AVATARS: ANGELA, ANGELICA

MOVEMENT ONE

Movement one is limited to the exploration of the mind within the perspective of an isolated Earth, in which all the exceptions to our common reality have been thoroughly obfuscated by Modern Thinking.

An Open Mind

A story of the advent of psionics in a contemporary world. Science fiction, in the area of psionics and its impact on human potential. Also a story dealing with issues including rape and gender dysphoria. The main character, Morgan, is an avatar of Av, and is based in part on the character's Morgan E. Wildmuir and Lynx, and inspired in part by Marvel Comics' Phoenix, AKA Jean Grey. Characters appearing include two characters based on Hunter and Marcus Singh Khan (who predates Fox Mulder as an FBI Agent specializing in paranormal investigations), and Caitlyn and Lauren Sinclair, both of whom were inspired to pursue the founding study of Psionics by their childhood experiences with their half sister, Morgan.

The dynamics of the plot. Morgan's rape at the hands of her psionic mentor. The murder of Lauren, and the investigation into its paranormal aspect. The apprehension of Caitlyn soon after, in response to an obscure note left by a Field Technologies Researcher who vanished from his lab mysteriously. An investigation of Morgan (a run-away) based on accounts in Lauren and Caitlyn's confiscated notes. An old case file detailing the reappearance of an individual resembling Morgan over the course of many generations. The use of Morgan's power to resurrect Lauren, and alter the sex of her two childhood friends (one as an experiment, the other in response to acute gender dysphoria), and the consequences those acts incur. A suggestion of vampirism; impulses of biokinetics and morphokinetics, and tapping the power of light--each producing similar characteristic traits. The rousing of an underground vampire/psionic subculture.

[COMPOSITES PARTIAL REDUCTION]

In the penetration of a young woman's mind begins the unlocking of psionic potential and an epic saga of unearthly proportions. The story progresses following a typical American teenager on her journey beyond the known. For her, this path starts in an elite and prestigious school of arts and letters. The form of this thread is that of the passage of this girl through her normal life, in a normal world, peopled by perfectly natural people. Some interesting and mysterious, others less so. The paths chosen by her peers in this story encompass more in their own parts than what she herself can show us, but she is intimate enough to give us a shocking glimpse. The convolutions of their evolution distract her from recognizing her own trial; yet her impressions, and fancies give color to this slice of life which are not visible to the eye. The exotic and surreal are but a shadow within which the heart of the tale is told, while the common world is a stage, a mirror where the qualities which find highlight come to find representation. This book is more of an approach to the assumption of the first chord than a conscious pursuit of it. Those questions which vex and perplex will be surveyed, however, like is common in life, will become overshadowed and occluded by the sensibilities of living and the fancies of desire. They will mostly demonstrate the exceptional adeptness of her mind than demand their own focus. This is something of a modern day Anne Shirley. This tale is a fair sibling to its more concentrated dual, the Threshold. It too will approach the impossible, in its allusion to confirmation. It too will allow acknowledgement without forcing declarations out of itself. This tale is concerned with Angelica's point of view; her experiences and her exercise of will. We are intended to come to feel for her, not judge her. But, if we come to judge her, then perhaps we might come to judge ourselves. While this can be a difficult process, even that is useful to us in improving ourselves. To helping us wake up to ourselves.

This concept evolved out of the original inspirations for the Terminal Moment, the Second Gesture, Companion and Threshold. It is a story about awakening to true psionic power. Deliberately glancing across the surface of its three deep currents, this work focuses on one that makes less of a demand on the reader. It engages the mystery of psionics and confides, through an individual's life, the dark and twisted journey of essential self discovery. The apprehension of these greater mysteries only figures in as much as *this individual,* like any of us, has an opportunity to seize the meaning of it. She is witness to what each of us begins to discover once we begin to stray away from the model which we have become dedicated to supporting. What we can not help but confront in the advent of psionic revelation. All that we can know in existence is confronted in the mind. This story enters a disturbing arena where the prospect of illuminating psionic ability is a murky one at best. At present, serious investigation into the very basis of mental ability

PART ONE THE EDGE

ACT ONE EDGE OF THE MIND 111

AEID : EARTH NEXUS

Events contributory to the evolution of the world mind of Earth.

EN : (1987-1988) They thought she would be like her sister. Identical in form though different in nature, they hoped she would show the same promise. What they did not know was how much greater her potential was. In the penetration of a girl's mind begins the unlocking of psionic potential and an epic saga of intergalactic proportions. Here we follow a typical American teenager on her journey beyond the known into the inner circle of a psionic leadership of Earth under an alien exile. For her, this path starts in an elite and prestigious school of arts and letters. Long eclipsed by the rising star of her elder sibling, and awarded a mysterious full scholarship to follow in her sister's footsteps, she cannot resist the morbid need to understand her sister's death. When the dreams come she begins to ask questions. This dark obsession leads her into dangerous company, and the embrace of her sister's doom. Will her differing nature save her as she approaches the terminal moment?

She was a true psionic, and for her, waking up to the hidden realm of the mind would be an initiation to a world of dangerous shadows and intrigue. Her older sister is one of the major ties between the leading roles. One was her lover, who is suicidally aggrieved over her loss, one is the killer who pushed her so hard and now seeks to fulfill his desires in her younger sister, there is herself and the muse who knew of her at the last. There is a second mysterious death, which is the current school intrigue. The work begins with moments from her earlier life, which focus on events which herald her awakening potential. Her sister's psychic potential was in fact inspired by one of her own traumas. Through her roommate, she is drawn into the circle of individuals who are creating the dangerous instability in what should otherwise be an observation period. Their own intense and unguided investigation into the unknown will be a catalyst to accelerate her awakening. The breaking point will be the unwise confrontation between her and her older sister's nemesis. Out of that conflict will come the rampant interest of the men behind the scenes. Their attempt to catch and subdue her before she should pose any threat to either their secrecy or the world is the spur that drives her over the edge and into the arms of her mysterious power.

INFLUENCES THROUGH AN OPEN MIND

*Av* is a nickname, an alias, an expression of Angelica and Angela's mutual sense of identity. Each regards it as an expression of what she is as a foundation for who she is. In a pique of irony Angelica once dubbed herself *alias*, discovering herself to be the one who plays at many parts; a dreamer of dreams of herself. In exploring her limits it proves out to be a prophetic name. [modify—the link to Av of Aes is totally subliminal] The truth about her limits gives her pause about what she defined as her purpose. Clearly her *being* is an expression of *aes* as much as it is an expression of *av*—a condition surely reached by abandoning the folly of ever trying to *become* aes or av, and so abandoning the ideas of self and the memories of that striving. This illuminates what she has accomplished and the price of that accomplishment. It also shows up the risk she is taking by remembering her abandoned selves; the possibility of negating her self-possession.

So it came to pass. Out of oblivion, conceived of herself and born of herself in av and in aes of the three cusps. The reconciliator became the reconciliation. The only price being the loss of all she had become in her time of diafracture, and birth in utter ignorance of her triumph. Naked, she began an ascent toward the understanding of herself and the purpose of her long sacrifice—pregnant with a gift of promise for all who would dare the path of the dreamer. Dreaming the dream of self.

Now, as it ever was, the purpose of av's existence by virtue of its implication, draws the shadow of nemesis. In celestial antiquity there was an assassin, a being both angelic and demonic—the equal of the most dangerous part of the dreamer, the angel of death, anjael—charged with the elimination of the dreamer, avael. Or god as it was feared she had become. Azael was not evil by nature, but the power of his intent, the ruthlessness of his execution dared consequences abominable and absurd both indiscriminately and particular. However, avael survived his attempt and her fall to earth. Azael, for his part survived the wrath of her defense and tracked her descent to the obscure world where, after the fall of phoenix, he went into exile to await the return of his quarry. He staked his resources on the belief that this world, with its obscurity, would be her choice to protect her from discovery during the time when her reassertion made her vulnerable. He knew in his gut and loin she would come. As it must prove out, he was right.

The irony is that this world was her choice by dint of the fact that it was here and now that she was first born, first conceived. The vulnerability of this moment so greatly exceeds azael's estimation that it would have given her hysterics if she could have known aught of what was to come. Her coming was heralded by the coming of a dream incarnate of her. Ages ago, azael found her and others to breed her and her descendants to strengthen and encourage the evolution of a shard of his quarry. In the last descendant of an ancient Morgan of the wild muir he had his weapon—an angel of the abyss.

The first resolution of point paradox into time, space and awareness gives power to define limits as structure upon which existence evolves. The limits innate in each do not obey the same boundaries. To either side of the existence with which we—the author and the reader—believe ourselves best acquainted unfolds a hope for the destiny of our souls. There are three separate movements in the expression of the aeid. Each is founded on a reiteration of the same essential character. The tentative beginning is enacted in the third movement, the rending of the veil of heaven. The transitional stage of the expression is the first movement, in which the revelation of the third movement is united in the spirit and mind of Angelica. The climax occurs in the second movement, in which Angelica reaches the actual point of self conception and faces the consequences of three separate existences at a crucial moment in earth's development. There is, however, no defining moment in which the expression itself can begin. This is all an essential story in which many boundaries are crossed but where no single history is expressed. It is only in following the evolution of Angelica as an individual that a single plot unfolds along a direct progression. Thus, it is this that dictates the avenue of exploration. Angelica's discovery of herself and her confrontation with other echoes of herself is the defining element of the aeid. In addition, it is a story which she has to tell for herself to survive the most vulnerable moment of her existence—her time on earth.

Herein encompassed are all but the ripples left in Angelica's wake, whose expression stand independent and included in the tide of the whole. The dreams and delusions confronted and embraced by those lifted on the waves of opportunity to discover the promise of self realization. The stories of those who could be artists in the art.

DAVID AES PILOT OPTION 2| ANGEL

SINGULARITY

Understanding... At the age of five, the death of her brother seared her mind. At the age of seventeen, the death of her twin sister seared her soul. As she did with her brother, she keeps here sister alive in her mind, not truly understanding the implications of her decision. No longer innocent and naive, however, she cannot escape confronting the consequences of her transformation. As she consciously pursues the author of this senseless tragedy hoping for some kind of cathartic release from her growing confusion, she is drawn deeper into the realm of human potential than she had ever imagined possible for herself. Goaded by the memory of her sister and brother, she is awakening to a new reality underlying and permeating the mundane world; struggling to maintain her equilibrium in the repeated shocks to her sanity. In the coalescing flood of new perceptions comes the need to act, to express her understanding unmistakably in the world.

