead in the hollow between his neck and shoulder, kissed the skin there.

At last he could take the silence no longer. "What do you see?"

No words, for a long time, and then Lisette moved her head, rolled her weight on top of him so she could look into his eyes. There were tears in her own, a first from Lisette. He saw them drop, felt them land, cool on his cheeks. The moon reflected silver in the tracks on her face.

"Darkness, my love. All I see for us is darkness," Lisette whispered, and putting her head to his chest, she wept.

* * *

Thereon paused for a moment, took a deep breath. Two glanced over at him.

"This is hard for you. I'm sorry, Theroen. You don't have to tell it."

Theroen shook his head. "No, it is best that I do. I have kept this story to myself for hundreds of years, and I think perhaps this is why it is still so painful. If I could have brought myself to talk about it, I might have been able to heal. Modern psychology seems to bear that theory out."

"Could Lisette really tell the future?"

"She was certainly right in this instance. All there was for us, in the end, was darkness."

"What happened next?"

"Next? It's funny, in a way. What happened next was done to protect me. Ah, Two, I was young. I was so very young. I had lived for over sixty mortal years, yes, but forty of those were vampire years. They pass in a blur, and contain fewer lessons. There was no death to deal with, aside from the victims. No sickness. No worrying about occupation or supporting a family. There was nothing to make me into a man.

"Lisette knew this, I imagine; she knew how naive I was. Perhaps that is what made her love me. Lisette's strain is prone to depression, particularly after long stretches of immortality. She was more than eight hundred years old when I met her. I believe that Naomi and I became her anchors. Her reasons for living. She was terrified of what might happen to us, but equally terrified of pushing us away and being alone."

"What did she do?"

"She told me not to worry about it, to forget her words. I was confused. Upset. To be honest, I was frightened quite severely by this sudden change. I had never seen Lisette weep. In truth, I had never seen her give in to a weakness of any sort. To see her so distraught was disturbing, though I did my best to comfort her. I held her, and she clung to me in a panic for a time. I whispered in her ear that I would make things right, that all would be well. Eventually she regained her composure."

"Did she explain?"

Theroen shook his head. His voice betrayed more frustration than sorrow. "No. I attempted to learn more from her, but she would say nothing. She dismissed it as the emotional ramblings of a woman, and like a fool I accepted it. The calm, collected, unperturbed Lisette I knew was returning, and I was glad for it. Relieved. I took her at her word. This was a momentary emotional outburst."

"But it wasn't."

"No. And looking back on it now, it is obvious. Her entire demeanor changed after that night. She knew that the end was coming, and she hid that

knowledge to protect me. Ah, Two, I loved her. I loved her as I love you, but I am so angry with her, to this very day. Furious. Why did she not explain? Combined, prepared, we might have prevented it. There might have been some other alternative.”

“Sometimes people, even people who have been alive for hundreds of years, make mistakes, Theroen.”

Theroen nodded. “Indeed. It is not the mistake that frustrates me. I have only grief for that. It is the knowledge that, if she were here right now and presented the same choices, she would come to the same decisions. She would make the same mistake.”

“But she’s not here, now. Something happened, Theroen.”

“Isaac happened.”

“Isaac?”

“There were other vampires in London during the seventeenth century. Naomi and I did not know, because Lisette had never explained it to us, but there are rules among vampires. Laws. Lisette was breaking them, and by extension, so were we.”

“Normally, fledglings are in great danger if separated from their masters for any extended period of time. Even now, this is sometimes a problem. Rival vampires are likely to attempt to make an example of them. I was tolerated in my separation from Abraham in part because his power was so immense even then that there was concern over what his reaction might be, and in part because of my lineage. *Eresh-Chen*, first child in a line of first children, dating back to she who was the source of all vampires.

“Traipsing around with Lisette and Naomi, two vampires not of my bloodline who had, it seemed, stolen me from my sire ... this was not acceptable. Eventually, disapproval became dislike, and dislike became hate. Isaac used this hate in an attempt to further his own political position among the local vampires. He made an example of Lisette in a bid for power.”

Two looked out at the road ahead. Theroen was not driving at his normal reckless speed, as the road did not have his full attention, but they still drew near to the mansion. “Finish the story, Theroen? I want to know how it ends.”

Theroen nodded. “There is little left to tell, to be honest. Six more months of happiness – forced, on Lisette’s part – before it all ended. I said before that I had never really had call to become a man, in the forty years I spent with Lisette. I made up for that in one night. In one instant.

“When Isaac kicked the door to our apartment in, Lisette did not even flinch. She did not even look up, just continued to stare into the fire. I looked into

her eyes and I saw great sadness there, and great fear. I also saw acceptance, and understood that Lisette knew that her death had arrived. In that moment, Two, I aged those forty years.”

* * *

Theroen was on his feet, startled. The door to the apartment had been blown inward, shattered and destroyed. The hulking silhouette in the shadowy entrance did not move, only stared, pale blue eyes shining out at them. Lisette closed her eyes for a moment, touched a hand to her forehead, and turned her head to the door.

“Isaac.”

“Lisette.” The vampire took a step forward, into the light, and surveyed them. He looked for all the world like a Viking in Englishman’s clothing. Tall, well over six feet, with long blonde hair and a heavy blonde beard, Isaac’s vampire nature only added to his already formidable presence. He looked at them with an air that seemed almost detached. There was certainly no fear in him.

“I knew it would be you.”

“Ah. Who else? It is time to pay for your transgressions, Lisette. You must answer for what you’ve done, for thieving away the *Eresh-Chen* from his master. We will not stand for it any longer. You will release them, and come with me for judgment.”

Lisette shook her head. “I know your judgment already.”

“That may be. You will come with me regardless. Your fledglings may leave. The one you stole from Abraham will have his own judgment to face. The other will be ... watched with great interest.”

Theroen took a step forward, meeting the eyes of the vampire in the doorway. “We go nowhere without Lisette.”

“Theroen ...” Lisette’s voice was a whisper, the sadness behind it immeasurable.

“Mind your tongue, priest, lest you find it removed from your mouth.”

“You have no right—”

“Fledgling, do you know the concept of seniority? I have lived for more than a thousand years. I have every right, if for no other reason than it will bring me pleasure to see this one punished for her crimes.”

At this Lisette stirred, anger flashing in her eyes. “Crimes? Against whom? I swore no allegiance to your covenant, Isaac, nor that of any other. I am bound by no rules but my own. Your seniority matters not to me, nor does Abraham’s,

nor does Edward's. Eresh herself might give me orders and I would disobey as I see fit. I will not live by rules penned by the dead. *I will not!*"

Isaac seemed unruffled by this. His expression was amused, detached, a man only passingly interested in what he was hearing.

"You've made that obvious, Lisette. I would not be here otherwise."

"No. And you ... you live by rules written by dead vampires who could not have foreseen these times. The old ones are all dead, Isaac, or so disinterested in our affairs that they might as well be. Why do you cling still to their words? Why hold yourself to their useless laws?"

"*Sin challas est mura. Si mura vallas etruars.*" Isaac seemed to be reciting, as if the sentences had been drilled into him.

"I have read the scrolls, Isaac. *Without law there is chaos. With chaos comes destruction.* It is due to weaklings like yourself that those words hold true."

For the first time, her words seemed to have an effect on Isaac. He turned to Lisette, gaze smoldering, a sneer on his lips.

"Weaklings ..."

"Mark this, Isaac. You will be undone. You will know fear, and you will remember, in those moments before the eternal sleep, what I have said to you. You will know your weakness, and you will die in shame. That is your curse."

"I have been cursed by many, Lisette, in my years. Someday, perhaps, I will die. When I go down that black hallway, I will take pleasure in knowing that you went first."

Isaac moved forward swiftly, grinning, eyes aflame. Naomi shrieked something incoherent, and Theroen leapt out in front of the charging vampire, grappled with him, and was appalled at the strength in those arms. It was like wrestling iron. Lisette screamed his name, the word a desperate plea. Isaac made some noise that was halfway between a laugh and a snarl, grabbed for Theroen's hair, and by it threw him across the room. The back of Theroen's head collided with the marble slabs of the fireplace with a flat, harsh cracking noise, and he felt himself moving as though slipping slowly down an incline.

He heard more screams now, Lisette's, over and over, calling his name. Had Naomi's voice joined in with hers? Theroen couldn't tell. It seemed difficult to think. Difficult to breathe. There was the clink of chains, but it was all so dim, so quiet, so distant. Could he hear other footsteps? He thought perhaps the room was flooding with vampires, disciples who had been waiting only for a command from Isaac.

Theroen wanted to move, wanted to help his beloved, but he could not seem to gain control of his limbs, and everything had grown so dark. He slipped into this world of darkness, where nothing seemed to matter, and everything felt safe.

* * *

The blow would have shattered a mortal man's skull and sprayed its interior contents out across the marble. Theroen, no longer a mortal man, was left with nothing more than an hour of unconsciousness and a splitting headache upon awakening. An hour, though, was too much time. Too much time by far.

Lisette was gone. Naomi was gone. The apartment was dark, empty, abandoned; little more than shattered furniture and scrape marks against the walls were left to tell the story of what had happened. Theroen fled from it, stumbling through the pain in his head out into the night, into darkness. There was no sign of the other vampires, no clue to where they had gone.

Theroen shut his eyes, trying to concentrate through the throbbing, trying to feel Lisette's presence, as she had taught him to do. There was nothing for him, nothing but the echo of her words, over and over again, in time with the waves of pain and nausea. *Darkness, my love. All I see for us is darkness.*

Sick, frightened and helpless, Theroen felt his legs buckle, felt the hard cobblestones cut his knees, felt hot tears scald his face. He put his hands there, covering his eyes, and knelt in penitence, praying for salvation to a God in whom he no longer truly believed.

* * *

Theroen was silent, reflecting, lost in his memories. He had recounted this final part of the tale in a voice that was listless, almost dead. Two understood. With pain came emotional detachment. It was a survival instinct, and one with which her days with Darren had made her quite familiar.

She felt vaguely ill. She knew where all this led. There was no redemption. There was only three hundred and fifty years of darkness, followed by her arrival, which in turn had become the catalyst for events that seemed likely to end with more blood, more death, more despair.

"Not your fault, Two. Mine. Death and rebirth. With you I can be free, but as with anything else, there is a price I must pay first."

"How does this story end, Theroen?"

“I do not know. It is still ongoing. I can tell you how Lisette’s chapter ended, though not in great detail. I know from Abraham’s network of contacts that Lisette was burned alive, chained to a pillar with brush heaped around her. Of Naomi, I know not. The stories are confused ... conflicting. Some said she died with her mistress. Some said she was able to escape, to flee into the night. I desperately hope for the latter, but I hold little faith in it. In either case, I could never bring myself to track down the truth. It would have been painful enough to learn for sure that she was dead, and I fear that the judgment in her eyes, should she be alive, would be even more unbearable.”

“And what happened to you? To Isaac?”

“To me? You know the answer there. Lisette was gone. Naomi was gone. Isaac was more powerful than anything I had previously known, save Abraham.

“And so it was Abraham that I turned to.”

* * *

Theroen had not stood in front of the large stone dwelling that housed his father in nearly half a century. He could feel Abraham here and, as ever, that presence disgusted him. The throbbing in his head was distant now; it had faded away to an echo of pain over the course of the lengthy walk. His sire’s mansion loomed before him, Golgotha, the place of death.

Summing up his courage, Theroen walked up the path to the large double doors, rapped once, twice. There was no answer, but he felt the invitation as if on the breeze. Come in, come in. He opened the doors, stepped into the light that burned not for Abraham, but for appearance. Abraham’s quarters would be without light. There, down the hall where the torches lay dark.

Theroen stood outside the doors to Abraham’s sanctuary, wondering what he might say to this creature whose evil he had abandoned. Wondering what vengeance might be exacted for this betrayal.

There was a low chuckle from somewhere beyond the doors, and they swung open before him. All inside was blackness, save the embers of a small fire just inside the doorway. When the voice came, it was from the far end of the hall.

“And so, the prodigal son returns. Come in, Theroen.”

“Abraham. Father.” Theroen stepped into the darkness, and the doors shut behind him. The elder vampire laughed again.

“Oh, and now it’s ‘Father,’ is it? How very delicious. Now that the lover is on the slab, and the dream is over, the fledgling returns to his sire.”

Theroen felt his heart shudder at this. He shut his eyes for a moment, spoke into the darkness. "She is ... dead, then?"

"Surely she must be, no? Isaac is many things, but a procrastinator he is not."

"How much do you know? Could you not have stopped it?"

"Theroen. You never gave me time to *teach* you! You never wanted to be my son, not after that moment of weakness in the graveyard, after you were accosted by that idiot Leopold. The scrolls speak of many things, and one of them is this: the affairs of others are their own. Certainly, I could have interfered, but these are not my affairs. Your reluctance to be my son has made it so. What concern is any of this to me?"

"And so you did nothing."

Abraham laughed. "My son, my son ... why would I do else? Do we share a bond of love, that I would come from on high to rescue your beloved? No. You have spurned me from the first. Now you come to me with accusations. I am not the guilty party, Theroen. You have not earned the right for such salvation."

"But it was in your power to grant, as it is within your power to give me revenge."

"Many things are within my power. Light a candle, Theroen."

Theroen had no matches, and so used a branch from the fire. The light did little for the room, but he could see Abraham's face now, the heavy eyebrows overshadowing eyes which gleamed with malefic humor. Abraham looked like a wolf as it gazes upon a herd of sheep. Theroen found he preferred the darkness. Abraham seemed to sense this, and the gleam of his eyes was joined by firelight reflecting from his grin.

"You will never be like me, Theroen."

"No, father."

"And yet, some part of me is pleased with your return. A deal, Theroen?"

"Go on."

"Be my fledgling. Be my servant. Be what you were supposed to be when I made you. Remain here with me, or wherever I may choose to go, until such time as you are of age. Perhaps in a handful of centuries, you will be ready. Some fledglings never leave their masters. My blood runs in you, though, and you are powerful ... or will be.

"Now, though? Now you are weak, and in need of a master not so easily dispatched."

"What do I receive for this service?"

“Ah. Yes. The deal. My end of our little ... bargain. Remain with me here, Theroen, prove your loyalty, and perhaps I will look more kindly upon you. Perhaps I will see your plight with Isaac in more sympathetic light.”

“Perhaps? It seems an unbalanced arrangement, father.”

“I do not think, my son, that you are in a position to make any demands at this time. I will assuage your doubts, however. I am many things, and most of those are evil. Wicked. Hateful. I hold no love for any vampire. I hold no respect for the scrolls, short of how I may use them to my advantage. Isaac and I are bound to come into conflict. I know of his foolish politics. He would oust all competition and gain control of London. I could leave, or simply ignore him, but I could be persuaded to take a more ... active interest.

“Serve me now, Theroen, and when that time comes I will give you not only Isaac’s head, but those of his entire line.”

Theroen was young, still gripped by mortal concepts like revenge. Still able to hate. He felt this hatred now, burning hot like something molten inside of him.

“Ah, son, such emotion! Isaac has left you alive. Would you not give him the same courtesy?”

“There is nothing else left for me, without her, but my hate. Isaac took from me everything I had. I would not.”

“Then we have a deal?”

“We do, father.”

There was a moment of quiet as the two vampires surveyed each other. At last, Abraham turned back to whatever lay on the desk, beyond the reach of the light.

“Put out the candle. There is a room for you in the west wing. I shall call upon you tomorrow.”

Theroen, as he would for centuries thereafter, did what he was told.

* * *

“And that is all there is, or nearly so. I could tell you lies. I could tell you that I worked for goodness, even in Abraham’s service, but that is hardly true. I’ve done many things that humans would consider evil for Abraham, and I regret very few of them, beyond bringing Melissa and Tori to him. I held my own goodness close. I would not tarnish Lisette’s memory by returning to my former ways.

“I was hated, greatly, by some for my continued existence after my transgressions with Lisette. Abraham’s power protected me where hers could not,

and in time, my own was more than adequate for the task. Of those vampires left that might be capable of bringing about my destruction, none care enough anymore to bother. The old hate is gone.”

Two stirred, stretched, felt the rush of air through her fingers. She should be freezing, driving in late November with the top down. The only cold she felt was internal.

“Isaac?” she asked at last.

“Isaac. Yes, Isaac died badly. I was present for it, but I found that I took little real pleasure in his destruction. A certain ... mortal need for revenge was served, but after that I had before me only endless years as Abraham’s servant.

“Lisette’s words proved true, though. Isaac knew fear. He knew his weakness, and he died in shame. Abraham had him bound and gagged, hung upside-down, so the blood would go to his head and keep him alive while his skin was flayed from his body and he was unmanned and disemboweled.

“Abraham brought out his children, his fledglings. Isaac had three of them. And in front of him, while he wept, Abraham cut their heads from their bodies and burned them to ash. I was not sorry. All three had taken part in Lisette’s abduction.

“At the end, when Abraham removed his gag, Isaac could not even speak coherently. Terror, sorrow, and pain had combined to rob him of his senses. He wept and pleaded, some of the words in the vampire language that Abraham has never allowed me to learn, and Abraham did him a favor and cut his head from his body.”

“Jesus ...”

“It was something less than pretty. I watched from a distance, but I made sure Isaac could see me. Oh, I made very sure of that. I am not proud of these things, Two, but I do not regret them, either.”

Two was quiet for a moment, thinking the story over in her mind. What would it be like if someone swooped in and took Theroen from her now? How could she go on?

Theroen smiled at this. They were very near the mansion now.

“Two, there is no one left to do so. Abraham has known for many years now that the time of my leaving was imminent. He does not have to like it, but he will permit it.”

To Two, this was somehow little comfort.

* * *

They rounded a corner, and the mansion came into view. Two felt a sudden surge of adrenaline, followed by a slow, crawling dread. Theroen grimaced. At the end of the driveway, nearly hidden in shadow, stood a massive black figure that could only be Abraham. The Ferrari moved up the gradual slope of the long hill, and the creature's face came into the headlights. The light seemed to shy away from him, illuminating his features only grudgingly.

Two felt locked in place, unable to move. Theroen shut off the car, and Abraham was plunged once again into darkness.

"I have awaited your arrival, my son." Abraham's voice was less heard than felt, like slugs crawling through Two's head.

"Have you, father? I thought I had fulfilled my duties for the evening."

"Yes. Yes, well enough. There is much we must talk about."

"It would appear so. You are aware of Missy's transgression, then?"

"I was aware while it happened, Theroen. You know this."

Theroen nodded. "With respect, father, may we talk in private?"

"You would not expose your pretty fledgling to me any more than is necessary, would you, Theroen? Afraid of corruption, perhaps?"

Theroen said nothing. Abraham smiled, fangs reflecting silver-white moonlight from amidst the shadow of his face. His eyes burned red, that same dark humor behind them.

"Very well. If your daughter, or lover, or whatever it is you've made of her, can move, she is free to do so."

Two realized that this creature was reveling in her obvious fear, and it was this, more than anything else, that gave her the strength to get up. She moved on wooden legs away from the door, wanting to glance back at Theroen, afraid to do so. As she passed behind Abraham, she felt his mind touch hers once, like the dirty groping fingers of a licentious old man. The feeling reminded her very much of her time working clients for Darren, and her instincts lashed out, angry, against it.

Abraham turned casually toward her, and with what seemed no more than a flick of his wrist, grabbed her shoulder and whirled her around to face him. The force was immense, nearly dislocating the joint and Two hissed at the pain that lanced through her. Abraham's touch revolted her, burned into her skin through the thin leather jacket like hot iron. The sight of his eyes drained her of anger, left only a numb fear unlike anything she had felt before. Primitive, primeval, beyond consciousness. She wanted to weep, to cry out, to do anything but look at this thing before her.

“Do not forget whose blood runs in your veins, my dear, impudent little bitch. Your lover may defy me, on occasion. He has earned that right through time and service. You have not.”

“Father ...” Theroen’s voice was strained, not with fear this time, Two thought, but with something beyond loathing. Two’s vision began to swim, and she realized she had not taken a breath since Abraham had laid his hand upon her. She tried now, and found she could not. Her eyes, her lungs, were locked by Abraham’s gaze. Adrenaline coursed through her body, her heart beating furiously, but to no avail. The world began to go grey, and Two felt her legs weakening.

“If you kill her, Abraham, be prepared to kill me as well. I shall surely attempt to do so to you.” Theroen’s voice held no tension, now, only a cold, deadly seriousness.

At this, Abraham grinned, and took his eyes away from Two. She slumped to the gravel, gasping for breath, head throbbing sickly. Theroen made to help her up, and Abraham put a hand out, restraining him.

“Come, my son. Walk with me. Two is *Eresh-Chen*, now. She can find her way to her feet on her own.” He walked toward the edge of the grounds, where grass met forest, as if a refusal were impossible.

Theroen cast a glance at Two, and she nodded, motioning him away. She had drawn herself into something of a sitting position, propped up on her arms, legs stretched out to her side. She thought she would very soon be sick, and she didn’t want Theroen to see it. His jaw clenched momentarily, his hate for Abraham clearly visible on his face. Then it was gone, replaced with that same calm that she had seen so many times before. He nodded, turned and followed his father.

When they were safely out of sight, Two struggled to her feet. She managed two steps, head still thudding, enough to lean against the wall of the mansion’s garage as she coughed and dry-heaved. Her body had already absorbed the night’s blood, and after a few more attempts, it gave up trying to expel what wasn’t there. Two leaned against the wall for a few moments longer, shuddering, waiting for the awful, spinning blackness at the edges of her vision to clear. In time, it did, and she shuffled her way into the mansion.

