

KITH

Part Three

***“HOW ODD IS MAN’S ABOMINABLE ATTEMPT TO CREATE ARTIFICIAL
LIFE; HAVE WE LEARNED NOTHING FROM OUR OWN REBELLION
AGAINST HE WHO CREATED US?”***

CHAPTER ONE

JULY 2010

The Farcus Café was just one business within a strip mall of many. Years ago the old gas pumps had been dug up and covered, making room for a hair stylist, dollar store, bookshop and grocer. It still resided on an exit from Highway 1 but was now in the town's outskirts and not outside the town. It had turned from a desolate gas station to a bustling meeting place for truckers when old Farcus had passed on and his tycoon son had taken over. It was a business run on profit and no longer on guilt.

One hour 'til close, Melanie thought as she looked up at the clock above the doorway. The café was the last business to close, and was usually bustling right until Midnight. But tonight things had calmed shortly after seven, which suited her just fine. It had given her a chance to mop, dust and merchandise for the morning.

Sunday nights were never the busiest, nor the most interesting. Even the radio station had taken to replaying hits from the 90s, such as Amanda Marshall's "Let It Rain" which was on now. Guitar and vocals, not much talent needed there. Certainly not as much as the current style of computer generated songs. Anyone could train their voice, but few could master the complexities of an electronic language.

Lost in the solitude of her own thoughtful meandering, hypnotised by the repetitive task of cleaning the counter, it was no wonder she jumped when the door-chime sounded.

Melanie smiled, looked up to see a young man, and glanced at the clock. Twenty minutes to close. Please don't stay long, she hoped. This gentleman looked freaky, Adam's Family freaky, dressed in a morbid trench coat and wide collared shirt. He had his hands tucked deep into his pockets and his head tilted so that his long, Midnight hair fell over his face. In his icy blue gaze was the melancholy of a broken heart and in his walk a deliberateness that displayed purpose. He strolled to the stool in front of where she cleaned, met her gaze, smiled and sat. Melanie smiled back.

"Hi," Melanie said and waited for him to answer. When he didn't she asked, "Can I get you a coffee?"

"No." He stared at her as though trying to transfix her with his gaze. "Have we met?"

"I don't think so," Melanie said and looked at the security camera.

The stranger stared long past that moment and did not look away until after Melanie asked, "Do you need directions? Or medication of some sort?"

"I'm sorry." He put out his hand in a gesture that said, "Allow me to explain." His gaze wandered toward the window, at where his reflection would have been had it not been for the display of Coffee Crisp bars. He sighed, smiled and tapped his palms on the counter.

He said, "I have been on the road for many days and am very tired. The Greyhound driver said this was the best coffee in Manitoba, so perhaps I should start with that."

"Well okay then. Dare I complicate things further and ask regular, decaf or espresso?"

He laughed. “Just a regular, black, boring cup of Java ... second thought, with cream and sugar.”

Melanie found herself staring at him. His eyes had intensity about them as though he had lived many lives but all at once. Whether it was wisdom or a life led unapologetic she could not be sure. The stranger made an obvious show of glancing at the security camera, just as she had when he stared at her, and Melanie laughed. She crept out the creep.

“Cream and sugar is on the counter,” she said as she turned to the coffeepot behind her. After grabbing a cup from the cupboard below the carafe she filled it with steaming brew.

“I love the scent of coffee,” she said and turned to hand the cup to the customer.

“Spoken like a true addict! Why don’t you join me in a toast?”

“I don’t think my boyfriend would approve.” A lie she had rehearsed so often even she sometimes believed it.

The stranger opened two creamers and a packet of sugar. After pouring them into his drink he stirred until the black fluid turned golden brown. He sighed again and said, “I just thought it might be a nice welcome.”

“You’re staying?”

“Returning. I went away to school.”

Melanie started cleaning. “High school? You don’t look old enough for university.”

At the same time that the stranger laughed the door chimed. Melanie looked at the clock that read five minutes to close as five men entered. Each sported leather jackets, caps and sneakers with heels that lit whenever pressed. With practised unison they surrounded the stranger, two on his right, two on his left and one behind.

“Well, well, well. Isn’t this all cosy and nice,” the fifth said.

Melanie looked at the stranger, her light blue eyes like a cold cloth on a fresh burn. When she turned her gaze on the man behind him she snapped, “Robert! This is a customer!”

“Customer?” Robert pushed against the stranger. “I didn’t see any trucks outside, which makes him a drifter. Why don’t you continue to drift, punk.”

The stranger rose and turned to face the young man. He stood only as high as Robert’s shoulders, but, though dwarfed by his bulk, a confidence emanated from the stranger’s eyes that made the gang leader wary.

“My name is Trent.” He held out his hand in friendship.

“Get lost punk.”

“How about we all join one another in a cup of coffee? My treat.”

Robert suddenly grabbed him and pivoted his body, throwing him toward the door. Trent stumbled, but caught his balance. Smiling, he placed a loony and two quarters on the nearest table.

“For the coffee and the service.” The stranger turned and walked out the door.

“Punk chicken shit is what he is.” Robert called, his voice drowned by the bell’s jingle.

Melanie, narrowing her eyes and pursing her lips, said, “Why are you so mean?”

Robert turned to her and sat on a stool. He leaned against the counter. “Go out with me and I guarantee I’ll be nice.”

His two buddies sat beside him, both laughing. Melanie turned away.

“Don’t hold your breath,” she said, cleaning the coffee maker.

“You telling me that you’d fuck Matt, but you won’t give me a ride?”

“I didn’t *fuck* Matt. We made love.”

“Aww, ain’t that sweet. But when he tells the story, and he does it a lot, he talks ‘bout you like just another slut.”

Melanie’s muscles stiffened. “Maybe you should ask him for a fuck.”

“Y’know bitch, one of these days I’m just going to take what I want.”

Melanie’s hands trembled, and standing tall she tried to hide her fear beneath a veil of anger. “Not a good idea to talk like that with the surveillance cameras.”

Robert laughed. “They don’t have sound. I’m leaving now, but sooner or later I’ll get what I want.”

Melanie held her composure as Robert and his buddies left. But as though the bell’s jingle were a sprite whose song stole her strength her knees buckled and she collapsed in tears against the counter.

Then a voice: “There is no need for your tears, you were never alone.”

Melanie raised her face from her palms to see the stranger. “How did you ... the bell never...”

“You must not have heard it over your weeping. I apologise if my presence has frightened you, but after I left I realised I’d forgotten something.”

“What?”

“My manners. I’m Trent,” he said, extending his hand to her.

“I know. I heard you tell Robert.”

His eyes grew glossy, and he stared into a world beyond that which Melanie could see. “How strange I would introduce myself to him, and not my hostess.” He still extended his hand, but when his voice became as distant as his gaze she didn’t take it. Then, as if he were in a dream he said, “I knew a man like him once.”

Melanie laughed, breaking his dream-like state. Taking his hand she said, “I’m Melanie. Why do you talk like you’re an old man? You can’t be more than twenty. If even that.”

He counted off three of his fingers and smiled. “Nineteen, I suppose. I guess when you uproot a familiar world and later reflect upon it, it seems like a lifetime ago.”

“I guess. Listen, I’d pour you another cup of coffee but I just poured out the pot. Can I get you something else?”

“Tea?”

“Sure. Hot water and a bag, what could be simpler.” She smiled. “So, you said you were visiting. Mind if I ask who?”

“Not at all.”

Melanie grabbed a tea-pot from beneath the counter and, after pouring hot water into it, she tossed in a couple of tea bags. Taking a hot-plate from the same place as she had got the pot she placed both in front of Trent. Still waiting for him to answer, she took his wide smile to heart and asked, “Well?”

“You haven’t asked yet,” he chuckled.

“Who’re you visiting?”

“The Powers.”

“Oh. I don’t know them. My mom probably does, she knows everybody.” Turning she grabbed a couple of mugs.

“They were my parents.”

“‘Were?’ You mean they aren’t anymore?” she turned back, placing the two mugs on the counter.

“They died about,” again he counted on his fingers, “a year and a half ago.”

“Oh. I’m sorry ... it must have been tough to lose them at such a young age.”

“It’s tough at any age.” He sipped the hot tea, his eyes looking distant.

“Where are you staying?” Melanie cocked her head and slowly brought her mug of steaming tea to her lips. When she sipped it the tea burned her tongue. “Ow! How can you stand the sting?”

“That’s unfair. You’ve asked two questions. Of them, I shall answer but one.”

She smiled and blew the steam away from her mug. “Okay. Where are you staying?”

He looked thoughtful a moment. “I never really considered it. Could you direct me to a hotel?”

“I can do better. We have a guest room in our backyard. It’s sort of humble, but...”

“It will do fine.”



Melanie wasn’t sure how her mother would react when she saw the stranger she’d brought home. Speeding down the highway in her Datsun station wagon, she glanced at him. He stared out the window at the stars with a look in his eye as if he knew them personally. She felt as though she was returning an orphan to his home, and not at all like she was bringing home a stranger who had come to pay respects to his deceased parents. He was so calm that Melanie had no worry that he might be some kind of lunatic. Of course, her mother was another story.

But even if he was, she would at least take comfort in knowing that the guest-house was self-contained from the main house.

“How long will you be staying?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” His voice sounded like the rain’s empty patter on a dark summer night.

“When do you have to be back at school?”

Melanie stared straight ahead at the approaching houses. She heard him shuffle, and knew he had repositioned himself to look at her. When next he spoke he did so with a tone that made her want to hold him. And yet all he said was: “I may not go back.”

“You’re going to drop out? Are you sure that’s a good idea? I mean...”

“Please,” his voice brought a tear to her eye, “there will be so much time for questions. I have had a long trip.” He again turned to look at the heavens. “I don’t mean to sound rude, but...”

“It’s okay. I have a bad habit of talking too much.” She pulled the car against a curb in front of a yellow house trimmed with light brown. “We’re home anyway. Mine’s the ugly one. Well, the yellow ugly one.”

Melanie climbed out of the car as did Trent. She watched him scan the neighbourhood, a smile grew over his solemn face.

“Where did you live?”

“Here.”

“Here? My house? My mom bought this house thirteen years ago.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean your home.” He turned to face her, his pale complexion burning red. “I meant next door. Here, next door.”

“Oh. Come on in, I’ll introduce you to my mother.”

“I’d like that.”

Melanie strolled up the walk onto the stoop and through the front entrance. Trent followed, closing the door behind him. He looked about the house, first at the sunken living room on the right then at the reading-room on the left. Taking a few steps he examined the tall staircase and, looking down the hall beside it, he peered into the kitchen.

“I like your home.”

“Thanks. Why don’t you go into the living room and sit, I’ll get my mom. She never comes down before...”

“Putting on her face,” Trent said, walking into the living room.

Melanie stared at him, wondering if it was his intention to come home with her all along.

She bounded up the stairs two at a time until she came to its top. Rushing down the hall past her room, she caressed the banister the entire way and stopped only when she came to her Mother’s room. The door was closed as usual and, tapping on it, she waited.

“Come in Melanie,” her mother called.

Melanie opened the door and leaned against its frame. “Can we talk?”

Her mother was curled on her window-seat with only a reading lamp drilled into the wall above her for light. Her large window was open, with the curtains drawn and a gentle breeze whispering in. She was reading a novel, another vampire horror, and holding up an index finger she quickly finished her paragraph. Closing the book she guffawed, as if she actually knew what “real” vampires were like.

“Of course we can talk.”

“Uhm,” Melanie sat on the edge of the bed, lips pursed. She could no longer look her mom head-on but had to fixate on the mirrored reflection cast against the closed portion of the window. “Remember when you said you wished we could be more charitable?”

“Y-ess, why?”

“Well, there’s this guy who came into the diner tonight, and he needs a place to stay...”

“Stop right there young lady. You don’t propose we let this stranger stay with us, do you? He could be a rapist!”

“He isn’t! He couldn’t be. And I thought he could stay in the guest house.” Melanie paused and looked at her mother. Then she whispered: “He’s downstairs.”

“Oh Melanie!” her mother said, raising her hands and burying her face in them. She lost the place she held in her book. “What am I going to do with you?”

“He’s in town to visit his parent’s grave and pay respects.”

“His *dead* parents? Are you kidding me? This gets better and better. Who are these people?”

“The Powers,” Melanie whispered. “I never heard of them, but...” she stopped. Her mother had turned a shade of white like none she had ever seen before, and slowly she rose.

“He’s here?”

“Yeah. Downstairs.”



Melanie's mother stood beneath the arch that opened up the sunken living room to the foyer, staring at the stranger within. He stood by the window, looking out with his back to her, and when he didn't turn she assumed he hadn't heard her. She tried to speak, but no words came to her.

Then he said, "Hello Jen."

"Trent?" Tears overwhelmed her like a storm over a midsummer's day.

He turned and walked to her, embracing her tightly. She held him, too, and whispered, "It's been so long. Why did you never write?"

"I wanted to, but every one of your letters seemed so different." He broke their embrace and walked to the window. "You're no longer my little sister."

"Y'know, when we were kids, I hated it when you called me that." Jen laughed.

"I still am a teenager. To me, a decade is but a year. To you, a year is but a decade." He turned back to her. "As I get older, I understand more and more how meaningless time is."

"And seeing you reminds me how meaningful time is."

He walked to the couch, unable to look at her. Standing poised over the sectional he pondered whether to sit. When he didn't, he turned to stare at her with eyes like those of a parent who had lost their child.

"Do you wonder why I have come?" he asked as though he read her mind.

"Yes," Jen said, walking to the couch to sit, "but I'm afraid to ask."

"You know that I have spent the past two ... twenty-two years, learning to defeat the Dark through Christ."

She nodded, and he sat beside her. Closing his eyes Trent took several steady breaths and got that same look on his face as Melanie had when she was two and wanted to know where her dead goldfish had gone. And when he answered, her heart exploded in the same deadly fury as it had when she'd explained death to her bewildered daughter.

"I am joining the Dark."

CHAPTER TWO

Melanie crept down the wooden steps, testing each one before putting her full weight upon it. She hunted for the “warning” stair, the one that creaked with a noise that woke the dead. Well, sleeping mothers anyway. Not that she had ever heard it, but on more than one occasion it had alerted her mom that she’d broken curfew. When she stepped from the last one and begun to tip-toe toward the entryway, she wondered if there really was a “warning” stair.

She crouched close to the ground as if she were a five year old waiting for Santa on Christmas eve. Her mom and the stranger were whispering, but she managed to hear him ask, “Will you let me stay?”

Melanie hoped her mom would say “yes,” though she couldn’t figure out why. No, she could figure that out. He was different; strong, certain, yet kind and friendly. When she sat with him in the diner she felt safe, and glad for the first time that she lived in Minnow Creek. “Please mom, say yes,” she whispered.

“Yes, you can stay,” her mother said, the words trailing close on the heels of her daughter’s plead. “I’ll get my daughter to show you to the guest house.” Then she yelled, “Melanie?”

“Yes mom?” she said, rising and stepping into the entryway. She blushed, realising they knew she had been spying.

“Were you eavesdropping?” her mother asked with the same tension as when she’d asked her whether she and her boyfriend were engaged in sex.

“No,” Melanie answered, the same response as she’d given the question of sex. She wished one of those times she could have told the truth. “I was just coming down the stairs.”

“Would you show Trent to the guest house?”

Both she and the stranger held deep breaths, reminding Melanie how her mother had put condoms inside her dresser as a test. She then told her that if she was going to have sex then she should use protection; that if she was, then her mother would rather know she was at least being smart about it.

Every night her mother checked the condoms to see if any had been used, and every night she found all of them in the drawer. Had her mom checked those in the machine stationed inside the men’s washroom at the local bar, she would have known differently.

“Sure I will,” Melanie answered, perking an eyebrow when she saw both the stranger and her mom exhale as if her agreement had assured she hadn’t been listening. It made her suspicious....

Trent rose from the couch and faced her mother. Melanie swore she saw a tear trickle from her eye when the stranger said, “Thank-you Miss Snell.”

“Mrs.,” her mother corrected, “my husband is away on business. And it’s Kraft.”

“Of course. I should have guessed as much.” He turned from her and walked to Melanie, holding his arm against his body in a triangle. When she took it he asked, “Shall we?”

“Sure, it’s just out back.”

Melanie escorted him into the back where a single floor dwelling lay hugged against a high wooden fence. It had a door facing away from the main house, and a window facing it. A flower garden had been planted just outside the door and, amidst the flowers, a wooden cross jettied almost unnoticed toward the heavens.

"It used to be a garage, but my Dad turned it into a guest house."

Melanie's voice quieted like a child's top slowly losing its twirl. She stared mesmerised at the stranger, who studied the cross buried within the flowers.

"To whom is this in memory?"

"My mom lost her best-friend when she was sixteen. Whenever she misses him she spends time in her garden. I used to think it was pretty weird, but now..."

"But now?" He turned to her, and she glimpsed embedded within his ocean-eyes waves wishing to lash out. She turned from them when her own eyes swelled with tears.

"Now I wish her pain would leave."

"You have been a most kind hostess, but I am tired. Unless the guest house is locked, I can see myself in."

"It's not locked. I'll see you tomorrow."

Melanie left the stranger alone and rushed into her home. Her mother was still in the living-room and, before Melanie climbed the stairs to go to her room, she heard her crying. After closing her door she collapsed onto her bed as though she had just engaged in some stressful physical activity.

"Strange," Melanie whispered, reaching for the phone that lay beside her alarm clock on the night table. She depressed each number without having to think about the sequence and, when the phone rang, she waited.

"Hello?"

"Hi Alix! How's it going?"

"Boring. Did you just get home from work?"

"No, 'bout half hour ago. Robert showed up again."

"Want me to talk to his Dad? The last time I pretended to be your mother he got a shit-kicking."

"No, I don't think that would solve anything. 'Sides, I have gossip."

"Yeah? What?"

Melanie bit her lip, thinking about how much she wanted to tell. She walked to her window, wishing it faced the back like her mother's. Just her luck to wind up with the one facing the street corner.

"Well?" Alix pleaded on the phone's other end.

"This guy came into the diner tonight, and he is so Brad Pitt!"

"He looks like Brad Pitt?"

"No, but he acts like him in *Legends of the Fall*."

"Did you get his name or give him your number? You didn't, did you. Of course not, you're too loyal to Matt."

"He's staying in my guest-house."

"Matt?"

"No! Matt and I are over, like since lunch. I caught him with Carol this time. I'm talking about the guy ... Trent. His name is Trent Powers."

"How did you get your mom to agree to that?"

"I don't know, so don't expect me to repeat it for things we need."

“But he is good looking, right? How old is he, your age or mine?”

“You aren’t that much older, my dear.”

“Hey, five years is a long time,” Alix laughed. *“So I take it Matt’s been replaced.”*

“No. I’m not even sure Trent is staying.”



Trent knelt in the garden, his knee sitting comfortably within an impression. Emotions swirled in him as though he were a toy soldier discarded by the child for whom he marched. Caressing the wooden cross he plucked a yellow bloom and laid it before the marker.

“I am dead in your eyes, aren’t I?” he asked without taking his gaze from the grave.

“Can you tell me that the girl you thought of as a `sister` is not to you?” Jen knelt beside the grave, placing one hand on his shoulder. “If you came to say good-bye, or because you needed to see if things really had changed, then I hope you’ve seen enough.” Jen paused, and staring at him sidelong she pursed her lips. “You didn’t come back to say good-bye, did you?”

“No, I did not.” Trent rose and walked to her. Placing his hands on her shoulders he looked deep into her baby blues. “I came to ask for your help.”

Jen felt a numb finger trace over her spine. She wondered what it was that a Kith could need from her.

Trent smiled with closed lips, though one eye tooth hung out. “You’re afraid to ask what?”

Jen nodded.

“It isn’t blood, if that’s what worries you. I get drunk on the Holy Spirit, not on death.”

“That wasn’t what worried me,” Jen’ words were lost under a long sigh.

“You may wish, after I tell you what it is, that it was only blood.” Trent turned from her and his gaze again fell upon his grave. “Keelin failed in my mission when the Dark demanded she partake in a Life-drink.”

“So what makes you think you’ll succeed where she failed?”

“Some vampires have mortal slaves, sort of like a portable winery.” Trent turned to her, his eyes wide like when they were kids and he had asked if she wanted to play “doctor.”

“I can’t...” she whispered with the same reluctance as she had more than twenty years ago. “I have a daughter ... a husband...”

“A life.” Trent flushed, and Jen remembered when she had told him about her going out with Billy Bender.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I came in search of Jen Snell, my `sister.` That was foolish of me. This is not His plan for you.”

“How do you know? What if it is?”

“It isn’t.” Trent cupped his palm gently beneath her chin. “If it was, He would not have blessed you with such a beautiful daughter. Your spirit dances in her eyes.”

“But what if this isn’t His plan for you?”

“Then I will die. It is, after all, in His will for us to fail.” Trent smiled. “My comfort is knowing that, success or failure, in Him I am saved.”

“I wish you wouldn’t go.”

“If I die, I do so as one of God’s children. If this person lost in the Dark dies, they do so damned. If I forsake the chance to introduce this person to my Saviour, how closely do I walk with Him?”

Jen embraced him and wept. “I will pray for you everyday, and thank God for this good-bye.”

“This has been much harder than I expected. I will leave tomorrow night.”

“Are you afraid to die?”

“After coming back to Minnow Creek and seeing how rapidly the world has changed without me, I am more afraid to live.” He closed his eyes and, breathing heavily, he whispered, “Will you do me a favour?”

“What?”

“Keep this grave. Trent was a good kid and did not deserve to die so young.” Opening his eyes he kissed her cheek. “You ask if I am afraid to die? I tell you that I died when I lost you.”

White washed walls, the scent of Glade plug ins, a tiny corner walled off for the toilet and sink and a cot. Old jigsaw puzzles glued onto cardboard hung as pictures and there were no windows. Trent sat on the cot with the dim light above for illumination. His bag, all the belongings from a life he still could not fully accept, lay closed on the floor.

“Father, dear God above, have mercy on my soul.”

A tap on the door interrupted his prayer. Rather than call out Trent walked to the door and opened it. