

Unredeemable

by E.A. Koetting

That late October night seemed so very hot then, almost murky like a Mississippi swamp hidden within the impenetrable mass of wild trees and man-sized grasses. A deep, sorrowful evil - also so closely reminiscent of that ancient bayou - suspended in my chest like the blackest cloud that refused to rain. But now, in somber retrospection, I can clearly see that the air was chilled, more like a wintry Boston or Detroit rather than New Orleans' French Quarters on a crowded summer afternoon. The memory of steam rising from my lips to form a cloud in the ashen sky now comes to mind. My skin was contracted around the bones and was covered with goose bumps; but then it had felt so very hot.

It all still seems like a picture or a video... clear and unbroken, yet so very far removed. How could anyone in sane mind not disconnect themselves from their own terrifying actions? Who would possibly want to bear the responsibility for such wickedness? Then again, am I actually qualified to properly judge my own sanity?

That night, that single moment trapped in the molten essence of eternity, haunts me now so unmercifully. It has become an unbearable Hell from which I cannot escape. No amount of therapy, opiates, self-abuse, or suicide attempts could or will ever release me from the glass walls of Hades that I have built around myself. Walls that show nothing but my horrid reflection.

He stood in the cemetery when I had first seen him that night. He stood tall and straight like a Roman guard, never breaking rank and never losing his bearing. His long leather coat hung down to his feet like a mystic's cloak, concealing his slim, toned body wrapped in skin that had never seen the sun. Blond hair fell softly onto his shoulders, shrouding parts of his face from my view.

He had seen me when I first entered that archaic graveyard, the gargoyles watching the rusted gates for trespassing demons. Now, I have to imagine that they must have been looking the other way when I entered. Surely, they would never allow a soul as mine to defile their sacred burial grounds had they spotted me.

He also had recognized me, although he gave no sign of it. His silver eyes were inseparably transfixed on a particular headstone. There was no name or epitaph, only an illegible date of death. The small stone could easily escape the attention of anyone's eyes. Anyone's except his.

"This is the night," he spoke, still concentrating on the headstone, struggling to receive some impression of the deceased's life. The spirits roamed that night. They whistled through the pine needles and clamored at every loose shutter. They also tempted the darkness within the hearts of two young men about to embrace the coldest parts of Hell.

"It is," I replied, trying to force my voice into a monotone as his had been. "It's already midnight, Jason. She's probably been asleep for hours. Let's go!"

He finally lifted his head to look up at my face, a notion that startled me. I began to believe that Jason had become marble; his stillness, silence, calmness, and seemingly chiseled features made this statue impression seem all the more real. None of my emulations or imitations could ever match the silent majesty he radiated from every aspect of his character.

Jason's hands, gloved in leather, stretched out to his sides to form a human cross. "Tonight, my brother, we become Gods!" A madness shimmered in his eyes for an almost unnoticeable moment; an insanity that I now see every day in the dreaded mirror.

The streets were quiet, as they had always been this late at night. The entire city slept as we began our clandestine journey into Hell. Her house seemed to glow like a beacon, although the only lights were imparted by the slivered moon and countless stars. A sweet scent like fresh honey or pine resin lingered in the midnight air.

Jason, unmoved by the beauty of the nightly solitude, approached her door, finding it unlocked. Up until that night, everybody in this rural town was so trusting. Nothing bad could imaginably happen there. Until that night, that is.

I opened the trunk of my car in preparation and joined Jason at the porch, peering into her welcoming doorway as if it were a portal inviting me to forever reside in outer darkness. He entered first, fearless even of his own evil - and I followed warily behind.

A foyer greeted us with a "Welcome" rug, a ticking grandfather clock, and family pictures hung perfectly square on the walls. We passed through this room into a kitchen furnished with all of the modern cooking devices. Then past that room down a short hall, and stood just outside of her chambers. The door was wide open, and Jason glared inside at her frail body lying comfortably on a down bed.

He motioned with his gloved hand to enter behind him. As he crept, I could hear the soft carpet crushing beneath his boots and that old grandfather clock could still be heard ticking this life's time away. My own breath seemed to issue from my lips like a roaring furnace, so I tried to stifle each breath as much as I could manage.

The darkness only allowed us to see her outline once inside the room. Jason again motioned with his hand that I inspect her before we moved. I took a step towards the bed, having to command my feet to move as they became lead when not following Jason's. My breath caught in my throat, and I was afraid to release it in fear of the airy current awakening our sleeping victim. Each step towards this girl became a step further to my own perdition.

Finally standing over her, I was numbed by the realization that I could never go back. In the cemetery, I could have turned away. Outside of her house I had the opportunity to leave. Even just outside of her bedroom door I could have abandoned my friend and kept my conscience. But, leaning over the girl only a year younger than I, hearing her breath and even her heart, I knew that I had entered a Hell with no exit and no emergency escape.

I bent down to look at her face. It was still so very dark. I leaned closer and closer to her resting body until her porcelain skin shined through the blackness. I had become entranced by her... by my victim. I leaned even closer until I could feel the heat of her blood and her warm breath against my cheeks.

But something was wrong. The dreaded sight that caught my eyes was one that fear would not let me believe. She laid there silent, save for her breath... yet her eyes

were wide open. As I stared into them in disbelief, she began to tremble. Tears shook from those opened eyes and streamed down her face. I straightened immediately, stammering as I tried to warn Jason. My mind went blank, as if I had gazed into the abyss itself and was dumbfounded by the hideous sight.

As my garbled warnings floated through the air slower than I had ever thought sound could move, the girl lunged towards me, teeth gnashing and hands flailing. I attempted to move aside, to dash backwards from her, but found myself on the floor, my feet stumbling over my wordless confusion.

Jason seemed to fly across the room and grabbed her in his arms. He tossed her effortlessly onto her bed and bounded on top of her. His hand reached into his coat pocket, pulling out a rag reeking of chemical fumes, which he held over her face until her spasmodic thrashing ceased. The young girl's motionless body rested ominously like a corpse. I could do nothing but lay on the floor and stare in rapt admiration.

I cleared the way for Jason as he carried her through the silent house, opening and shutting doors as we went. Her body was lain in my empty trunk as if it were a royal carriage, and the lid was softly shut to enslave her.

Adrenaline of the purest form burned in my veins as we returned to the hidden cemetery. Jason sat silent in the passenger seat - silent as he always had been. I longed to talk with him, to perhaps tell him of how my heart was racing faster than I could count or how my intense breathing was beginning to make me dizzy. I wanted to tell him how scared I had been when I realized the girl was not asleep, how I thought that it was all over for us then. Really, I needed to hear him say that he felt the same; confirm that he was as mortally frail as I. But I said nothing.

The headlights beamed down the old stone pathway towards the forgotten graveyard. The night was hushed in a dismal reverence except for the rumble of the car's idling engine.

Jason looked at me the way a God would gaze upon his trembling servant. "Go ahead of me," he whispered, his cold voice shattering the quiet sanctity that I felt might save me. "Get everything ready. I'll bring her down in a minute."

I could feel my lips trembling and my back began to twitch so slightly as to escape his scrutinizing sight. I opened the car door, the crisp metallic crunch almost scaring me as if entirely unexpected.

The path twisted downwards into what appeared to be a blackened abyss. Soon, those rusted iron gates came into view, only increasing my terror of what we were about to do. The car's headlights shut off behind me, and just as my sight adjusted to the darkness I could hear the trunk popping open.

The gargoyles glared at me this time as I creaked open the gates and stepped onto that sacred burial ground. They knew my intentions, but didn't seem to care. A large cardboard box awaited me at the center of the cemetery, and I already knew what it contained. I pulled four long tent stakes from the box and sunk them sturdily into the moist earth, attaching chained cuffs to each one. A large double edged dagger followed, the feel of the wooden handle menacingly gripped in my hand making me tremble in fearful anticipation. Large candles were set in a circle around the stakes in an equal arrangement of black and red. A tin goblet was placed at the head of the circle, in the western position, and a filled incense burner beside it.

While the last of the provisions were made, the gates creaked open again, heralding the return of my companion and our victim. Jason carried the unconscious girl to the circle formation and set her lightly on the ground. Kneeling beside her, we fastened the cuffs around her wrists and ankles, shackling her to the unforgiving earth. Jason opened his hand to reveal a glass vial and broke it under her nose. Breathing the stringent vapors in, the girl awakened with a choking cough. Her eyes immediately filled with fear, and her arms once again flailed as far as the chains would let them.

As she struggled against the restraints binding her to the ground, Jason and I adorned ourselves in black robes, throwing the hoods over our heads as if we were true Satanic priests rather than ordinary young men having nothing more than hearts filled with evil.

My eyes glanced once more at the girl, now seeming like a captured angel. Her persistent endeavors towards freedom had left her, and she laid exhausted on that wet cemetery grass. She lay with arms and legs spread to their limits, her white nightgown reflecting the light of the moon. Her short brown hair was mangled by her exertions, and her ivory skin began to rash from the needle point tips of the grassy blades. Those brown eyes filled with tears looked up at mine, begging to be released. She wasn't asking for riches or special favors; all that she wanted was to live... the basic drive and desire of every existent thing which we were about to steal from her. In the moment that our eyes locked, I had completely forgotten why it was we were doing this thing. What could possibly justify denying an angel as beautiful as she of the simple right to remain alive?