* * *

Chapter 5

A Tooth for a Tooth

The mansion. The next evening.

Two was used to this new style of waking, now. Instantly alert, instantly aware. She stretched, ran a hand through her hair, and sat up, looking around the empty room. Theroen had not returned before sleep had taken her the night before, and he was not here now.

The house had been devoid of life when she had entered it the previous evenings. Melissa's room was dark and empty. No noise came from the cell in the basement. Two had made her way to the room she shared with Theroen, exhausted and shaken from her encounter with Abraham, and promptly collapsed into unconsciousness.

A shower seemed like a good way of prolonging the time before she would have to leave the room and face the dark things growing outside. Two sighed, padded her way to the bathroom on bare feet, and lost herself for a time in torrents of warm water.

* * *

One of the televisions downstairs was on. She could hear it as she left the bathroom. Two pulled on clothes, ran a brush through her hair, and departed. She descended the arching staircase and turned into the room she had come to think of as the media center. Large televisions, three of them, each at least four feet tall, lined one wall. Discreet wooden units housed their audio components. Couches were arranged in front of the screens. Most of the clutter that seemed to choke the rest of the mansion was missing from this room, perhaps because it was one of the few areas of the building that received frequent use.

Theroen reclined on one of the couches, and his presence confirmed that it was Melissa who sat on another. Two found it unlikely he would tolerate Missy, particularly given recent events.

As if to confirm this, Melissa turned to her and spoke. "We were wondering if you were ever going to wake up." She tried for a smile, managed something like one, and then looked away. Two sat down next to Theroen, who adjusted his position to allow her to recline against his chest. He said nothing.

"It was a long night," Two said.

"Tell me about it." Melissa sighed, shook her head.

"I'm sorry, Melissa. For whatever that's worth."

Melissa offered her another smile, sad, but more sincere than the last.

"I know. We need to talk about it, don't we?" she asked. Theroen nodded. Two felt the movement. Melissa bit her lip, glanced at the TV, muted it.

"Where do we start?" Two questioned. Melissa shrugged. Theroen sighed.

"Let's begin with a lesson on vampire biology," he said. "How do you feel right now, Melissa?"

"Exhausted," Melissa admitted, after a moment.

Theroen nodded. "Indeed. Certainly not in any shape to undergo the rigors of finishing the process that was started last night. In fact, your blood is so weakened at the moment that the process would not even advance. Missy is, of course, unaware of this, but at best Samantha will remain a half-vampire for decades or centuries."

Two turned her head up to glance at Theroen. "Why?"

"Melissa's blood needs time to rejuvenate. But to remain a half-vampire, Samantha needs periodic infusions of that blood. Before Melissa could strengthen enough to complete Samantha's transformation, she will either have to give the girl blood in order to keep her a half-vampire, or allow her to revert. If she allows the latter, then when she again tries to make Samantha into a vampire, it will be to the same result. Melissa will not be prepared to create a fledgling for hundreds of years yet."

Melissa rolled her eyes. "Great."

"Such is the nature of our particular strain. This, of course, is the least of our current problems. It is just the most easily discussed. There are other things of which we need to speak, Melissa."

The dark-haired vampire on the couch across from them was quiet for a long time. Finally she said, "I've known Missy for a long time. There, I said it. I've never said her name before. Missy. I *hate* that name. I hated it before she even existed. But I knew her before she existed. She ... Abraham didn't create her, exactly. He just woke her up. She was just a dream before that; something that only came occasionally, and brought nightmares where I did awful things.

"I hated those dreams. Not because they were frightening, or awful, but because in the moments right after I woke up, I could feel her. I could understand the appeal. Christ, I'd wake up totally fucking aroused, like a part of me I couldn't feel when I was awake not only enjoyed the things in those dreams, but *got off* on them.

“The pain of the blood, Abraham’s blood ... it brought her out. It spoke to her like nothing I had ever allowed into my life. Once she woke up, she didn’t want to go back. She can’t take over ... not yet. She has to wait until I’m asleep. But she can keep me out for longer and longer each time, and she can let me back in whenever she wants. She’s stronger than I am. She spends more and more time with my body. Eventually, what happens? I wake up next to a half-vampire I don’t even know, and find out that it’s my blood that did it.

“So that’s when I really knew. This body is Missy’s. I’m just along for the ride until she beats me back completely. Then I’ll be the dream, I guess. Maybe I can give *her* nightmares.”

Two opened her mouth to say something, and could think of nothing to say. Melissa wasn’t telling them anything they didn’t already know. She was simply admitting the truth to herself.

Melissa was crying now, unable to look at them. “When you first told me about Two, Theroen, you said you thought you would stay here maybe twenty years. Twenty years? I’m not sure you’ll last another twenty days. I could never read people like you could, and I could *never* read you ... but I’ve been able to all the time for the last few weeks. Escape. Escape. It’s like a flashing neon sign in your head.

“And I can’t even b—bring myself to hate you for it. Either of you. It’s not your fault, and I know it, and that makes it so hard.”

Theroen stirred. Two shifted her weight, allowing him to sit up. He looked at Melissa and when he spoke, his voice retained its nearly ever-present calm, but there was deep sympathy in it, and an almost heart-breaking sadness. “A hundred and twenty years, Melissa. It comes and goes like the wind, and I hate myself for all of this, even if you cannot.”

“Don’t.”

Theroen shrugged. *It can’t be helped.*

“I don’t want her to win, Theroen, but she’s going to.”

Two spoke up. “Does she have to? Is there any other way?”

Theroen answered her. “I don’t know, Two. We have little time to find out.”

“Why?”

“There are two things eating away from our time here, my own desire to leave not included. The first is Samantha. She will wake, soon, and that will force a decision on her fate. A minor matter, perhaps. Perhaps not. The second is Abraham, who has instructed me of his desires. He wants us gone, Two, the sooner the better. As Melissa said, we will not be here another twenty days, but

not because of any desire on my part. He says he has grown tired of me. As for Missy, Samantha, Tori—he has told me that when we leave, we must not take them with us.”

Melissa made a quiet sobbing noise. She was not looking at them, was instead watching the silent images on the television.

“What if you killed Abraham?” Two stood up, paced back and forth a few times, then looked at Theroen. He raised his eyebrows, tilted his head slightly, said nothing.

“I’m serious. What would happen to you? To Melissa? To Tori and Samantha and me?”

“This is an unwise avenue of discussion.”

“Is he really that powerful? Is it impossible?”

“That and more. Abraham has studied long in vampire lore. He is very aware of his capabilities, and has pushed those boundaries further than perhaps any other living vampire. He revealed a rather startling talent to me last night, unwittingly I think, when he caught your breath. I knew that in close proximity, his power over others’ minds was significant, but I did not know that he could allow you full reign of your thoughts while controlling otherwise involuntary functions. I do not know how to do that, do not know how he did it, and do not know how to fight it.”

“Okay, but suppose somehow he died. We can’t kill him. Fine. But say tomorrow Abraham ... I don’t know ... gets hit with a nuclear bomb and is turned to ashes. What would happen to us?”

“Us. Very well, Two. On a purely speculative basis – as what you speak of is simply not a possibility for a wide variety of reasons – I think I can answer that. What happens when the head of a line dies? It depends on the age of his children, and the type of vampire.

“If you kill an Eresh vampire, his children may be significantly weakened. Certainly any half-vampire he has created will revert to human form. Full vampires may or may not revert, depending on the amount of time that has passed since the change. If someone killed me, Two, you would revert to human form in a matter of weeks. You’ve not been changed nearly long enough for it to ‘stick,’ so to speak.

“If someone, somehow, killed Abraham, the effects would be less drastic. Melissa and I have made the change completely and will not revert. Tori might revert, but I have no way of knowing if her mind would return with her humanity, and at this point the physical changes may not completely fade. It is possible that she would be very strong and very fast, for a human being ... comparable perhaps

to one of the other vampire strains. There would be no effect on Samantha, or on you, if Abraham were killed.

“So, continuing this interesting but, unfortunately, rather useless line of thought, if Abraham were killed, it would have little effect on the present situation, beyond possibly allowing Samantha the opportunity to return to her normal life, since he would no longer consider her his property.”

Two watched him, frustrated, knowing that he would not lie to her, but unwilling to believe that defeating Abraham was not within some realm of possibility. No guarantees on Melissa, Theroen had said, but would it not at least give them more time to work on helping her rid herself of Missy?

“It would indeed.” Theroen had picked up her thoughts. “But that in itself is not a guarantee, and an attempt on Abraham’s life would assuredly lead only to the cessation of our own. If Karma exists, I’ve been living on borrowed time since Lisette ... died. But I could not bring myself to sacrifice your life so needlessly.”

“We have to do something, Theroen.”

“Yes, we do, but the choice is not ours, Two. We have three options. The first is the easiest, at least for us: we leave. Melissa, Tori, and Samantha stay. The second: we stay for as long as possible, against Abraham’s will. Melissa is eventually engulfed by Missy; Samantha is kept in a state of half-vampirism indefinitely and is likely warped by Missy’s teachings; Tori continues her mad existence; and eventually Abraham’s evil drives me away. In the interim, there will be little other than despair, and the end result is no different from the first option.

“Then there is the third ...”

Melissa had turned to listen to Theroen again, and her eyes said she knew what he was to say. Theroen grimaced, looked at his sister with deep, sad eyes, and continued.

“The third is a possibility that Abraham must know is in consideration. He has known me for too long not to guess that I would offer my sister this choice: if she wishes, she and Tori will die by my hand. That is the third option. Had Abraham expressly forbid it last night, I would have acceded. He did not. He told me only that he wished that they remain here. He has left me to make my own decision on how to interpret that.”

Melissa’s eyes were hard and glassy, but if more sobbing threatened, she held it at bay. She met Theroen’s gaze, her mouth a thin, white line. Two looked between both of them, and at last shook her head.

“No. That’s crazy. There’s a fourth alternative, whether you want to admit it or not, Theroen. The fourth is that we attempt the impossible and try to kill him. We have to!”

It was Melissa who spoke.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Two. I’m going to die. Pick any scenario, and at the end of it, I still die. I’d rather not go with your life, and Theroen’s, on my conscience.”

“But if he dies, maybe Missy will ...”

“Disappear? I told you, Two. I’ve known Missy for a very long time now. Abraham woke her up, yes, but she doesn’t intend to be put back to sleep. If I believed there was the *slightest* chance of that, I might agree with you, but even then probably not. So put it out of your head, now. You’re going to get yourself killed talking like that.”

Theroen waved his hand, dismissing the idea. “Abraham knows the difference between threat and idle speculation. If anything, hearing Two speak in this manner would only amuse him. Were you to attempt to kill him, Two, I do not think he would be particularly upset with you. He would likely welcome the entertainment. He would destroy you, of course, but he would do it smiling.

“We cannot fight him, and even if we could, even if we pulled off the miraculous, what would be the purpose? The inevitable end for those we would be trying to save does not change. It is too much risk for no reward.”

“Well that’s fucking great. I hate *all* of the choices, Theroen.” Two was beyond anger. Beyond tears. Her voice was hollow, exasperated, depleted of hope. Melissa gave her a look of sympathetic commiseration, as if Two was the true victim.

“I’m not fond of any of them myself. I’m not entirely certain which I would choose, if the choice were mine. It is not. Melissa knows, has known for decades, that it is not. The choice lies with her, and I will abide by her decision, even if she chooses your fourth scenario.”

Melissa sighed, shut her eyes, leaned back against the couch. Tears, tinged pink with blood, slipped down her face, but she did not lose her composure. After a long minute in which Two felt as if her own heart had ceased to beat, Melissa looked up at the ceiling, and then over at Theroen. Her face was hard, and rage danced behind her eyes. Rage at them? Rage at Abraham? Rage at the situation? Two could not tell.

“I want a promise.”

“Anything, Melissa.”

“Take Samantha with you. Don’t leave her behind. Don’t leave her here for him. I know it goes against what he asked, but I can’t do that. She’s just a human. Promise me you’ll take her and get her home. You can make her forget. Will you promise?”

“You have my word, Melissa.”

“Good. Then I want you to kill me. I’d rather you than that bitch who shares this body. Kill me, and kill Tori, and when Abraham rages, spit in his fucking face and tell him it’s from me.”

* * *

It had been twenty minutes since Melissa had departed, and Two still felt numb. There had been little more conversation after Melissa’s choice. She had asked Theroen when, and he had said only, “Not yet.”

Melissa had nodded, and left to hunt. The expression on her face was dark and distant, and Two did not envy whomever Melissa might choose as a victim.

Theroen sighed, stood, turned off the television. He turned to Two, his face set in its typical expression. “Hungry?”

“Starving,” Two admitted. “But I think if I drink right now, it’ll overwhelm me. I’d never be able to stop crying. How can it be like this, Theroen? Why aren’t there more choices?”

“Abraham makes it so. His age, his power, his will. There is something I neglected to mention to Melissa, something that makes me willing to risk his wrath and do as she asks. He believes he has found a way to make more children.”

“I don’t understand,” Two said. Theroen was quiet for a moment, organizing his thoughts. At last he continued.

“Eresh blood is too weak to make fledglings for a very long time, and then within a century or two, it becomes too strong. The power of the blood makes our offspring go mad, as Melissa and Tori have. Another few decades, and the fledglings begin simply dying from shock.

“Through great study, and having watched your progression, Abraham believes he has learned how to dilute his blood and, by doling it out in minute increments over a lengthy period of time, create a sane fledgling.

“I left this out because Melissa does not need to know. It is bad enough that Missy will engulf her, let alone that she someday will become useless to Abraham entirely. When that happens, Abraham will butcher Melissa, Tori, and

Samantha without a second thought. Whatever death I can offer Melissa will be much better than anything Abraham might deliver.”

“God, Theroen. How can you talk about this? How can you be this ... this ...”

“This cold? I have been contemplating it for decades, Two, as I have said. Melissa’s fate is of great importance to me. I wish I could provide her with more choices. I wish I could save her, but I don’t know how. Every emotional fiber of my being screams against the decisions that are being made here. But I don’t know what else to do.

“The young man whose body I occupy is still here, somewhere, Two. Vampires do not age as human beings do, and the hot blood of youth is still very close to the surface in me. I simply have centuries of practice controlling it. That young man rages against this. He would try your impossible deed, if I let him.

“I have firsthand experience, awful beyond description, that vampires of my age and power can be killed easily by their elders. Lisette’s destruction came at the hands of a vampire only a few hundred years her senior, and that vampire lived only ten more years before Abraham destroyed him. It has been centuries since those events, and Abraham has only grown more powerful. If we challenge him, we will die.”

Two opened her mouth to reply to this, when a scream, long and wailing, echoed from somewhere below them. She shut her mouth with a snap, eyes wide, looking at the floor.

“Samantha awakens,” said Theroen.

* * *

It was Two who went down to see the girl. She had asked to, and Theroen had simply held his palms up to the air. *Be my guest.* Two wondered if sometimes he understood her motivations better than she did herself. Two did not know why she needed to talk to this half-vampire woman whom she had never met. Two only knew that it felt right, and after a life guided mainly by instinct, she had learned to trust her feelings.

She knew the girl could hear her footsteps, coming down the long stone staircase. She could sense a sudden panic, could hear already rushed breathing speed to a near hysterical pace. She spoke into the darkness: “I’m not going to hurt you, Samantha.”

The girl's panic seemed to break, and she found her voice, questions bubbling out of her like water. "Who are you? Where am I? What's happening to me? Where am I? Help me! Where are you? You have to help me!"

Two's eyes were better than a human's now, and even in the dark she could see the bars of the cell, could see the girl behind them, on her knees, shuddering. Samantha was wearing a pair of jeans and a loose, brightly-colored blouse. No socks, no shoes. Two tried to remember waking up in that cell. Only a few weeks ago. It seemed forever.

"I'm going to light a candle. There's one down here. Everything's going to be okay. You're fine, and I'm here to help. Try to relax, if you can. It will be better for you."

Samantha lapsed into gulping, panicky breaths, staring out into the darkness. Only half-vampire, her vision was not as good as Two's. There was a candle on a small table by the cell, a box of matches sitting beside it. Two struck one, and held it to the wick. The flame glowed and flickered, casting enough light that Samantha was able to pinpoint Two's whereabouts. She scurried down the length of the bars, pressed up against them, held her hand out, and cried, "Help me! Help me!"

Two sat on the floor and extended her hand. Samantha gripped it tightly, enough so that the pressure would have been painful, if Two were still human. "Samantha. It's okay. You're okay. You're not hurt."

"I feel *wrong*. Help me!"

Two laughed a bit at that. "Yeah, I imagine you do. Let me guess: right now you can hear better than you ever could before, and see better in this light than you should be able. Am I right?"

"Yes. I ... yes."

"Okay. Look ... I've been through this, and I'm okay. You're okay too, I promise. Can you take the facts straight, Samantha?"

Her matter-of-fact tone was working. Samantha closed her eyes and, with visible effort, forced herself to breathe deeply, to get control of herself. Her grip on Two's hand loosened slightly.

"Just tell me," She said after a moment.

"How much do you remember?"

"I don't know. I was ... I was at the club. Some Goth chick kept smiling at me, and I couldn't stop staring at her. Look, I'm not normally into that, okay? I couldn't help it. I remember finally getting up to go talk to her ... and then I woke up in this fucking hole."

Two nodded, and said, “Okay, well, here it comes. When you don’t believe it, I’ll prove it to you. But I’ll tell you first. Last night you came home with a vampire named Missy. You uh ... hooked up with her, and she bit you, and drank a lot of your blood. Normally you’d either die, or wake up somewhere and not remember anything, but she decided to give you some of her blood in return. Since she didn’t drain you all the way, you’re not completely a vampire yet, but you’re about halfway there. After that it gets ... complicated.”

The girl was silent for a long time. Her response, when it came, didn’t surprise Two much.

“What?”

“I know it sounds hard to believe ...”

“Hard to believe?” Samantha gave a tiny, hysterical laugh. “Hard to fucking believe? I pass out somewhere, and I wake up in a fucking prison, and some random chick comes down and tells me that I’m in some fucking Brad Pitt movie, and it’s only ‘hard to believe’? *Dios ...* this is fucking impossible!”

“It’s not impossible. Trust me.”

Samantha pulled her hand from Two’s and gripped the bars, stared out at her, furious. “Listen, you crazy bitch, I don’t care who you are. I don’t care what the fuck hallucinations you’re having. Tell me where the fuck I am, and then let me go. Right now.”

Two felt anger for a moment, and forced herself to react as Theroen would. She closed her eyes for a moment, and when she opened them again, they were calm.

“Samantha ...”

“Sam. Everyone calls me Sam.”

“Sam. Get up. Go look in that mirror on the wall. You couldn’t see it in the dark, but I know from experience that the candle’s more light than your eyes need, now. Go look, and tell me how hard it is to believe.”

Sam stared at her for a moment, then curled her lip in defiance and stood up. She took two quick strides over to the mirror and peered into it. Her reaction was immediate, and very similar to what Two’s had been. She flinched, stumbled, fell backwards, crying out: “Jesus!”

What had Theroen said? *Jesus has nothing to do with this.*

“I’m sorry, Sam.”

Two watched as Sam covered her face with her hands and wept.

* * *

"I'm dreaming." Sam was staring at Two with horrified eyes. Two had not moved, was still sitting Indian-style on the cold stone floor. She shook her head.

"No."

"Then I'm insane. Locked up somewhere. Hallucinating. Someone gave me some bad acid. *Something*..."

"No."

"How can you say 'No'? This shit is not possible."

"I sometimes find it hard to believe, myself. I've only been a vampire for a few days, and I was human less than a month ago. You grow accustomed to it pretty quickly, though."

"Somebody wake me up," Sam moaned.

Two shrugged. "Okay. I don't really care whether you accept this or not, right now. How about this? At least play along. It will make things easier in the long run."

Sam sighed, shrugged, said, "Fine. You're a vampire. I'm a vampire, too, I guess? What do we do now?"

"Do you want to get out of the cell? I can take you upstairs to meet the others ... or Theroen, at least."

"Who's Theroen?"

"Theroen and the girl who made you, Missy, were made by the same vampire. If you follow the whole vampire lineage thing, I guess he's something like your uncle."

Sam grimaced. "If I pretend to believe you, will you let me out of here?"

"You have to promise me a few things."

"Like?"

"Like first, you're not going to bolt out the door the moment I open it. You wouldn't make it past me, and you definitely wouldn't make it out of the mansion. Theroen would know what you were doing before you got up the steps. Even if you did get outside, you'd have to deal with Tori, and I think she'd probably kill you. So when I open the bars, let's stay calm, okay?"

"I can do that, I guess."

"Good. Second, try to keep an open mind. I know how hard that is ... believe me, I know. Try to at least give what you're seeing and hearing a chance, before shutting it all out."

"I ... okay, I'll try." Sam didn't sound like she held much faith in herself on this point, but at least she had regained some of her composure. Two produced the key Theroen had given her, unlatched the door, and opened it.

"Okay. Let's go upstairs."

* * *

It was evident to Two, simply by the expression on Sam's face, that she was no more accustomed to such opulence than Two had been. Sam seemed unable to decide what to look at first, and was moving her head about in quick motions, like a bird, taking it all in.

"Interesting, huh?" Two was walking slightly behind Sam, letting the girl take her own meandering course through the first floor's many interlocking rooms.

"It's incredible."