Angelica and Angela, a last night together

Angelica, the end of summer

Angela, finding her own niche

Angelica and Angela, holiday reunion and plans for the future

Angelica, playing

Angela, dying

Angel, aftermath

Angel, in her sister's footsteps

Angel, the element of shock

Angel, testing the waters

Angel, perception and association

Angel, interpretation and articulation

Angel, awareness

Angel, attention

Angel, perspective

Angel, will

Angel, understanding

Angel, intent

Angel, structure and implementation

Angel, intercourse AKA participation

Angel, patterns

Angel, ruthless, cunning, patient, and sweet

Angel, the stalking

Angel, going for the throat

Angel, embrace

Angel, the shadow of light

Angel, expression

Angel confronts only herself, driven by the ghost of her sister to challenge her assumptions and recognize her potential. Once that challenge is admitted she is gradually drawn out of her suicidal obsession and forced to analyze her life from a new perspective, one which suggests that there has always been more to herself and the world around her than she was alert to. Taken in hand by a host of new and old friends, and stimulated by their intense intellectual intercourse, she discovers within herself the key to her destiny. Awakened to her true potential, she is at once confronted by her personal demons, death and revenge. She turns her mind to stalking her sister’s rapist and killer, convinced that that is the only thing she wants out of life now that she knows how to control it. She rebuffs the efforts of her friends to save her from her folly. Her search leads to one of her friends and the darkest hour of her life. Angel is almost seduced by the thrill of her power to act without thinking, but he forces her to confront the truth both within him and within herself, rising to the challenge of what she has become. As her friend, and as her sister’s lover, he pulls her back from the abyss and coaxes her to open up and look at what she was avoiding accepting. She sees the crime she accused herself of, and for which she had been willing to damn herself in an act of cold-blooded murder to find punishment—devouring the souls of her siblings. A certain uncertainty remains as she considers this aspect of self-deception, and she realizes that she has much to learn about the nature of understanding.

Comment

Our potential is so much greater than we realize. In spite of the part of ourselves that strives for that realization, we remain estranged from ourselves until death. There is no one simple diagram of human fulfillment, but it is clear that we deny much of ourselves the expression necessary for us to grow into that awesome potential we possess. Life is too short and complicated for the average person to perceive and act on the opportunity life presents us with. And yet, there are those of us who for one reason or another are too sensitive and too curious to numb ourselves to that goading inner voice. Especially those of us who are seared by the touch of the unbearable. Here is the story of a girl who is forced to confront her limitations and peer deeply into her soul. She is stricken by too great a loss and her search for answers that will redeem her suffering, she is reacquainted with her spirit; that other embodiment of the mind we have all but amputated in our quest for facts. Awakened to a deeper sense of reality, she enters a realm of possibilities that envelopes and is encompassed by the mind.

Existence is a complex weave, and the texture of its fabric is confusing. In an age when the existence of the mind itself is in question, humanity is at a much more desperate threshold when the existence of the spirit was rejected. The closer we come to robbing ourselves of ourselves, the worse the world seems to become. Even though it all seems hopeless, we still have time to open our minds to the answers that come from within. There is still time to stop ourselves from a return to chaos. There is still time to awaken to the point of our existence, and redeem the purpose of reality. In the penetration of her mind begins a passage through the evolution of reality—dream, mystery, magic, science, art, divinity—and the aspiration of ideality.

Angelica

Opening

August 1975 as a young child angelica and her younger brother fell into an abandoned dry well. Alex broke his back protecting angelica during their fall. During the four or five days they were trapped, their minds' merged; angelica experienced Alex's death. Broadcasting her grief into the aether she triggered Angela's latent gift allowing the twin sister to lead a rescue team to the well site. Angelica retreated into autistic shock and by the time she recovered, her psionic gift had gone deeply latent. Angelica falls behind her sister in school.

August 1987 the end of summer break. In a last outing with her friends from high school, angelica confronted the darkest fear of her childhood and the resurfacing of the memory of that tragic day.

April 1988 Friday. Angel has talked her friend Chris into going out as one of the girls. He has a delicate face and an androgynous figure that needs little help to present as a beautiful young woman. Their friend Jon is delighted by the effect, taking it all in stride, as if suits his prankster's nature. Since their trip to camp Casey, they have all become a bit more flexible in their attitudes about sex and gender. Chris does it because it is fun and the evening is a riot. The target for their game falls for their prank and no real harm is done.

Escalation

April 1988 Friday night. Angelica returns home from her evening out with her friends in Seattle—her mother is going over the bills at the kitchen table. Her father is taking a nap in his recliner. Nathan is an architect who often works out of his home; Janice works in partnership with her brother and sister at their bed and breakfast/hunting lodge. Her family is amused by Chris’ transformation, though he gets the predictable lecture from the men folk of her house, before Jon takes him home, laughing.

Angelica stays awake late that night having a hard time sleeping and yet unable to concentrate on her book; her mind keeps phasing out. A sense of aroused passion and confused violence impinges on her attention. The images are confusing, and there is a powerful sense of fear rising to a crescendo and then a terrible dislocating shock. The entire household is awoken by Angelica’s keening for the death of her twin. As before, the shared experience of death forces her mind to withdraw from the suddenly harsh contact with reality. Unable to get a response out of her, her family places her into the hospital where she is examined. Her body gives every sign of having been raped if lacking only one detail.

Variant

Angela has become involved in an intense relationship with mason—a passionate exploration of telepathy spurring off of their more sedate exploration of the mind’s potential. On their last night together, Angela awakes from a drowsing afterglow and slips out into the night thinking to put a little distance between them and this strange experience. Angela realizes that she is being stalked and finds herself confronted by a stranger. This stranger’s mind touches and begins to invade hers. In that moment of sudden terror she panics and literally blows her mind. Her body is found barely alive and rushed to a hospital. Her brainwave activity is faint and erratic as she is treated for brain trauma attributed to an assault with a stun gun from what appears to be burns from electric current at the base of her skull. Recent evidence of intercourse leads the doctors to conclude that she was raped and left for dead. Angela is pronounced brain dead shortly after her parents fly down and consult with the doctors.

The disorder of angelica’s room and the broken glass found both within and outside her rooms are added to the picture and an investigation is opened. The doctors and her family wait for her to snap out of her autistic trance. Attempts to notify her sister of angelica’s condition fail to reach her and word goes out of her disappearance. A few days later, word comes back that Angela may have been found; it had taken days for the doctors to verify Angela's identity. The news snaps angelica out of her fugue and opens the floodgates for her grief. The doctors refuse to release angelica right away, so she misses the flight down to retrieve Angela's remains for the funeral and loses the chance to confront the demons of her sister’s death.

May 1988. Compounded with the tragedy of Angela's inexplicable demise a dark shadow is cast on the path in front of her. She is forced to face the specter of her sister's death in her admission to the school she had intended to join her sister at. A place she has lost all desire to go, but to which she has been awarded a full scholarship she cannot turn down. She is mystified by the letter that also arrived from her sister posthumously in the mail. She is alarmed by the suicidal tone of the message, and disturbed by the hints of antagonistic influences her sister felt were acting against her. But as she thinks about it she begins to see a way to fight back against the grief and anger. She makes her plans and prepares to cut out any possibility of delay.

That week. The news of her early departure makes its circulation and comes back to her in a shattering letter from her boyfriend. Unwilling to deal with the thought of a long-distance relationship and her seeming obsession with her sister's death, Craig cuts her off. Apparently, she is the last to learn of it, as her high school nemesis is there at hand hoping to catch her on the rebound whether she wants it or not. After an abrupt fight, she sets off fruitlessly after Craig. Instead, she encounters an enigmatic character who implies that she must her sister’s killer, as though he were a threat to humanity at large.

June 1988. Weeks later, at the school where angelica is headed, Kelly deals with his now suicidal grief over the loss of Angela. A task which challenges his faith and his will to live. Ultimately, he resists the temptation to end his pain by committing himself to discovering the truth of her death and revealing it to the world.

A week before summer classes begin. Mason dreams, unaware that angelica dreams with him on her flight to California. In his dream, he finds himself changed by what he has done to Angela. In the dream he tries to rationalize the meaning of this experience but his thoughts are influenced by angelica who accepts the transformation and thus resists his aversion. However, the episode leaves both of them more confused than enlightened, and neither actually recognizes the presence or identity of the other.

Chris and Jon, angelica’s intimate friends meet after, her departure. Jon is looking for a job, but Chris is suspicious of the fact that he is going through a San Francisco newspaper. When he challenges Jon, he replies that in light of her sister’s death, he plans to be close to her to help her. When Chris criticizes him, Jon reminds him of her reaction to her other sibling's death. That swings Chris over to his side and both of them focus on how to get back to her side.

The next morning. She arrives at her new quarters, poorly informed and not entirely secure. Ember arrives to confront this unannounced imposition of a houseguest. After sizing each other up (there is a lot to learn for an observant individual like ember) and having a little confrontation and mutual confusion, ember is summoned to meet with her unusual superior. She receives her orders—be congenial, helpful, and above all observant—with a secret agenda. Secret even from her.

On her first night, angelica has a strange dream. A dream hinting at a greater sphere of existence in which her own small world is under observation by beings of unimaginable nature and power.

Over the next few days. Feeling like an inconvenience, angelica attempts to smooth out things with her new and—at the moment—only acquaintance. She retells something of where she is from and her connections to things in the general picture (being a bit vague on the exact origins); which gives the other a few things to look into. She also receives *her* directives. Report to [lab] for extensive testing and examination. Her curiosity is aroused regarding the origin of these orders and mixed feelings about her autonomy. It seems there is a catch to her scholarship. In co-operation with various university medical centers, the cross scholarship recipients are required to participate in medical case studies, a clause which applied to her sister as well.

After her first exam. Angelica inquires about the source of her scholarship funding. She discovers that there are serious possibilities of a military connection, with such implied threats as her medical profile becoming government property. She also discovers over the first week of classes that she is something of a hot commodity in the interested eyes of a wide range of individual's tastes and insights. Add to her surprise her discovery of the re-assignment of a research pathologist from the Stanford medical unit who assisted in her sister's autopsy to the research and development team she has been handed over to.

Implications. Her appearance does not go without notice, although that notice is circumspect. They thought she would be like her sister. Identical in form though different in nature, they hoped she would show the same promise. What they did not know was how much greater her potential was. She was a true psionic, and for her, waking up to the hidden realm of the mind would be an initiation to a world of dangerous shadows and intrigue. In a moment earlier in her life, attention focused on her sister's role in the event that heralded the existence of her astounding talent. Angela's psychic potential was in fact catalyzed by angelica's own trauma.