Jason's hand grabbed my shoulder from behind in reassurance, then took that evil dagger from my hands. My body almost collapsed in that second under the weight of my soul. One day earlier, the worst thing I had ever done was stolen candy from the neighborhood grocery store, and here I was ready to commit a sin that not even Jesus - in all of his compassion and empathy - would ever forgive.

Like always, however, I followed the lead of my demonic counterpart and stood at one side of the girl, within the circle of flaring candles. Just as he had done a half an hour earlier in this very same place, Jason spread his arms out to form a mocking crucifix with his body. I did the same, although my eyes were still fixed upon the staggering beauty of our captive.

"Prince of Darkness!" He shouted into the cold night sky. "Accept this immolation in thy name. Open wide the gates of Hell and cast up the blessing of Lucifer upon us. We stand within this circle as men, but united with the Powers of Darkness we become Gods!" Silence ensued Jason's brief monologue, signaling that it now was my turn to pledge my alliance to the denizens of Hell.

"Satan," I yelled, trying with all of my will to keep my voice from cracking or revealing the unborn tears catching in my throat. "Infernal majesty and keeper of the powers of vengeance and death, see our lights and hear our calls, and do not forsake us. Offer up from the brackish bowels of the earth the hundred Legions of Dark Angels to surround this sacrifice, and deliver unto us all the powers of your damnable reign!" The words had been memorized over the course of several days, but only then - on that night - did I feel the gates of the abyss swing open and release the Hellish fiends.

Looking up at Jason, he then appeared somehow different. Not exalted or demonic as I had perceived he would, but different in a much more subtle way. I saw him as I saw myself. I saw him - for the first time since knowing him - as my equal. His

blond hair fluttered in the rising wind just as mine and his skin seemed just as vulnerable. Not marble anymore, but mere flesh. For an instant, I hated him for causing me to believe that he was something more than just another mortal.

We crouched beside the girl, and now even she looked different. She squirmed and writhed on the ground helplessly trying to escape as Jason began to cut at her nightgown. Her teeth clenched and her entire face twisted into a look of agonizing expectation. I felt disgust for the exact same person that drew out all of my sympathy only moments earlier. The dagger's blade sliced down the center of her garments, the wind that was ever growing louder and more violent sweeping them from her naked body.

My hand reached out, as if guided by some preternatural force, and touched her quivering lips. Her sobs became clearly audible at this motion; my touch seeming to singe her skin. I could see from the very corner of my eye Jason's glare at my departure from the ritual's planned format.

My malicious caress continued to her neck, thin and openly unprotected from a quick lashing of teeth or an unrepentant closing hand. Then to her breasts, firm in her youth and taut in the cold. Her sobs quickly transformed into wails, such screams exciting the darkest parts of my soul. Groping those breasts in the most unaffectionate way, I knew that she could do nothing to stop me. Even Jason in all of his strength and courage was stricken speechless at my actions. Casting a glare at him, he continually seemed to grow weaker, like I was stealing all of his strength and bravado and turning it into something of real power.

In what appeared to be envy, Jason reached out and joined me in my unbidden advances. As his hands roved her chest, I rested mine on her stomach. The muscles tightened and jerked like my gentle touch was more of a bleak lash. The girl began to thrust her torso off of the ground as to push us away from her body, not realizing that she was now nothing more than my object of sin. Her unintelligible laments quickly became soft beggings of mercy.

"Please," she would whimper pathetically. "Just let me go and I promise I won't tell anyone. Please, oh God, please." I leaned down to her ear, listening to her breathing grow more frantic and uncontrolled than before.

"God," I laughed lightly enough for her to hear me. "God's not listening. He doesn't care. I'm your only god now!" Her voice squealed in despair as I returned my attention to the lower parts of her body. I pressed a cheek against the skin of her stomach, feeling an eerie comfort in being close to my slave. My lips touched that skin proceeding my teeth, which clenched painfully onto it. A gasp could be heard escaping her lips... a gasp that could almost be mistaken for pleasure. When I could see that she had grown accustomed to the pain of my malicious bite, I knelt again with my back straight, a hand still touching her body.

Caressing the flesh that had nearly been torn by my teeth, my hand moved farther down the body of the captive angel. My fingers danced along her leg and brushed her inner thigh. That skin was so much softer than the rest, like new silk. My hand stroked the velvety skin for a moment before moving to the secret, untouched places of her body. Her thick black hair was noticeably wet, making me wonder for a moment whether or not she was actually enjoying this defilement.

Jason gawked at the lewdness of my advance, his hands parting with her breasts. He moved away from her and something shone in his eyes. Not the evil that I had once seen, but fear. A fear unlike that of the girl's. The look of terror could only have come from within. His lips began to tremble as well as his hands.

"Oh my God," he whispered beneath his breath. "Oh my god, I can't believe..." His eyes looked right into mine, and I can only imagine what horrors he beheld. "What's happened to you? My God, we're actually.... Jesus how could we... my God." He shook his head slowly, becoming pale and staggering backwards.

"Jason, control yourself," I commanded in the crisp, monotone voice I had once coveted when heard rolling so evenly from his lips. "Finish it. Like you said, tonight we become Gods." He looked down as if the doorway to the infernal empire had opened beneath him, the demons ascending to take his blackened soul to its resting place in Gehenna's flames.

My hand remained between the girl's legs, caressing her unbroken skin. Her moans had become nearly inaudible beneath the wind, her mind seeming to have drifted into paradisaical disbelief. A finger protruded into that sacred hole, making her gasp. She closed hard and tight onto that finger, and I could now hear her teeth grinding against each other. My lips curled into a sinister smile as I looked back at Jason, still shaken in horror.

"A virgin sacrifice, brother," I announced. He could find no words to reply, still trembling, dagger gripped firmly in hand. "Let's finish this. Let's embrace our birthright as Gods."

We resumed our places as in the outset of the ritual, our arms outstretched, the dagger in Jason's right hand. "Lord of this world," he began as if reading an assignment in school. "I call the forces of Darkness to take this soul and return to us the powers which were stolen at birth by the Nazarene child. As the dagger falls, so shall the kingdom of God, both on high and on earth."

No silence was needed this time to tell me to speak. "We walk the earth in human form, consulting with the leaders of the world and influencing every event of this life. Yet we are not men, but Gods sent forth from the abyss to clear the path of the Dark Prince. Grant us dominion over the inhabitants of this world. As we speak it, so shall it be."

Jason knelt by the girl as if exhausted, the shining blade catching the reflection of the moon. Her trance ceased and she began to scream. The shrieking pierced my ears and felt as if the night itself would crumble under the agony in her voice.

"Do it now!" I yelled at Jason, seeing his hesitation all too clearly. "You have to do it, there's no turning back. You don't have a choice, just DO IT!"

He raised the blade above his head and closed his eyes. His lips moved slightly, and I knew he was saying "I'm sorry." Despite the weakness in his character or the pleading screams of the victim, he thrust the dagger sharply into her chest. Her entire body jerked, and seemed for a moment to be completely off of the ground. The screams halted with a sigh of release. At first I stared, not believing that he had done it. Pride filled my soul, as if he was my pupil learning his first word.

Tides of scarlet blood gushed from the wound, the beautiful girl not even breathing on the ground. With a hysterical cackle I grabbed the goblet and caught the

running blood inside of it. I could do nothing but laugh at the evil presence that seemed to fill the air around us and the utter blackness that enveloped us in its dreadful arms.

Raising the blood filled cup to my lips, I could taste the panic and horror swarming in the fluid. Swallowing it slowly, I could feel the very force of her life connecting with mine. I offered the goblet to Jason, which he took and pretended to drink from. He stood up, long faced and nauseated, and began to walk away.

"You failed me Jason," I taunted after him, standing up to confront him. He didn't seem to care, but continued to walk away, back turned from me. "You're weak. This is our birthright. The Prince has blessed us with his mighty powers, and you dare turn your back on him? If you do, what just happened to this girl is only the beginning of your torture."

He turned around, although quite a distance from me. Opening my mouth to utter my final threats towards him, I saw a movement from the corner of my eye. I spun around to find the young girl's mouth wide open, gasping for air. As quickly as I could, I leaped on top of her and pulled the knife from her chest. Looking at the wound, I could easily tell that it had missed her heart completely.

"HAIL SATAN!" I yelled as my hand slashed the blade across her neck, and in the same movement buried it into her breast. She jerked again, but this time in a final, vain struggle for life. A watery gurgle escaped her throat and her eyes went dark as if the light of her life had instantly been extinguished. Blade still in my hand I bolted from the cadaver, my legs carrying me faster than I had ever gone before towards Jason.

"You fucking incompetent asshole. You can't even do this one thing right!" Trying to escape me, he turned to run. After a couple steps away from me, my hand reached out and pushed him onto the grass. I could hear his jaw crack against the hard ground, followed by a holler of pure anguish.

I fell on top of him and furiously drove the knife in his side, giving way to louder screams. Pulling it out, I spun him around to look into his eyes. Those eyes that used to seem so sure that now were empty of all explanation.