There was silence for a time, as they walked. Eventually, Sam spoke again.

"So ... you said the girl I met in the bar was Missy, right?"

"Yes, her name is Missy."

"Who are you?"

Two laughed. She'd forgotten to introduce herself.

"My name's Two. Like the number. It's a long story."

"Do you live here?"

"I do now, yes. For the time being, anyway. Like I said before, I'm pretty new to all of this myself."

"Did Missy do this to you, too?"

Two suppressed a shudder. "No. Missy is, well ... it's complicated. Missy is Theroen's sister, so to speak—sister vampire anyway; the same person made both of them. She and Theroen, and another girl, Tori, were created by the elder vampire who lives in the other wing of the mansion. His name's Abraham, and if you never meet him, then consider yourself lucky.

"Theroen created me, but I'm not really his daughter. More like his girlfriend or wife, I guess. Like I said: complicated."

Sam said nothing. She glanced briefly at Two, and the expression spoke volumes about her skepticism.

"I know you don't believe me, Sam. Just ... let's go on, okay? Maybe Theroen can convince you."

Sam shrugged. "Don't get your hopes up."

Theroen was nowhere to be found. Eventually, Two lead Sam back to the media room. "We might as well wait here for him. You can watch TV or something."

"I want to get out of here."

"We can't, yet. You need to talk to Theroen first. Trust me."

“Why?”

Two opened her mouth to explain, but before she could, they were interrupted. The mansion’s front door opened, closed, latched. Footsteps in the hall, growing louder, coming toward them. Two turned, expecting Theroen. She was greeted instead by a nightmare.

* * *

Missy. It had to be Missy. She was standing in the doorway, drenched in blood. The red liquid coated her face, her neck, the collar and upper buttons of her blouse. Her hair was tousled. Her eyes burned like embers.

“What are you doing in this room, with *my* child?” Missy’s voice was calm, but her expression bore malice beyond anything Two had thought possible. She leaned her weight on one hand, resting on the door frame. Her fingernails made repeated clicks against the beveled wood.

Two breathed deeply, steeled herself, met Missy’s gaze and held it.

“Talking.”

“If I wanted you talking with her, I would have given you my permission.”

“You weren’t around. Your better half went out hunting.”

Missy retained her composure, but her lip curled up at this. She glared at Two for a moment, and then her lips formed a smile. Her eyes still held nothing but hate.

“The woman you’re referring to is gone. She gave up. She let me in. First time in my life I haven’t had to wait for the stupid bitch to go to sleep to take over. She just ... gave up. It was marvelous. She gave me control, and that tells me everything. I know it, and she knows it: I *am* the better half.”

Two opened her mouth to reply to this, and Missy held up her hand.

“Save it. Melissa’s stupid and scatterbrained and she doesn’t remember anything about me, but I remember *lots* of things from her time in this body. Like what Theroen’s planning. His little parting gift to his sisters. I know all about your little plot: the priest and the prostitute, safe and happy and away. I know what Theroen has planned for me and Tori.

“But oh, Two, he doesn’t know what I have planned for you!”

Without further warning, Missy sprung forward into the room, moving at the same uncanny speed that Two had seen before, in the forest. Sam shrieked something incoherent, terror in her voice. Two felt adrenaline flood her body, felt herself springing to her feet as if propelled by some outside force. She shoved the

sofa at Missy and backed away, holding her hands up. Her hip bumped an end table, and she put it between herself and her oncoming attacker.

Missy vaulted the sofa with ease, came to rest on the carpet in front of it, and leapt again in one fluid motion. Her timing was nearly perfect, and Two was only able to dodge out of the way by fractions of a second. Missy hit the hard oak end table with the full force of her weight, and it shattered under the impact, vomiting pieces of itself in a spray around the room. Two dodged flying debris and moved behind the couch, looking for escape. The door led to the hall, but then what? Missy would catch her before she reached the mansion's entrance.

The other vampire, the woman who shared the body with someone Two considered a friend, almost a sister, was back on her feet and raving.

"You weak, stupid, useless whore! Where is your protector? Your lover? Your *Superman*? He is with Abraham. Abraham called to him, and he went, and left you helpless. I'm going to bring Abraham your heart on a plate, and he'll laugh and laugh, and there's nothing Theroen will be able to do about it!"

"Missy, Missy, wait! You don't have to do this. It doesn't have to be like that!" Two heard herself speaking, heard the fear in her voice, and could accept it. It was the tone that made her hate herself. The pleading tone sounded like old memories, like her time with Darren, like empty despair. This situation was out of Two's control and there was no hope for salvation. Theroen was not here to swoop in and save her.

Missy snarled, racing around one edge of the couch. Two moved swiftly to the other, keeping the sofa between herself and Missy's claws, hooked into talons and ready to tear at flesh. Her foot landed on something: a table leg. It rolled, and Two was unable to cope with the sudden shift in balance. She stumbled backward, fell to the carpet and landed on her back with a thud. The plush softness of the material seemed somehow obscene in light of the situation.

Missy howled in triumph and flung herself again into the air, so fast that Two could barely track her movement. It was too late to roll, too late to dodge, too late to do anything. Time seemed to stretch out. Missy was in the air above her, a vision of death and hate and horror unlike any Two had ever beheld. Two's hands scrabbled at her sides, looking for something, anything. Her hands touched something cylindrical, grabbed it in a panic, brought it in front of her.

The table leg.

Twelve inches long, three in diameter, the leg had splintered into a sharp point when the table had disintegrated. Two held it out against the oncoming impact in desperation. Missy's eyes flared wide in surprise just before she landed.

The sound the piece of oak made as it entered Missy's breastplate was indescribable. Splitting flesh, cleaving through bone, it pierced her body, the force of her landing driving it further and further in. Two felt a sudden liquid warmth gush across her hands. She shoved out and up, flipping the girl over on her back. Missy somersaulted, flailed in the air, and crashed to the floor on her back. Two rolled away, blood on her hands, her clothes, the carpet, everywhere.

Missy was making strangled choking noises, clawing at the stake in her chest, unable to get a decent handhold through the blood and the pain. She writhed on the floor, unable to lie flat. The point of the table leg held her back in an arched position. She screamed, and the scream became wet and strained, filling the air with red mist. Then she fell back again and was still.

* * *

Two lay on the ground, waiting for her limbs to stop shaking. It seemed an eternity but was in truth only moments. She pushed herself to a sitting position and looked at the body on the floor in front of her. She was vaguely aware of Sam's presence beside her. The half-vampire spoke, her voice taut and breathy with tension. "Holy shit!"

The body on the floor jerked at this sound, arms flailing, and clawed at the entertainment center to its left. Missy's nails dug into the wood, splintering it. With an effort, she hauled herself upward, leaning against the wall, coughing blood. She brought her feet around and slumped into a sitting position, leaning against the cabinet, looking at the stake in her chest.

"Oh, God," Two moaned. She scrambled backward on her hands, like a crab, away from the figure.

At this, the girl's head jerked upward. Her eyes locked with Two's. Not Missy's eyes, Two realized. Melissa's.

"Oh, *God!*" Two cried. "Oh, no! Melissa ..." She crawled back toward Melissa. The wood had pierced the lower part of Melissa's breastplate, traveling at an upward path and emerging just to the left of her spine, some six inches above the spot it had entered. Not knowing what else to do, Two grasped at the stake and began to tug, trying to pull it from her friend's body.

Melissa regarded her calmly, opened her mouth, tried to talk. A crimson bubble formed, burst at her lips, and the words came.

"Two. Two, stop. It hurts. Please stop."

Two stopped, looked at Melissa, tried to say something that would make up for what she had done, and instead burst into tears.

Melissa took her hand.

"It's okay, Two. Thank you. She's gone. She's dead, Two. You killed her. Thank you. I'm dying too, I guess, but that's okay. I told you: I was going to die anyway."

Two was making whimpering sounds, between her sobs. She wanted words to come. She wanted to apologize, to take it back somehow. Her throat seemed incapable of forming articulate sound. She pressed her forehead against Melissa's, tilted it up, pressed her lips against the bridge of Melissa's nose.

"Sisters." Melissa's voice was weakening. She turned her head, coughed blood again, looked at Two in apology. Two reached out and smoothed Melissa's hair away from her eyes.

"It's not so bad. It's all right. I don't even feel it anymore. I'm all numb. It's not so bad, Two. It's not so bad, Theroen."

Melissa's eyes moved away from Two, focused on a point behind her. Theroen stood in the doorway, motionless. His expression was calm, almost peaceful, but there were tears in his eyes.

"Is it not, Melissa?" he asked.

"No. Theroen?"

"Yes."

"Thank you ... for being my friend for all these years. You gave me more than I deserved."

"Melissa. My sister, you deserve far more than anything I could ever have given."

Melissa closed her eyes for a moment, opened them, looked back at Two. Her voice was little more than the movement of air past her lips.

"You're going to be a wonderful vampire. He loves you. An eternity of love, Two. Don't cry."

Two found her voice at last, a brittle croak that made her throat ache. "I'm sorry for this, Melissa. I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. I'm free. You're free. Don't be sorry."

She looked again at Theroen, who had moved to kneel beside her, and opened her mouth to say something else. It never came. As she drew in breath, her chest hitched once. Twice. Settled. Melissa's eyes grew wide and distant, distant and dark; like a glass reflecting eternity. Two made a low, sorrowful noise, closed her eyes, held Melissa's hand. Theroen spoke, but his voice was distant. Distant and dark.

"Peace be with you, Melissa. If there is a God, and if he is just, he will bring you to a better place than this."

Two felt herself rising, felt herself moving away, running away, as far away as she could go. She made it six feet before she tripped, stumbled, fell to the floor. Her hands clenched at the carpet, as if to tear it from the floor. Death, despair, love. The love made it worse, somehow. An eternity of love.

Two put her face in the soft loops of wool, sobbing.

* * *

It took nearly a minute of saying her name before Theroen was able to gain Two's attention. She looked at him, blinking and unable to comprehend, then shook her head to clear it. Theroen watched as her eyes filled again with horror, with despair.

"Don't." A simple word, delivered in the same calm, strong manner in which he always spoke. Not a request, not a command. Almost a piece of advice, as in the car, the first night she had met him. *Don't*.

Two clenched her fist, fought down the sorrow that wanted to engulf her, and looked again at her lover.

"We're in trouble, aren't we?"

"Oh, yes. Very much so, I'd say. This has not gone according to plan. Anyone's plan. Unbeknownst to me, there were many of those."

"What do you mean?"

"Your death at Missy's hands was meant to be Abraham's parting gift to his son. Just a little dark comedy. A way of thanking me for centuries of service, and a reminder of who truly holds the power, now and forever. It seems he underestimated your abilities."

"Or my luck."

"It doesn't matter. You are alive and Missy is dead. It is regrettable that she took Melissa with her, but this was inevitable. Abraham will not be pleased with this. I think it best that we leave. Now."

"Can I come?" The two vampires had forgotten Sam, who had thrown herself behind the couch when Melissa's body had initially jerked back to life.

Theroen sighed. He looked at Melissa's body, looked at Sam, looked at Two.

"You promised her, Theroen," Two reminded him.

"I did, yes."

"So let's go."

Theroen nodded. "Yes, Samantha, you may come."

Two looked over at Melissa. "What about her? We can't just leave her here."

"Abraham will take care of her. No, don't argue. I realize how preposterous it sounds, but you have to trust me. One of the few customs he seems to care about is giving dead vampires a proper funeral. He will conduct services, and then he will burn her, but he will do both with reverence. I do not know why he does this, but I have seen it more than once. It is the only thing in him that still seems human."

"It feels wrong."

"Everything is going to feel wrong for some times, I think. We must go, Two. You've done all you can for Melissa."

Sam came to join them. "So what now?"

Theroen turned to Sam. "Where are your shoes?"

Sam raised her eyebrows. "How the hell would I know?"

"You'll need something for your feet, and a coat. The closet in the hall is full of discarded clothing. Find something."

Sam looked at Two, unsure. Two nodded. "Do what he says, Sam."

She did. Theroen turned to Two. "Good. Let's go."

Two glanced once more at Melissa as they left the room. She wanted to apologize, to take it back somehow.

There was no time.

* * *

They found Sam at the closet, pulling on her shoes and jacket. Two had brought no possessions to the mansion, and had none to take. Theroen cared very little for any of it, and had no desire to bring anything with him. He held other apartments, in other places, had more than enough money in banks with which to begin their life. They left the mansion, packed full of art, trash, and everything in between, to Abraham.

The Ferrari wouldn't fit three, nor would a motorcycle, of which there were four in the garage. A Jeep was parked behind two of the latter, and Theroen leapt on the first, moving it quickly out of the way and returning to move the second. He seemed agitated, an unusual state for him. Two thought it best not to question, but Theroen picked up on her curiosity.

"I am greatly concerned by what Abraham may do in the heat of the moment. He is undoubtedly aware of his daughter's death, and I do not expect

him to take it well. I hope he may allow us to escape, though I do not know if he will. If he decides to stop us, things will likely not go well.”

“I’d ask you to define that, but I think I already know.”

Theroen nodded, and let the second bike drop with a crash, not concerned with it. He moved back to the Jeep. Two reached over, hit the button for the garage door opener, and watched it rise. It was raining outside, dark and cold; December rain just barely too warm to freeze. The hunger raged in her, but now was not the time. She heard a howl.

“What about Tori?”

“No time, Two, and no choice. Abraham’s orders were to leave her. We’ve already killed his daughter and are stealing her fledgling. I’ll not risk angering him further.”

Two looked again out into the blackness beyond the garage door, understanding but not yet ready to accept. Behind her, she heard car doors opening. One closed.

“Two.” Theroen was standing at his door, waiting. The passenger side was empty in the front. Sam sat in the rear. Two bit her lip, fighting against her anger.

“Okay, Theroen. It’s not right. It’s not fair. It’s totally fucked up, but I think we crossed the line between right and wrong somewhere around the time I stabbed my friend to death with a fucking table leg, anyway.”

“That may well be true. We wait on you, my love. You must decide if you are ready to leave.”

Two clenched her teeth, turned, moved toward the Jeep.

* * *

They made it halfway down the driveway before Theroen was forced to jam on the brakes, bringing the Jeep to a sudden, skidding halt on the wet asphalt. Two, not wearing a seatbelt, caught her weight on her arms. Stronger now than she had been before, she barely felt the impact. Sam thudded against the back of Two’s seat with a squawking cry.

“Theroen! Jesus, what are you ...” Two didn’t need to finish. The sweeping sense of dread that engulfed her, starting at the base of her spine and working its way up, told her everything she needed to know. Abraham. Outside. Two looked out through the windshield, and into the eyes of hell.

“Run him over!” It took Two a moment to recognize her own voice. It sounded like a scared little girl.

“He could pick up the car.” Theroen’s voice was flat, bereft of emotion, accepting, and Two understood in that moment what was to happen. This would be the end, likely, for all three of them. Frustration, hate and rage rose up inside her. It was going to end like *this*?

Theroen picked up on these thoughts, and turned to her. “I am out of ideas, Two. I love you, and I’m sorry. I’m sorry I brought you into any of this.”

Before Two could respond to this, they heard the rear door unlatch. Two glanced back. Sam’s eyes were fixated on the figure standing before the car. Glazed, unseeing, Sam pushed with her arm, opened the door, stepped out of the car. Two felt the tug as well, a gentle push. *Get out. Get out, and all will be well.* It grew like the tide, surging over her thoughts, compelling her. *Get out, and all will be well.*

Two felt Theroen’s own mind drive suddenly into hers like a spike. It acted as a harsh slap, a mental shock so great that it left her reeling. Abraham’s grip on her thoughts was lost.

“All will *not* be well. I’m sorry, Two. I didn’t want to hurt you, but I could think of nothing else to do.”

“S’okay.” Two felt groggy, like she had just been pulled from a deep sleep. “What do we do, Theroen?”

“We get out. All will not be well. Be ready to run when I tell you.”

“Run where?”

Theroen shrugged. “Run in whatever direction Abraham is not.”

He exited the car and went to stand beside Sam in the rain. Two followed. Abraham towered in front of them, massive, grim and silent, his face a mask of fury. Two felt rooted to the ground, legs stiff and numb from fear. Run? She wondered if she could move.

“Father.” Theroen’s voice was quiet. Cautious. Abraham’s eyes moved to his son, seemed to bore into him. Theroen stood firm, staring back at the elder vampire.

“Leaving so soon, Theroen?” he asked. His voice was light, mocking, but behind it Two heard anger, and an ageless, depthless hate.

“I thought it best. I can only assume you wish to be rid of me, and of Two, as soon as possible.”

“Rid of you. Yes. Yes, my headstrong son, I wish to be rid of you. And so, you may go. You will leave me Samantha, and you will leave me Tori, and since I am now short a daughter, you will leave me Two. In doing this, you release yourself from my bond, forever.”

Theroen took a breath, set himself, looked off to the side and back at Abraham. "No, father. I will not."

"Oh no? And tell me, boy ... how would you have this encounter end? Shall I allow you and your lover to run off into the darkness? No, I think not. Shall I instead slaughter her, and this half-vampire cow, right where we stand? My child is *dead*, Theroen, because of your fledgling. Her life is forfeit."

"Your daughter murdered herself, Abraham. There is nothing Two wanted less, but she did what she had to do. Two proved superior to Missy."

"Did she?" Abraham's voice was raw in its malice. "Did she indeed? What will she do now, Theroen? She is a quaking little girl, trembling at the darkness. See how she stares? She stands in the face of eternity, a candle before the blackness of the storm. What *will* she do?"

Theroen closed his eyes. "She will run, and when you try to pursue her, I will stop you."

Abraham seemed taken aback by this. He paused for a brief moment, cocked his head, and then howled his horrible laughter. Two felt goose bumps ripple up and down her arms. Sam cried out, and took a step backwards, her trance dissolving. Abraham put his hand out, and she stilled, but looked at Two as if awaiting instructions.

"You are ready to die for these two, my son?"

"Two has my heart, and Samantha has my promise to my sister. I will sacrifice myself for them, if that is how it must be."

"Ah, little, holy Theroen. Do you truly believe this act can make up for centuries of godless living? Centuries of death and evil? How much blood is on your hands?"

"That blood can never be washed away, Father. You know this. There is much I would atone for, given the chance, but the blood will always remain."

"Perhaps I shall simply kill all three of you."

Theroen shrugged. "It is within your power. I ask that as payment for three hundred and fifty years of loyalty, you let us live. Let us go, Abraham."

"No."

"Then I offer my life for theirs. That is the bargain ... the request."

Two wanted to protest, but could not find her voice. She wondered if it was Abraham or Theroen keeping her from speaking, suspected it was the latter, and began to weep in frustration.

"Your foolish notions of love and redemption disappoint me, Theroen. At every step, you have disappointed me. Did you learn nothing from Lisette?"

"I learned much from Lisette, father."

“Not everything. No, Lisette brought one secret with her into the ground, Theroen. Sweet little Lisette, pure and honest. Wretched. Loathsome. *Good*. All these years and you’ve never found out. How marvelous.

“Oh, Theroen ... How she did scream when I chained her to her funeral pyre.”

Theroen’s eyes blazed. His jaw clenched, hands wrapping into fists, muscles tensing. It seemed that at any moment he would spring at Abraham.

“Isaac—” he began, and Abraham cut him off with the wave of a hand.

“Isaac was a fool, and a puppet. It took me little effort to work him into a frothing rage over Lisette’s transgressions. He brought her to me, Theroen, so she would know. Before she died, I wanted her to truly understand the penalty for taking what was mine.”

Theroen was pale. Shaking. Barely in control of himself. He spoke through his teeth. “I have given you more than three centuries of service for a debt that I did not owe. You will let my child, and Melissa’s child, leave. Then you will prepare for death.”

And now Abraham grinned, his eyes greedy, burning with anticipation. “Oh, my. How exciting it all is! Yes, Theroen, she may leave. You will stay. This will be wonderful indeed.”

Theroen turned to Two. “Go.”

Two found she could speak again. “No, Theroen. I won’t.”

“You will. Take Samantha, and go, and do not look back.”

“You can’t—”

“Go!” he snarled. Two flinched backward, then looked at him again, frightened, confused, unsure. Theroen, with a visible effort, brought himself back in control. “Please, my love. Do not make me force you.”

His eyes held her for a moment longer, and then Two saw the anger swallow him again, and he turned back to Abraham. She took Sam’s hand, turned to her left, and ran, tugging the younger girl along.

* * *

They made it perhaps two hundred yards through the damp woods before Two was stopped by a low growling. She skidded in the mud, nearly falling, and came to a halt. Eyes glittered from the darkness before her.

“Whatthefuckisthat?” Sam asked in a breathless rush.

“That’s Tori. She’s the other vampire. She knows me ... but I think she knows what happened to her sister, too.”

Tori moved closer, into a patch of moonlight, and Two saw that her face was drawn and pinched in rage. She snarled, and charged them, howling. Two did the only thing she could think of. She held out her hands, still tacky with Melissa’s blood, and implored Tori to stop.

Tori seemed somewhat taken aback by this. She slid in the mud, came to a stop and rolled back on her haunches, considering Two.

“Tori, it’s Two. I know you remember me. I know you’re a lot smarter than you seem. I know you can smell Melissa’s blood. I know that you know she’s dead. Can you understand that I didn’t want it, Tori? That I’m sorry? I need you to understand.”