Angelica encounters Morgan when she finally goes to the scene of her sister’s death. Morgan, who apparently found the remains, has visited often looking for clues to explain the execution after the death of her stalker. She confesses that she did not know angel’s sister, and they go back to angel’s place to discuss what Morgan remembers. This is Morgan's first direct contact with ember, though not the first time either has influenced the other. Like ember, Morgan keeps her secrets about herself.

During the second week. Angelica begins assembling the bits and pieces she’s picked up. Amazed to discover that her sister was part of a government funded psionic research project. Angelica learns that she has been recruited in the hopes that similar talent can be discovered in her. Their arguments to gain her cooperation with the program are compelling and she is assured that the research is pure; she will never be asked to compromise her morals with her theoretical powers. However, she also discovers that the reason for her sisters closed casket funeral was not because of the condition of her corpse but because the remains had vanished during the coroner’s examination.

After she has become more used to the list of new distractions, she stops to remind herself of her purpose. Long eclipsed by the rising star of her “elder” sibling, and awarded a mysterious full scholarship to follow in her sister's footsteps, she cannot resist the morbid need to understand her sister's death. When the dreams come she begins to ask questions. Her purpose renewed, she accepts the advances of her sister’s circle of acquaintances and spends her first evening in their company. Her dark obsession has lead her into dangerous company, and the embrace of her sister's doom.

Implications. The investigative unit has had its share of troubles including the mysterious death of one of the faculty. Another staff member witnessed the death and professed that it was purely accidental, but there are suspicions that she covered up for another person involved. The possibility that Tony was murdered has put the entire program and its adherents under a great deal of suspicion. Mixed in with the unexplainable death of Angela, each of the faculty members is quietly investigating each of the individuals in the program at that time, which eventually intersects with the probing conducted by angelica and Kelly.

Mason consumed Angela's mind leaving her body vacant and on the edge of death. Of the group he takes the greatest impact from angelica’s appearance, though he strains himself hiding it. He becomes entranced by her and obsessed with penetrating the mystery surrounding her. He realizes that by default he is as much an adversary as an admirer of her. As an adversary he moves, leaving no time for her to struggle for equilibrium. His weapon is the conversation, the illuminating arguments forged between Michael and himself. Carried under that cover, his will insinuates its way beneath her consciousness. Her limited experience gives her little protection from his dislocating thrusts into her mind. The run of assaults gradually begin to shake her confidence in the validity of her own reality.

No matter how she argues, the resonance of truth in mason’s diatribes has threaded its way through her. The possibilities she glimpses are undermining her beliefs and convictions. Synopsis. She is at a crossroad. She is aroused and terrified by the door opening in her mind and losing sight of her purpose. Already she wonders if it is possible to continue to follow her original plan, or to break free to pursue some slight remaining chance at normal life. Angelica faces a tough decision, realizing that everything her sister was lives on in her killer. She began to understand this aspect of the truth long before she can narrow the search down to mason. She desperately fights to keep her head together—afraid of being locked away should the authorities intervene—that kind of help might just kill her.

Angelica witnesses the final confrontation between Michael and mason. Michael discovers a horrible truth about mason and during that confrontation the foundation of his reality cracks open beneath him. Mason has refined his little art and has discovered the flaw in his old friend and begins to maneuver him toward that breaking point. In a demonstration of unconscionable power, Michael is beaten down. Michael is a key part to fulfilling his experiment, and the shattering of his ego in this confrontation is the culmination of the first step.

Angelica helps Michael back to his room and watches over him for the entire night. He confides to angelica the essence of a meeting he had with one of his old girlfriends and tries to explain how that relates to his fight with mason. In the morning, when he awakes, he is not himself any longer. He becomes the first of the group to transcend mortality only to assume a new mortality.

A night in the arms of her troubled friend becomes a blow of many proportions—a twisting dagger of synchronicity in her gut. Angelica awakes under the passionate attention of her bedmate, but the hands, the body, all belong to her sister. She is confused, not connected with reality and half convinced she is dreaming. In the morning she is awoken by a terrified Michael screaming in the voice of her sister. In spite of the evidence of her eyes, it is clear in the light of day who this girl was only the night before. Both realize that the night before had been real, but beyond that thought they can barely think. Eventually the questions come, 'can the truth destroy you?' 'Do you really want to know?'

Angelica agrees to help Michael, but before they can come up with a plan, a report comes in. Michael's body had been found. The strange circumstances surrounding his death distract many of his compatriots, but Arden (quickly assumed) and angelica both know some scam is behind it. Michael’s body was reportedly found meticulously dismembered, more like dismantled, with every part carefully and systematically laid out in an abandoned warehouse. And now Michael has *her* body, but neither knows how important that connection is. The whole exercise was a shifting of patterns, and only the uncertainty on mason’s part required the unmemberment to grasp the quality of Angela's attention. Having translated the pattern the flesh of either was redundant. He could, at this point, resurrect Angela, but for that he would have to figure out a way to strip her out of his mind.

Conflict

The breaking point. Mason turns to the second phase of his ambition, and focuses on angelica. An unwise confrontation between them shatters the last of angelica's doubts. Having realized what mason is, she has suddenly come upon her inevitable trial by fire. Her will and identity will be tested--pushed beyond all mortal limits. Her destruction will be excruciating and slow as she stubbornly fights and resists the caresses of the devourer--the touch of destruction. His way is to stalk her; to catch her unawares, psychically deactivate her conscious control of herself, turning her into an unwilling participant, a living toy for him to sexually exploit. She is torn between the pleasure he causes her in using her in this manner and the fact that he has so utterly violated her. She finds herself wishing he had killed her and raped her corpse rather than leaving her alive with the knowledge that she has been reduced to an object of pleasure against her will. This desire was awoken in her sister, the same as it was now her. Her desperation will cause her to make herself an abomination to her old self before she finally must realize the truth. To learn at this time how vulnerable she still is, she must embrace the lesson for which her sister died.

As the last of her defensive armor evaporates she finally sees herself. At her moment of crisis she experiences an epiphany—realizing an elegant truth she was born with. Her sense vulnerability is actually an awareness of her openness to being touched, receptiveness to the penetration—the intimacy—of contact. Touch is the mother of all senses. Life is endured because of it. Existence is suffered for the sake of a simple contact beyond the isolation of self. A sense of wonder fills her that she could have feared to allow herself to be touched, explored and known by an unknown. Stripped of her illusions she remains a sensual young woman knowing no shame in a naked mind or bared soul. Beyond the simple feel of her, the fleeting essence of her being she is only a strength of will and responsibility to herself. Whatever might invade or aim to expose her nakedness could be met with unflinching candor. Faced calmly with integrity and without false morality. No longer turned against herself, she faces the remaining danger to her. The damage already done and the waning of her life. To become whole once more, to save to herself or have any hope of ever being able to live by her own will, she must confront death, and it will bring her to confront aes. ‘What do you want?’ angelica faces a tough decision, which was more valuable to her, having her sister living on in her killer or having his death on her hands to set her free? She understands that should she spare him she will eventually find herself in the position of having to stand beside or defend him from the wrath of Kelly and others who can hold him to blame for the death of loved ones as well. This position is made even more difficult by the fact that mason has gained an abominable lever over her through the insights of her sister. His efforts to seduce her and his instinct to use her much as he used everyone else in the project to further his own ends infuriates her. However, the only way she knows how to fight him is the way she learned form him, which is unsettling to her. Dare she deliver a killing blow to another being’s reality? Even in his case? A consequence of her own actions, angelica is confronted by the realization of a divine destiny. Stranded in a moment derived of innumerable possible realities, and doomed to chaotic dissolution--caught between her desire to salvage her role in her own ersatz world, the unyielding call of her self ordained destiny, and her own sensual and amoral nature--her only hope is to embrace the very soul of aes. Unfortunately, it is the devourer that wants her, and he'll do anything to get her.

Out of the conflict emerges her awareness of the rampant interest of men behind the scenes. Their attempt to catch and subdue her before she should pose any threat to either their secrecy or the world is the spur that drives her over the edge and into the arms of her mysterious power. Among the flood of following ideas are those which expand the limits of thought and perception, such as the shape of an awareness of so immense and complex as to incorporate a part of itself into all who are and a part of him, her or it into what it is. In so impersonal a world, one rarely ponders being so distant and removed as a god. A labyrinth of moral, spiritual, philosophical, and existential paradoxes and questions arise which the vital, evolving mind must come in time to consider. Something happens when faith, open mindedness, and desire are allowed to give way—an impossible quest to touch what we, in our limitation, call god.

Even in light of the horrifying revelations she has so recently endured, she compelled by her sense of responsibilities. In a time old tradition, she has retreated to lick her wounds but what should be a pause in the madness, a visit to medically confirm her enduring reality, somehow seems to be a nightmare of intrigue and mystery. Somewhere in all of these research efforts is a trap, and the only out for her is to out think whomever is behind the research. What she cannot expect, however, is that the powers that be are not through with her yet. In fact, they have hardly begun to make their full claim on her. Only now, when all she has loved has been torn from her by her own hand, does she learn what waits to embrace her. Committed to an existence immersed in the inconceivable angelica must learn that she has not even begun to understand the demands of her destiny. Especially as she learns that destiny itself is not inevitable. Can she live up to the subconscious designs she has placed over her self? Intimate encounters with virtually identical--yet disturbingly different--entities only accentuate her own uniqueness. Angelica, unleashed from the constraints of form, has become equal to her new diversity of form. Now, manifest in the body of an angel, she embraces her smoldering fascination with aes. She--a phoenix risen from her own ashes--would trade her physical immortality to embrace the essence of divinity.

Imminent divinity: the theme explored throughout the works associated with angelica have to do with discovering and exploring the divine nature of being. I have taken inspiration from many sources and genres. The whole resolved from these pieces is reinvention, by necessity. Angelica is invested in expressions of her divine nature across many incarnations and reincarnations. The roles and manifestations of these incarnations are symbolic representations disguised in apparently literal mantles. Past incarnations entered death's door and became gods to what she is reborn as. Present incarnations are transformed and transcend into various roles within the divine hierarchy elaborated through many lives. The mystique, illuminated and dissipated at once, is the truth of this elaborate majesty. This adventure is not concerned with rationalizing or accommodating a one true god or gods of any known faith. Language may imply, but only because the limitation of language is itself a piece of the puzzle. Theology and mythology are explored according to the character of angelica's mind and her own application—the collusions built up as conditions of her world. The strange paradox of divine intercourse, where individuals share a common world and yet that world is divinely tailored specifically for the individual in question. In a sense, everyone is in on it, a conspiracy to aid angelica in her ultimate revelation. Before every crucial step, she is given the opportunity to embrace the comforts of either ignorance or oblivion, but her will to know the truth, to understand the meaning drives her on.