"We were supposed to be Gods, Jason," I wailed. "Both of us, together. The Prince gave us this gift, and you turn your back on me? You turned your back on Him, Jason. You don't turn your back on the Devil! Especially when you're going to spend the rest of eternity in his house!" I raised the knife in the air and looked one last time into those eyes. Just as the girl's had, his pupils dilated as the point of the blade ripped through his skin - then became void as his life drained onto the ground.

I collapsed on top of Jason, my friend, and ran my fingers through his hair. My hands touched his dead face, and I knew that indeed he was not stone, but skin just like me. He no longer breathed, his chest not moving up and down as it used to. His silver eyes didn't gaze at me in assurance anymore, but stared into the oblivion of space, peering into the horrible realm of death.

After regaining my sinister sense of purpose, I burnt both bodies and buried the ashes right there in the graveyard. Few people even knew of the place, and what would two more skeletons matter to anyone.

To this day, in every empty moment, I recall how the moon's light had caught in those silvery eyes and how his voice was always so steady and sure. I had taken the

leather coat that he had worn as an item that would always connect us. Even in death, he must share the sin that plagues my soul.

I, too, remember the beauty of that angelic victim. I remember how she shrieked when the knife was thrust into her chest, and how her skin clung to the blade like a child to its mother's hand. The taste of her blood has never left my lips, and the softness of her skin I have never been able to scrub from my hand. I remember it all, and it kills me more every day.

Time, now, has become nothing more than a measurement of days from that moment... that night that I was brought into a living death. I hear the Devil's voice inside the thunder, and I see his awful face inside the flame, but none of his evils could ever match the demon I became on that cold, late October night.

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The black liquid steamed inside the porcelain mug, the scent of the roasted coffee beans seeming to drift in serpentine spirals for miles, penetrating entire city blocks with its irremovable odor. The metal spoon turned in my trembling hands, grinding like a pestle against the sugar that had sunk to the bottom of my mortar cup.

So many years I've been dead.

The newspapers and hometown gossips would lament over the poor Jacobsen girl and her mysterious boyfriend, found dead and buried in a derelict cemetery.

They weren't found dead. Their shells were found... the husks that held them for the short time that I allowed them to remain in warm bodies.

They never found the only one that had died that night. They never found me.

Although trapped somewhere between Satan's inferno and the even worse hell that is mistakenly called life, their specters still shimmer with a light that will never again be seen in the rotting carcass and forsaken soul that stared into that cup of black coffee.

My hands trembled, as pale as the snow that blanketed the city, yet as unsteady as a leaf straining against a tornado. My soul is one that was damned those many years ago. It would have been better to sell it to that archfiend. Even He would care for it more than I. And what fear have the damned of damnation, when their torment is already eternal, their flames already unquenchable?

And so I sin. Every minute I sin. Some sins are more damning than others, but every act is mutated into another step into Hades, and Virgil had abandoned me from the start.

The air pressure shifted. My ears became stopped, as if cones of beeswax had been instantly poured into them. I forced a yawn, but the pressure was not relieved. It can only be my dead friend come to see me once again. Eternally locked in our damnation, neither of us will let the other rest. Was not the evil completed? Will not the Gods turn us over to our own misery? Yet, every night the abyss widens to host the souls I throw inside.

The specter stood before me, in the kitchen that crawled with a million forms of bacteria and insect, translucent, yet still as beautiful as he had always been. He stood tall and straight, his long blond hair still flowing down onto his shoulders. Those silver eyes still gazed through me, rather than at me. Yet that stare no longer froze me. Quite the opposite, it enraged me.

His lips were silent as they had always been. He didn't need to speak. The sight of him was message enough.

The leather coat that had once clothed Jason then hung from my body, occasionally brushing the snow at me feet as I walked. He had always been a few inches taller than me. The bottom of the duster was shredded in a few places, worn in others. But I would never replace it. It had become my uniform.

On the steps I first saw her, a warm glow bouncing off of the immortal skin that no other human could see. She stood outside the door, and as my eyes met hers I cringed.

Pain still soaked those brown eyes like the fresh blood that remained on her nightgown after so many years.

She turned and entered the apartment building. As always, I followed.

Outside a door she stood, three flights up and five doors on the right. Then she vanished. She had marked the next sacrifice, the next victim of our nightmarish ménage tois. Forever, I am the demon, and forever she is my victim.

No rest for the wicked, no sleep for their prey.

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Mickey sat across the beat up wooden desk whose drawers were impossible to pry open and even more difficult to jam shut. His fat fingers punched the keyboard at an incomprehensible speed. The monitor flicked with blue light as each letter was evoked onto the screen.

Finally, he triumphantly slammed an index finger on the "Return" button, the monitor now taking on a green hue. I sat patiently, awaiting the information the machine had to offer me.

This was an age when the stalkers and the rapists - the Damned - were no longer possessed of the necessity to rummage through garbage cans to glimpse personal information from the debris of envelopes, banana peels, and used tampons. The Internet would conjure a fair amount of personal information, collecting and compiling from the DMV, state police records, university transcripts and perhaps a hundred other sources. The more intimate details of the prospect's life were gathered personally by what was known on the streets as Mickey's Boys.

A nine-millimeter handgun sat next to the keyboard. Mickey had never taken a life before, although he may claim differently. It is something that is spoken by the eyes, rather than the mouth. Mickey's eyes were baby blue, and as innocent as that very same baby. He had never fired the pistol at anything more than cardboard silhouettes. It was more a sign of his diplomatic reasoning than a weapon.

He was a connection, a fence. If a person wanted the best glass, they asked for Mickey's Boys. Any caliber and size of gun could be found within a half an hour by Mickey's Boys. If someone was needed to fire that gun, Mickey's Boys were more than happy to pull the trigger.

Information, however, was Mickey's personal department. The glow in those baby blue eyes made the innocent, childlike impression all the more vivid when he would print off page after page of stolen privacy and pirated information.

He reached across the table with a stack of papers in hand, still warm from the laser printer. A faint smile glossed his lips and his eager eyes awaited my approval. My hands, tremulous as they seemed to chronically be, fanned through the stack. I forced a smile and slowly rose, moving from my seat to the door in a single unbroken movement.

Mickey knew I'd have his payment delivered once the work was finished. He knew better than to question that. In fact, it seemed sometimes, during these frequent business meetings, that he knew better than to interrupt the silence that I clung to as my sole savior.

The bite in the air stung like a million misplaced acupuncture needles. The snow made a beautifully crisp crunch under my weight. I never could get away from the cold weather once I left my hometown in Virginia. I had once moved to Mississippi, hoping that the warmth and humidity would somehow stifle the spirits that haunted me. Had I only been able to divine the truth, that these phantoms would stalk me throughout time everlasting, I would have played my hand much more violently than I had.

How could I let myself believe for one moment that I could find some sort of redemption? The sacred atonement and crucifixion of the Messiah saves all souls... all souls but mine.

Gloved fingers thumbed through the printed pages, my eyes scanning, searching for something that could be used to gain entrance into her mind. Apparently, Mickey's Boys had watched her before.

Jessica Kyler.

Twenty-two years old. No children. All family ties severed after an abortion at the ripe age of 17. The lack of used condoms or birth control prescriptions suggested sexual inactivity, as well as never being seen entering or leaving her apartment with a man.

Jessica worked as a Certified Nursing Assistant at a retirement home, Pleasant Springs. She left her apartment at 7:30 each weeknight and stopped only at the convenience store two blocks from her home for coffee - two packages of creamer and two of sugar. She arrived at work at exactly 8:00 p.m. and clocked out at 6:00 a.m. She had taken out two sick days that year for a mild flu.

Saturday nights were usually spent first at Josephine's Diner, drinking cup after cup of coffee, with a side order of cheese sticks. She would flirt and tease any man that she could while there, but would never leave with any of them.

Once she had attained a good caffeine buzz, Jessica would walk from Josephine's to one of the city's smaller parks. Sometimes she would play in the jungle gym, at other times sit on the swings and think. An attempt to revert to the more simple times of childhood, no doubt.

The next stop was at the video store. She would usually rent between two to five videos selected from the classic horror or science fiction sections. The rest of the weekend was spent at home, with occasional trips to the convenience store.

Miss Kyler was a woman of ritual. In this respect, we could vaguely relate. In all others, I found her absolutely boring. I could never understand how people could live the "normal" life. Perhaps I longed for that life, and in rejection of that longing I had grown to detest it.

My eyes finally parted with the stack of papers in my hand, and I found myself standing in my kitchen. I hadn't remembered walking to my apartment, up the flight of stairs and through my door. This world seemed so false to me that I ignored it for the most part anyway. I was only concerned with my Work... with my descent. I laid the papers on the countertop and collapsed on the couch only a few feet away.

Mickey had done his job perfectly, as always. He made it inexcusably convenient to carry out any orchestrated attack. I was always enthralled by the few remaining perverts that would do all of the work themselves. They fed off of the individual smells and textures of their victim's garbage. They rifled through underwear drawers, pretending to be looking for some valuable clues while secretly and inwardly being thrilled by the experience itself.

This, I had done in Mississippi, and it was an experience I had sworn to never repeat. I hadn't the time for pleasure in this wilderness of pain. I was simply going through the motions of damnation.