Tori took a few steps closer, and made that questioning sound Two had heard when they had first met: like a dog yawning. Two held her hand out. Tori sniffed it, growled again, looking up at Two with accusing eyes. Two knelt, and matched Tori’s gaze.

“I didn’t want to kill her, Tori. I didn’t. Now I have to run. You can stop me ... kill me here if you want. That might not be such a bad thing. Or you can come with me. I don’t know how far we’ll get, but it’s me or Abraham now. You have to choose.”

Tori seemed to be struggling, perhaps attempting to process the words, perhaps only making her own decisions based on what she sensed. Two couldn’t tell. Finally, Tori moved out of Two’s way.

“Thank you, Tori. We have to go now. You can ... God, I’m so sorry. Sam, come on!” Two took Sam’s hand again, and they began running once more down the path. After a moment, Tori caught up to them, overtook them, turned and met Two’s eyes, and then shot away on a diagonal, down a different path. Two relied on blind instinct, as she had so many times before, and followed Tori’s route.

* * *

Theroen stood facing his father, trying hard to keep the rage from flooding him completely and drowning his thoughts.

Abraham’s eyes glittered at him, mocking, as he spoke. “So. After almost four hundred years, things *finally* get interesting.”

Theroen’s voice was low. Strained. “You murdered her.”

“I did. I did indeed. She took what was mine.”

“I was never yours, Abraham.”

“No, not in your mind, but it matters not. Lisette learned her lesson, and I gained my fledgling back. As is always the case, Theroen, I won. And now we stand here, father and son. Soon you will attack me, and not just because I took one bride from you, but because now I threaten a second.”

“You cannot have her, Abraham.”

“I don’t *want* her. I never did. I thought she was a terrible choice for you, my son. Drugs? Prostitution? She is unclean, Theroen. However did you find her?”

“I saw her standing on a corner. I saw her *working*, Abraham, waiting to pick up some strange man and have sex with him, and the strength I sensed in her caught my attention. So much strength, from one in so low a place. Would you even have noticed?”

“Ah. Strength. Much like Lisette, is she not? Young Two does not like to be owned by anyone. As I said: a terrible choice for a fledgling.”

“I do not look for slaves, Abraham. I look for equals.”

“I grow tired of this nonsense, Theroen. It will lead nowhere. Your child, and the half-vampire, and now yet *another* of my daughters, are all making their escape as we speak.”

“Good.”

“We shall see how ‘good’ it is when she feels you die, Theroen.”

“That is how it is to be then? My life for theirs?”

“That is the bargain, Theroen. You know me, and you know that I honor my bargains ... though I certainly stack the odds in my favor before making them. If she flees tonight and does not return, she will not suffer at my hands. This ... this will be worth the price my daughter paid.”

“I will not make it easy on you, Abraham.”

“My son, you never have.”

They were quiet for a moment, father and son, bitter enemies. Theroen knew he faced death, but his love for Two, his rage over Lisette, left him numb. There was no fear. Abraham, sensing this, broke into a malicious grin.

A single thought came to Theroen in that moment. Whether from his mind, or Abraham’s, he could not say. *Get it over with.*

Theroen charged.

* * *

Abraham, alive long before the birth of Christ, had met many challenges in his day. Some were human, some vampires, all had sought only to bring about his destruction. None had achieved that goal, and few had even come close.

Now his son charged across the wet grass, roaring, eyes dark with hatred. Abraham's amazing mind processed each instant like a still picture floating gently in time's pool. He had ages to react. Eons. Theroen, powerful as he was, held no threat.

Abraham stood and waited for his son. He waited to free himself from the chains of his progeny. Melissa, dead. Theroen, dead. Tori would likely turn on Two as soon as Theroen's death stole the whore's vampirism away. Perhaps then Tori would become a rogue monster, at least until she was hunted down and destroyed by other vampires, an aberration too dangerous to let live. Abraham no longer cared. He stood at the dawn of a new millennium, and at the edge of the next phase of his life, a phase where he doled out the gifts of his vampirism slowly, to supplicants who would appreciate the power he delivered to them.

Abraham had time to smile as Theroen charged. Ah, it was going to be glorious.

* * *

Hitting Abraham was like hitting a wall of solid concrete. Theroen collided with his father, fingers hooked into claws, seeking to rend and tear. The force of the initial blow alone would have shattered mortal bones. Abraham took only a small step backward.

Hands like manacles around Theroen's wrists, forcing his claws away from Abraham's face. Theroen snarled, lunged forward anyway, oblivious to the pain as his shoulders dislocated, snapping his teeth at Abraham's neck. He tried to bite, to drink. Perhaps if he could cut Abraham, he might weaken his father.

Abraham twisted, and pulled Theroen around by the arms. Theroen felt himself flying through the air, heaved to the ground. Abraham landed atop him. The creature was cackling, a horrific, mad sound, happy at last for action, after so many years of dark study.

Theroen screamed as he felt teeth tear through the flesh of his neck, opening his jugular vein in a warm gush. He struggled against the weight on top of him, to no avail, as the draining sensation began. Abraham was drinking. Laughing. Bathing in Theroen's blood.

The world began to grey, and Theroen felt his strength flagging. No chance, now. He could not move Abraham. The pulse of his heart seemed to grow

distant, like a receding tide. He saw faces. Lisette. Naomi. Melissa. Tori. Two. He fixated on this last, on the face of this woman that he loved. He wanted to focus. He wanted to see her eyes one last time. He wanted to tell her that he was sorry for everything, and that he would meet her in some other place, at the end of the mortal life his demise was buying her. He would wait there for her. If only he could focus. If only he could see her eyes.

Theroen was still trying to make this happen when he died.

* * *

Two felt him go.

The sensation was like a sharp tugging that pulled at her whole body, and yet held no physical force. She stopped, bewildered for a moment, and then realization flooded in like a dark tide. Sam and Tori were looking at her in confusion, but Two could not see them, could not see anything except blackness before her eyes. She felt Theroen's presence – so established within her that she had ceased even to notice it – dwindling, blinking out of existence. She felt her knees unhinge, and the gravel by the side of the road they had been following bit into her legs. She didn't notice. Didn't care.

Two tilted her head back and cried out denial to the uncaring stars. Wailing, weeping, she fell to her side, curled up like a baby, uncontrollable shuddering wracking her body. Theroen was gone, gone from her and gone from the world. Gone. Two wept, and screamed, and it was some time before Sam could do anything more than watch.

At last, Two's grief subsided enough for her to hear Samantha's voice calling her name, asking what was wrong. She fought against her tears, fought against the despair threatening to engulf her completely. Already she felt weaker, colder, more human, though she knew that she had not yet begun to revert to humanity. How long would it be before the various gifts Theroen had bestowed upon her withered away? A week? A month?

There was no time to contemplate this now. She had to get Samantha and Tori away from Abraham. The destroyer. The dark god. The most evil being that she would ever encounter.

Theroen's life for hers, but had Two ever truly believed it would come to that? Now she knew it had indeed, and she knew as well that by staying so close to Abraham, she was putting them all in great danger. They had to get away. She stood up, brushing herself off and sniffing.

"What is it, Two?" Sam asked.

“It’s over. He’s gone.” Two’s voice was hollow. Dead.

“Abraham?”

Two laughed. The sound was without humor. She took a breath and shuddered. “No. Didn’t you listen? Abraham is indestructible. He’s a god. It would be s—stupid to even fight him.”

Sam looked at her, uncomprehending, and Two felt her grief turn to anger before she could stop it. “He’s *dead*, don’t you get it? Theroen’s dead, and you don’t even know what that means! You don’t even know what your life cost!”

Sam blanched, stepped back, frightened by this sudden mood swing. Two saw this, felt despair well up inside her again, and covered her eyes. She could find nothing there in the darkness, no sense of Theroen, nothing to comfort her. After a moment, she looked up again.

“I’m sorry, Sam. We have to go. Now. While we still can.”

“Are you going to be okay, Two?”

“It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters. He’s gone. I owe it to Theroen to make sure you and Tori are safe. After that? Nothing matters. Let’s go.”

They began a hurried dash along the road, glancing frequently behind them, expecting that Abraham would show up at any moment to finish them all. Eventually they realized that he was not coming, that he would indeed honor his bargain with Theroen and let them go, and so they slowed to a walk, waiting for headlights, waiting for someone who would pull over. Someone Tori could make short work of. Someone with a car.

* * *

Chapter 6

Homecoming

Darren's building. The hallway outside.

Two could hear muffled grunts, the occasional cooing of some girl, bedsprings creaking. It sounded like a bad porn movie, and she smiled despite the bitter taste in her mouth. She'd come here because she didn't know where else to go. Dirty, tired, out of money, too ashamed and too frightened to go to Rhes and Sarah, she had returned to the building she had called home for the past year.

The trip hadn't taken long. A car had eventually come along, the driver slowing for the two young women standing in the cold rain. Two had felt bad about rewarding this kindness with death, but she was still a vampire. Still needed to feed. Sam watched in horror, but Two could see the thirst in her eyes. By the end of the car ride Sam, grudging and sullen, had admitted that she was beginning to believe the whole vampire thing.

They had spent the day in a motel, sleeping. Two had packed Tori into the bathroom, blocking the cracks under the door with towels, giving the girl plenty of blankets with which to build some sort of nest. She and Sam had taken the beds. Two woke, weeping, at sunset. There was no Theroen to wake up next to, and never would be again.

By that evening, Sam was already looking more human. Two still felt the same. She fed on a victim in an adjacent room, and then the trio had continued toward Brooklyn, toward Darren.

Darren's voice, through the door. "That's good, baby. That's real good, but you ... gotta sound like you're ... getting the best fuck of your life. Course, I know you are, right baby?"

"Anything you say, Darren." The girl turned the volume up a notch. Two grimaced. She'd done this. She'd been here. It was a place she never intended to be again. She stood in the same building, but not in the same place. She had strength now, power now, purpose now. Descent and rebirth. Two had survived this process twice already. She would survive a third.

Two kicked the door, hard, just below the lock. The frame splintered and the entire mechanism fell to the floor with a clatter. The door swept inward on

creaking hinges, ricocheted off the wall with a flat smacking sound, and came to a stop.

Darren was quick; Two had to give him that. The door had not even finished its swing before he was rolling off of the girl, yanking a drawer in the nightstand open and pulling a gun from within. In a moment more he was up on his feet, pointing the weapon toward the dark hallway. From his perspective, there were only vague grey shapes. Two's eyes were much better. Before her stood Darren, naked and still half-aroused, gun cocked and held out in front of him.

"Who the fuck are you and what do you want?" he snarled.

"Put down the gun, dumbass, before you get hurt."

"Answer the fucking question, bitch. Who is that? You one of my girls? Gonna get you some revenge, maybe put some holes in old Darren? Answer me or I start shooting."

"Something like that. I'll give you a few hints. She's short, she's cute and she's been missing for a month or two."

The gun wavered for a brief moment. Darren's eyes registered vague surprise before growing icy again. "I didn't authorize no vacation, Two."

"I didn't fucking ask for one."

Darren sneered at her, still unafraid. Two knew that look, and it was all she could do not to charge screaming into the room, to tear her former pimp limb from limb. It spoke of Darren's complete disdain for his girls. It was a look that carried with it all the baggage of his beatings, his orders, his forcing addiction upon them. Two tried to think of Theroen. Tried to remain calm.

"Put the gun down. Now." She said.

Darren actually smiled at this, and shook his head. "No, I don't think so. Here's how it's going to go: You're going to come in here, and I'm going to kick the living shit out of you. If you beg real nice, maybe I'll stop before I kill you. If that's how it goes, then you'll get back to your room, and heal up, and get your ass out where it belongs, and maybe then I *might* give you a ration some time this fucking century."

Two laughed. After the blood, heroin had lost its appeal. "Last chance, Darren. Put down the gun."

"No."

Two shrugged, and released her grip on Tori's shoulder. What happened next was better even than she could have expected. Tori sprang into the room, howling, so quick that she seemed a blur even to Two. Darren's expression moved from confidence to terror in an instant. He got off one shot, wild, and the recoil from the gun caused him to drop it. Tori leapt, and Two was treated to the wholly

satisfying view of Darren loosing his bladder on his own feet. He ducked at the last possible moment, and Tori sailed over him, into the bed.

Darren scrambled away on all fours, making noises that sounded something like words, something like screams. There was a choking sound from the bed, and when Tori reappeared, she was drenched in crimson. She leapt down to the floor and advanced on Darren, growling low in her throat, the rumble of a jungle cat. Darren had backed himself into a corner, soiled, wet with piss and tears, and was making some sort of plea for his life.

Two called Tori's name, and the vampire stopped, less than two feet from Darren. She raised her lip in a sneer that was oddly human, then turned, picked the gun up in her teeth, and brought it to Two.

"Don't do that. Dogs do that. Use your hands." Two's voice was soft, her heart not really in the scolding. She was too busy watching Darren to ensure he didn't move. She entered the room, Sam and Tori trailing behind, and stood by Darren's desk, looking at him. He sat on the floor, glaring up, making the slow move from fear to smoldering humiliation.

"Stand up."

"Bitch, I ain't doing *shit* for you."

Two's expression was almost bored as she swung the gun upward and fired twice, putting a shot just to either side of Darren's head. Behind her, Sam made a small shrieking noise. Darren's eyes went wide, his face paper white.

"I don't have to miss, Darren. Trust me on that, 'kay? I'm in charge, now. Stand the fuck up."

Darren did what he was told.

"Put on some fucking clothes. I've seen all of *that* that I plan on seeing, thank you."

Darren struggled into a pair of jeans, very nearly catching himself in the zipper. Behind Two, Sam giggled. Darren shot her a look that made it perfectly clear that being laughed at by women was not something he was used to tolerating. Two waved the gun, drawing his attention.

"Don't even look at her. She can laugh all day, if she wants. We need money, Darren. Now. As much as you have. You're going to get it, and you're going to get us some clothes, and then you're going to leave."

Darren's eyes blazed. "I'm not taking orders from—"

Two cut him off. "Yeah? That right? Your friend GLOCK here says you will. Even if he didn't, I think Tori's next on the chain of command."

Tori was sniffing around the bed. On hearing her name she glanced at Two, wandered over, sat on her haunches and licked blood from her arm, indifferent.

“Get us some clothes, Darren. Then come back.”

“The *fuck* happened to you, Two?” Darren’s voice was plaintive. Confused.

“It’s a long story, and you’re not worth the time. You know sizes. You can guess what’ll fit us. If you feel like running, go right ahead. Tori could track you anywhere, even before you smelled like piss, and as you’ve seen, she’s a lot faster than you are. If you’re not back in five minutes, I’ll send her out.”

Darren opened his mouth to say something. Two cut him short with a gesture. “Next time I see your tongue, Darren, I blow it out of your fucking mouth. Clothes. Now.”

Two motioned toward the door. After a moment, Darren went.

“That was amusing ...” Sam was looking at the bed with distaste. A hand hung limp from under the covers. “Do you two do this often?”

“Me? No. Not when I can avoid it. Tori, maybe. I ... Tori, get out of there.” Tori was inspecting the closet, sniffing at garments. Two didn’t know where Darren’s supply might be hidden. It was unlikely that it would be any place so unguarded, but the last thing she needed was an overdosing vampire.

Sam sat at Darren’s desk and lit a cigarette from the pack that was sitting there. She dragged, coughed, dragged again. “Three days without one of these. Thought I was going to go crazy.”

“Yeah, they get their claws into you.”

They were quiet for a minute. Sam smoked. Two watched. Tori sat at Two’s side, licking her arms like a cat.

“You want one?” Sam asked, stubbing hers out.

“No. Thanks. There’s a shower through that door. You want the first one? I’ll deal with Darren.”

“Okay.” Sam made her way to the bathroom. Two sat down at the desk, looking at her watch.

* * *

Darren made it back with just under twenty seconds to spare, and dumped the clothes unceremoniously on the desk in front of Two. He stood, waiting, anger like embers at the back of his eyes. Two had her feet up. Tori was curled up at her side, but she opened one eye and growled low when Darren entered. Two glanced at the clothes, nodded, and turned to look at him.

“So what happens now, Darren?”

“You tell me, slu—Two. You’re the one with the gun and the crazy bitch who thinks she’s a dog.”

“You don’t want to talk about her like that. I don’t think she’s very fond of you, and I *know* that I’m not.”

“Feeling’s mutual.”

“Money, Darren. How much have you got here? Don’t lie to me.”

“Three, maybe four grand in the safe.”

“I want it. Then you can go ... under one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“Get out of this business. You’re smart enough to make money some other way. I don’t give a shit what you do. Open a bar. Run drugs. Whatever. Just stay away from girls. You’ve fucked up enough of them.”

Darren rolled his eyes. “Spare me. Doesn’t seem to have done you too badly ...”

Two closed her eyes a moment, thinking of Theroen. “No? You don’t have a clue, Darren, and you’re walking into bad territory. I’m giving you a break here. If revenge was everything, I should have Tori tear your prick off with her teeth so I can feed it to you. It’s not, and I’m trying to be better than that. Don’t talk to me about how I’m doing. Just get me my money.”

Darren went to a safe at the wall, and if Two had been human, things might have ended some other way. As it was, she could see exactly what was in the safe, was well aware of the cold glint of metal in the shadows. Darren stood by the safe, appearing to count money.

He looked up at her, and there was a small smile on his face. “You sure I have to leave? I was damn good at this.”

Two rolled her eyes. “Yeah, exploiting twelve-year-olds and beating up women. You’re the greatest, Darren.”

Darren shrugged. “Got to keep you in line. We had a business relationship, Two. I gave you what you wanted, you paid for it.”

“Fuck you. I never wanted that. You forced it on me.”

“And you loved it. I know you stole shit from those other girls. You loved getting high. What’s so wrong with that? It’s good shit. What does it matter what you paid for it?”

“That’s not love. That’s need.”

“What’s the difference?” Darren shifted position. His eyelid twitched, and he glanced at her. Cagey. Two knew what was coming. She thought about his

question. Love. Need. What was the difference? She loved Theroen. She needed the blood. She loved the blood. She needed Theroen.

“You can’t have love without need. You *can* have need without love. This is going nowhere, Darren. You’re done.” Two glanced down at Tori, who was looking up at her in anticipation. Tori could feel the tension growing. Two held out a hand, hidden from Darren’s view behind the desk, telling Tori to wait.

“Suppose I said I don’t want to leave?” Darren would have seemed calm to a normal person. To Two he was a bundle of nervous tics. Tiny involuntary muscle movements around his eyes, in the muscles of his right arm.

“I’d tell you that you don’t have much choice.”

“Baby, I have all the choice in the *world*.” Darren snarled and made his move, bringing his arm up, pointing the gun at Two. As he began his move, Two closed her hand into a fist. Tori leapt into motion.

Darren was quick, but Tori was supernatural, a creature beyond the bounds of human limitation. If the vampire girl had moved fast before, she was like lightning now, covering the distance between her and Darren so quickly that her passage made an audible rushing noise. The gun was knocked away, Tori’s teeth found his throat, her head made a ripping, rending motion, and Two’s former pimp’s life ended with a gurgle that was supposed to be a scream.

* * *

“I thought you said you didn’t do this often.” Sam was standing at the doorway to the bathroom, wrapped in a towel, staring at the slumped form that had once been Darren. Two was pulling it toward the closet, where she had already deposited the corpse of the girl in the bed. Two glanced over at Sam, shrugged. She finished her task, closed the closet doors, walked over to the desk, and lit a cigarette. The first drag made her cough. Made her head spin. The second went down more smoothly.

“And I thought you didn’t want any of those.” Sam said.

“If I can’t have anything to love, I’ll take something to need.”

“What?”

“Never mind. Here, Darren brought us some clothes.”

“Okay. Two?”

“Yeah.”

“What now?”

“Let me think about that. You don’t owe me anything, Sam. There’s money in the safe. Take it and run. Or stick around. I’d be happy to have someone to talk to, at least for tonight. I have to wait here for a while.”

“I’ll stay. Go take a shower. Am I safe with ... her?” Tori was again curled up at the base of the desk, seeming to doze.

Two nodded, got up, and headed for the bathroom.

The shower was heaven. Good, hot water and lots of it. After two days on the road, and skipping a shower at the motel, she’d felt terrible. Being clean helped. Being rid of Darren helped more. She didn’t regret it, not at all. One oppressor down. She wasn’t ready to think about the other.

Two showered, dried off, brushed her hair back into a ponytail and tied it wet. The girl in the mirror looked pale and tired, but more alive than the heroin addict who had stared back at her not two months ago. Theroen had done that for her. Now he was dead.

She put it out of her mind, and left the girl in the mirror behind.

“You going to try to get *her* in there?” Sam indicated toward Tori, who was now sprawled out on the bed, snoring in a most unladylike way, oblivious to the blood on the covers.

“Going to try. She stinks.”

Sam nodded again. She was counting money, pulled from the safe and spread across the desk. Two pulled off her towel. Sam held up a hand and looked away. “Whoah, hey, let’s keep the full frontal nudity to a minimum. Tori’s enough.”

Two laughed. “Sorry. I used to shower with other girls in this building all the time. You stop thinking about it.” She put on some clothes. Darren had managed a good guess at both her size and Sam’s. Two had never been a heavy girl to begin with, but now vampirism had shaped her form to its absolute peak. Clothes that would have fit the Two that Darren had known were now a little loose.

“Tori. Hey, Tori. Wake up, lazy. You want to take a bath? Or a shower?”

Tori rubbed sleep out of her eyes and looked up at Two, puzzled. Two indicated toward the bathroom with her hand, and Tori glanced toward it, not comprehending.