OPENING

Try to establish the difficulty of approaching new directions from within the limits of the old. It is more than a test, it is a surpassing effort. An appropriate theme is the dreaming of one's self into existence. It is about how one can come to find oneself, and so find much more than one ever anticipated. For a mind with the wit to conceive of the possibilities of the story as it lives it, the passage beyond mere revelation to manifestation is within the limits of the story to relate. This does not yet approach the attainment of this extraordinary ascent, but details a hard hitting illustration of the effort and excruciation of the attempt. All that exceeds will be easily within the convention of dreaming for the vacillating mind to take refuge. The key moment of the opening thrust is but an allusion to the piercing of the veil, what follows is the paradox of an unstated resolution. Some things will be seen, but the out comes will not be told. It will be intimate, confiding, even conspiratorial, but visible only to the corner of the eye. Seen only by those who manage to glance in the right direction. A harder thing to do than one would expect, for reasons stated further on.

ESCALATION

Like a good stalker, the escalation will present the novice with a paradox of possibility. It will play on the tendency of the mysteries in life to pass so close as to thrill the soul, and yet give no confirmation to the mind. It will play on the willingness of the individual to doubt, even as the events occur with such impudence as to suggest that none other but the implied is true. The story, like the reader, will tend to shy away from any moment of confrontation great enough to strike down the walls wherein we huddle. But, the body of evidence will invariable demand thought and recognition from the adept mind. It will silently declare, like the laughing lynx, that it was magic and miracles all along. That what can not be said must all the more be demonstrated. It is only the mind, in the end, which chooses to delete the soul. Deny the ghost in the machine. It is the purpose of this tale to lead the reader into an alliance with the hero, or victim, as she is given a tour of her own fragility and strength. It is a sorcerer's tale, and it will be as ruthless, sweet, cunning and patient as such a tale demands. This is intended to give insight to the wonder of my more fanciful, and overwhelming confidences, the larger mystery which I have a will to write. It is a petition, silently given, for the reader, or the writer, to seize the weight which lies more wholly behind the words. An offer to go beyond mere concept to association.

CONFLICT

The inevitable confrontation marks a threshold point thoroughly separating the mundane from the exotic. Av and her associates represent a generation stepping across the threshold of the mind and encountering the Infinite Expression. Unfortunately, there are little problems with each of them and as a result their tentative probing will draw divine attention. This is the heart of the work, this probing of the Umbra, and with it must come certain consequences. They are not the first to access the Umbra, and yet it remains little more than an uneasy suspicion of *something else* people hardly recognized. Their revelation suggests that all the things each has been seeking are attainable with and within each other. The researchers who were sponsoring their education were hoping for just this sort of revelation, and at least one of their group was willing to hand it over to them. However, the Angelica fast becomes alert to the presence of power-minds behind the amiable and trusty researchers. She has to ask what is really going on. The answer is not what she expects. She begins to see a hidden architecture.

CRISIS

All together, recent exchanges have brought it to their attention that there is a kind of war going on. They are getting a lot of exposure and what they are exposing is not designed to offer any guaranties of long life and happiness. There does not seem to be a human solution to the situation they are in. Standing at an open door, with calamity closing in on them, it occurs to them that there really isn't any reason to linger. Not with the consequences staring them all so closely in the face. As a group they face the decision, take action and intervene, or pretend none of this ever happened.

CLOSURE

Having done what they could, they have to measure what they accomplished against what lies in the future. For some the scars of this passage beg for time to heal, and many of them simply cannot bear each other. Many of them are let go, free to reconcile this in their own minds, mostly in pairs or triads. A few have faith that they can reconcile this with their disrupted lives. Take the future one day at a time.

CHAPTER ONE

[revision note : the intimate friendship of these three must be an issue from the start or it must wait for a later scene. Intimations of psionic ability must also be developed from the beginning, which may be the only justification for a sexual thread in the opening chapter. Consider the best emphasis on Angel, a first person narrative.]

In the mouth of the bunker, the restless pounding of the surf could be heard making its eternal assault on the beaches beneath Fort Casey. Something the northern most point of the W.W.II "Triangle of Death" had withstood for a long time. Even during the war, this retired line of defense was little more beset. Now only tourists patrolled its fortifications, abandoning them again in the waning hours of the day. Usually. Three adolescents, facing the end of their last summer and the beginning of their senior year, lingered to face the dying of the light. Over to the side of the cement labyrinth's entrance, a concrete stairway led to the ramparts where once sat the great five and ten inch guns, now impersonated by replicas. Between stairs and reinforced steel doors, the trio shed their backpacks and split up. The two boys moved to inspect the dark tunnels while the girl, clearly avoiding the enclosed depths, mounted the steps. Out of the shelter of the bunker the stiffening breeze carried a tang of salt. Climbing the retaining wall she found a perch from which her eyes command a wide view out over Puget sound.

Light stabbed through the veil of blood red hair, glowing orange and gold as the wind whipped it about her like a miniature inferno. It also teased the fabric of her blouse. Typical of her choice of dress, it was a loose fitting, oversized shirt, hanging to the tips of her fingers and brushing at her knees. Her opalescent grey eyes gazed out over the waves. The water was losing its glimmer beneath a towering thunderhead riding the wind in from the sea. In almost no time the mounting clouds had blotted out the sun. *I wonder which falls first,* she tried to guess, *the dark or the rain*. A glance at her watch told her that they should have been picked up over an hour ago. The house they were staying at was on the far side of the island from the old base. There was little chance they could hike it back on their own before either night or the storm set in.

Behind her, her friend Christian appeared. She frowned at having missed any sign of his approach. As he slipped down beside her she looked at him. He was a slender youth, graced with an elegance of form many girls envied. His short hair was a chalk white blond, and his eyes were a complex hazel. At the moment were watching the storm clouds warily. She voiced her thoughts to him, "Any chance we'll get home before it starts?"

His face took on a measuring look as the clouds rolled menacingly closer. In spite of the hour the wind was warm and charged by the impending storm. He shrugged, as aware as she that their plans had gone amiss somewhere. "Even if our ride had showed on time I doubt we would have beaten the rain home. We expected to be getting home at dark. But that's not what you're really asking." He shrugged. "I hate to say it Angelica, but I think we are going to have a long and unpleasant walk home," he observed grimly.

Angelica glared at him. "You know I don't like my friends calling me that, Chris."

He frowned his eyebrows at her, "Yeah, I know, but your sister's name shortens down to Angel too. What kind of parents give variations of the same name to their twins? I never heard of anything like it before I met Angela and you. Why confuse the issue further the way you do?" he asked critically.

Angel sighed. "Think of it the other way, when you really don't know which one of us you're sitting next to, isn't it nice not to have to try and guess and get it wrong? Besides, Angela is off in California getting ready for college so why not talk to me like a friend instead of a parent or teacher?" she countered calmly. "I mean really, you practically get hives if your friends call you 'Christian'," she jabbed with a sharp grin.

He winced, and smiled at her. "I get the message, Angel," he said ruefully. "Still, I guess ... it's just that I really like the sound of 'Angelica' better. It's got some quality, sort of majestic or elegant," he trailed off when she turned to stare at him as though he'd suddenly started speaking Swahili. "At least it rolls of the tongue nice," he teased in retort.

"Oh," she responded flatly. "Well, I guess I don't mind you using it so much as some others," she warmed. Her gaze was drawn back over the water. The sun shone vainly through the clouds, conspiring to make an ugly prospect disturbingly beautiful. After a short silence, she returned to the subject. "Anyway, since we can't possibly get home intact," she grinned, "what do you think we should do?"

He glanced up and smiled devilishly, "Maybe we should run," he got out before the first wet drop slapped the concrete between them. The smell of rain had been seeping up on them and Angel suddenly realized how strong it had become. A second drop struck nearby as Chris continued, "Lets go find Jon, he knows his way around here a lot better than we do."

Angel considered the suggestion, as she looked up at the cumulostratus looming over them. "Why don't you go ahead?" she prompted, casually gesturing to the real thunderhead, the cumulonimbus, "*One* of us should start picking his brain for ideas—*I* want to watch *that* come in..." she trailed off into a sigh. She didn't particularly relish getting drenched, but then again she was not in the least inclined to delve into dark tunnels in any hurry, either. "He's still in the bunker, isn't he?" she asked with a slight shudder, knowing full well the answer.

Chris considered that as he regained his feet. He was picking up some of her uneasiness but attributed it to the storm. "You know," he offered, voicing the logical evolution of his thought, "we could wait out the storm right here in the bunker. We have plenty of food, some blankets... why, we could stay for the whole night comfortably enough if we had to," he pointed out.

Angel clasped her arms around herself to mask the sudden quaking in her hands. Eyeing the storm nervously, she asked, "Do we have a choice?"

"Not really," he shrugged, noticing the tension in her voice. A sharp chill thrilled its way through her, darting down her spine. She turned away from Chris to look inland at the hills and trees once intended to hide the installation from hostile forces at sea. Chris watched quietly while she carefully composed her face and reflected on some hidden thought. She ran her slender fingers through her wild hair, effectively concealing her profile from Chris' view. Somehow, Chris sensed that she was through talking for a while. "I'm gonna go get Jon then. See if he has any ideas before we decide what we'll do, okay?"

She turned around and smiled uneasily. "Um, okay. I'll ... ah, be right down in a few minutes," she responded, then went back to her thoughts.

"I tell you, something's bothering her, Jon. She's ... I don't know ... *sulking* up there right now," Chris reported to Jonathan as he helped him move their gear inside bunker. "She doesn't like the idea of staying in this place for the night," he deduced, accurately enough, though he had no idea why.

"Come on, don't worry about Angel. She's a tough one. Maybe she's just tired. Y'know?" replied Jon in his 'practical' voice. He shrugged, tossing one of their back packs across to Chris to join another inside at Chris' foot. "Hell, maybe it's just her time of month."

"God you're crass. You know, if she heard that you might as well bend over now and kiss your sweet ass good-bye," Chris scolded his friend.

Jon just glanced up the stairway and grinned. "No stress, she's cool. She always says that to me when she's in a mood."