Quite often the amusing thought had come to mind of placing a timeclock with punch cards beside my door. I was doing a job for which I was paid in darkness. And who was my employer but that sweet little Jenny Jacobsen and her silent partner, Jason, murdered in that old cemetery.

The sacrifice had been seen by only three pairs of eyes. The two gargoyles had witnessed my birth into death, yet they refused to speak of the scene although I had begged them day and night for weeks after. And my eyes, oh god my eyes, were forever stained by that original sin, yet they refused to be plucked out. And so my whole being shall perish, and shall be cast into hell.

The damned do live, imprisoned in their tired and scarred skin. The damned live, not for fear of what lies after death (for our hell is eternal, and eternity is always in the present), but for the comfort of those flames that devour every last shred of humanity, and for the power gained grace by grace from the One in whom grace is never found.

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Black candle wax pooled on the floor as the flames licked at it like a viper testing its prey. Nine black candles, one placed at each of the nine black gates. And I sat in the center of the circle, spellbound by the shadows and the flame. I crossed my legs beneath me and my hands seemed to move together of their own accord. Were it not for the darkness culminating in the room like a fast approaching orgasm, one could mistake my posture for that of prayer.

The spirits present would deter any such miscalculation, however.

My eyes jerked upwards, my head following the motion, until I found myself staring at the acoustic textured ceiling. And my gaze drifted, through the ceiling, through the night, through the thousand layers of reality and into the purest ether of the universe's soul.

I could see Her, and my breath caught in my throat like a scream that was silenced just before release. I could see Her, riding like a demonesess upon the winds. A shadowy mass, unembodied, sweeping towards me like the blackest tide. The incarnation of midnight. She neared me, and that scream rose into the back of my mouth, waiting only for my tongue to set it free.

The shadows took form in the night, upon that ethereal canvas. My three eyes stared in rapt adoration as She descended before me, just outside of my ring of dripping black candles. The air pressure once again changed, more violently than any other being could provoke. A sound was heard in the distance, and were it heard by any other person it could be mistaken for electricity moving through wires and transformers, or for a swarm of bees assembling. But I had heard it before. The rapid generation of electromagnetic energy, stabbing its way from the eternal realms to the world of matter.

Each particle and atom of air compressed, transfigured, and collected before me. She was building Her body, choosing to manifest fully on this plane. My dear Jessica will feel so honored once she learns that the Mistress of the Night Herself descended to earth to oversee the initiation of the capture.

The air began popping, the elements of it seeming to snap under the strain of Her manifestation. The spirit I beheld in my mind began solidifying like a thickening mist in some long forgotten forest. The cackling in the air grew louder, to the point that my eyes squeezed shut as if the pressure in the room might pull them from their sockets. The popping quickened until one could not be distinguished from another - one loveless din rushing into this world from an unseen portal.

Then silence.

I opened my eyes, and She stood before me, as spectral as my two invisible cohorts, yet as fully seated on this plane as a giant redwood. My gaze first caught her deep violet eyes, penetrating into the brackish depths of my soul. Then her lips, a pale rose, parting with a smile at the sight of such a disciple. In that parting, I glimpsed the fangs of a serpent, brilliant white save for the stains of the blood of a million saints. That whiteness was wordlessly contrasted by the sheer blackness of her skin. She was not African, nor was the blackness merely a darker pigment of skin. The hue was of pitch, her tar pit heart having bled throughout her entire being.

My jaw slacked as if suddenly shattered. My heart stopped beating. My lungs quit, and my throat could speak but one nightmarish word.

"Baphomet."

Sunlight pierced through my closed eyelids, and no amount of squinting and squeezing them tighter would shut it out. I let them drift open, to find myself curled like a dying spider on my linoleum floor. Where the candles once stood in full majesty there then were puddles of black wax. A pungent scent seemed to rise from the floor itself. Lakes of blood, the salty smell of tears and sweat, stirred together in the invisible cauldron by the sweet smell of sunshine.

I pushed myself to my knees and staggered to my feet. My head jerked around the room, eyes scanning every corner as if in search of some villain hidden therein.

Nothing.

The stack of papers still sat on the counter, keeping safe all of Jessica's secrets.

She seemed so alone in the world. I, too, was alone. I have been every since Jason left me. Even with his visits that have not ceased through the span of eternity, I am alone. But what tragedy had isolated this young girl? What darkness did she hide from the world? Or was it she who hid from the darkness *of* the world?

The television came to life when I pushed the red button on the panel. Morning news. An anchorwoman faced the camera, microphone in hand. Behind her was scorching desert littered with dark skinned people running about like ants, holding automatic weapons and children.

The contrast entertained me. I sat on the couch, papers in hand. The channel never changed. I never could beat to watch 30-minute sections of the dramatized lives of fictitious people, or even the so-called reality game shows. The current world events didn't thrill me, but only served as a reminder of the hell in which we all live.

Jessica Kyler. Why did that name sound so familiar?

Clipped to the back of the paper stack was a photograph taken at the Driver's License Division less than a year ago. She was a plain girl. Pretty, but plain. And it wasn't in the least bit familiar. Just the name. Jessica Kyler.

Before the mystery had the opportunity to gnaw at my mind, the colors on the screen changed. I looked up to see a city map with specific locations marked by red dots. I leaned forward and turned the volume up.

"... Three violent rapes followed by the painful and brutal deaths of young girls. Authorities have stated that there is no apparent connection between these three victims. No connection, of course, except for the ritualized manner in which they were killed. The families of the victims have banded together in an effort to bring the killer to justice."

The voice of the female narrator deepened with the last sentence, as if the attempt would not be in vain, but in fact would bring the wrath of God upon the attacker via the Wisconsin State police.

The most regretful part of ever getting caught would be the fact that the intelligence of the human herd is far beneath par. They would never associate any of the Wisconsin murders with those committed in Michigan, even more in California, one in Mississippi and the original two in Virginia. At most, I would be convicted of the few here in Wisconsin. They would never know the purpose of the culling. They would never realize that they were witnessing the world's final unholy baptism of blood.

Even if they did find all of the bodies and connect them to me, which they never did, not even God could utter the truth of what atrocities had been inflicted upon their souls.

* * * * *

The park grass was still covered from the constant downfall of snow Wisconsin seemed to be cursed with. The surrounding Great Lakes always brought in more moisture than was necessary to keep the forests from dying. I had always loved the wetness though, so I allowed the clouds to weep.

A figure sauntered down the street, its features hidden in the darkness of the night. Passing under a streetlight, I could see that it was her, my Jessica.

She chose the swings that night. She sat, hunched over like the outcast kid on the playground, and pushed herself gently back and forth with her feet.

For the first time that night, I wondered how the victims were chosen. My spirit conspirators had remained silent through the years, the last sounds from both of them being screams of agony... then silence that would last forever. I made attempts now and again to stir up conversation, and even found myself yelling at them, trying to provoke them into breaking their icy muteness. Yet they refused to speak to me.

I often wondered if they would talk amongst themselves, perhaps plotting out further ways in which I might be brought deeper into misery. At times I could swear that I've heard their hushed voices whispering secrets indiscernible to my ears.

There must be some connection between the girls, I had thought. There must be some order to it all. Jason was far too meticulous to do anything at random. Even Jenny was specifically chosen as our first sacrifice. Her great grandfather had a large hand in

the witch trials and executions of the early American settlements on the east coast. Jason used to tell me that the burning times had not come to an end, but that it was simply our turn to roll the dice.

Had each of my victim's ancestors had a similar influence in those days? There were far too many for that theory to be feasible. What, then, was the connection? And why, after over 20 victims, did the name of Jessica Kyler invoke a sense of remembrance?

An aura of exhaustion appeared around her that night; a disconnection from the world and its events. She rose from the swing and shuffled through the sand, returning to her car at the Diner. In what seemed to be a habit learned as a young man in those formative years as Jason's only friend and student, I followed.

I had parked a temporary car a quarter block from the diner. I didn't need to follow her home and tempt the suspicious nature that most people possess. One thing that my history of sin has taught me is that people aren't quite as oblivious as the average assailant assumes. I knew where she was headed, and I had probably visited the neighborhood more times that day than she had.

Her blue Honda Civic pulled into the apartment parking lot. The engine died as she removed the key and stepped from the car. I sat on the curb across the street, cigarette between my fingers and eyes towards the stars.

She didn't notice me. Had she looked, I would have known. I would have felt it. My presence was concealed from her.

Jessica entered the building, taking the elevator three flights up and opening the fifth door to the right.

Five minutes later I traced her steps, feeling like the starved wolf that follows the rabbit's faint scent through the fields. It had been four months since the last capture. Jason and Jenny knew as well as I did that attacking too often is sloppy, and the Work would cease.

As she had the night before, Jenny stood outside of the apartment door. Her face was white and her lips were parted. Phantom tears streamed from her eyes. She was screaming, although no sounds issued from her mouth. She wore the same expression

that had been her mask when the dagger separated the veins in her throat and then slammed into her once pounding heart. The same expression I had seen just before her eyes went blank. A shiver came over me, yet didn't seem to pass but lingered deep inside.