“Ah, fuck, you don’t know what the hell I’m talking about. This should be interesting. Come over here, Tori.”

Tori followed Two into the bathroom. After a moment, Sam entered as well. “Gotta see you try this.”

Two grinned. She turned on the water and motioned toward the bathtub. Tori looked nervous.

“Look, silly, it’s like rain except it’s warm, and there’s no mud. You’ll be fine.”

Tori was alternating between looking at the shower, and looking at Two. Her expression was skeptical. Two laughed.

“You’ll be *fine* Tori. Look, Sam and I both took showers, and we’re exactly the same.”

“Well, technically our hair is now ‘full of body and life,’ I think. According to the shampoo bottle, anyway.”

Two rolled her eyes. She moved toward the shower, ducked her head under the water for a moment, then returned to where Tori sat. “See? It’s fine, Tori.”

“Bathroom’s getting soaked, Two.” Sam tossed a towel on the ground.

“The superintendent’s dead. I don’t think he’s going to bill us. Come on, Tori. We haven’t got all night.”

Tori’s expression was uncertain, but she allowed herself to be lead toward the shower. After a moment’s hesitation, she stepped in and, feeling the warm water, gave them a brilliant smile. Two laughed.

Sam held up her hands. “Okay, I’m out of here. As much as Darren might’ve appreciated it, I’m not into watching you teach Tori the miracle of soap. I’ll be waiting.” She departed, returning to her counting. Two turned back to Tori and began attempting to instruct her.

* * *

Two left the bathroom laughing. Tori trailed behind her, appearing bewildered by the towel wrapped around her upper torso. Her hair was dry and brushed, and she looked like a completely different person.

“Wow, holy shit ... she’s gorgeous with all of that dirt off,” was Sam’s appraisal.

“Yeah. You should’ve seen her preening with her hair in the mirror. You’d think she was getting ready for a date.”

“Well, good to get in the habit. I don’t think running around dirty and naked is going to work for very long in the city.”

“No, probably not. That reminds me ... time for Tori to learn about clothing, I think.”

“Don’t you suppose they tried that already?” Sam asked.

Two pondered this, then shrugged. "I don't know. I'm not sure they ever gave her a fair chance. I think they saw her regress, or change, or whatever, into an animal ... and they just let it happen. I think there's more human left than they imagined. Or maybe she's starting to change back. I have no real idea how this shit works."

"I'd comment that we're all human and I still think you're crazy, but it gets harder to keep that up every time I think about the last twenty-four hours."

Two nodded. "I think any 'there's no such thing as vampires' argument sort of goes out the window after you meet Abraham. Hey, Tori, you want to put on some clothes?"

Tori looked at her, not understanding. She tugged at the towel, and it fell away. Tori reared back on her haunches and stretched, showing off well more than was proper.

"I could've done without that," Sam commented.

"She doesn't know any better. Come here, Tori. This is a shirt. See? Like the one I'm wearing. Put it on. No ... no, the other way sweetheart. That's backwards. That's ... Tori, here, let me help."

Sam laughed. Two glanced sideways at her, questioning.

"You sound like my sister. She's got two kids. Also, you're *never* going to get her to understand the concept of a bra."

Two smiled and rolled her eyes. "No, I didn't even bother."

* * *

"It's been over an hour since all that shooting, Two, and no one's even bothered to investigate?" Sam had finished counting the money, and was reclining in Darren's chair, feet on the desk, smoking another cigarette. Two was sitting on a maroon couch across the room, also smoking, taking a break from teaching Tori how to walk on two feet. The room was nearly dark, illuminated only by the diffuse glow creeping in from the city outside.

"Most of the girls are out right now. The rest are probably hoping he's dead."

"Nice guy, huh?"

"Oh, yes. A warm and friendly person. Darren was loved by all." Two's voice was dry.

Sam laughed. "Right. Okay, so ... what's next? There's four grand and two bags of what I assume is either heroin or coke in the safe. I don't know anything about that shit and don't even want to touch it. Do I get a share of the money?"

“Yeah. Take half. I’d give you all of it, but I need some immediate funds.”

“Whatever. Two thousand bucks will make up for one lousy night. That’s not enough for you to flee to Mexico with, though. Are you staying here? I think New York might be hazardous to your health, Two.”

There was a thud. Tori had been attempting to cross the room on only her feet, and had lost her balance. She made a sound of frustration. Two smiled at her, said something encouraging, and turned back to Sam.

“New York is dangerous to everyone’s health. I don’t give a shit. And I don’t really know what’s next yet, Sam. Sorry. Right now I’m waiting for Molly to come in. I need to see her. If she’s still alive.”

“Molly?”

“She’s a friend. One of the few I have. After I talk with her, Christ ... I should run. You should go home, and I should run. I should take off and go to California. Or Europe. Or fucking Japan. Anywhere where Abraham’s *not*, but ...”

Sam arched an eyebrow, spread her hands, waiting for Two to elaborate.

“But I don’t want to do any of that.” Two sighed, ran a hand through her hair, shook her head. Her jaw clenched. “I’m so fucking tired of living my life afraid, Sam. He took everything I had. When Theroen ... when it happened, when I felt him go, I almost gave up right there. How am I going to survive? How do I live knowing that Abraham’s out there somewhere? That he might show up any time? That the horrible, twisted, evil *thing* that murdered Theroen is still wandering free?”

“I don’t know, Two.”

“Me neither. And that’s not all. What have I got left here? I have no job. I have three friends, one of whom also now has no job and is still hooked on smack. The other two don’t really understand me and don’t know how to help me. In another week or two, tops, I’m not even going to be a vampire anymore.”

Two rolled her eyes and bit her lower lip, fighting back tears. Sam seemed to be trying to find the right words, but coming up empty. Two waved her hand, dismissive. “Don’t worry about it, Sam. I’ll be okay.”

“Look, Two, I’m just a poor Dominican girl from the Bronx, so maybe it’s not my place to say, but maybe you need to look on the bright side? You’re not on heroin. You’ve got friends. This might be a chance to start a new life.

Two said nothing, just stared, sullen, at the floor.

Sam toyed with another cigarette for a moment, then lit it. She looked concerned.

“What, Sam?”

“You want me to be honest?”

“Yes. I can handle that.”

Sam shrugged, trying for nonchalance. “I don’t know you very well, Two. We only met a day ago. But I like you, and I’m worried that you’re going to go and do something stupid, like kill yourself or something. I’m afraid to leave you alone.”

Two shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. At least, it hadn’t occurred to me yet. Not since right after Theroen died anyway. I wouldn’t do that to you or Tori.”

“Good. She needs you to take care of her. And I think you can count her as another friend, and me, so now you’re up to five. You could maybe forget Abraham, if you tried, and go back to a normal life. Would that be so bad?”

Two pondered this, trying to put her feelings into words. “No,” she said after some time. “No, it wouldn’t be so bad. Being human is a wonderful thing, in a lot of ways, and I guess I could probably get used to it again. It’s being without *him* that I’ll never get used to. I’ll never forget, Sam. I ... there was love, a lot of it, even though we didn’t know each other for that long. But that’s not all of it. When Theroen turned me into a vampire, it connected us in a way that human beings just can’t understand.

“The way his mind worked, he was always there, always with me. I didn’t even really *notice* it, not until he was gone. I feel empty, Sam. Like a part of me died with him. That feeling’s not going to go away. I can tell you that right now. At best, it’s just going to fade a little.”

“So what are your options then, Two? Find another vampire? Make the change again? Maybe you could get Tori to do it.”

“Tori’s not strong enough. I’ve been thinking about it since we left the mansion, Sam. I’ve been trying not to, but I can’t help it, and I guess really I know what the next move is. That’s why I told you that you could go. You don’t need to be a part of this. I don’t want you to.”

Sam closed her eyes, rested her forehead in her palm, and sighed. When she spoke, she did not look at Two. “You’re going back, aren’t you?”

Two nodded, looking out the window. The rain on the glass distorted the red light of a neon sign across the street, made it ripple, reminding her of blood. After a moment, she answered Sam’s question.

“Yes. I’m going back. I’m going to kill that fucker.”

Sam was quiet a moment, smoking her cigarette and staring up at the ceiling. The ghosts of car headlights from the street below made the room pulse as if breathing.

Finally, Sam spoke. "That's crazy, Two. You said so yourself. You said he was a god."

"The Romans killed God two thousand years ago. Or his son, anyway. Maybe I can do the same."

Sam blew air through her pursed lips, unimpressed with this line of reasoning. "What are you going to do, Two? Shoot him?"

"No. Yes. I don't know. I'll bring a gun. And a knife. A big one."

"Oh, good. A big knife." Sam rolled her eyes. "What about garlic? A wooden stake? Maybe some holy water or a cross?"

"That's all bullshit. Abraham's just like anything else ... if you destroy his brain, or his heart, it'll kill him. The problem is that you need something like a nuclear bomb to do it."

"Or a big knife." The sarcasm in Sam's voice was caustic.

"What do you want from me, Sam? I have to try. I'll never forgive myself if I don't try."

"Theroen would never forgive you for going back," Sam said. Two drew in a shocked breath, and Sam looked up at her, saw the expression on Two's face, and immediately put her hand to her forehead in regret. "I'm sorry, Two. Really. That was unfair."

After a moment, Two shook her head. "No. It would only be unfair you were wrong. But I have to, Sam. I have to. Go home. Get away from this. Forget you ever met me, or Abraham, or any of us, and go back to your life."

Sam considered this, and nodded. "Okay, Two. I'm sorry you have to do this, but I know damn well I can't stop you, and I don't know enough about this to try and talk you out of it. I'll stop making you feel bad about it."

"Are you leaving?"

"I have nowhere to be ... might as well hang here. I'll leave when you do. Or when we run out of cigarettes. Whichever comes first."

Two nodded, and lit another.

* * *

Time passed, and girls began to show up. Two greeted each with a sardonic grin. Two had been one of Darren's girls, and they all knew her. They asked where he was.

Darren was out, she told them. Would he be back soon? No ... no, she didn't think so. One by one, each girl got the point. Most left smiling. None had called the cops. Two might not have brought salvation – many of the girls would

simply move on to new pimps and pushers – but at least she had brought them temporary freedom.

Molly was one of the last, and she came in bruised and bleeding, black eyes like raccoon markings, rail thin. The heroin was finally getting the better of her. Two could see it in her posture, in her eyes, and in the way it had eaten away at her body. Molly took one look at Two, and her shoulders slumped. She looked down at the ground and began to weep.

Two crossed the distance between them at a run and took Molly up in her arms, holding the girl, crying herself, murmuring words of comfort to her friend. Finally, through hitching breaths, Molly was able to speak.

“I thought you were dead!”

“No. Just gone. Are you okay, Molly?”

Molly sniffled and looked up at Two. “Yes. I mean ... no. I mean ...”

“You’ll live.”

Molly nodded. She embraced Two again for a moment, then stood back.

“You look different.”

Two smiled at this, wiping her eyes. “I guess I am. No more smack. No more Darren. At all. We took care of him.”

Molly’s eyes widened. “Is he—?”

“Dead? Yes.”

The expression that followed this piece of news had no business on the face of a twelve-year-old. It was a combination of satisfaction, glee, and hate. It hurt Two’s heart to see it there, but she understood. She understood very well.

“Good,” Molly said.

“Yes. Listen, sweetheart, how do you feel?”

Molly pondered this a moment, then sighed. “I dunno. I don’t even care anymore. I don’t care about the fucking, or the beatings, or what the other girls say about me. I don’t care about scoring crack or meth. I don’t even like shooting up anymore, but I *need* it.”

Two frowned. “This isn’t supposed to be your life. We’re going to change that.”

“We are?”

“Yes. Here, hang on a second.” Two counted out several hundred dollars in cash and set it on the desk. “You’re going to take a cab to Smith Street, and get out at Sid’s bar on Pacific. You’re going to ask the man at the door if you can talk to Rhes. Chances are that the guy you’re asking will *be* Rhes, but it might be the other bouncer. If Rhes isn’t there, tell the bouncer Dan that Two said he needs to call Rhes right now. Can you remember this?”

Molly nodded, big eyes peering at Two, trying to keep track.

“Good. When you meet Rhes, you’re going to give him the note I’m about to write, and whatever cash you don’t spend on the cab. He’s going to take you in until I get back. Trust me, he’ll do it. ”

“Where are you going? Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I’m going away for a bit. I have things I have to take care of.”

“Who are these people?”

“Friends. Don’t worry about me, kiddo. Get yourself into that cab, and go see Rhes.”

“Okay, Two.”

Two found paper in the desk, and scribbled out a quick note.

Rhes and Sarah,

This is Molly. She’s addicted to heroin and she needs your help. She’s a sweet, wonderful girl who deserves better, and I’m begging you to help her get through this. I’m sorry there’s no notice, but I know I can count on you. Please do this for me.

I don’t know if I’ll ever see you again. There’s something dangerous I have to do. I can’t explain. It’s too fucked up. Everything is fucked up, but I want you to know that right now, at this moment, I am okay. Better than I ever was. Clean and sober and I have a reason to live, even though I don’t know if I will.

That’s why I need you to help her. Please. She’s just a kid, and I need her to live, even if I don’t. Don’t worry about hearing from Molly’s former employer. He’s dead.

If Molly needs someone to hate, let her hate me.

Thank you so much. I love you both.

- Two

The note was a gamble. If Molly read it, she would never make it to Sid's bar. If she knew that Two was sending her to a life without heroin, she'd choose the street. Two folded the note in half once, then again, and taped it shut.

"Take this," she said, handing it to the girl. "Don't open it. Don't read it. Just take it and give it to Rhes."

Molly looked concerned. "You sure?"

"Absolutely. Rhes is a sweet guy, and his girlfriend Sarah's wonderful. You're going to live with them, for a while at least. They've got a big black dog named Jake. He's a sweetheart. You'll love him."

"Where am I going to get a fix?"

It hurt to lie to Molly, but there was no choice. Two looked into the girl's eyes and did her best. "Rhes will take care of that. He knows people. Do you trust me, Molly?"

"Yes, Two."

"Good. Give me a hug and then get the hell out of here."

Molly embraced her again, and Two hugged back. She hoped to make it through the dark days ahead, but knew it was unlikely. Molly was redemption. Even if Two failed and Abraham destroyed her, Molly at least was safe.

After a moment, they broke apart. Molly was crying again when she said goodbye, but she moved resolutely toward the door. At its edge, Two called to her.

"Hey, Molly?"

The girl turned around, cocked her head, raised her eyebrows. "Yeah?"

"Do you still pray every night?"

"I stopped. I didn't think God was listening."

"Maybe he was."

"Maybe I'll start again."

"Do that. And pray for me, okay?"

* * *

Two lit a cigarette and leaned back, lost in thought. It hurt, seeing Molly, but in that bittersweet way—as much pleasure as pain. Sam spoke up.

"Seems like a nice kid."

Two nodded.

"There's no fix waiting for her with this guy Rhes, is there?"

"Of course not."

"Think she'll make it through?"

"God, I hope so."

"You forgot to tell her *why* she should pray for you."

Two gave Sam a bitter smile. "No. I didn't forget."

Sam stood up, stretched, walked over to the desk and looked Two in the eyes. "He's going to *kill* you, Two. I'm sorry, but this is crazy."

Two shook her head. "You can't talk me out of it, Sam."

"Too bad. I'm not going to stop trying. Will you bring Tori?"

"Yes."

"Will she fight him?"

"I don't know."

"What if he kills her too?"

Two smacked her hand down on the table and looked up at Sam, eyes flaring. "Then he fucking kills us both. Tori's probably better off anyway. That was the decision. That was the plan. Kill Tori, Kill Melissa, drop you in the city and run like hell. Abraham just fucked it up."

Sam took a step back, holding up her hands. "Okay, Two. I'm sorry. I know this is hard on you."

"No, we're beyond that. This is the easiest thing in my life, Sam. *I have no choice.*"

Sam shrugged, clearly unconvinced. Two dragged at her cigarette, blew smoke into the dark room, tried not to think about Theroen. She didn't want to think of him until the next evening, until she was working herself up to a fever pitch of fury and hatred, ready to kill or be killed.

"If I live through it, do you want me to find you?" she asked.

"Hell yes."

"I don't have an apartment. Give me your address and phone number. Maybe I'll be in touch."

"Sure." Sam scribbled the information down. Two stuck it in her back pocket and went back to staring out the window.

"Thanks for staying, Sam." She said finally. "I know you could've left a couple hours ago."

"It's okay. I spent the time thinking up excuses to explain to my friends where the hell I've been."

Two laughed a bit at that. "I have no idea what I'll tell mine, if I see them. I'm not sure I could even face them, after all the shit I've lied to them about since I met Darren."

"I'm sure they'd forgive you."

"Yeah. Can I forgive myself? Don't know. Probably doesn't matter. Like you said ... he's going to kill me."

“Right, but ... What happens if you win?”

“Honestly, Sam? I don’t think there’s much point in worrying about what will happen if I win.”

“Are there other vampires?”

“So I’ve been told.”

“Will they come after you?”

Two smiled. “Get out of here, Sam. Go home. Stop thinking about it. You’re practically human. I can hear it in your voice. Another night, and this will all seem like some bizarre dream.”

“Yeah. Okay. Can’t say it was nice meeting you, Two – things were too fucked up to call any of it ‘nice’ – but I’m glad I know you, if that means anything.”

“It means a lot.”

Sam looked around. “I’m glad to leave. I don’t know how you stood this place for so long.”

“It’s easier if you’re high all the time.”

Sam headed for the door. When she reached it, she turned. “Hey.”

“Yeah?”

“Goodbye. Good luck.”

Two looked over at her, and smiled again. “Bye, Sam. Thanks.”

Sam waved, turned and disappeared through the door. Two sat, Tori dozing behind her, and watched as smoke curled up into the darkness, lost in thought, lost in her plans for revenge.

* * *

Midnight shopping was easier in New York than anywhere else in the world, and Two had little trouble finding the supplies she needed. She already had Darren’s gun and bullets to go with it, the extra clips found in a desk drawer. To these she added a machete, purchased at a hardware store, and even a few wooden stakes, although seeing them sitting in the car truly drove home how futile it all was. Wooden stakes? For Abraham?

Two drove from spot to spot, trying not to think about it, picking up things she thought she might need. Tori amused herself by playing with the various lit switches and dials inside the car. Eventually the incessant noise of the radio flipping from station to station faded into the background.

She and Tori fed on a homeless man under a bridge somewhere in Brooklyn, but Two found her thirst waning early. It was starting: she was becoming human again.

They left the city around four in the morning, heading toward Binghamton. There she found a motel. When the coming sun forced her into sleep, Two was glad for it. She was ready for the end.

* * *

The drive was miserable, the walk worse. They ditched the car a few miles from the mansion, and made their way toward the house in a downpour that wanted to be snow, couldn't quite manage it, and settled for sleet instead. Two smoked, walked, saying nothing. The gun was jammed into the waistband of her pants. The machete hung in a sheath from her belt. She hadn't even bothered to bring the stakes.

Two walked. Tori stumbled along behind her, insisting on walking but occasionally dropping to all fours to catch up.

The mansion emerged from the surrounding trees like a horror-movie haunted house. Huge, dark, lurking like a thing alive. It seemed as if the evil of its owner, held back perhaps by Theroen's presence, had engulfed it. She found herself losing her resolve. Did she really want to be here? Surely this was madness. Hopeless. The fear pressed on her, taunting and shoving, trying to force her back to the car and away from the mansion. Two fought against it.

She thought of Theroen, forcing herself to contemplate the awful truth: he was gone, never coming back, and she would have to live without him. She thought of all of the things they had meant to do together, of the time they had planned to spend, and it seemed her heart would break.

The hurt brought anger. The anger brought hate, and Two looked up at the mansion with loathing in her eyes. Abraham was up there, somewhere. He wouldn't know that she had returned. There might be some chance for surprise, some possibility of success.

"Coming for you, Abraham. Going to cut out your heart, eat it in front of you, and then set you on fire."

Two snarled up at the mansion, and again moved forward.

* * *

The front entrance was lit. Too dangerous. Too obvious. Two knelt next to Tori, whispered in her ear.

“Tori, I know you can understand me if you try. Please try. Do you know if there’s a back door? A side entrance? Something?”

Tori looked back at her, confused but wanting to help.

“See that? That’s a door, but that one’s *bad*, Tori. Is there a different door? Somewhere else?”

Sudden understanding dawned in Tori’s eyes, and she began to squirm about, excited to have the answer. She pointed at the side of the mansion, pulling at Two’s hand.

“Okay, Tori. Good. Thank you.”

They crept along, skirting the edge of the forest on the mansion’s west end, keeping the shadows. The lawn was soft and wet, muddy in spots. Freezing water sprayed up with each footstep. The sleet kept falling from the sky, and Two and Tori both were both soon soaked and filthy. A normal human might have been succumbing to hypothermia, but Two was still mostly vampire, and barely felt the cold.

Two caught sight of an indentation in the wall to her right; a door, possibly a servant’s entrance. It was unlit and quiet. There was nothing between them and the entrance except wet grass and a few cultivated trees. Rotten crabapples littered the ground, slowly returning to the soil.

Tori lead. Two kept her eyes to the ground, afraid to look at the mansion. The sense of menace was palpable, like a wet cloth that wrapped them, stifling, suffocating. Two felt as if could barely breathe.