Chris shook his head. They were all close friends, and it was expected that occasionally they would rub each other the wrong way, but he suspected Jon could be a bit more insensitive than even friends would forgive. Angel was normally very easy going, but her temperament had extremes. No one who had seen her exact revenge on Mark Kingston—a senior who'd slandered her name on campus last fall—wanted to cross her. Eleven years of dance and gymnastics—and an uncle who ran the only martial arts dojo in town—had taught her exactly what her body could do. It gave her quite an edge in a fight.

He looked up as Jon broke the silence, losing his train of thought.

"You know, she'd better move it quick, its really starting to piss out there," Jon observed almost casually. Chris looked out through the entrance just as the shower became a punishing down pour. Native Washingtonians though they were, they stood in awe of the gale force rain for a full five minutes before a sodden Angel flew in out of the open.

"I am absolutely soaked!" she despaired laughing as water ran off her nose and chin. "I think that's a genuine flash flood!" she exclaimed, smiling ruefully. She shivered as she wiped the sheen of water off her face and flipped her hair back out of her way. The boys quickly moved the gear deeper into the tunnel to keep what they had dry—the wind flung as much moisture into the opening as Angel was splashing around shaking off.

"D'you want a pop?" Jon asked pulling out a can of Coke.

"I'd prefer to dry off first," she stalled him, with a gesture to set it out for her while peeling her plastered shirt away from her skin. Chris reached into his backpack and pulled out a towel. He tossed that to her and as she began to attack her hair with it she murmured, "Thanks."

"Jeez, Chris, you packed a towel?" Jon quipped, laughing.

"Hey, we're on an island. With all that water available, I knew *someone* was going to end up wet," Chris returned evenly with a grin. Then he caught Jon's savoring gaze and followed it to Angel. Nothing they hadn't seen before, but damn it had developed since... "You really ought to change out of those," Chris commented as she tried to wring out a corner of her shirt.

She snapped a look at him. "In here?" she asked archly, "You'd just like that, wouldn't you?" she challenged, half embarrassed by the fact that she was not wearing anything under her disturbingly white wet blouse and jeans.

"You don't want to catch a cold," Chris shrugged in self defense.

"There are rooms in here you can change in, if it bothers you that much," Jon suggested innocently. Angel looked past them into the abysmal darkness.

"I don't have much of a choice do I?" she observed with a shiver. Chris looked between her, Jon and the dark tunnel and then gestured at her pack. She nodded for him to dig out a change of clothes. "Turn around guys," she ordered. Chris and Jon exchanged sighs and turned to face into the bunker. "If you two want to be able to walk in the morning you'd better behave," she warned as Chris passed back what he found. As soon as she had her back turned, their eyes wandered back toward the light.

Angel kicked off her shoes, amazed to discover how sodden even her socks were from the relatively short exposure. She could not hike her jeans up enough to strip off her socks, so she straightened and began to work at the buttons of her fly. As Angel began to pull at the clinging material, she could almost feel the heat of their eyes on her. *I wish we could go back too,* she thought at them, *I wish we were mature enough to have that and still be friends.* She mentally shook her head, doing anything else would only make the situation worse, *one of us has to be strong enough to say no.*

Drenched denim clung to her slender body making it a struggle to peel her jeans away from her hips and thighs. The muscles of her back and legs played under her skin as she kicked off her pants and stripped off the blouse. Chris and Jon marveled at her physique, because it was as lean as it was well defined. As she moved, hard tone muscles broke the smooth contours they normally hid in. It was her height, the length of her limbs and even the slender column of her neck, that disguised her build. Even seeing it before them it was hard to believe that a frame so graceful and feminine could hide such strength and power. In many ways she was still too much the tom boy who befriended them in grade school. Neither boy could fathom why she tried so hard to hide her beauty, not realizing that she did it solely for them. Better to hide what she had discovered must be withheld.

Having enough decency to feel guilty about staring, they wordlessly withdrew their attention as she began to rub down with the towel. It was amazing how she could make them forget she was really a girl until they were confronted with the naked reality. A few minutes later she announced it was safe to look, dressed in an emerald poet's shirt over her black work out tights. Kneeling down, she tied her sneakers and then cracked open her drink. The boys sauntered back over to their packs and the three of them extracted and passed around trail mix, sandwich rolls and other tidbits left over from their hike through the woods. Just as they were getting more comfortable though, a gust of wind threw a sudden shower over them.

They were up instantly snatching their gear and retreating even further down the tunnel. "Okay, that's enough of that," Jon announced. "Come on guys, there are rooms further in where we won't have to worry about water seeping in under us," he explained. The last of the light faded out into the distance. Within the remaining darkness, no one could see the glaze of fear evolving in Angel's eyes as the invisible walls closed in around them. She heard Jon head off, and right after him, Chris' footsteps began to shuffle away. She clamped her free hand to Chris' pack and gritted her teeth to follow.

"Guys?" Angels voice broke the silence, "Stop for a minute, I have to find a flashlight. I need to be able to see where we're going." When she was ignored, she snapped, "Hey, come on," tugging hard on Chris' pack. It seemed to her that they had been walking for an eternity in the absolute dark.

"I know where we're going, Angel," Jon replied confidently. "It's not that far now, its not like there's anything to run into except us. Besides, don't you think we ought to save the batteries for an emergency," he counseled reasonably.

"This just might be an emergency," she growled less reasonably under her breath. Neither indicated that they had heard her though, and did not stop. "I could just use one... mine. Your two will be enough for an emergency," she argued to the blackness ahead of her. Suddenly, she collided with Chris, as he stopped just short of crashing into Jon.

She heard Jon sigh and say, "Come on, Angel, don't be a stain. There's a room just up ahead where we can stay for the night in safety. No flashlight is going to hold out all night and if you turn on one now it'll only be that much harder for your eyes to adapt." That said, he turned and stalked ahead once more. Chris caught her arm in his hand and squeezed reassuringly, before starting after him. Covered by the dark, he shook his head. He had been watching Jon like a hawk since morning because for once in his life the practical joker had not caused a problem on their trip. *Yet,* he thought. That had to mean something big was laying in wait. He felt Angel shudder under his light touch, as if she had caught that thought.

"I thought you said the room was right ahead, Jon," Chris demanded softly, a short while later as he stopped to get his bearings. Angel sank to the floor as soon as she realized he had stopped. When nothing but silence replied, he knew at once what had happened. He immediately dropped his pack and, with care to make no revealing sound, started rummaging around in it for his flashlight. Uncannily Angel picked up on it at once.

"What are you looking for, Chris?" she asked sharply, an unnatural panic edging her voice.

"Flashlight," he said simply, "I think Jon ditched us."

"What?!" Immediately, frantic pawing sounded behind him. He found his flashlight, but swore under his breath as he pulled it free of the backpack. It felt unnaturally light. Then a shrill, "God damn him!" escaped from Angel, "he took out the batteries!" Angel dashed her flashlight against the wall in a rare display of temper.

In a quiet voice he confessed, "Mine too. Angel..." he tried to find her in the dark with his hand, "come on, calm down. It's not that bad..."

"I can't breathe!" she interrupted in a full blown panic. Just as his fingers brushed her shoulder, she gave a startled shriek. "I've got to get out of here..." she breathed in a rattled voice immediately after the echoes faded. In a flash she was on her feet running blindly back down the passageway. Chris cursed and took off vainly after her. There was little he could do, he had too much of his sanity to be able to run through the darkness. Naturally, they forgot about their packs.

She ran with all her strength and speed. Soon she was far beyond him forcing him to strain desperately to distinguish the sound of her steps from the booming echoes, almost losing her more than once. Finally, as she began to tire, he caught up to her. He grabbed her, having to pin her arms to her sides and pick her up to keep her from breaking loose. She struggled blindly, with no awareness of who held her.

"Easy, easy. You're all right. I'm here. No one's going to hurt you. Just relax, shhhh..." he comforted. He had to repeat his litany of reassurance for a while before the violence of her reaction began to ebb. Once she had settled down to a lingering shudder, he set her back on her feet. Her head slumped onto his shoulder and she clasped her arms around him tightly. He was still startled that he had man-handled her so easily. She was about the same height as he, and he guessed, in better condition.

After what seemed an eternity, she finally let go and began to control her sobs. He stroked her hair gently, scared by the whole event. It had not really sunk in yet, somehow seeming disconnected with reality. Never in all of the time he had known her had she ever lost her composure before anyone. As her body shivered against his, he realized that there had been signs to warn him, but like Jon he had been blind to them. Sure, she was a strong girl, he thought, but a phobia is a phobia. Whatever it was that set her off, the dark, the enclosure, whatever, neither he nor Jon had any right to have compelled her to confront it. It shamed him that Angel had not felt she could tell them, and worse, that as their friend she had not dared to openly avoid it.

In a quiet voice, he asked, "Why didn't you say something?"

Angel shook her head before speaking. "I didn't realize..." she whispered, "it was so long ago I just forgot. I have never been comfortable about going under ground since..." she cut that thought off sharp. "I... I didn't know it would hit me this hard. I never tried to face it down before. I never knew how bad it was." Her voice was heavy with shame and tears. "I thought I could face it after all this time. Chris," he could feel her look up, "please, I need to get out of here."

Chris realized that whatever she was feeling, it had not gone away simply because she had regained a measure of control. He apologized and let her go, just holding her hand, as she started for the entrance again. By this time his eyes were as wide as they could get, trying for so long to see in the dark. Up ahead, around a bend he could make out a grey area in the black. As they came closer it grew into an outline edging the corridor. His heart sunk. It was a door.

He released Angel and moved ahead to get a closer look. He ran his hand over the face of the door, realizing that this was indeed where they had come in. Angel caught up to him and laid her hand against the metal. In spite of the fact that a hint light was trickling in through the cracks, it was really nothing more than a grey chaos. He heard her palm sliding over the surface looking for a handle or something. A second later the door squeaked and groaned as she tried to budge it. He heard her grunt as the complaints of the door suddenly grew faster and more violent. He was already trying to grab her again when he heard the thump of her shoulder against the door.

"Damn it!" she exploded, giving a resounding kick, "They locked us in!" His hands missed her as she sank down to the floor in despair. Chris figured out her position as her head began to pound against the reinforced portal. Alarm flashed through him as he deduced the cause of the sound. Dropping in a crouch in front of her he gathered her head in his hands.

"Angel," he said forcefully, "please stop. You're not in any danger, but if you keep this up you're gonna end up seriously hurt. No one knew they locked this place up for the night. There's nothing we can do about it now, but wait it out until morning." He grabbed her hands and pulled her back to her feet. "Come on, let's go back for our things and find someplace to settle down for the night," he said.