The ghost continued screaming and flailing just as she had years ago. I stood inches from her, and still heard no sound.

Mickey's Boys were kind enough to let me borrow her apartment key. I shoved it in the lock forcefully, the penetration seeming ominous at the time. The door pushed open quietly.

The apartment was dark except for the faint glow of the television set. That multicolored radiance cast its glow on her face, which quickly moved to an expression of absolute confusion. I could almost hear her thoughts spinning, the questions weaving an unexplainable web.

How did he get in here? Did I forget to lock the door? No, I'm sure I did. Who is he? What does he want? Why is he here? How the hell did he get in here in the first place?

These and countless other thoughts raced in the space of a second. The second before I reached into the same coat pocket as I had seen Jason reach into, pulled out a rag reeking of the same chloroform, and flew towards the couch upon which she was sprawled.

I held the rag over her mouth and nose.

Breath the vapors! Breath them! Suck them into your lungs. Just inhale the damn fumes and you won't get hurt right away!

Her legs thrashed and her arms waved to her sides in a desperate attempt to gain some sort of leverage. I moved myself between her whipping legs and rested my weight fully on her. She thrust her hips, as most women do as a last effort towards freedom, trying to but me off of her. Her legs wrapped around me as if that would be leverage enough, yet all it did was arouse me.

The thrashing became weaker, then stopped. A few more tired hip thrusts, a few spasmodic jerks of her arm, and she finally lay still.

I stood, taking the rag from her face. Her eyelids were still. Had she been pretending, as some occasionally do, her eyes would have moved. But in the unconscious state produced by chloroform, they hang like dead men from their cords.

My hand went to the inside coat pocket and retrieved a small .38 automatic pistol. The practicality of the weapon was amazing, as it was an Israeli Military issue. From the same pocket I found a silencer, courtesy of none other than Mickey's Boys. I took a few deep breaths to regain control of my lungs, and twisted the silencer onto the barrel of the pistol.

Moving around the room, I tried to make myself comfortable. Comfortable with what I had just done. Comfortable with what I was about to do. Comfortable with who I became each and every night.

I glanced at the pictures on the walls. It didn't seem that she had any of her parents. No family portraits. No reunion photographs. The only frame that held anything more than cartoon dogs and playing kittens was one that highlighted Jessica with two friends.

Something about that picture grabbed me, shook me, and pulled me closer. Inches from the glass, I was slapped with the realization that the girl to Jessica's right was an exact replica of Jenny! The only difference I could see was the age. This girl had the perfect appearance Jenny would have possessed had I not stolen her life away so soon.

My knees suddenly became weak.

This isn't real. Jenny is dead. I slashed her, stabbed her, burned her and buried her with my own hands. And nearly every day I am visited by her shadow.

I tried to shake the thought off. My eyes were playing tricks. Or, perhaps, she was playing tricks on my eyes.

But the feeling never did leave me.

Never.

The car rumbled to a stop on the dirt road. The area was veiled by trees for miles, expelling a wonderful pine odor. Stepping onto the snow-covered dirt veined with tree roots, I sighed. Such a perfect night.

Jessica was still slumped over in the passenger seat, cuffs binder her wrists together. I could hear her breath deepening, becoming more exaggerated. Her mind was beginning to fight the effects of the chloroform. After slinging a filled backpack on my shoulder, my arms gathered her up like a mannequin.

For a moment – just a moment – I imagined her to be my bride, asleep in my arms. Rather than carrying her down the snowy path to an even colder eternity, I imagined a silk covered bed awaiting the consummation of our union.

Gently onto the frozen ground I laid her, and followed her down, resting myself beside my unconscious prey. I slipped a key into the cuffs, gently, oh so gently and so quietly releasing the lock. Her wrists showed no signs of the metal restraints, so great was the care I had taken in tightening them. For reasons unknown to me then, this one seemed more pure than all the others had been. All except, of course, the body that once held the soul which has every since haunted both my sleep and my waking.

From that old and faded leather coat, I pulled a glass vial. Though the seasons have changed more times than I can recall, the methods of the capture remained the same. It was a ritual with little room for improvisation. Only one detail had been altered. The chains were removed before the awakening. This was more for her than for myself, I would lie to mind. She needed to feel, even unto the last breath she took, that there was some hope.

The chains hadn't earned the right to steal that hope.

I had.

Jessica coughed and spat and gasped for breath once the vial was broken under her nose. I knelt beside her and reveled as fear and further confusion flashed over her entire being. It began in her eyes, as all things do.

They widened, the pupils dilating, then squinting as if a closer look at her captor would answer all of her questions. Then her lips, tightening to withhold a scream or perhaps a sob. The final sign was the momentary paralysis that petrified her body.

Then came the terror.

Her body jerked, her hands slapped the ground as she struggled to push herself away from me, dragging her limp body with them. I couldn't help but smile, but laugh, just a little, for the angle worming on the ground.

With a motion perhaps too quick to be comprehended, or perhaps the situation as a whole was far too overwhelming, I was again on top of her. My left hand had pinned both wrists to the ground.

My right hand reached for a knife.

A black handled knife.

The same knife that had been used throughout the years in honor of sweet Jenny. The same knife that had opened wide her throat and had pierced her heart.

The blade, freshly sharpened, cut easily through Jessica's blouse. She wore no bra, and her breasts toppled into the night. The stars seem to envy me as they looked on. The two spirits that were always watching were filled with a different emotion altogether, I am sure.

Animal sounds came from the young woman's throat, beggings and whimperings, all made without words. I looked into her eyes. I found myself lost inside of them. Utterly lost to the terror and the quick approaching pain that they knew all too well.

My hands laid my pistol by her head, on the frozen earth. I waited for her noises to cease, as they always did at that point.

"My dear," I whispered. "I do love you. I love you because you free me from salvation. You free me from any chance of it. And you will love me, because I am going to return your gift. I will free you from the chains of beauty. I will release you from the bonds of the flesh. I will give you the gift of everlasting pain!"

And the screaming resumed, much more frantic this time, much more uncontrolled. She knew that I could not be stopped or bargained with. Her screams were not intended for my ears or for those of anyone that might help.

She didn't know why she screamed now. All she knew is that she *must* scream. Primal.

My hand rose in the air and came down on her face with an open fist. This was all procedure by this point. The sting of the slap in combination with the cold of the night and the dread in her heart shook her being and silenced her lips.

She now could do nothing but stare.

"Now, my dear Jessica," I continued my address. Her eyes widened and her whole body shook at the force of the realization that she was not randomly chosen. That she was my prey, and only now had I pounced.

"This is going to hurt you immensely. It is going to hurt you more than you can now imagine. But it will be short, and it will be nothing in comparison to the pain that lies in store once I've finished. Now, you can close your eyes and you can say your prayers, but nothing can say you... that I guarantee."

One hand still binding her arms, I moved the other to her jeans. The buttons came down effortlessly. The pants were peeled away like dead skin, leaving my angel completely bare.

More tears flowed down her face, steaming on the cold ground upon which they fell. And my hand continued, my fingers violating body, mind and soul.

That wicked hand snatched up the knife that had for so many years been my only friend and fiend. That blade, that evil blade filled with so much blackness now ran across her chest, so naked and cold. The skin parted way for its touch, and the blood flowed out.

Screams and tears were insufficient. Silence became the only Messiah that would comfort her now.

Another cut on her smooth stomach, and more blood. Another on her thigh and more blood. I penetrated her body, and more blood.

The sharp blade continued slicing, cutting, perfecting the art beneath me as I writhed inside of her warmth. Blood became the sheet that separated us... the veil between paradise and inferno. Her muteness was as loud as any screams could be, I recall, and my panting seemed a melodious dirge.

“Baphomet, I yelled, jerking my head upwards as the final moments inside this angel neared. “You have chosen this sacrifice, and I have delivered. I have proven my power and have exalted my Throne above the stars of God, to be seated beside you. Come now and take her to the Towers of Night and Flame. Take her to the Land of Perdition, and grant unto her all of our grotesque delights. Open wide the Gates of the Abyss as I thrust this pure soul inside!”

The blade then made its final incision, sweeping down from the sky to kiss her neck, and then flew through her naked breast to nest inside of her beating heart. She gasped, and I looked into her eyes.

Once again, the blackness, and the dilation of pupils. The light of life flashing as it had never flashed before, struggling in vain to fight back the spell I had cast upon her with the blade.

The light began to die. Slow it died. And finally, it was gone.

My hand still on the handle of the dagger, I could feel her soul rushing from the wounds into the Gates that had been opened, into the waiting arms of my Black Goddess. I collapsed on my love, and my lips went to her throat, the insides of it clearly in view. My tongue slithered along the severed skin and the bleeding tubes that had once carried air and gathered the dying embers of her soul that had remained in her blood.

When my eyes opened, seeming to be hours later, I found myself encircled by young girls. By dead girls. By girls who knew first hand the evil that I had awakened that night.

And with them stood Jenny, weeping.

Beside her was Jason, smiling.

The photograph trembled lightly in my hand while my eyes studied the faces with minute acuity. I had taken it from Jessica's apartment after her remains were cared for.

She barely screamed, I remember now. Not as much and not nearly as loud as the others, as if she knew some great secret that her screaming might betray.