They were nearly there when Tori stopped short with a sudden yipping noise. Two looked up, and at once felt her limbs go weak. There before them was a shadow within the shadows, dark and looming, a presence so powerful it seemed to beat upon her like a physical force. Abraham. There. Waiting.

“Hello Two.”

Two could not find words, could barely look.

“You’ve come back to finish this, have you? And you’ve brought my daughter. How lovely. Tori, you have been a *very* bad girl. I thought we had trained you better than this.”

Sudden anger blazed in Two, and she found her voice. “Don’t you talk to her like she’s your fucking dog, Abraham!”

Abraham turned his attention again to Two, focusing his gaze on her. She stood up to it as best she could, teeth clenched, holding on to her hatred as an

anchor, remembering Theroen. It was the only way to keep from screaming under the onslaught of his gaze.

“I will talk to her, little girl, however I please.”

Calm turned suddenly to rage in his eyes, and Abraham bent forward, eyes blazing, snarling at Tori. She cried out first in fear, and then in pain. Abraham never touched her. Tori thrashed on the ground, wailing, left finally lying on her side, shuddering and weeping pink vampire tears. Two heard herself screaming at Abraham. Semi-words. Noises of rage and hate and terror. Abraham ignored her.

“Now, Tori. Go!” he roared, and sudden strength seemed to flow into Tori’s body. She leapt up and ran, reverting to all fours, pelting across the yard to the forest, yelping. Two felt tears on her cheeks, hot like branding irons against the cold and the slush. She was growling obscenities at Abraham, over and over, unable to stop. Abraham smiled at her, quiet, in control once again.

“You’re a fascinating young woman, Two, but too good. Too good. It is in many ways a shame to destroy you, but I think that were I to break you, I would destroy the same qualities that make you so intriguing.”

“Fuck you.”

“No, little girl, don’t you remember? I’m possessed of no such abilities.” Abraham chuckled. The sound was like turning earth. Like scraping stones.

“I’m here to kill you, Abraham.”

“I know. Oh, I know. You might even have succeeded in surprising me. I must admit that this is the *last* place I had expected you ever to return. The very last. Yes, you might have come upon me unawares, and at least had that small satisfaction before your death. Alas, Two, you have not. I have had some help.”

Two knew it before he spoke her name.

Abraham smiled. Moved aside. Gestured. “Is this not true, Sam?”

Two turned to meet the eyes of her betrayer.

* * *

“I’m sorry, Two.” Sam looked sick with fear and shame and regret. “I’m so sorry. Two, I’m sorry.”

“You fucking bitch ...”

“You don’t understand!” Sam was crying. “He came to me last night, after I left. He said if I didn’t tell him what you were going to do, that he’d kill you anyway, and he’d never finish me! I didn’t have a choice!”

Two was taken aback. “Never finish you?”

Sam took a step forward. "He's a god, Two. We could be children of God. You know what it's like. Never sick, never weak. How could I *not* want it?"

"Not like this, Sam. You don't want what he's offering."

"I do! He gave me a taste of the blood last night. It was ... oh, God. I want it. I need it!"

Abraham observed them, silent, smiling to himself. Two whirled, faced him, hatred now beating down the last of her fear.

"Tell her! Tell her the truth! Tell her what your blood does!"

"The truth, Two? The truth is that I have escaped the curse of my blood. I have discovered, through much experimentation, that my blood can be diluted. I can have now what I could never have before: a true fledgling, dedicated and attentive. I will dole out my blood in small amounts, and slowly Samantha will be transformed."

"A slave, Abraham. That's what she'll always be to you. You'll never finish her, and even if you do, you'll keep her here forever."

"Can you take the word of this prostitute, Samantha? This unclean whore who would throw away your chance at immortality for the sake of her dead lover?"

Two turned back to Sam, plaintive. "Sam, please ..."

"I'm sorry, Two." Sam took another step forward. A third. The distance was rapidly closing.

Abraham spoke again. "This end was inevitable, Two, from the moment you murdered my daughter."

Two closed her eyes and felt despair welling. It ate at her courage once again. Accept this? Get it over with? Lie down and die?

Inside her something grew. A spark became a flicker, a flicker a blaze. Death meant reunion with Theroen, so what reason was there to fear it? If she must die, so be it. She would do so on her own terms, though, not like this.

Sam was nearly within grabbing distance. Two looked up at her, met her eyes, and shook her head.

"I'm so sorry, Sam."

Action as instinct. Two moved so quickly that Sam had no chance of stopping her. Abraham could have, if he'd wanted to, but Abraham simply stood where he was, his black grin never wavering. In one swift move, she drew Darren's gun from the waistband of her pants, leveled it at the girl in front of her, and fired. Once. Twice. A third shot went wild, but it didn't matter. The first bullet hit Sam in the neck. The second entered at her forehead and removed the top half of Sam's skull, spraying it backward in a gout of bone and brain. Sam's

eyes looked confused for a moment, then went blank and lifeless. She exhaled in a long, rattling sigh, and dropped to the ground.

Two was already spinning, pointing the gun at Abraham, and now he moved. She felt it yanked from her grip before she could squeeze off a shot. A hand she couldn't see collided with her midsection and sent her hurtling backwards, rain-softened ground rising up to meet her. On pavement, the landing would have shattered bone. Two lay in the grass, writhing in pain. Abraham towered over her.

"You're very good at making things difficult, Two."

Two wheezed, finding her breath. "Fuckin' A."

"Can you run?"

"Break as many of my fucking ribs as you want, bastard. I can run."

"Then I think you had better do so. Who knows? The forest *is* quite dark. Perhaps I shall lose you."

Two looked up at the smiling figure of death above her, laughing to itself at this little piece of nonsense. Abraham wanted a chase, that was all; a little action after so many years without. Two knew it, and knew that her last chance was rapidly expiring. She reached into the interior pocket of her leather jacket, and brought out the only hope she had left.

White powder, some of it clumped with moisture, some still dry. Heroin. Sam had found it in Darren's safe, and Two had brought it with her. She had no interest in it now, not for herself, not for Molly, not for Tori.

But maybe for Abraham.

Two hurled the drug at his face, heard him inhale in surprise, pulled herself to her feet, and ran for the forest.

* * *

That drug, Theroen, more than any other, is poison to our kind.

Abraham's words, echoing in her brain as Two had stared into the safe, at the bags of heroin Darren kept therein. This was not the street grade junk he gave to his girls, nor even the private supply of cleaner product he kept for special occasions. This was uncut, raw, too powerful yet for use. Now it coated Abraham's lungs, his nasal passages, the ducts of his eyes.

Two could hear him screaming.

Pain, rage, hate; Two heard the depths of her own soul reflected back at her in Abraham's voice, and grinned with malice as she ran. She did not know if the heroin would kill him, or only slow him down and give her a few moments

more to live before her tore her limb from limb. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered anymore, except the deep, black well of joy within her. She had done damage to a god. She had hurt the thing that could not be hurt. Two laughed as she ran, a maniacal cackle of glee and hatred.

She slipped, slid, fell down a short, rocky embankment, cuts on her arms and face, still laughing. Hysterical, now, and barely able to run. Something seemed to stab her in the side with every gasp. Two didn't care. Her laughter came in gasps and shrieks. Behind her, she could hear Abraham crashing through the bushes. Roaring. Snarling. Two screamed obscenities back at him, egging him on, daring him to kill her, laughing at his rage.

The path led to a sheer rock wall, the tangled underbrush on either side too thick to climb through. Two skidded to a halt under the limbs of a tall oak, and looked around in desperation. She was trapped. Behind her, she felt Abraham's presence growing. There was no chance that way, and no other alternative. Death had come for her. Two turned, put her back to the rock, and faced that death grinning.

Abraham staggered into the clearing and came to a stop ten feet in front of her, his face twisted with hate. He coughed, rubbed an arm across his eyes, wobbled slightly, and Two knew she had hurt him badly.

"You like it, fucker?" she screamed at the figure. "How does it feel? You flying high yet?"

"I'm going to cut the skin from your body in strips. I'm going to hang you upside-down. Keep the ... blood at your head. Keep you alive." Abraham's voice gurgled. He turned to one side and dry heaved, broke into a fit of coughing. There was blood on his face, and Two realized the heroin was eating away the soft tissue of his mouth and lungs. Abraham swung back toward her, and his eyes spoke now only of death.

Two beckoned to him. "Don't tease me, sweetheart. Do it. *Do it!*"

Abraham lurched forward, moving at a fraction of his former speed, unsteady in his step. Two unhooked her machete and prepared for death.

Something dropped from the tree above, hit Abraham with full force, and knocked him from his feet. Snarling, screaming, writhing limbs. Tori. Two howled in triumph, racing forward, raving, cackling.

"Tori! What are you *doing?!!*" Abraham's voice was weak. Confused. Its power was lost, and this more than anything filled Two with hope. Tori was at her peak, energized by rage and hatred, and the desire to protect her friend. Now was the time, yet Two could not get a clear shot with the machete without hurting the girl.

“Tori, move! You have to move!”

Too late. Abraham shoved forward, and threw Tori from him. The vampire girl collided with Two, knocked her backward, knocked the machete from her hand. Abraham advanced now, still fast, despite the heroin. Tori got in his way, was knocked aside, and landed hard. Two could hear the crack of her head on rock from six feet away, like ice snapping on a lake in midwinter. Two fell to her knees, scrabbling at the ground.

Reaching, searching, her eyes never leaving Abraham’s advancing form. She felt the machete’s handle, clasped it, and brought it up in a last, desperate arc. She swung the heavy blade with all of her strength, screaming prayers in a nonsense language to an indistinct God. Prayers for speed. Prayers for strength. Prayers that it was not too late.

The blade caught Abraham just below the chin, carving into the skin of his neck. For Two, it was like chopping at stone. She felt pain lance through her arm as muscles separated, tore, gave out, but did not draw back, did not stop her swing. Abraham’s head separated from his body, flew up and backward into the air, hit the ground rolling, and came to a stop by Tori’s inert form.

Two rolled away from the headless trunk, which stood for a moment as if welded to the ground. Great black jets sprayed forth from the ragged stump of neck, and the hands clutched at its sides as if searching still to tear Two apart. Then at last like Goliath it fell, borne down by its own weight, and lay still upon the ground. Abraham, the dark god, elder vampire of the New World, lay dead.

* * *

Blackness overtook Two, and she lay on her back for some time, covered in filth and blood, heedless of the slush soaking into her clothes. Gasping, sobbing, calling out to Theroen, Two lay on the cold ground until she at last realized that Theroen wasn’t coming, and dragged herself to a sitting position.

Tori.

She made her way to Tori’s body and bent down, fearing the worst. To her relief, Tori’s body was already healing, the flow of blood from the wound on the forehead slowing. She was breathing in deep, slow, steady breaths. Two shook her gently, and Tori opened her eyes. She sat up, groggy, and looked at Two, then at the head on the ground, and broke into tears. Two held her tightly, kissing her face, her hair, unable to believe they had both survived it.

“Oh, Tori. Oh, sweetheart. We did it. He’s dead. Tori, he’s dead!”

They took the head back with them to the house. Two wanted it nowhere near the body. She knew that vampires possessed formidable powers of regeneration, and if someone had told her that Abraham's head could somehow reattach itself to his body, she would not have doubted them.

They emerged from the forest together, staggering, leaning on each other for strength and making their way slowly toward the mansion, toward warmth. Two's head was throbbing, though she couldn't remember hitting it on anything. Her right arm felt as if on fire, every muscle torn and pulled. Tori shuffled along, leaning against her, still dizzy and sick from the blow to the head. Neither woman was capable of mustering more strength than was necessary to keep their limbs moving.

The side door was locked, and so they made their way toward the front. Two didn't know what she would do if that door wouldn't open. Break a window, perhaps. It didn't matter. They needed to get inside. The mansion was hope where no hope had been. It was warmth. Survival. Two wondered if she was crying. Her face was too numb from cold to tell.

The front door opened with ease, swinging wide, opening on the rooms in which she had spent the past two months. Two made a choked, sobbing noise of gratitude and stumbled inside, slamming the door behind her. She eased Tori down onto the plush oriental carpet, and staggered to the entrance to the basement. She threw Abraham's head down the stairs, then bolted the heavy oak door at their top.

The pain in her head and arm were making her dizzy. Two stumbled forward into the first room she could see. The media room. Melissa's blood still stained the carpet, and Two looked away. She struggled to one of the couches, fell down upon it, and let black unconsciousness take her.

* * *

She woke in the early morning, the sunlight still painful on her skin, and moved to a couch that lay in the shadows. Here she slept the rest of the day, and into the next evening. When at last she came out of her slumber, she found Tori curled up next to her. Her head still ached, but only slightly. Her arm was better, though still painful to move. Two felt very human indeed, and wondered if her regression to that form had been hastened as she had healed.

She sat up, looking around, trying to determine what hour of the day it was. The media room's windows were dark. Two could see smears of dirt in the

hallway, and realized that during the day, Tori had dragged herself into the front closet.

“Smart girl,” Two said. She turned on one of the televisions. Sights and sounds flashed by, news reports on things she didn’t care about. She flipped channels and found a cable access station broadcasting the time and date.

Near midnight, mid-December. It would be Christmas soon, the television informed her. Had she done her shopping? To Two it felt like she had lived ten years in the course of the past two months. She turned off the TV and stood on shaky legs. She was starving, but not for blood. What she really wanted was a cheeseburger. This realization made her laugh, even as tears sprung to her eyes.

Two made her way upstairs into the room she had shared with Theroen. Her clothes were still there, in closet and dressers. Bathroom supplies, books of poetry, it was as if she had never left. Two thought of Theroen, lying next to her on the bed, and the ache in her heart leapt to the forefront.

“I could kill you a thousand times, Abraham, and we’d never be even. You took everything I had.”

Two went to take a shower.

* * *

They lived at the mansion for six weeks, and in that time Tori began to show definite signs of returning to humanity. Christmas came and went, the New Year began. Two and Tori healed. As her mind changed, Tori began to behave in new ways. She mimicked sounds, and was beginning to understand simple questions that Two asked.

She was still strong. Still fast. Two wondered if the changes that vampirism had made to the girl’s physiology would every truly leave. She wondered if Tori would ever fully regain her mind. She didn’t know.

There were only two moments of unpleasantness left for Two during her stay at the mansion. The first occurred early: the burning of Abraham’s remains. Two had taken care of the head first, out in the yard, dousing it with gasoline and covering it with kindling. She’d taken the machete to the skull, blackened and cracked by the flames, and scattered the pieces around the grounds. She’d repeated the process with the body. If Abraham could somehow heal himself, it was beyond her power to do anything more to stop it.

The second occurrence came a week later. Exploring the mansion, she had come upon a staircase, behind a set of iron doors at the back of Abraham’s study. The stairs led to depths deeper even than the basement in which she had found

herself, that first night after meeting Theroen. Two had ventured down into the dark and foreboding space with trepidation, holding nothing more than a single flashlight.

The sight upon reaching the bottom had forced a cry of despair from her lips. There, on a stone bier, lay her lover. Theroen, pale and broken, was spread out on the slab. His body had been cleaned and dressed in a dark suit. It appeared as if Abraham had been preparing to perform some sort of ceremony. Two had run across the room, bit into her left wrist hard enough to bring blood, barely aware of the pain, and held it above Theroen's open mouth.

Nothing.

Crying, begging, Two held her neck against his lips. They were cold and dead. Theroen did not move, did not change, and Two wrapped her arms about the corpse and wept.

She knew that she could not bring herself to burn Theroen, and so left him there, climbing the stairs and closing the doors, piling objects in front of them. Stone statues, marble tables, anything heavy. Tori helped her move them.

Two hoped Theroen had found peace. She hoped he was somewhere with Lisette, loving her, telling her stories of Two and what fun they would have whenever Two finally joined them. She wondered if she had the strength to go on without him, and could not find an answer.

She wondered if some night she might awaken to find a vampire hovering above her, eyes like fire, bringing retribution for Abraham's death.

She wondered if any of it even mattered.

* * *

Chapter 7

The Search

An apartment in SoHo. Fifteenth floor.

“One fish ... Two fish ...” Tori read haltingly, struggling with the words, anxious to please. She looked up at Two, frustrated. “This is hard, Two! It’s hard.”

Two smiled, nodded, dragged at her cigarette. “I know, sweetheart. You’re doing fine.”

“Can I stop now?” Tori closed the book. Forty minutes of reading seemed to have worn her out.

New York. Two had been back in the city for three or four days. The mansion had provided her with enough money that she would never need to sell herself again. Jewelry, clothing, cars ... Two had sold them for prices so low they were obscene, and still pocketed an unbelievable amount of money. The Ferrari alone had brought her a quarter of a million dollars. Two wondered how much the heavily modified car would have been worth if sold legally.

She had spent the past few days opening safety deposit boxes, speaking with lawyers and accountants, looking for ones who could help her to deal with this sudden influx of wealth. She was not concerned with legality or morals, and soon found counsel that could help her retain the money without any questions as to its origins.

Two and Tori had left the mansion in January. Near the end of February, Two had returned for a final salvage trip, and found only a pile of ashes where once it had stood. Whether the fire had been caused by man or vampire or simply a bolt of lightning, Two could not say. She had not been able to bring herself to search the ruins and see if the sub-basement remained intact. Seeing him again like that, lying there on the stone bier, would have been more than she could bear. Her physical wounds were gone, but those that scarred her soul felt fresh still. She left, choosing to believe that somewhere below the ash, buried in a chamber of stone, was the body of her lover. Would he ever be found? Puzzled over? Dissected?

Two tried not to think about it.

She sighed. “Sure, Tori. You can stop. That’s fine.”

Tori handed her the book. “Do you want to read, Two? You read good, like my big sister.”

Two looked at her, puzzled. Tori had been mentioning this mystery sister for a few weeks now. When asked if she meant Melissa, Tori would shake her head. No. Someone else. A human sister? A mother? Two wasn't sure. She dragged on her cigarette, exhaled, let the fingers on her idle hand flip through the book.

Tori wrinkled her nose. "Why do you smoke, Two?"

"Because a girl can only give up so many addictions, Tori. I gave up the heroin. I gave up the blood."

"Is heroin the needle stuff?"

"Yes."

"That's bad for you!"

"Yes. Very bad for me, and even worse for Abraham."

Tori growled at the mention of her vampire father's name.

"Don't growl, sweetheart. Dogs do that, not people."

"Okay, Two."

Two knew she should call Rhes and Sarah, knew that she should let them know she was not dead. She desperately wanted to know how Molly was doing. She was waiting until she felt safe that she wouldn't burst into tears at the sound of Rhes' voice. She thought maybe tonight she could handle it.

"Do you want to go meet some friends of mine, Tori?"

"Sure! who?"

"You remember Molly? The girl we saw when I took you to Darren's apartment?"

Tori pulled at her hair, miming pigtails, her eyes questioning. Two nodded.

"Yes. Her, and a man named Rhes, and his girlfriend Sarah. You'll like them, Tori. They're good people."

"Okay, Two."

"Today should be one of Rhes' days off. They're probably at home. Should we call, or risk it and try to surprise them?"

"I like surprises!"

Two grinned. "Okay, Tori. Let's go meet some friends."

* * *

Rhes opened the door and stood there for a moment peering out at Two. He was tall and muscular, with short black hair and a trimmed mustache-goatee combination. The expression on his face brought tears to Two's eyes even as it

caused her to burst out laughing. Shock, wonder, joy. He stammered for a moment, finally finding words. "Jesus. We thought you were dead."

Two opened her arms, hugging him tightly, crying into his shoulder. Rhes lifted her up off the ground for a moment, set her back down, still grinning and looking like he might weep himself. He ran a shaky hand through his hair. Tori was looking around, bewildered. There was a dog barking in the background.

"Wow. I mean ... I just ... wow! Are you okay, Two?"

"I'll be better when you invite me in off your freezing-ass doorstep, and let me see Sarah."

Rhes laughed, moved aside, beckoned with his arm. Two walked into the house, a small but tidy Brooklyn brownstone, and looked around. Tori followed.

"Sarah's upstairs checking on the kid, but she'll be down in a second. Molly's fine, before you ask, Two. Well ... maybe not fine, but much better. It was a rough couple of months. Killed us to put her through it, but I think she's crossed over to the easier side of it now."

"Good. Thank you *so much*, Rhes. I don't know how I'm ever going to repay you guys for this."

"Two, I ... listen, don't worry about it. Trust me. We love her. She's the sweetest kid I've ever met. I hope you're not planning on taking her somewhere."

"Hadn't thought that far ahead, but assuming she's happy, and you guys want her here, I can't think of anywhere else she'd be better off."

Rhes nodded. "Good. Who's your friend? She okay with dogs?"

"Her name's Tori, and I have no idea. Guess we'll find out. Let him in before he pees on the floor, Rhes."

Rhes opened the door to the kitchen, and the dog, Jake, came bounding out, barking and wagging his tail. Tori took a nervous step backward, but Two knelt down and cried out the dog's name, throwing her arms wide. Soon, both girls were laughing and petting Jake, who was enjoying the attention.

"Do you like him, Tori?"

"He's soft! And ... eugh!" Jake licked Tori's face, and she pulled back, grinning and rubbing her cheek on her sleeve. Two laughed.

"And friendly. And smart, although I guess that seeing-eye dogs sort of have to be."

"Sure do," Rhes said. "Hey, Jake. Relax, big guy. They're not going anywhere."

He patted the dog, then pointed toward the couch. Jake leapt onto it and lay with his head over the arm, watching them with big, dark eyes.