She jerked away, slamming her back against the door. "No, Chris, I can't go back in there," she pleaded.

He squeezed her hands and argued, "Angel, we are already *in* here, and it doesn't make any difference where we *are* in here, its for just as long. If we stay here we'll be miserable. Please," he urged luring her away from the door. Before she relented she kicked it again both hopefully and resentfully. It did not budge. Resigning herself to her fate, she slipped her arm in his she allowed him to lead her back into the darkness.

When they finally reached their backpacks, they found Chris' flashlight switched on and aimed at an open doorway a little further down the passage. Jonathan was standing in the doorway.

"I forgot to tell you, they lock the place up at night," he announced carelessly, the punch line of his little practical joke. Chris stepped up to the tall athlete and slugged him in the jaw. He didn't even think about it. But as he watched his friend stagger back in shock, he was suddenly glad that Angel hadn't beaten him to the punch. He half expected Jon to get up and kill him, but Jon was too astonished. Chris was not one who lost his temper or threw the first punch. Jon finished reeling back and flopped down on his rump still within the beam of light.

Before either of them moved again, Angel spoke, "I forgot to tell *you* that I'm severely claustrophobic."

Jon froze. He looked too shocked for words. He looked up at Angel who was wild eyed and damp with nervous sweat and tears of terror. She was shivering perceptibly and her lip was bleeding from being chewed upon.

"Oh Jesus, Angel," Jon breathed, guilt beginning to follow the shock. "I didn't know... I didn't mean for you..." Chris interrupted him.

"She just about killed herself trying to find a way to get out of here," he said accusingly. "I hope you're real proud of your self."

"Oh God! I had no idea," he looked from her to Chris. Chris' fear for Angel had turned to anger at *him*. He looked back at Angel, and murmured, "You were the one who always laughed off my pranks. I never expected this..." His face was a portrait of contrition as he begged, "Can you... ever forgive me?"

"If I manage to survive this night, it might be possible," she said in a low deadly tone. From the look on her face, it did not seem likely.

"I thought it would be Chris who'd take it seriously..." he began, trying to deflect her anger. "That's why I had him go talk to you outside, earlier; so I could get the batteries," he confessed in a small voice. He was shaking his head, "You were supposed to stay where you were so I could scare you." He looked up, "but you were gone when I popped out..." Angel stared at him like a pronouncement of doom. She said nothing for several minutes. With an act of will she stilled her trembling and slowly wiped the blood from her chin before speaking. Jon put his hands over his face for a moment then dragged them back over his head pulling his hair tight across his scalp.

"When are you going to grow up?" she demanded quietly. "Do you think life is all just a game? Do you ever take anything seriously?" He looked down and his shoulders slumped. He pulled his feet under him and stretched his arms out over his knees, shaking his head slowly. "I thought you were becoming more dependable on this trip. That's why I followed you in here in spite of my fear," she continued. "I trusted you Jon. I thought 'hey, its okay, Jon knows his way around here... he won't let me get trapped in the dark, cold, damp.' I trusted you," she repeated, pausing to wipe a tear, "and you tricked me!"

He took it as far as he could bear it then he shouted back, "How the fuck was I supposed to know!?" His eyes gleamed in the direct light of the torch.

Angel's control cracked and she screamed at the top of her lungs, "You knew my brother you fucker!!!" Chris staggered back as the concrete walls amplified her voice. Angel's face crumpled in a sick knot of rage and grief. She snatched up her bag and the flashlight and stormed past both of them. She shoved past Jon and made her way to the center of the vast room he had hidden in. At the center she sat down and braced the flashlight so its light shone up to reflect throughout the room. She sat there and shivered by her self for several minutes before either of them moved.

"What was she talking about?" Chris leaned close and asked in a whisper.

Jon didn't look at him. "I don't know," he answered, "her brother died a long time ago, she was just a little girl. I barely even remember him," he looked over toward his oldest friend in the world and silently wished he was dead. He got up stiffly and moved over to her. The look on his face told Chris to keep his distance. When he had come up beside her he knelt down and gently brushed at the hair on her shoulder.

She leaned away just enough to evade the contact and looked up at him with eyes of pain.

"I never *ever* meant to do anything like this to you. I'd *never* deliberately hurt you," he protested. She looked at him with a hint of surprise. "You're not like other people to me. You were always so fearless. I've always admired and respected you more than any other," he smiled humbly, "I've often wished I could be more like you. And now..." he trailed off guiltily.

"I never knew that," she said quietly. "When I would watch you play sports, I would always wish I could be just like you," she laughed a melancholy laugh. She curled her arms around her knees and buried her face in her lap. "We've been friends for a long time. I guess we just never learned how to really talk to each other."

Chris slipped up and nudged Jon. "Jon... about punching you. I was just so upset..." he began remorsefully. They were all in a bad situation and it could have been much worse if they had gotten carried away with violence. He shook his head and met his friend's eye, explaining, "I've always felt this secret need to protect Angelica. Tonight I got to, and it scared the hell out of me to watch her come undone. But I had no business taking out my reaction on you."

Jon shrugged. "I deserved worse, buddy. I feel like I've just done the worst thing in my life," he admitted. The three of them sat in silence for a few minutes, and Jonathan was greatly disturbed by what Angel had screamed at him. He finally couldn't stand it and he spoke up. "When you said that... about knowing your brother, what were you talking about, Angel?" he asked cautiously.

She turned and stared at him. There was anguish but she seemed to swallow it down. "You really don't remember do you?" she said softly. He shook his head slightly and both boys fixed their eyes on her as she frowned in pain. She stared off into the shadows for a few minutes before nodding to herself. When she began to explain, her voice was so light they had to strain to hear it. "When I was a girl... when I was five, I followed my brother off into the back woods," she began, "It was the end of summer and I was going to be starting school in a few weeks. Angel had been in school for a year already and he was sort of impatient about getting back so he could to see all of his friends every day. I didn't know it then, but his hiking was just a way to kill the time. I thought it was great to go exploring and since I worshipped him it was a lot of fun to sneak around after him. He didn't like playing with me anymore because his friends at school called him a sissy if he let me join in.

"I didn't understand it and so I guess I was a little mad at him. He didn't dislike me any more than he ever did, but he didn't like to be laughed at," she shrugged. "So, I had started riding him. Pushing him. On that day, I was getting tired of being left out so I decided to get back at him for ignoring me. When he stopped on the trail to rest, I snuck up and stole his lunch and started running. Naturally he chased me, which was just what I wanted—to have him paying attention to me again. We used to always run races together so it wasn't easy for him to catch me.

"When he finally did begin to catch up to me, I wanted to *keep* his attention. I went off the trail and cut through the trees. I scrambled over a log and found myself at the edge of a drop off. It was only about one story or so, and the ground looked soft with pine needles, so I jumped down. I heard the hollow thump as I landed and that's when I realized I had gone too far. Just then Angel appeared above me and before I could warn him he vaulted over the log. He heard it too when he landed, followed by loud cracking as the ancient timbers gave way.

"He grabbed me and tried to scramble for the edge when it collapsed under us. It had been some sort of cover over an abandoned mine shaft, or something, and we fell a long way down," she paused and swallowed a few times to combat the tears that were forming. "He was trying to protect me as we fell, and he took all of the impact when we reached the bottom."

Chris and Jon held their breath as she winced at the remembered sound. "His back broke on a support timber that lay under us. He was instantly paralyzed, but he managed to hold on for a couple of days. It took them a week to find us. I talked to him almost constantly when I wasn't screaming for help, unable to climb out. I felt him *die* in that dark hole," she stopped, trying vainly to hold back her tears.

Chris reached out to her, and she shook her head violently. "I lost my mind after that. They had to put me in a hospital after my sister brought them to find me." She almost stopped there, but there was more they had to know, "I didn't start school that year, and they wouldn't let my sister stay back waiting for me. I spent most of that time in psychiatric care," she explained in answer to one question she had never responded to in the past. "My sister did everything she could to help me get over it, but she was also a little afraid of me. The doctors called it some by kind of fancy name but it was like I had absorbed a part of my brother's personality. I aped a lot of his habits and mannerisms, I slept in his room and played with his friends. I even did all the little things around the house he'd always done, so with me around it was like my brother never left, but had just become invisible. It hurt everyone in my family, and so no one ever talked about it or him. It was like he had never existed."

Jon was struck, because now he did remember it. He had played with Angel ever since they were babies. One day he simply didn't show up to play. He remembered that everyone had been very sad, but all they told him was that Angel had gone away. Eventually he had met Angelica and he forgot all about her older brother.

"Oh my god," he said feeling sick. What she said was true. She had been so much like Angel that she had taken her brother's place in his memory. He hadn't really met her until they were about seven, but he had remembered it as if they had learned to walk together. If he hadn't flunked the first grade twice, he wouldn't even have met her. Not as likely, anyway.

"I wish I'd known," said Chris softly. He had met her in the first grade too, and he'd always thought it neat that she could be one of the guys. He looked around as it all began to sink in. How much willpower had it taken for her to go with them into these dark passageways? He looked into her eyes, this time with new understanding.

Because it was cold, they all scooted closer together, leaning on each other, and gradually began to talk about growing up together. Chris and Jon shared some of their own fears with Angel, mostly talking to keep her distracted. They kept it up for hours, since she didn't seem able to relax enough to fall asleep. Eventually, Chris noticed that Angel wasn't the only one shivering. Quickly he grabbed up the blankets and started to pull off his shirt.

"What are you doing?" Jon asked.

"Take your clothes off, both of you. We're gonna get hypothermia in here. We need to gang up under the blankets and our clothes are only going to suck up body heat we should be sharing," Chris explained as he slipped off his jeans. "Sorry Angelica, but this is serious."

She thought for a second, but she remembered her long stay in the hospital so she wasn't about to argue. After she had shed her clothes and nestled between them under the blankets she laughed weakly, "God, just don't tell Craig about this, he'll kill us all."

They all laughed weakly. Jon grinned in the dim light. "Yeah, I'll bet he'd wish he bothered to come with us if he knew..." he said running his hand over Angel's thigh. Angel sighed. She didn't mind the touch, because in spite of Jon's horrible practical joke, she trusted him. Actually, of all the boys she had grown up with, he and Chris were the only ones she had trusted when it came to taking risks. She leaned her head on Chris' shoulder and caressed Jon's hand on her thigh. Like many things they had explored together, they had discovered their sexuality together.

Chris sighed. "Why are you seeing that jerk anyway?" he asked plaintively.

She snorted, "You mean, why am I sleeping with that jerk," she chuckled, knowing him better. Chris and Jon exchanged a look and then they both nodded severely in agreement with her. She sighed. This was another of those things she had not been brave enough to talk with them about before. She had learned her lesson about silence though. She pulled the two of them into a closer embrace, and took down the one promise she had bound them too when she had stopped sleeping with them.

"Outside of you two," she began, caressing their backs under the blanket, "he's the only guy I've met who I respect." They both raised eyebrows at that, but then they were biased. She grinned sadly, "Unlike you two, I can stand to hurt him if I have to; to cut him off from the group, because he was never as close as we are." She looked carefully at them. "If I thought you two could honestly share me, I would never have pushed you off. But I didn't want to come between you and I couldn't pick just one of you. Do you understand?" she asked with great concern.

They looked at each other and the same thoughts passed in their eyes. They had always been just 'the guys' even though one of them had been 'fortunate' enough to have been female. They had learned about making love, and about fucking, not as boys and girls but as friends. Nothing would change the fact that physically, hormonally, they were boys and she was a girl, however. It was simple biology, and the fact was, as they had almost proved tonight, they *would* fight over her; it only needed a perceived reason. They nodded their heads unhappily.

It was hard to admit, because it was harder to submit to the consequence that they did not have the hope of her as long as they had respect for their friendship. They had not been able to accept it when she had drawn the line and ended it. *I'm sorry guys, I didn't mean to hurt you either,* she thought, realizing that she had. Angel slid a hand up each young man's body and stopped gently to caress a face. *If only you cared for each other as much as you care for me.* She spoke to both at once, "I can never be your girl, but I will always be your friend and that's..." she paused. *I hope we've grown enough to deal with this,* she reflected once, knowing where she was going, "...what makes lovers." Her head ducked down, and with great difficulty, she spoke. "I don't want to use you, but I *need* something... to occupy my mind... or I won't make it through this," she pleaded quietly. Not to their manhood, but to their honor. It was not an easy thing to do, for any of them, because they did feel love for each other, and they lived in a world where what she proposed would only cheapen her and confuse them.

Maybe even humiliate them.

She looked into their eyes, and they saw that she had already thought of that. Silently she urged them to grow past what other's might think and realize that this was just between them and had nothing to do with the rest of the universe. She could deal with it her self in those terms—that in the private reality the three of them had shared, intimacy between them was nothing to be ashamed of, but a point on which they deserved to be proud. She only wished she had been able to face it herself without something like this to prompt it. She watched them struggle with it for a while, and felt it with them as they realized that this was about being equals, and that it had nothing to do with gender.

Chris and Jon exchanged a look, searching each other for trust, because what she hadn't said had still come through. She was not opening herself back up to them but asking them to open up to each other.

"This isn't..." Jon began carefully.

"...I know," Chris responded, managing to keep eye contact.

Jon sat still for a moment, then gave his hand to his old friend and grinned impishly, "Hey, I'll still respect you in the morning." They all laughed to ease the tension.

She had to admit to herself that she had doubted they would be able to deal with what she'd implied, but her pride in them soared as they looked past sexuality and embraced naked sensuality. It might have made her uncomfortable to consider it in the clear light of day, but locked in a barracks in a hole in the ground on the verge of losing her mind, it made perfect sense.

All night long, a face had hovered between her and any hope of dreams. In her sleep, she had studied the image trapped in her mind’s eye. At best, she could only pick up the details peripherally. Her inner eye would be captured by those intense, opalescent, grey eyes, and the vision would flicker and vanish before she could bring anything else into focus. It would immediately be replaced by some other remembered glimpse of her face. As they flashed by, she had been fascinated to note how those eyes sometimes appeared twilight blue or emerald green, depending on the mood she was captured in. It just went to show how many different faces a person could show. Always changing, always the same—like an eternal flame.

All these memories, and yet her face remained as elusive as a dream.

A spear of light burned through the morning mist, bringing the room to life and disturbing her sleep. A flood of warmth caressed her face. Luminescence poured through the open window and pierced the thin curtains that shifted lazily in the breeze. Her eyes blinked open as the sun stretched itself into shape at the crest of the hill. Awakened, but not entirely wakeful, she gazed about the room, watching the blue tinged shadows brighten and then turn white, while the edges of things became highlighted in gold. It was so beautiful she immediately forgave the sun for coming up so very early. On another day, she would be as impervious to the dawn as her twin, curled snugly against her back.

All at once, the dream came back to her. It bothered her that her mind had found such a common sight as her own twin’s face impossible to grasp. She realized it was a symptom of her latest worries, but at the moment, she was still feeling the imperative which had spawned that unsettling experience. She rolled away from her sister, and sat up to study her. The other girl rolled onto her back and clutched the sheet to herself without waking.

Her mind embraced the image, as it would a word or name that emerged after eluding thought or speech, though the meaning had burned perfectly clear. She gazed at the face, reaching out impulsively to touch it. She traced her fingers over that smooth and gracefully curved brow—savoring the velvet softness of her skin, as she stroked the flawless, mother-of-pearl complexion. She extended that caress down to the round point of her chin, which softly united the angles of her jaw—integrating subtler angles suggested by the faint hollows of her cheeks, as they merged with the strong curves of her cheekbones. Her nose was straight and demurely sharp. Her mouth—it was exceptionally expressive when she chose, naturally hinting at an enigmatic smile—hid sharp, slightly pronounced canines very capable of piercing flesh.

A mane of fine and strong blood red hair framed her diamond-on-heart shaped face. Her hands came up to flow over her own features. Her fingers savored the texture of liquid silk, as she ran her hands on through her hair. Long, straight and sheer, it had a tendency to develop a curl from the ends rather than the root. Both of her hands met at the nape, and slid down the slender column of her neck. Looking straight into her twin’s face, she saw the exact opposite of herself. Her face as it appeared to others, rather than how it appeared to herself in the mirror. That subtle difference in perspective lay at the root of her worries. They were perfectly identical, but the truth was they were not sisters.

So how could they really be twins?

Angel—Alexandrea Virgin Morgan—had the power to split into two people, and for seven years, she had been living two lives. Only one of them knew why they had become divided. The other simply accepted it as a part of her evolution. She took advantage of her strange circumstance to be her own best friend, confidant and lover—a girl had every right to touch herself, but using two bodies went way beyond using two hands—which inevitably made it possible to keep secrets from herself. It bothered her. Originally, she had been protecting herself. Allowing herself to continue developing normally without trying to deny what had happened to her. Now that she was old enough to deal with those experiences, she discovered that there were secrets on her other side which drove the wedge between her and her other self even deeper.

It had started with nicknames, and with pretending to be twins. It was inevitable for Angelica and Angela to become separate in people’s minds. Except for the secrets they kept from each other, they still shared a single mind. Unfortunately, they were big secrets, and she had gotten too close to cutting herself in half. Angela, the part of Angel that was presently awake, had been trying to pull them back together, to confess her own secrets, when she discovered something that had been kept from her. Angelica held a secret from a time when Angel had simply been Angel. A couple of years before the split, Angel had discovered the ability to assume either the male or the female sex. The little girl had toyed with being a boy and got burned. She had buried the memories, but never quite forgotten what she could do.

Angela sat there looking at the girl who was well on her way to becoming another person, remembering what had happened when she attempted to merge with her. She had believed Angelica was ready to face what had happened once Angelica had embraced her sexuality. Angela had let her set the pace, encouraged by the fact that Angelica had no fear of embracing herself. She was happy exploring and experimenting with the one person who was perfectly safe. Her healthy attitude and confidence had restored the confidence Angela had lost, once she could understand how she had been taken advantage of. She had been young and sensual, eager to participate, but they had been older. They had known it was wrong, but exploited her naïve curiosity to satisfy their own desires. It had been her own participation that left Angela feeling so ashamed, but Angelica had taught her that sex *was* shameless—in the sense that sex was nothing to be ashamed *of*, ever. Angela had taken responsibility for the actions of others, but the shame of those acts belonged to those who had burdened her with guilt through their abdication of responsibility.

Realizing that she did not have to hide from herself anymore, she had tried to heal the rift. She had confronted Angelica with her desire to go back to being one person, explaining that she had stayed apart to protect her secrets. She could not explain, but assured Angelica that she would understand once she was whole. Angelica accepted that and tried to welcome her back. It had not worked. In one body, she had still possessed a divided mind. Angelica remained apart from Angel, wrapped around secrets of her own, and Angela’s secrets remained locked away. Angela had tried to tear down those walls, even managed to glimpse Angelica’s secrets. Angela had been unable to reveal her own buried experiences. On an unconscious level, Angelica knew and she still refused to confront them. Combined with her own secrets, her hidden desires, she could not bear to embrace the whole truth of her sexuality.

Angelica had a healthy attitude towards sex, but there were grey areas within her she could not accept as healthy or normal. Angela thought she was being too hard on herself, but that was the whole problem. She had always been too hard on herself. No one was normal. Everyone had quirks and ghosts that haunted them. Angela had finally accepted that, but if Angelica did not as well, Angela was going to lose a crucial part of herself. She shifted a bit, looking down at her other self again. She glanced up, peering at herself in the mirrored headboard.

“I have to do it,” she mouthed to herself in dismay.

The black silk sheet, stretched tight over the queen-sized mattress, released a sigh as she sprawled onto her back. The sound registered only distantly, in Angelica’s slumbering mind, but the complex report of pressure, temperature, and texture, as her body rocked within its nest to the motion of the bed, triggered a shift in awareness. Her brain remapped her entire body to place the sensations into context. In the process, awakening her, and reminding her that she had a body.

Angelica rolled onto her back, stretching her arms and legs as she sorted herself out. The top sheet clung to her torso. She must have wrapped it around herself and tucked it in place fairly tight at some point in her sleep—probably when Angela got up and exposed her to the cool morning air. She pulled it away from her body, and flipped it back over the heavy down comforter that straddled her hips.

As she sat up, Angelica realized that she had thrown the sheet back over her twin. She grabbed the sheet and pulled it back slowly. “Sorry,” she smiled, ”I thought you were already out of bed.” Angela straightened her legs, so she was laying full length opposite herself. Angelica studied her for a moment and then dropped her hand to Angela’s knee, and ran it teasingly up the inside of her twin’s thigh. “So,” she grinned, “since you’re not, maybe we should start celebrating our sixteenth birthday.”