And that face in the picture, beside her, so familiar, haunting me just like that defiled specter. I would have Mickey check up on it, right after the flight.

I laid myself on the gray plush carpet in my living room, resting on my side, a good part of my weight on my shoulder.

The brass pipe awaited. And the sticky red demoness sat in her jar. I pulled a rock from the glass container and dropped it into the pipe. The torch flared, and the rock began to jump. The demoness laughed and hissed as I breathed her in.

My body disappeared. All that remained was my head, which began fading too, until all that was left of me was my mouth on the pipe like an infant's lips on his mother's breast.

The walls burned and the floor fell, and I was in the abyss. I opened my Center Eye to behold Jessica being romanced by the Devil and caressed with His unquenchable flames. Worms with teeth bit into her ethereal body and dug their way into her immaterial skin. I could see them feasting on the heart that I had pierced, and she began coughing them up, the worms spilling from her throat.

What is that sound? My Goddess nearing with unbearable pain beside Her. Her hand reached out to me. It became the sky, and it touched my head. The black sky touched my head, and from grace I fell in love with Her again.

Blackness was her name, and blackness I had become inside her womb. Blackness filled my sight, shrouded my every thought.

* * * * *

Mickey's office door was guarded by a large Nordic with a military haircut. He carried two pistols and possibly one knife. These weren't visible. They didn't need to be. I could feel them, hear them whispering to me, revealing the Nordic's secrets. I left my dark sunglasses over my eyes as I stood waiting to be invited into the office. It was night, and the glasses served no purpose other than to conceal the black flames in my eyes that might steal a glance and evoke a question from Mickey or any of his boys.

The office sat in the back of a diner whose guests could vaguely be heard gabbing and clamoring. I listened more carefully, tuned my senses tighter, and could make out each conversation. Nothing of much interest; just human noise.

The Nordic regained my attention when his hand touched the shoulder of my coat. I turned my head to find his eyes moving back and forth across the reflection in my sunglasses, searching for my black pupils somewhere far beneath.

"You can go on in now."

His voice was never quite as deep or as clear as I had expected.

The doorknob to Mickey's office showed its use as I turned it and the screws threatened to slip right out of the threads.

Mickey sat in the same black vinyl chair as he sat when I was first introduced to him by Kristopher, the only friend I'd had that still remains in his body. At that time all I

was looking for was a reliable handgun. Hunting with a dagger didn't seem to give the same sense of security and seething power that an automatic weapon did, even if it was the black handled dagger. Even if it was the dagger that doubled as a key into the very brimstone gates of hell.

Mickey smiled. A false smile, but pleasant all the same. I took my usual seat on the opposite side of his desk and pulled the photograph from my pocket.

"Who is she?" I asked sharply, my tone almost giving insinuation that Mickey already knew. "What is her name, age, her favorite food. Everything."

I tossed the picture onto his desk and watched it settle next to his pistol.

"Oh, and most importantly," I added. "Why the fuck is she in *this* picture?"

Mickey glanced at the photo, then back at me.

"Well, her name is Jessica Kyler, and she was murdered last night, found this morning. Should I reprint the sheets on her, or is any of it coming back to you yet?"

I didn't appreciate his attempt at a joke. The longer this photograph was in my possession and in my head, the more it confused and even angered me. It began to take on the dreaded radiance of a cursed talisman.

I took the sunglasses off and folded them in my hand. My gaze left the floor until my eyes met Mickey's. Like Jason, I didn't need to speak.

"Jesus fucking Christ, it was a joke," he grumbled. "Forget that you's all business and seriousness. You should take up poker or interrogation or something."

My stare continued to grind into him, pressing against his forehead and drilling through his thoughts.

"Give me a minute and I'll pull up your girlfriend's, uh, girlfriend." Mickey's fingers, fingers that would normally appear so slow and clumsy, immediately began their tap dance across the keyboard stage.

"I'm guessin' that you're gonna want a whole history of how they know each other, what their relation was like, first kiss and everything, right?"

I gave a slight nod and put my glasses back on. Mickey seemed to release a sigh.

Once again, a final stroke came down on the print button. Mickey smiled.

Victory. He loved his work.

The printer began ejecting page after page with quick mechanical noises. I reached into my inside coat pocket and threw an envelope on the desk.

"You're a good man," Mickey said, smiling as he saw the money inside. "You're the only person that pays me *after* they've done what they're doin', you know. You've never once given me reason to think you couldn't come through neither. I tell ya, you're one strange motherfucker. One evil motherfucker if you ask me. Even Alex out there gets nervous when you come around. He says you just have this... feeling about you that gives him the chills. Like you just stepped out of hell or something.

"But aside from all that, I can't think of anyone I'd rather do business with."

A practiced grin revealed far too many silver capped teeth.

I stood, seeing the last page roll from the printer's tiny wheels and onto the plastic tray. I appreciated Mickey's attempt at a compliment, but had nothing to say in reply.

He handed the stack to me, placing the accursed photograph on top.

"Thanks," he called in his lazy yet jovial manner. "Make sure you come again you fucking antichrist."

Alex straightened his posture as I passed.

* * * * *

Papers covered my living room floor. None of it made any sense to me in that it was identical to the many other sheets Mickey had pulled for me. Her address, phone number, family; everything *except* her relationship with Jessica.

I flipped pages in my hands and found myself slamming them to the floor in disgust. Why did this bother me so badly? What significance could any of this have? And where is that page that connects the goddamned dots?

The anchorwoman was on the television again. This time her concern and feigned sorrow was directed towards a union strike of some sort. Nothing about Jessica Kyler's murder.

My eyes moved from the small TV set to the few remaining sheets of printed paper. A lease agreement for an apartment in Virginia was photocopied and sitting now in my hands. Two names were listed on the lease: Jessica Kyler and Katrina Angell.

This seemed to be the single connection Mickey could find between the two girls. Nothing of great importance was revealed. Katrina still lived in Virginia, attending the College of William and Mary. Miss Angell trotted through the farm like a good sheep. Nothing special.

Perhaps I had asked the wrong question, I wondered. Perhaps I should have had Mickey connect Katrina to Jenny. I'd have to make another visit.

Mickey's café was quiet that evening. A few older couples were seated around the restaurant, the only sound coming from them being a soft chewing on softer food.

I stared into the cup of creamy brown coffee as if it were my black backed mirror, shimmering with visions of celestial delights and infernal orgy.

Jason had taught me next to nothing in the short time we were friends, before his betrayal. It seemed now that he was afraid of giving me the secrets and the keys of his black sorcery. Kristopher had offered me much more while we worked together.

I had first met him in that same café. He walked through the door, followed by a legion of unseen servitors. The temperature must have dropped ten degrees in that moment, and the lights must have dimmed in respect, or in fear. My chest had felt as if it would implode, my every rib threatening to shatter.

And his eyes met mine. Azure eyes piercing through the shroud of long black hair and the cloud of midnight that enveloped him. I wanted to look away, my god I tried. But those eyes shrieked a nameless terror approaching on the wings of Satan himself. His eyes burned with the very same Hell that the mirror now shows me every day.

For two years after that moment I was his student. He had opened my vision and had multiplied my gifts tenfold. Sitting in that same café, so many years later, I knew that I was his equal. I knew that our thrones would share the same castle in our joint Perdition.

The desecrated visions faded from the surface of my coffee. My eyes moved upwards to find the seat face me filled, not with flesh but with spirit.

Jenny's lifeless eyes, still dilated and screaming, glared at me.

Her mouth opened as if to speak, but was just as quickly closed. She jerked her head to one side, then the other, her ghostly eyes searching for some unseen adversary. Desperate panic glossed her face as her stare returned to me.

Her lips parted again, not giving way to words or sounds, but swarms of flies escaping her reeking bowels through her mouth and even more through that larger opening in her throat; the opening that I had decorated her with as a young boy.

Each winged insect impressed me with a deep aura of malevolence. Little Jenny's eyes shrieked with a terror not seen since that light was extinguished in her.

The swarm clouded over my table, watching, waiting like a patient killer, as countless of their brethren hordes were vomited into the stale air. When the last fly had flown from the gash or from her mouth, the apparition vanished, face still paralyzed with confused horror as she was forced into the gaping abyss.

The looming cloud of insects remained above me, and for my soul their malign purpose could not be discerned.

Jason stood at the café entrance, seen only by my eyes. His mouth opened, and with an inhalation the entire swarm of flies were sucked into his vacuous depths. He looked at me and smiled. His hand slowly moved to his mouth, index finger pressing against his lips.

A simple message. Silence.

“What'd you do,” Mickey asked as soon as I entered the back office, his prevalent East Coast accent growing lazier every visit. “Don't tell me you already offed that Angell girl.”

I slowly nodded my head in the negative. The sheet of sweat must have accented the whiteness of my face.

“Are you in some serious shit, kid? Sure likes like it.”

My hands fumbled for the chair, and I pulled it closer. I felt that one more step then necessary might send me to the floor.

In all these years, my phantom friends had never before interacted so personally and as spontaneously as the event I had just witnessed. Usually it seemed like we were existing in two different realities that occasionally overlapped. Jason and Jenny would appear to mark a victim, and to witness the offering. Never anything else. Never anything like this.