There were footsteps on the stairs, and Two looked up to see Sarah descending them carefully. She had cut her straight, red hair since Two had last seen her, and it now hung just below her ears. She was wearing a pair of dark sunglasses, as always, and was holding the hand-rail as she descended. "There better not be any boots at the bottom of these, Rhes. If the blind lady trips and falls again, she's going to break your arms."

Rhes laughed, looking sheepish. "No, hon. They're in the closet."

Sarah came to a stop in front of Two. "Damn near killed me last week. Who says love isn't work?"

Two laughed. "How are you, Sarah? I like your hair!"

"Better for hearing your voice, Two, and thanks. Do I get a hug, or did Jake wear you out?"

Two embraced Sarah, laughing. They broke apart after a minute, and Two looked around smiling. Rhes spoke up. "You look good, Two. I hope you don't mind my asking but are you still, uh ... you know? Staying clean, and all that?"

"Oh, yeah. That's done. Been done for a while now."

"Any cravings?" Sarah asked.

Not for that, Two thought. Out loud she said "Occasionally. Mostly no."

"Good."

"Yes."

There was a pause. Two sat down on the couch, and Tori followed her. Rhes took an armchair. Sarah pulled up the piano bench.

Silence for a moment more, and then Rhes tilted his head to one side, looked at her for a moment, asked "You going to tell us where you've been, Two?"

Two sighed. "I don't know if I can. It's crazy, Rhes. You'll think I'm crazy."

There was another silence, then Rhes shrugged. "Okay. I won't push. Too happy to see you, anyway. You want anything to drink? Beer? Soda?"

"Fuck, yes. Beer. Whatever you've got will be great."

Rhes stood, moving toward the kitchen. "What about your friend? And Sarah, do you want anything?"

"I'm good, hon, thanks."

Two turned to Tori. "Do you want something to drink?"

"What's beer?"

"You wouldn't like it. It's a drink that sort of tastes like raw bread dough."

Tori made a face. "Yuck. Can I have a soda?"

Two laughed. "Sure. Whatever you have, Rhes, long as it's got sugar in it. She's not picky."

Rhes departed. Sarah got up, and stole Rhes' seat with a sideways grin toward the kitchen. She bit her lower lip for a moment, then spoke. "So, uh ... Tori, I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but I can't tell if you're five or twenty-five."

"I'm this many." Tori held up seven fingers with pride. Two rolled her eyes. Tori picked a random number of fingers each time her age came up.

"Tori, Sarah can't see that, and it doesn't matter anyway since you're making it up. It's hard to explain, Sarah. She's sort of both, really."

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "Don't suppose you'd care to explain that, either?"

"No, but I figure you're probably going to make me eventually, so I guess I might as well. Let's wait for Rhes."

"I get the impression there's a *lot* you're not telling us, Two."

"Centuries worth."

Sarah raised her eyebrows, but Two didn't elaborate. Rhes returned with the drinks, handed Two her beer, sat down on the piano bench.

"Way to steal my seat, dear," he said to Sarah.

"Your fault for offering to get the drinks, sweetie." Sarah was grinning, the slightest hint of sarcasm in her voice. She turned to Tori. "Where are you from, Tori?"

"I came from a big house. It was full of stuff but mostly I lived outside."

"Outside?"

"Yeah. In the woods."

"Oh, jeez ..." muttered Two. "We don't know where she's from. She only remembers the last place she lived, for now."

"Right. The last place she lived. Out in the woods. What the hell, Two?"

Two rolled her eyes, drank from her bottle of beer, looked around the room for a moment. "You're not going to let me *not* tell you this, are you?"

Sarah spread her hands. *Waddaya want from me?* Rhes said nothing.

Two sighed. "Okay. I ... fuck it. Here goes. When it's done, you can call the loony bin and have Tori and me committed. I'll start by saying that I can prove this, if I have to. I can take you to where the mansion was. I can show you what I took from there. I can dig down to ... to Theroen, and show him to you, if I have to."

"Theroen?"

"Let me tell it. It's going to take a while."

"Okay, Two."

Two took a breath, gathered her thoughts, and began. "It started on a regular night, I guess. As regular as it gets, anyway ..."

* * *

The story took three and a half hours to tell. By the time she finished, Tori had fallen asleep next to her on the couch. Sarah looked pale and shaken. Rhes looked dazed, like someone had hit him in the head with a sledgehammer. Two couldn't meet their eyes. She was shaking, needed a cigarette, and thought she might very soon begin weeping.

"Questions?" she asked, trying for humor and finding little. Her throat hurt, that muscle ache at the back that comes with holding back tears, or talking through them.

Sarah ran a hand through her hair, exhaled as if just remembering that she needed to breathe, flopped back against the cushions of the couch. "I have approximately seven hundred billion questions, Two."

"That's about half as many as I have. I can't answer most of them, Sarah. I didn't have very long to learn."

Rhes spoke up. "I have one. You really believe this, Two?"

"Yeah. Yes. I really do. I suppose it's possible that I've been lying somewhere hallucinating for the past three months, but I doubt it. I don't have any pictures, but I have the gun, and the stuff from the mansion, and Tori, who'll back me up as best she can if you ask her."

Rhes rested his head on one hand, staring at the floor, looking confused. "This is crazy."

"Yes."

"It's ... it's *fiction*, is what it is," Sarah said. She heard Two's intake of breath, held up her hand, cut Two off. "Not your story. I don't mean you're lying, or making this up. I haven't even come *close* to making a decision on that. I just mean the whole concept. The whole vampire thing. I want to believe you, but this isn't the dark ages. No one buys into that stuff anymore."

"I know. I don't know how to prove it, short of Theroen, and I guess even if I brought you there, he'd just look human. Nothing I can do. All of my witnesses are dead, except Tori. I guess she's not really that credible ... but if you want to take her outside, she'll happily lift the back end of a car six inches off the ground for you."

"Actually, I'd say Tori's proof even without any of that. I don't think she's really capable of lying. At best she'd have been hallucinating right along with you,

Two ... and if that's the case, then there'd have to be some explanation as to why you both hallucinated the same events."

Two looked at him, silent. Rhes stood up, stretched, paced back and forth a few times.

"I guess if it comes down to one story that's as weird as another, I'm going to go with the one that you think is the right one. I'm trying to believe you, Two, because I think you're telling the truth. My head hurts. It feels like my brain wants to abandon it for safer pastures, and I think I'm going to sleep with the lights on for the rest of my life, now, but I believe you."

Sarah sighed, but nodded. "Yeah. I guess I do, too."

Two looked at them both for a moment, then burst into tears. She covered her face with her hands, sobbing, shaking, unable to control herself. Tori woke at the sound, looking worried. "Are you okay, Two?"

Two sniffled, ran a hand across her eyes, tried to regain her composure. "I'm all right, Tori ... it's okay."

Rhes and Sarah were looking at her. Two gave up on maintaining any illusion of control and let herself cry. She needed it, and it didn't seem to bother them. Eventually she was able to compose herself enough to speak.

"I never want to tell that story again. I killed people. Victims, vampires ... Sam and Melissa and Abraham. I'd do it again. I'd do all of it, and I'd do even more if it would keep Theroen alive. I'd murder everyone between here and there, for that. I never expected you guys to believe me, but if you do, I won't blame you for hating me."

"Believing you is pretty difficult. Not hating you is easy." Rhes brought her a tissue, and another beer. Two thanked him, opened the beer, drank half of it in three quick gulps.

"What now?" asked Sarah.

Two leaned back, thinking. "What now? Good question. Now, I need to try to relax, and pretty soon I'm going to need to sleep. Also, I need a cigarette. Ashtray still on your porch?" Sarah and Rhes were both nonsmokers, and Two was long familiar with having to step outside for a cigarette.

"Yeah. Might be buried under the snow, though. You want company?" Rhes still looked dazed, but he was coming out of it.

"Nah. Stay inside where it's warm, and finish figuring out whether you think I'm crazy or not."

"No offense, Two, but I'm not sure I can figure that out that quickly."

Two shrugged. She still wasn't sure herself.

Tori stayed inside, playing with Jake. Two, out in the January cold, pulled her jacket closer to her, huddled against the building, smoked and thought.

Two and a half days. An eternity of promise, and it had delivered only two and a half days to her. She had been a half-vampire for several weeks, had in that time known the taste of Theroen's blood, known his touch and his kiss and above all his simple presence, always there at the back of her mind. As a vampire, though, the events – it seemed a year's worth – that had led to her return to humanity had lasted only a scant sixty hours.

Two tried to regret it. It would be so much easier to regret it, that brief taste of immortality, than to live with the loss. She couldn't, though, despite the worry, the horror, the hate. Her experience as a vampire had been filled with wonder and love and joy. Two hoped she could someday bring herself to embrace her humanity again. It seemed now a cold and hollow shell, a dim reflection of what she once was.

There was a police car rolling down the avenue toward her. Two felt that old, familiar prickling at the base of her neck she'd known during her time with Darren. Cops were trouble, and were to be avoided at all costs. She pushed it away. There was no reason for it now. The car stopped in front of her, window rolling down, and an officer looked at out her.

"Nice night," he said.

Two nodded. It was. Cold, but clear, without a lot of wind. Tiny, dry snowflakes danced under the streetlights, hovered in the air, caught the lights of the city and turned the night sky brighter than usual.

"Your parents know you smoke, little girl?"

Two rolled her eyes. "I'm nineteen. My friends Rhes and Sarah live here. They don't smoke, so I have to come outside."

The cop smiled, amused at her annoyance. "All right, sweetheart. Fair enough. Still, this ain't the best neighborhood ..."

Two gave him a tired smile and put her cigarette out in the coffee can that served as an ashtray.

"I've got nothing to be afraid of here, Officer. Trust me." She gave a small wave, turned back to the door, and made her way inside.

* * *

Rhes was talking to Tori. He'd always been good with kids, and she seemed to be responding well to him. At least, she was answering his questions with enthusiasm.

"Tell me about Melissa, Tori."

"She was my sister! She had black hair and was tall and sometimes she'd come out walking with me and tell me stories."

"And what about Missy?"

Tori faltered for a moment. "Missy? She was the same as Melissa. Same thing, Rhes."

"Mmm. No, not quite, Tori ... but okay. I guess you couldn't make the distinction."

"What's disjunction?"

"*Distinction*." Two sat down next to Tori. "It means telling the difference between two things, Tori. Like black and white."

"Oh. Okay."

"Who used to read to you, Tori?" Rhes asked.

"My big sister."

"Melissa?"

Tori look uncertain again. Confused and perhaps even a bit panicked. "No. No, my ... my other big sister."

"What was her name?"

"I dunno."

Rhes looked at Two, raised an eyebrow.

Two shrugged. "Let's not press it tonight, Rhes, okay? We'll talk about it later."

"Okay. You want to crash here, Two? It's late, and the subways will be running slow. The couch folds out, and we've got a spare bedroom. I know Molly would love to see you."

"She doesn't hate me?"

Sarah interjected. "No, definitely not. I'm not sure Molly could hate anyone. She was pissed, for a while, that you'd lied to her ... but I think she's come to understand it. She knows you saved her life, Two."

"Okay. You want to sleep over here, Tori?"

"Sure!"

"Good. We'll get up and have breakfast with everyone, 'k?"

"Okay, Two." Tori yawned, stretched, rubbed at her eyes like a kid. She was having trouble keeping them open.

Two stood up. "I'm going to put her in the spare bedroom. I'll take the couch. You guys going to be up for a while?"

Sarah nodded. "Time for the grownups to talk? Yeah. We'll be here, Two."

Two took Tori by the hand and led her upstairs.

* * *

With Tori settled into the guest room, Two made her way back down to the first floor. Rhes and Sarah were waiting with questions, and they spent another few hours going over Two's story. They wanted to know more about Theroen, more about Melissa and Missy, more about Abraham. They wanted to understand the events that led up to her standing over the latter's headless body, holding a machete. Two did her best to answer their questions.

Over and over, the conversation kept returning to Tori. She was, of course, the key. She was Two's proof, the deciding factor that forced Sarah and Rhes to accept the story that Two had provided.

"We have to find out who she is, Two." Sarah said finally.

Two sighed. "I know. I just don't have any idea how to do it."

Rhes spoke up. "Public records search at the library. You said that Tori couldn't possibly have been a vampire for more than two decades, right? How many girls with her first name and description could have gone missing in that time? Hell, she might be the only girl with that *name* to have gone missing. It's not that common."

Two considered this. "I guess that's true. You think it'll work?"

"It's as good a place to start as any." Rhes drained his beer, looked inquisitively at Two. She shook her head.

"What do we do once we know who Tori is?"

There was silence for a moment, and Two felt herself growing angry. She knew what was coming. At last, Rhes shrugged and said without looking at her, "I think we need to find out if her parents are still alive, Two."

Two grimaced. "You're not taking her away from me."

"They have a right to know she's alive." Rhes' voice was gentle. He knew she didn't want to hear this.

"Not if it means *that*. Not if she has to go. That's not fair. She's all I've got!"

"I think they might disagree with you about how fair it is, Two, but it's not important right now. We don't even know who they are or whether they're alive yet. Just ... consider it for a while. I think you'll see that I'm right."

Two looked out the window, frustrated. She *knew* he was right. She just didn't care.

Sarah stretched. "I'm beat. Haven't been up this late in ages, not since Rhes and I settled in and got boring. This has been a long, weird evening, and

even though I could spend another three hours asking questions, I think we'd all better get some sleep."

"Yeah, no kidding. Thanks for letting us crash here, guys."

Rhes stood up. "No problem, Two. I'll go grab some blankets. Do you want to go to the library tomorrow?"

"I suppose we should," Two said with distaste. The idea of actively searching out ways to take Tori away from her was painful.

"It's for the best, Two ..."

Sarah smiled, took his arm, stood as well. "Don't push it, dear. She said yes."

Two laughed, then got to her feet and embraced each of them in turn. "Thank you guys. You don't know how much it means to me that you don't think I'm insane."

Sarah shrugged. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't have my doubts, Two, but you don't seem insane. Tori doesn't seem insane. Developmentally challenged, but not insane. Bare minimum, the people you're talking about existed. That I'm sure of. The vampire thing ... I may never believe it completely without seeing it with my own eyes, but I'm trying. We're both trying."

Two smiled at her. "That's more than I expected. Thank you. Now go to bed, before we get going again."

Sarah and Rhes headed for the stairs. Two began unfolding the couch.

* * *

It was late morning when Two awoke, Jake curled at her feet on the fold-out bed, sunlight streaming in through the vertical blinds that covered the brownstone's window. After a moment of disorientation, she remembered where she was, and lay back for a moment, thankful for good friends. Then she stretched, got to her feet, padded into the kitchen. The house was quiet, no one up yet.

Two made coffee.

In the middle of her second cup, Tori wandered downstairs. Two said good morning, got the girl a glass of orange juice, and the two of them sat in silence, happy just to be alive and in each other's company.

"Did you tell Rhes and Sarah about the bad stuff?" Tori asked after a time, and Two looked at her, surprised. Tori's mental capacity and ability to speak were improving by leaps and bounds.

"Yes. I didn't want to ... but I had to."

"Were they angry?"

"No."

"Okay."

"Tori?"

"Yes?"

"What was your big sister's name?"

Tori looked troubled. "I don't know."

"I think you do. It's okay to tell me, Tori."

"I don't wanna."

Two raised her eyebrows at this. "Why don't you want to tell me?"

Tori was suddenly on the verge of tears. The glass of juice trembled in her hands. "You'll make me go away!"

"Tori. Sweetheart, I'm not going to make you do *anything* you don't want to do. Okay? Neither are Rhes and Sarah."

"Promise?"

"I promise, Tori. Cross my heart."

Tori was silent for a long time. At last she sighed, and the sound broke Two's heart. It was an adult sound, full of wisdom and worry and understanding. "Her name is Mona. She's not my sister."

Two nodded. "She's your mom, right?"

A pause. "Yeah."

"Don't you want to see her again?"

Tori sipped at her juice, refusing to meet Two's eye. "Dunno."

Two let it pass. She didn't want to scare Tori with talk of taking her home to her parents. Now, though, her suspicions confirmed, Two knew there was little choice. She had a name to go on, and she owed it to Mona to at least find out where the woman lived and whether she was still alive and searching for her daughter.

Sarah was the next one down the stairs. "Ah. Coffee. You're a life-saver, Two."

Two laughed. "I try my best."

Rhes followed soon after. Molly was last, and when she saw Two sitting on the couch, she came down the stairs at a run, calling her name. Two had just time to set down her mug before Molly embraced her, laughing.

"Hey! Molly. Hi! Nice to see you, too. How are you feeling? Are you okay?"

Molly smiled, cast a shy look at Rhes and Sarah, and nodded. "Yes, I'm okay. I'm great, really. I was *mad* at you, and Rhes and Sarah, at first ... but it's all

right. I started going to this program thing last week, just to talk to other people like me. It's ... well, it's not fun, but it's really helping. They're all really nice."

"That's awesome Molly. Terrific. I'm so glad you're okay. I was worried."

"We were worried about you, too! Where *were* you?"

Two smiled. "Sorry. That's a long, weird story, and you don't get to hear it right now."

Molly began to protest, but Two only shook her head. "No, Molly. It doesn't matter, okay?"

A pause, and then Molly relented. "Okay, Two. If you say so. Are you staying here with us?"

"Only for last night. This is my friend Tori. She and I have an apartment in SoHo."

"Oh. All right. Will you be around, though?"

"Don't see why not."

"Great! Sarah and Rhes told me I could stay here as long as I wanted."

Sarah spoke up. "We're really glad you sent Molly to stay with us, Two. We're hoping she'll stay for a very long time."

Two grinned. "Excellent. You going to go back to school, Molly?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Should I?"

"We're going to tutor her for the rest year, and start her back at public school next fall," Sarah said. "I'm scaling back my work a bit. Shouldn't be a problem."

"Guess that answers that," Two said. "You're a smart kid. You'll catch up."

Molly beamed at the compliment. There was silence, not awkward, as Two and her friends sat and thought. At length, Rhes turned to Two.

"Breakfast?"

"Thought you'd never ask, big guy. Here, or out somewhere?"

"Here, I thought. We've got plenty of food. I'll make eggs. You want to help, Tori?"

"Sure, Rhes."

Rhes headed for the kitchen, Tori behind him.

* * *

Breakfast brought light conversation, catching up mostly. Rhes was still working for Sid, Sarah still teaching at the school for the blind. Two avoided conversation about herself. There was too much she could not bring herself to tell about her time with Darren, and she wanted to bring no reminder to Molly of

those dark days. She talked mainly of her apartment, of Tori's efforts to learn to read, of days spent preparing for the future.

Two offered money. Rhes and Sarah refused. Two accepted this, expecting it, and said they knew where to come if they were ever in need. They thanked her. Molly seemed awed at Two's newfound wealth. She asked for details, and Two declined, saying only that she had found great fortune in the past few months.

No one mentioned vampires, prostitution, heroin. They did not skirt around the topics, much, but they'd been talked about. *Talked out*, Two thought. She wanted to move on. Molly wanted to move on. Rhes and Sarah saw this, and so they left it alone.

Breakfast over, they made plans to visit the library. Two took Rhes aside and explained Tori's revelation of her mother's name. Rhes was pleased; this would make searching for records that much easier. They agreed to meet at the library in the early afternoon. Two and Tori left to go home and change into clean clothes.

A subway ride took them back into Manhattan. Two gazed out at the lights whipping by, illuminating names tagged at great risk on the tunnel walls. Some she recognized, some were new. Vandals and artists, publicizing themselves via drawings both crude and complex in the dark under New York. Tori asked questions endlessly, in the manner of a child. How did the subways work? Who drove them? How far did they go? Were they really traveling under buildings? Two answered them absently, smiling. Life in the city made one forget the simple wonder it could inspire.

Back at the apartment, showers, new clothes. Two thought about living on her own, wondering if she could stand it. She thought of what it would be like to lose Tori, and thought again of the girl's parents, and what they must have gone through; must still be going through. This only strengthened her growing resolve. Rhes was right. They had to find Tori's parents and, if possible, get her home.

They set off toward the library in the full light of day, unseasonably warm and dry, and for the first time in recent memory, standing in the sunlight did not remind her of her time as a creature of the night. There was too much to do. Two felt she had some purpose again, something to do as a human. She would help this other woman who was, or was rapidly becoming, also human. That she might, by completing this task, leave herself with nothing more to strive for was not now a concern. Two crossed bridges when she came to them, and had little interest in contemplating them beforehand.

Tori and Molly were in the children's section, flipping through books. Sarah sat reading books in braille. Rhes and Two worked the library computers, searching microfilm reference for a missing girl named Tori, daughter of Mona. Rhes reflected that, even five years ago, it would have been an all-day project. It took Two less than thirty minutes, refining her search several times, to produce a short list of possible matches. One in particular caught her eye.

Perrault Girl Still Missing

New developments in the possible kidnapping of Ms. Tori Perrault have police baffled. Daughter of Mona and James, of Lima, Ohio, Tori was last seen ...

The clip was followed by a series of codes that indicated the exact microfilm on which the entire article could be found. Two laughed, called out to Rhes, earned a disapproving look from the librarian on duty. Properly chastised, but still grinning, Two beckoned for him to join her. He left his own terminal and leaned over her shoulder.

"Whatcha got?"

"Sounds like maybe our Tori. Almost definitely. Look at the date; twelve years ago. Gotta be her."

Rhes agreed. "Let's get that microfilm."