Angela shifted her legs apart invitingly. “Maybe?” she challenged, looking up at Angelica with a matching smile, wondering how to confront her other self with the fact that she had discovered one of her deepest secrets—a wish—and she intended to grant it. “Girl, I’ll make you scream if you don’t!” It started as something she had done for herself many times before, as sex play with herself, but somewhere in the midst of it, it became sex with the male version of herself. Again, Angela let Angelica set the pace. Once they were both warm and tingling with anticipation, she tapped those stolen memories and shifted into Angel’s male form. Angelica’s hand, which had been sliding down Angela’s belly, met with a proud and unexpected pillar of manhood. Angelica gasped, and her hand wrapped itself around it, squeezing to confirm its solidity.

“Whoa,” Angela yelped. “Easy. That thing’s sensitive, you know.”

“But,” Angelica stammered, “but—why?”

“I told you I had a special gift for your birthday,” Angela chuckled. Angelica stared at her—him, she quickly corrected. Desire and apprehension warred in her face and Angela took her by the hand. “Look,” he said, “Everything we’ve done before has been wonderful, but we both know what we really want. Neither of us has gone looking for it, though. Boys our own age are too clumsy, or too arrogant. An older man is too risky. With us, it’s always been just sex. No questions, no complications, and no long-term consequences. I only want to satisfy my curiosity, and I’m not going to get this intimate with someone else just for that. If it’s true for me, it’s true for you. If I can satisfy my own curiosity, why the hell shouldn’t I?”

Angelica looked at him in disbelief. “You peeked!” she accused suddenly.

“I stumbled onto it. I thought I was the only one keeping secrets from myself,” Angela modified. He sat up and pulled the girl into his lap, “Look, first of all, it’s isn’t healthy to keep secrets from yourself. I am you, remember? We could have talked about this, like everything else, and I could have listened to your fears—which are ridiculous, by the way—and helped you resolve them. If I had known I could turn into a boy, I would have tried so many things. Maybe I don’t really want to be a boy, but as a girl I think it can be useful, especially when it comes to sex,” he pointed out.

This time, Angelica spoke with concern, “Maybe, but do you really want your first experience with real sex to be as a boy?”

“Angelica, we’re not two separate people,” Angela stressed, “Before, I experienced sex as two girls, now I can experience sex as a boy and a girl. Why wouldn’t I want that? I am not exactly a normal person. I don’t have to accept the limitations of a normal person. This is a natural and normal evolution of my mind. Unlike most of the people in the world, I can truly evolve into a whole person,” he noted, smiling. Angelica ducked her head acknowledging his point; he hugged her, and brought up the one question that really mattered, “Do you really want to deny yourself? I mean, why possess an option if you aren’t meant to experience it. Is there any reason for me to be ashamed—or afraid—to embody and embrace it?“ Angelica did not answer. She thought for a moment, then laughed. Before Angela could say anything else, she turned and kissed him. From there, they proceeded to perfect the act of sex. There would be questions, and there would be consequences. Such was the price of any action. The difference was, no one but Angel could get hurt—and that, only if she was not careful.

CHAPTER TWO [ALTERNATE DRAFT : PASSION]

Angelica flinched awake, [jarred by the quiet texture... vision quietly pierced haze of her mind]. She closed her eyes as the book dropped from her nerveless fingers. A crowd of strange faces danced before her mind's eye. The world began to spin around her before leaping away. As shock and alarm filled unknown faces one gaze claimed and devoured her attention. A dark face with intense hazel eyes stabbed into her, reaching, reaching. Drinking in her dying thoughts. Fear exploded even as the hard ground cracked under her head. A bright flash washed out everything but those eyes. A primal scream tore out of her throat as she felt herself torn across every nerve ending in her body. Then, nerve by nerve, sensation folded into nothingness. A moment of blankness chilled her and then the rosy glow of sunlight bleeding through her eyelids brought her back to herself.

With a gasp, she opened her eyes.

*Angela!* Angelica bolted out of the lawn chair and rushed into the house. Running in near panic, she knocked her father out of her way as she passed him inside the door. Without even a word, she ripped the phone out of her mother's hand and hung up on her call. She was punching in the numbers for the long distance call even before Janice Kinkade Shae-Quinn could begin to protest.

"Angelica! What the bleeding hell is the matter with you?" her father growled, stunned by the violence of her actions. His confusion at being startled awake by a bloodcurdling scream rapidly turning to anger. Jan began backing away from her daughter, the fear that was boiling off of Angelica suddenly infected her, compelling her to intercept her husband before he could hit the hang-up button on the cradle.

"Goddamit, Angela, pick up the phone!" Angelica cried as the other end kept ringing.

"Nathan..." Jan breathed, grasping him painfully on the wrist. She suddenly remembered the day, twelve years ago, when Angela had roused the entire neighborhood in a panic only to lead them all directly to where Angelica and their son Angel had been trapped for four days at the bottom of a dry well. Too late, to the moment of her first scream, to save the boy's life.

Angelica slammed down the phone, just about to redial, when it began to ring. The color drained out of her face, and her fist clenched the receiver in a white-knuckled grip. The phone rang twice more before Jan pried her hand off and took the call. Her end of the conversation consisted of a half a dozen yesses and nos, an ohmigod, and, "we'll be on the next flight."

Jan raised her eyes to Angelica's. Angelica's hand jerked up to cover her mouth and tears quickly began to flow over her fingers. Jan wrapped her daughter up in a crushing embrace before the girl could collapse to the floor. Nathan Alexander Shae-Quinn reeled in shock unwilling to put two and two together, but unable to escape the conclusion written on his wife and daughter's faces.

"What..." he croaked, "who was that? What did they say? Janice...?"

Jan raised a shaking hand, cupping the side of his face. "That was one of Angela's friends at the university," she said. "She said that Angela just collapsed on her way between classes." Nathan reached for the phone only to hear the dial-tone. "They are calling for an ambulance," she said to explain the sudden disconnection, "her friend said she would inform us as soon as she knew where they were taking her, but that we should come as fast as we can."

"Jesus," he exclaimed, "what idiot would call us instead of an ambulance first?" He dropped the receiver into the cradle, glancing at his watch. It was two twenty. Two minutes ago, he had been napping peacefully and all had been right with the world. Now it seemed as though the world had gone mad.

"It's done now. They'll have her at a hospital in minutes, but we'll be lucky if we can get there by tomorrow," his wife retorted.

He absorbed this, figuring out what they would have to do quickly in his head. Before doing anything else, though, he grabbed his daughter carefully by the shoulders. "Angelica?" he probed, "Honey, can you explain what happened? How... how did you know? Is there anything you can tell us?"

"I... I don't know. It just hit me," she stammered, "I was just reading my book and all of a sudden it felt like I was dying." Nathan drilled her with questions, and she tried to describe the vision she had had, but none of it made much sense. The timing was too much of a coincidence, but as far as he could tell, she might have just imagined it all. He soothed and reassured her, promising that they would do everything they could to take care of Angela; trying his best to convince her that it *was* just a coincidence.

With quiet efficiency, he set his wife and daughter to packing for an immediate trip while he called the airport and booked passage for the three of them on the first flight available. A few more calls, and his sister in law was on her way over to take care of the house, with her brother to drive them to the airport. It was early evening by the time they were all piling into the car to go when Adrienne Kinkade rushed out of the house; it was a call from the university hospital. Nathan had to sprint to beat Angelica to the phone. While he introduced himself to the man at the other end of the line, Angelica was slipping into Nathan's office picking up the extension. The doctor explained that Angela had arrived at the hospital at two twenty eight pm, dead on arrival. The doctor, a pathologist, received her body at approximately three thirty after all attempts to resuscitate her had failed. A preliminary autopsy was conducted indicating that she was in excellent health at the moment she died. No traces of drugs or poisons, no indications of cataleptic shock, no sign of brain trauma. The follow up autopsy detected abnormal levels of endorphin residue in the brain but no discernable cerebro-vascular trauma. As far as the pathologists were able to determine, her brain simply closed up shop and death due to asphyxiation resulted. When Nathan asked why an autopsy was performed so quickly and without family consent, the pathologist replied that he had simply been following orders, and that all the paperwork had been properly completed.

About halfway through the phone conversation Angelica collapsed in shock. Nathan heard the receiver drop to the floor over the phone but it didn't connect to anything until the doctor hung up. Following the hunch, he made his way to his office and found Angelica curled up on the floor. He tried to shake her out of it, but she was as bad as she had been after the accident when they had pried her off of her brother's corpse. Cursing the helplessness of the situation, he called out to his wife. There was barely time to make the flight, and Angelica had gone totally autistic on him. Still, he couldn't leave her like this. Angelica's mother came in and assessed the situation at once. Jan announced on the spot that she would drive her to the local hospital, and Nathan would have to fly down to California without them. One of them had to go, at least, and with luck, she could follow him down once Angelica was taken care of. Nathan helped drag his daughter to his wife's Ranger, gave his wife a quick hug and then he had to fly.

Janice drove carefully. Nathan had not had time to tell her the news, so she had hope for the moment, if only a dim one in light of her daughter's condition. She tried several times to get through to Angelica, asking a million questions hoping that she could get a response. She had even brought along the book the girl had dropped on the patio, since reading was one of the few things she had done during the years of her earlier withdrawal.

Due to the hour, she had to pull up to the emergency entrance and call for one of the orderlies to help walk the girl in. Another one parked the Ranger for her so she could go check her daughter in. She explained everything that had happened as best as she could remember, unable to explain what had tipped Angelica off on the collapse of her sister so far away. Nor did she really know what had caused Angelica's withdrawal. While she sat in the waiting room, she opened her daughter's book. One of the pages was crumpled from when it had dropped. Absently she scanned the page. She almost dropped it herself in disbelief at what she read there. It seemed incongruous but for some reason the short description of a character's death, though in no way easily interpreted to mean anything that could be connected to Angela, convinced her that her eldest daughter was dead. The hope faded out of her as she went to the phone and arduously began to inquire about Angela's fate by calling the university and emergency services until she had the university hospital on the line and officially received the news of Angela's death.

A couple of orderlies arrived, attracted by the sound of her raving grief and ushered her into one of the examination rooms where she was administered a sedative and interrogated by a doctor. After he had pieced together the tragic story and offered his empty condolences, she was taken to see Angelica.

She entered the darkened room and found her way to the bedside. Angelica was awake, to her surprise. Angelica gripped her mother's hand and turned heavily glazed eyes up to meet hers and said huskily, "Angela's dead, mother."

"I know," Jan whispered, "Oh, baby, I know." Her heart clenched guiltily over the relief she felt to hear Angelica speak, even though her words were unbearable. There was nothing more either could say for the rest of the night, but it did not seem like Angelica would relapse now that she had faced and admitted the truth.