What was Jenny trying to tell me, and why was Jason so adamant in stopping her?

“I need two favors,” I finally managed to sputter, the words themselves taking autonomous reign over my mouth. “I'll pay you up front on this one.” In reality, the events and sensations experienced in the past few days had left me not only questioning the remaining threads of sanity, but also the few remaining sands quickly passing through the hourglass. Leaving this life didn't bother me, so long as I was even with those that had gone out of their way to help me.

“First, I need you to make a connection between Jenny Jacobsen and Katrina Angell. They're both from Virginia, and they look identical.

Before I had finished my sentence, Mickey had conjured information on Jenny onto his screen.

“This one may be a bit tougher,” he apologized, sensing the seriousness and urgency about me. “Specially since she’s been dead for sixteen years. It may take a few days, but I’ll get it for you.”

“I know you will, Mickey.” I tried to force a friendly smile that more probably seemed more like a grimace. “The second favor I have to ask is for you to find Kristopher. I think I’ll be needing his help with this new project.”

Mickey’s hands left the keyboard, an occurrence that was seldom. He sat back in his chair and closed his eyes, releasing a sigh.

“Now that is next to impossible. Kristopher is harder to find than Amelia Airheart. You know that the FBI, CIA, Interpol, and factions of the UN have been trying to get their hands on him for about a decade?”

I nodded my head again, as if to say “And your point is...”

“Last I heard, he bombed or burned a church in Sweden to the ground... with over a hundred praying people inside.”

“Mickey,” I said flatly. “Can you find him? I’ll do what I can on my end, so it shouldn’t be too difficult.”

He gave a false laugh at my statement. “Sure, I’ll put word out and you can call your winged demons.”

I stood up, relieved, somehow knowing beyond logic that soon mentor and apprentice would be reunited. “Thanks Mickey.”

I threw an envelope on his desk.

* * * * *

A thousand blackened angels flew at my command into the night, to seize the body and mind of my good friend, Kristopher. Why I felt I needed him there, I wasn’t quite sure. Something that ran deeper than instinct begged for his presence; the very same intuition assured that he would come.

My cold body felt so dead in my living room, a million miles away. At once I was with Mickey, in his back room. In the same instant, I hovered above the trees, gazing down at the ground whereon sweet Jessica was wed to Eternity. I also found my vision cast down towards my body, not moving, the chest not even showing signs of inhalation.

My omnipresence singled and focused itself in one fiery blue point which burned deep in the forehead of my empty corpus.

My eyes jerked open, pupils contracted, body jolting with the initial thud of my heart. I gasped for breath, robbing the room of as much air as I could ransom.

And like a sweeping wind surging through the trees, I could hear rushing between my every molecule Kristopher’s voice answering my summons.

He was coming.

* * * * *

Although the Queen of Winter had left her thin sheet of snow and slush on the ground, spring was irrefutably fast approaching. The temperature had been rising from a steady 10 degrees to a pre-spring 40.

Early March that year didn't permeate the atmosphere with hope and rebirth. It chimed of something much more ominous.

The birds didn't seem to be singing that month. Perhaps they, too, felt the sinister currents high above the trees, yet trapped so conveniently beneath the clouds. Perhaps they knew what twists this drama might contain before such avenues had even been realized.

The wet, brown grass, still struggling for rebirth, crushed crisply beneath my feet. Like cancerous blotches on skin, patches of snow ate into the once green earth.

Just ahead I could feel that ground throbbing with cosmic electricity. Through the trees that encompassed the area, I could still feel it. The ground had swallowed her blood as quickly as it spilled from her.

But her screams remained, resound through the forest.

Even louder, her final silence lingered. It pulled me close and kissed me. It ran its nails down my back. And though I tried, I could not resist it. I let it fill me completely, possess my being.

The force of it shook my soul and buckled my knees. I found myself kneeling before her, my most recent enslaved angel. Her eyes glared up at me, no longer shackled with fear.

Her fetid body reeked of a pain that she could not gurgle from her open throat. My hand reached out to touch her bruised cheek, yet just as its coldness began reaching to frost my hand, she vanished.

* * * * *

Mickey had only found one genealogical connection between the girls, but even that was a stretch. They had no immediate relation aside from a great uncle. They had no known friendship or physical connection. According to Mickey's seemingly omniscient sources, Katrina Angell had never even met her identical stranger, the late Jenny Jacobsen.

The good new, however, greatly outweighed my confusion. Mickey tracked Kristopfer down in Amsterdam, living with a girlfriend that liked to tell friends about her sadistic lover and his homicidal exploits. My old mentor didn't seem overly annoyed with the phone call, and agreed to meet me in Virginia before the week was over. Mickey, of course, provided the passport and airline tickets.

I could hear my mind pacing back and forth across a dungeon's concrete floor. A million or more trivialities leapt from the depths of memory.

Formalities, although hoped for, would not be tolerated by Kristopfer. He would be here on business, that is all. I respected his coldness; at times envied it. At other times, however, I longed for a friend, a peer, rather than a co-worker.

Again, the brass pipe was cradled in my hands, as I was cradled in the arms of the Dragon. The green smoke filled the room.

The thin, white mist cleared the surface of the black mirror, revealing a scene only seen by my scrying eyes.

Katrina's feet fell sharply on a sidewalk one after the other, clad in vinyl boots laced halfway up her calf. Trees lined that sidewalk, busting with spring's blossoms.

My mouth went dry and my heart seemed to thud to a silent stop, looking at this replica of my original victim. It was as if Jenny's long incinerated corpse has clawed through the cemetery dirt, reclaimed her beautiful flesh in all its rosin and glow, and now walked through the wet streets of Virginia, a grown woman.

Something emanated from her, some force alien to me. It came from her eyes so softly, like the whitest summer cloud, yet it turned to steel as it touched my transparent skin.

A deviance from the others struck me almost as sharply as the invisible daggers beaming from her eyes. Katrina walked straight, feet counting a perfect cadence. She would offer a smile to most everyone she passed. And they would smile back. Not at all like the others.

A million ethereal particles collapsed and made the thought-speed migration to my apartment and into that indigo eye.

* * * * *

My eyes cast downward, I could almost make out the aural traces left by her boots on that same concrete sidewalk. I could almost feel her essential traces seeping into the hard rubber soles of my boots. In such, for a moment I could almost make out the strong heart beating alongside of mine.

The town of Charlottesville, Virginia, was far too familiar for comfort. My hometown of Culpepper laid only a 45-minute drive away. Jason and I would spend a good deal of our Saturdays in Charlottesville. To us, then, it was an immense metropolis.

Kristopher was meeting me there. He was to fly into D.C. and rent a car. I fished in my pockets and retrieved a pocket watch. It was a gift from my father just a year before his death.

A month or maybe two after Jason and Jenny were found in the cemetery, murdered, desecrated and burned, my parents' house caught fire, leaving only myself alive.

Little boys should not play with matches.

The early April air tasted like honey as it passed into my mouth. My mind was quiet, completely silent. At first it was peaceful, serene. As time wore on that day, however, the serenity began tasting sour. I tried to discern the origin of such passivity, tried to determine its source. With little time, I wanted nothing more than to annihilate it completely, to fill the space with chaos.

But chaos fled and left in its wake only the dreaded silence.

The grass in the park was wet, soaked to the soil by a week's worth of rain. It had almost felt like a marsh as the foam earth sloshed against my boots.

I stood looking down at it, at the ground that sponged up so much rain. My mind, it its clamorous silence, was transfixed upon this single phenomenon that was nature's daily routine.

There was a feeling in the night as of a million demons riding on the breeze, circling the area like scavenger birds.

I let the feeling overtake me, flood the whole of my awareness.

My back straightened. I felt my entire body surge with the silence that filled my head. I felt my blood stop flowing through my body, my lungs no longer pulling air into them. Every cell stood perfectly still.

Initially, I could feel Kristopfer entering the park. I could almost hear his unmistakable presence: the sound of a million children screaming in unison.

The foot steps trudged through the swampy park. The steps stopped, just feet away from me. My eyes still studied the moist ground.

I was surprised at myself. I was afraid that I would jump up and down or try to hug my old comrade when he arrived. But standing there in the park, listening to his breath in the cool night air, even feeling the slight waves of heat coming off of his skin, I felt nothing.

"We have to do this tonight," I finally said, not breaking my gaze with the ground, but shattering the silence with my voice all the same. Kristopfer was quiet, confused at the lack of any salutation.

"Yes, we do," he finally replied, his voice seeming to quiver just enough to be noticeable.

I turned to look at my friend. He was clad in black, as was usual for him. His dark, curled hair had grown midway down his back and he now wore a thick curled beard. His blue eyes contrasted against the rest of his figure covered in black.

"Let's go gather our prey," he said, regaining the coolness in his raspy voice.

* * * * *

Katrina's house glowed with incandescent light that flooded the shadowed neighborhood surrounding it. My dark friend and I looked on, hidden in the night from her vision.

Katrina was walking around her kitchen, unaware. She opened her fridge and prepared some sort of salad, obviously mistaking it for a meal.

As she walked a few feet away from the window, I could see that she was wearing nothing but a small white tee shirt and very small blue panties.

The rest of the black was black and quiet. A few lingering clouds filtered the moon's rays. Everything was a dark blue, as if the three of us were somewhere deep in the ocean's abyss.

I moved towards the back of the house and Kristopfer followed. For some implacable reason, he didn't seem as thunderingly sinister as I remembered him being. He exuded a malign power, yes. But then, creeping around the house, stalking our prey, he seemed altogether mortal. And breakable.

I tried the handle of the black door.

Locked.

My hand dove into my inside coat pocket, reaching for a pick set. Just as the leather wallet filled with picks and prongs was in my hand, Kristopfer's food smashing into the door just above the knob.

I gaped in astounded annoyance. Now, not only did she know we were here, but everyone else in the neighborhood did as well.

The door flew open, the brass latch splintering the jam. I cast a quick glare of reprimand at Kristopfer and entered the house.

Katrina was no longer in the kitchen.

Kristopfer followed behind as I marched down the hallway. I peered into a bathroom to the left as I passed. A blue shower curtain caught my eye, decorated with yellow ducks.

A few feet down the hall, another doorway anticipated our entrance. From the room that it guarded came a series of light whispers.

As I neared the doorway, the whispers stopped. A cordless phone beeped, obviously being turned off.

I slowed my pace and began to look around the doorway.

SMASH!

A baseball bat crashed into the door jam, apparently aimed at me.

Kristopfer jumped ahead of me and directly into the doorway.

The girl brought the bat to her shoulder and braced herself for another swing.

Kristopfer took a small step towards her, and immediately stepped back again. His feint was played well enough to cause Katrina to open the swing. Before she had time to realize the trap, the bat was already in motion.

He then stepped slightly to the right and grabbed the flying bat, using its momentum to rip it from Katrina's tiny hands.

She knew, deep in her churning stomach, that she was caught. But even deeper, perhaps in her willful soul, she refused to submit.

Katrina shot into a run, straight towards Kristopfer. Just before she would have slammed into his chest, she dodged to her right and nearly knocked him over, the full weight of her body pounding his shoulder.

Myself being smaller than Kristopfer, I can only guess that the dear little girl thought that she could knock me right over, trample me and scamper off. Her run didn't slow, didn't even hesitate as she attempted – bare foot and armored in panties and a tee shirt – to plow into me.

A fraction of a second before impact, I took a small step backwards as I grabbed both of her shoulders. Pulling her in full momentum, I spun around and tossed her to the floor.

I knelt above her, straddling her, trapping her with my legs. The expression on her face was one of complete and priceless astonishment.

My hands went to her throat and squeezed, not in the least bit gentle. That soul that refused to be captured sent Katrina into a manic fluster of full-body thrashes and spasms.

My grip tightened, my determination to squeeze the life out of this little bitch even stronger than her will to not allow this domination.

Her eyes bulged and her face grew red. She was gasping, both for air and for hope. Hope for some divine deliverance from me.

Those eyes that bulged were rolling, tilting upwards for one last look at the god that had betrayed her. Rolling even further, until there was only white in those sockets.

She began to swoon, to fall under my control. To fall beneath that black waterfall of sleep.

My hands started cramping, yet I couldn't release my hold had I wanted – or even needed – to. I could feel myself pulling her into me, stealing both her breath and her soul. We became one.

Her eyes closed, then jerked back open. She knew if she succumbed to that desire, there would be no hope remaining. Yet, struggling for that hope was futile, and finally her will gave way to mind.

Her eyes shut one final and regrettable time.

* * * * *

The unconscious body was slumped over my shoulder as I carried her into the woods. The strangulation had only deprived her of enough precious oxygen to put her in a pitch black sleep. Although I had wanted to keep my hands around her throat, feeding from her as if my hands were vampiric tentacles, I knew that the ritual needed to be performed.

Kristopher tromped behind me. His methods were effective, sometimes too much for his own good. But they seemed altogether too Neanderthal. Nevertheless, I was glad he was there. I could feel the power rising from the collective entity of this triad. I could hear the abyss churning, the realm of chaos shimmering and smiling. I knew that this night would be special.

I would never forget it.

The chains rattled a bit just before pulling tight. Katrina didn't seem to have the same confused expression as most did upon waking. She possessed a chilling air that seemed to say "I know who you are and what you're doing."

Even more icy was the hint of a concealed smile as if she were privy to some damning information that would forever hold me in thrall.

Kristopher had insisted we use restraints. I simply wanted to finish her, adding her immortalized self to my collection of tortured dolls.

She was already naked, her two skimp garments stripped away by my thoughtful accomplice. The ground that was her bed was soaked through, so very different than Wisconsin's permafrost soil.

I stood back a few feet, allowing Kristopher room for play. He drew from a sheath in his boot a small dagger, pressing this to her throat with no delay.

He leaned down, his untrimmed beard tickling her skin, and put his hot, swampy mouth to her nipple. Rather than arousing her with sucking and kissing, he bit hard onto her. She yelped like a kicked spaniel and began whimpering when she could retreat.

Kristopher laughed, and unbuttoned his pants. With about the same amount of preparation, he shoved himself inside of her.

Sobs became wails.

I wasn't particularly aroused, but I did want another taste of her soul. I knelt to her side as my friend thumped her body. I put my hand to her neck and caressed.

She didn't appear to notice me joining in until that hand closed on her. Instantly, the pain and unwelcome intrusion Kristopher assailed her with was not as immediate a concern as her inability to breath.

I inhaled and felt her in my hand, like a warm, blue light. Taking another breath, that stolen light traveled up my arm and dispersed through my entire being.

Looking down at her, I noticed she was trembling, shaking, rather than the heretofore convulsions leading to escape.

Kristopher grunted and pulled his length out of her, covered in blood and her lubrication. I moved away just as his semen spewed out over her body and on her face.

"Alright, enough fucking around already," I spat, disgusted by his act. "Let's do this!"

Buttoning himself up again, Kristopher knelt at the opposite side of the girl. He took a few deep breaths. I could already sense the change in his aura.

"Come friends, from the pits of Hell," he began the invocation with no further urging. "Rise up from your resting places in the bowels of the underworld and witness this bloodshed. Come Belial and Satan. Come Tchort and Damballa. Come those that have witnessed these blackest of rites, and empower us in our wicked deeds."

For a moment I was silent, not for lack of words, as they were already put to memory. I was silent for lack of thought, as the hordes of Hell swept towards us with an awful wind, leathern wings spanning miles, flapping chaotically on the night breeze.

"Baphomet," I finally cried out to my goddess of blood. "Take this defiled whore into your embrace. Teach her our ways. Show her our pain that is unending

"Azmodel, Azagthoth, Shiva, Pazuzu, Ngii, awaken from your Ancient Catatonia and return to the earth through this gateway, to ride on the winds and to walk the earth in the shapes of men."

The night seemed much darker, more stifling then before. And then I saw the source of the darkness. The Ancient Gods were there.

My left hand went to Katrina's forehead while my right held the dagger above her heart. I could feel her soul swimming in the fear and anxiety that drowned her.

"Do it," Kristopher urged. "Do it now!" The blade came down once, and her body jolted from the ground as if 2000 volts of electricity had passed through her. She gasped and gurgled and slobbered.

Looking up from her dying eyes, I saw two friends standing nearby.

Jason moved, inches off the ground, towards Kristopher, who noticed the event as well. Jason raised his hand, clutching the air in front of him, looking straight into Kristopher's eyes.

In an instant, he was gone. In that same instant Jenny, too, began moving, as if being drawn by a vacuum towards Katrina. Drawn *into* Katrina, into her body, pushing aside the dying soul to make room. I could see Jenny's face inside Katrina. Could see those haunting eyes looking out at me. It seemed to flash, then, dozens of faces. Girls faces. The faces of all of my victims. Our victims!

I broke my stare away from the victim, still gagging on pain, and looked at Kristopher for some answer. He looked at me, but not with his eyes. Not his blue eyes.

Kristopher looked at me with silver eyes.

“Finish it,” a familiar voice came from his lips. A voice not heard in years.

I looked deep into those silver eyes, and could only think one thing.

My hand released the dagger, letting it fall to Katrina’s bare skin with a slap. I reached inside my coat, feeling my back until hard, cold steel touched my fingers.

The handgun raised in the air as time slowed to a half-beat, the barrel nearing Kristopher’s head. The hammer came back with two clicks, and a pull on the trigger let it back down.

A piece of lead spun out of its shell and down the rifled barrel.

Kristopher’s head jerked back as the bullet dug through his forehead and blew the back of his skull off.

Those silver eyes faded.

* * * * *

I sat with Katrina at the hospital until the police arrived.

I knew that night that the evil cycle would be completed. I knew, looking into those dead, silver eyes, that our work was finished. As the past played out before my eyes, I made the only choice I felt I could.

But I still question exactly why I did it.

Perhaps it was to spite my long dead friend, there in the final moment that would otherwise be victory.

Perhaps it was my way of begging a god that I had made my enemy for a forgiveness I could never obtain.

Or perhaps this existence had grown far too comfortable. Perhaps there, staring into the yawning abyss, teetering over the edge of absolution, I finally realized that hell can feel like home.