The reader was a bulky piece of equipment, and skimming through pages of the *New York Times* took longer than Two would have liked. Still, it was not long before they came upon the article. Rhes scrolled the film so that the entirety of the text was in view.

Perrault Girl Still Missing

New developments in the possible kidnapping of Ms. Tori Perrault have police baffled. Daughter of Mona and James, of Lima, Ohio, Tori was last seen in her dormitory at Syracuse University on March twenty-fourth. Three days after this last sighting, friends reported her apparent disappearance to college authorities. After cursory investigation, university security turned the disappearance over to the

Syracuse Police Department. To date, the young woman's whereabouts are still unknown.

"There are few clues," says Officer Andrea Leigh, "For all intents and purposes, it appears that the girl simply ran off. The only indication of foul play is that she seems to have taken nothing with her. No clothes, or cash, or anything else of value."

"There's no apparent motive, no ransom demands, no sign of any sort of struggle. We have no indication whether the young lady is alive or not," Leigh adds.

The search continues for information on the whereabouts of Tori Perrault. Parties with any such knowledge are strongly encouraged to contact the Syracuse Police Department.

Rhes let out a long breath. "That's her."

"Oh yeah. No question. Abraham or Theroen or Melissa showed up, snagged her, and brought her back. Why the hell Abraham chose her, I have no idea."

"Strange though. What were they doing in Syracuse?"

"Who knows? Abraham traveled, not frequently, but he wasn't stuck in the mansion. Maybe he caught sight of her on a trip. Maybe he was bored. It's beyond me to guess what his intentions were."

Rhes considered this. "I guess it doesn't matter, at this point. He's dead, and she's slowly returning to the point she was at when all of this started. The most important thing now is to find out more about Mona and Jim Perrault, of Ohio, I think."

Two agreed. That part was comparably easy. The same computers that had led them to the newspaper article could very quickly find addresses, phone listings, anything else they might need. She and Rhes sat down at a terminal, filling in as many blanks as they could. As expected, there were only a few Perraults in Ohio to begin with, and only one couple in Lima.

They met with Sarah first. Jake was sitting at her feet. He and Sarah looked up at the same time, before either Two or Rhes had spoken, and she asked if they had found anything. Two laughed. It took some time to get used to the fact

that Sarah's other senses had heightened significantly to make up for her lack of vision. She had heard their feet, even on the library carpet.

"A James and Mona Perrault, of Lima, Ohio. It's them, trust me."

"Great!"

"Yes. Now we need to make a phone call, I guess. But first I need to talk to Tori."

They found her where they had left her. Molly was engrossed in a book. Tori, still unable to read very well, was beginning to get bored. When Two walked up to her, she asked if it was time to go.

"Almost. Tori, do you remember your dad?"

"I think so."

"Was his name James?"

Tori stared blankly. "Dunno."

"Jim?"

Her eyes lit up. "Yes! Jim! Jim and Mona. Mom and Dad. They live in Lima."

Two rolled her eyes. "Could'a told me that before, Tori, and saved us some time."

"Sorry, Two."

"S'okay. You ready to leave?"

"Sure. Where are we going?"

"First, a bank."

"What's a bank?"

"It's a place where I can exchange ten bucks for a bunch of quarters, so I can make a phone call," Two replied. Behind her, Rhes laughed.

* * *

The phone was picked up on the third ring, and a man's voice answered. "Hello?"

"Mr. Jim Perrault?" Two was nervous, playing with the phone cord and tapping her feet. She really had no plan for how to proceed.

"Yes?" Caution in the voice. He probably thought she was going to try to sell him something.

"Hi. My name is Ashley Majors." Ashley felt no more right for her now than it had as a child, nor during her time working for Darren, but it allowed her to get on with the call without having to explain her real name.

"What can I do for you, young lady?"

“This is going to seem strange, I think, but do you mind my asking you a question?”

“Go ahead ...” Curiosity in his voice, mingled with trepidation. Two felt nervous, afraid to lose Tori, but determined to follow through.

“Are you the father of Tori Perrault?” she asked.

There was a lengthy pause. “Yes, I am.”

Mr. Perrault did not sound at all pleased to hear his daughter’s name. “If this is ‘Unsolved Mysteries,’ then no, we don’t want another list of phone numbers. There are a lot of girls who fit Tori’s description ...”

“No, I’m not from a television show. I’ve never even seen it. But I have seen your daughter.”

“Where?” Perrault sounded exasperated, as if he’d long since given up any hope of seeing his daughter again. Two didn’t blame him. Twelve years was a long time.

“She’s standing right next to me.”

There was another, longer pause. When Perrault spoke again, he was obviously angry. “Do you think this is funny?”

Two was taken aback. “No. No, sir, I ...”

“Why is that, after twelve years, there are still sick people out there who won’t have the common decency to let a man get on with his life?” Perrault was shouting by the end of the question.

“Mr. Perrault, I ...”

“I don’t want to hear it,” he snarled. “Goodbye.”

Two listened to the dial-tone for a moment, then slammed the handset down into the receiver. “Well ... fuck.”

“What is it?” Rhes was sitting with Sarah and Molly on a bench, a few feet away. Tori was looking into the display window of a jewelry store.

Two lit a cigarette, dragged at it, rolled her eyes. “The good news is: I found him. The bad news? He thought it was a prank phone call.”

Rhes sighed. “She’s been gone for over a decade, Two. I’d think it was a joke, too.”

“Is it a funny joke?” Tori asked, rejoining the group.

“I suppose it might be, to someone else. Not to me.” Two sat down on the curb, smoked, stared at the traffic.

Sarah stirred, stretched, then leaned against Rhes. “So, what do we do now?”

“I buy two plane tickets, I guess. I could keep calling until I wore him down, but what’s it matter? We have to go there. We have to take her home.”

"Are we going home already?" Tori asked, misunderstanding.

"No, Tori. I meant that we're going to go see your Mom and Dad."

Tori took in air to protest this, and Two held up her hand.

"It's okay. I'm coming with you. I promised you I wouldn't make you go away, by yourself, unless you wanted to. Right?"

Tori considered this. Acquiesced. "Okay, Two. I miss my Mom and Dad."

Two and Rhes exchanged glances. Two turned back to Tori. "Good, sweetheart. I'm sure they miss you too."

"When are we gonna go see them?"

"As soon as I can order us some plane tickets."

Molly spoke up. "Are you really going to fly to Ohio, Two?"

"Someone has to, kiddo. I could drive, but what's the point? For once in my life, money's not a problem."

"How are you going to get from the airport to Lima, Two?" Sarah questioned. "You could take a cab, I guess, if any run that far ..."

"I figured I'd rent a car."

"Two, you're nineteen, and you have no license. Most places don't let you rent until at least twenty-one, even if you're legal to drive."

"I'll be twenty in April. Also ... hang on a second."

Two pulled out her wallet, dug through it, laughed. She held up a fake license, expertly crafted. "Here we go. This one says I'm twenty-two."

Sarah shook her head, smiling. "Jesus, Two. I'm not sure you should hang around Molly. I think maybe you're a bad influence."

Molly giggled. Two grinned at her. "I think of all the people Molly's met in her life, I'm one of the ones you need to worry about the least."

Rhes stood up. "Okay. Let's go do this. I've got to be at work in a few hours. Fridays are busy. I know a travel agent down in the village."

He started down the street. Sarah held his hand in one of her own, Jake's harness in the other. Two, Molly and Tori followed.

* * *

Two purchased a round-trip ticket for herself and, after some deliberation, a one-way ticket for Tori. It was hard for her; she had honestly enjoyed Tori's companionship, and the two had formed a strong bond. Few, if any, had gone through trials like they had, and Two considered Tori her sister, in blood and spirit. Still, she knew that Tori needed time to become reacquainted with her

parents. Two expected to spend only a short time in Ohio, and she expected to return alone.

She had allowed two weeks of time before the flight, as a chance for both of them to get used to idea. Thirteen days had passed since they ordered the tickets, and in that time great pieces of Tori's mind had returned. She was now in possession of the larger part of her memories from before her conversion at Abraham's hands, and was anxious to see her parents.

Tonight they were packing. Tomorrow would bring them to the airport via cab, to fly first-class to Ohio. Their flight left at four in the afternoon, changed over in Detroit, landed at eight-thirty. Two supposed they would spend the night in a motel, and find Tori's parents the next morning. Tori was clearly excited.

"I can't wait to see them again!" She was sitting on the bed, folding clothes.

Two laughed. "It should definitely be an experience."

She wondered what it would be like, presenting the Perraults with a daughter that hadn't aged in the twelve years she'd been gone. Two hoped they didn't think Tori was some sort of imposter. She found it unlikely; parents were capable of telling the difference between identical twins. Two had little doubt that Jim and Mona would recognize Tori for who she was.

Tori was looking over the plane tickets. As her memory had returned, so her ability to read had improved drastically. She was now in most ways a fully-functioning young woman. The only abnormalities now were not mental weaknesses, but rather physical strengths. She was unbelievably strong, and very fast. These traits did not seem to be disappearing, and Two had begun to doubt they ever would. Whatever changes Tori's years of vampirism had wrought on her body, not all of them could be undone.

"Two ..." Tori's voice was hesitant.

"Yeah?" Two was stuffing clothes into suitcases, not worried about folding them, just wanting to be done and ready to go.

"One of these tickets is one-way ..."

Two sighed. "Yes. You know why."

"What if I don't want to stay with them?"

"I think you will, Tori. At least for a while. I think you need to stay there without me, and get used to being normal again."

"Are you sure? You can stay there for as long as you want. My parents will think you're some kind of angel, trust me. They'll be happy to have you."

Two grinned. "No thanks, hon. New York or nothing, for me."

"And why should I be any different?"

“Oh, come on. You might want to move back someday, sure ... but right now? You’re dying to see them. You know it, I know it. It’s been twelve years, and now you remember them and you miss them. This is your opportunity to make up for all that lost time. You’re not going to want to leave, Tori. Not for a while.”

Two liked being able to hold a normal conversation with Tori. While she missed some of the wide-eyed innocence that the girl had possessed during her slow return to humanity, overall she was very happy that Tori had regained her mental capabilities. More than that, she was glad to find that even as an adult, Tori was someone she liked very much.

Tori sighed, smiled, nodded her head. “Okay, yes, I’m dying to see them. I miss them so much.”

“Then stop worrying about what’s going to happen in the future, and worry about what’s happening now.”

“Which is?”

Two laughed. “Which is: you’re wasting time. Keep packing.”

* * *

They arrived in Akron ahead of schedule, just past eight o’clock. Two’s fake ID held up under the scrutiny of the young woman at the rental-car counter. “You don’t look twenty-two at *all*.”

Two gave her most winning smile. “Thanks!”

The car was a sedan, well equipped, comfortable. They drove it a few miles from the airport, found a motel, and once settled spent most of the night talking. Tori was scared and excited, unable to sleep. Two was nervous as well, and had didn’t mind staying up to chat. She wanted this to go well for Tori. After everything the two had been through together, it would be a nice change of pace to have something go smoothly.

They woke early the next morning, showered, and left the motel. An hour and a half into the drive, Tori began to recognize landmarks, but an hour later was forced to admit that her memory was still not flawless. They were lost. A quick stop at a gas station put them on the right track, and it was only twenty minutes later that they entered the Lima town limits.

“Turn right, over there.” Tori seemed confident in her memories of the town. Two thought about checking the map, decided she could trust Tori, and took the turn.

"Now left. Okay. We're going to drive up this road for about ten minutes, and there'll be a right. Tower Street. Turn there."

They drove, and there was Tower Street. Two guided the car onto it.

"Take your next right, and then the first left, and then we're there." Tori looked vaguely ill.

"You all right?"

"I don't know. I feel kinda sick. Probably just nerves."

Two nodded. She wondered what it would be like to be reunited with her own parents. It was, of course, not possible with her mother. The concept of returning to her father was laughable at best. Two hadn't liked him as a child, and by her teens she'd despised him.

"Blue house on the left. Oh God." Tori was fidgeting with her seatbelt, had been doing so every time Two had glanced at her in the past twenty minutes.

"Thank Christ," Two laughed.

"Why are *you* so relieved?"

"Because if I was forced to watch you twist that stupid seatbelt around for another five minutes, I'd have lost my mind."

Tori laughed, gave Two the finger, let the seatbelt fall from her hands. They were there.

It was eleven o'clock, a Saturday morning in February, cold and clear and grey with tiny snowflakes dancing in the air. The house was light blue with darker blue shutters, a ranch, sitting squat on a patch of dead grass. Small piles of snow had collected in the shaded areas. The scene was far from idyllic, yet there was a sense of comfort and welcome about the place. Inside, Two, thought, it would be warm, and there would be the smell of something good cooking. Apple pie, maybe, or fresh bread.

Tori took a deep breath, left the car, stood staring at the house. Two walked around the car, adjusting her coat against the cold, and Tori embraced her suddenly. "Thank you so much, Two."

"What are friends for? Go ring that fucking doorbell, Tori. The suspense is killing me."

Tori laughed. "Killing *you*?"

As Tori moved toward the door, Two leaned up against a large tree growing in the front yard, lighting a cigarette. This was not her moment, and she was comfortable remaining in the background. Tori pressed the doorbell, waited, shifting from one foot to another.

"Just a minute!" A woman's voice called from inside the house. Two saw Tori's breath catch.

The door opened, and a pleasant-looking woman in perhaps her mid-fifties looked out. She was carrying a plate and a towel. There was a long moment of silence as she looked at Tori.

“Hi, mom.” Tori’s voice was soft, and shaky, almost scared. Two watched, waited, hoped.

The dish fell from the woman’s hands, forgotten, to shatter on the doorstep. Neither Tori nor her mother seemed to notice. Mona swayed a little, and Tori reached a hand out to steady her. The moment Tori’s hand touched her mother’s shoulder, Mona’s paralysis broke.

“Oh my God my baby!” she cried, and flung her arms around Tori, who put her head on her mother’s shoulder and wept. Mona stood there, repeating those words, “My baby. My baby,” and rocking Tori, arms locked around her daughter. Two felt a painful, wonderful wrenching in her heart, saw a flicker-flash pass by her vision: Theroen, smiling. Here again was a reminder of what it was like to be loved.

Two felt tears at her eyes and was unsurprised. Tears of joy for Tori, tears of pain for Theroen, tears of relief for herself. Descent and rebirth. Tori was home, and Two stood now on the very lip of some new life. She had passed through the nightmare and come through to the other side.

“Can I see Dad?” Tori asked finally, managing to calm herself at least well enough to speak.

Mona laughed, clapped her hands, called for Jim, nearly jumping up and down in joy and excitement. “Come here! Jim! Come now! She’s back, oh, she’s back! Come see!”

A man at the door, now. “What the hell’s going on out ...” Jim stopped in mid-sentence, the sight of his daughter slapping the words from his mouth. Two laughed at his expression, watching it warm from shock, to awe, to joy.

“Sweetheart?” His voice was low. Shaky.

“Daddy!” Tori was grinning, laughing, crying. She flung her arms around him, and Jim began to weep as well, holding his daughter in a tight embrace. Mona encircled them both with her arms, husband and daughter, and the three of them stood there on the doorstep, clinging to each other and crying.

* * *

Later there were introductions, explanations, excuses. Tori the victim of a cruel abduction. She remembered being forced to take some sort of drug, and then nothing. Amnesia. No understanding of what had happened or why she

hadn't aged. Two fed out the tale as she and Tori had devised it, sitting in the motel room in Akron. She had found Tori wandering the streets of Manhattan, and had helped Tori to slowly regain her memories from before the event.

It was spotty at best, transparent at worst, but Tori's parents bought it completely. It didn't matter to them. Tori was home with them at last, and that was more than enough.

Invitations were offered to Two without hesitation. Room, board, as long as she might want to stay. Two accepted with thanks, knowing that it would not be long before she felt the desire to return to New York. For now, though, it was enough to be with Tori and her parents, and to be a part of the amazement, and laughter, and love.

Two thought often of Theroen, thought of love, thought of redemption. She wondered what might lie ahead, where life in New York might take her. For the time being, she was content to leave these questions unanswered. For years she had lived in darkness and though now she wanted nothing more than a life under the night sky, she could stand for a time in the light, and find it good.

* * *

Epilogue

Lima, Ohio. The dead of night.

The girl with the blonde hair wakes from a dream she can't remember, and looks out the window at the moon rising full in the sky. Stars like she's never seen, no lights of a great city to obscure them, glitter back at her like diamonds cast against a mat of soft black velvet. They reflect in her eyes, large and green.

She hears the soft breathing of the young lady in the twin bed on the other side of the room, and sighs. She thinks of breathing in the dark with her lover. She thinks of the time they shared together.

Sleep does not come easily for the girl, even now, in safety and warmth, and she crawls from the bed and pulls on jeans below her nightgown. A winter coat, a pair of socks, her shoes. She wants a cigarette. She wants to think.

If the young woman in the other bed hears her leave, then she lets the girl go. There are times when it is best not to disturb. There are times when it is best to feign sleep and hope, hope that a friend will find the answers that she's looking for. Hope that all will be well.

The girl sits on the front porch and smokes, and smiles through her tears, calls herself silly. The moon makes everything blue-black, and she remembers the woods, and how they seemed lit as if by daylight, to vampire eyes.

Two sits and smokes, and smiles through her tears, and thinks about Theroen. She thinks about the future, and about the past. She knows there are other vampires. Surely Theroen could not be the last of his kind. She knows there are others, and she knows from his stories that some of them, at least, are like him. Decent. Honest. Good. They are untainted by the evil that infested Abraham. They are out there; awake like her, under the same moon, under the same stars.

Two could learn to love the light, perhaps. She could learn to be human, to pursue again those human dreams, human ambitions. A husband, maybe. A child. A life like any other.

She doesn't want it.

The decision is made between the flare of the match, and the cigarette's last dying ember. Under the moon and the stars, it's so much harder to lie to herself than it is under the sun. She wants what once was offered. What once she had. There are others, and they are out there, living the life she wants, knowing

the power of the blood, moving their way through the cities and towns and woods of the world.

Two sits, and smokes, and smiles through her tears. There are others. They are out there. She knows it.

* * *

Continued in Book 2:

[Blood Hunt](#)

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About the Author

Christopher Buecheler is a web designer and developer, an author of both fiction and non-fiction, a student of mixology and brewing, a player of guitars and drums, a follower of professional sports, and a fan of of video games, genre and mainstream fiction, and horror movies.

He lives a semi-nomadic existence with his amazing wife Charlotte, and their two cats: Carbomb and Baron Salvatore H. Lynx II.

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Blood hunt

Sneak Preview

The alley was dark, and damp, and smelled like mold. It stretched for perhaps twenty meters in either di-rection, opening up to streets on either side. There were other doors that opened out into it, but all seemed locked tight. The vampire was nowhere to be seen.

“You’re kidding me,” Two said, running a hand through her hair. “You have got to be fucking kidding me! Where did you go?”

She moved down the alley toward the rear of the building, kicking boxes and old newspapers out of her way. There was no sound but the noise of her progress, and the bass thuds coming from the club. Two reached the end of the alley and peered down the street. Nothing.

“God damn it, don’t leave me here!” She shouted back at the darkness, but there was no response.

Two began walking back up the alley, muttering to herself.

“Fine. Fuck you and fuck your stupid vampire bull-shit. Fuck your stupid games. I’ll come back tomorrow, and the next day, and the next day after that. I’ll keep coming back until you talk to me.”

There was a sound like rushing wind, and Two felt something heavy hit her shoulders, dragging her toward the ground. The motion was fast, disorienting, and Two was sure that at any moment she would hit the hard cob-blestones of the alley floor. Instead, she found herself cradled in the arms of the woman from the club.

“I’ll speak with you now, since you request it,” the vampire said, her voice icy and detached. “You know what I am, and we can’t have that. I’m sorry ...”

“Wait!” Two shouted, and took in air to speak more, but it was too late. With one swift motion the vampire grabbed Two’s chin, forcing her head back and exposing the veins of her neck. The vampire lunged forward and Two felt a brief spike of pain, like fire lancing out from where the vampire had bitten her to touch every nerve ending. After a moment, the pain was replaced with warm, pulsating waves of pleasure that coincided with her heartbeat.

Two felt herself being drained, felt her life being stolen away from her, felt blackness overtaking her. It didn’t seem to matter, anymore, caught in this comfortable embrace. She thought to herself, at least it’s over. At least it’s finally done.

She did not expect the abrupt end to the sensation, nor the sudden plummet to the unforgiving stones below. She was dimly aware that she must still be alive, because hitting the cobblestones had hurt. Two looked up, groggy and trying to clear her vision. The vampire was backing away from her, eyes wide with confusion and surprise.

“Tah ama vamper. Sa pare tah ama vamper. Ashi?”

The words meant nothing to Two, but she forced herself to respond anyway. Her mouth grudgingly formed the words.

“Told ... toldjoo to ... wait.”

“Ashika moritas?!” the vampire cried.

Two was fading rapidly, but she forced herself to a sitting position. Her head spun, and she leaned against the side of the building for support. The walls of L'Obscurité throbbed and hummed against her back.

“I don't speak ... whatever language that is, sorry,” Two said.

The woman seemed to have regained some of her composure. She was regarding Two with curiosity.

“You have vampire blood,” she said.

Two's vision was fading now, the world going first grey and then dark. She laughed. The sound was more like a sob, and with it went the last of her strength. Two slumped to the ground, and her last words where a whis-per.

“Not anymore.”

* * *

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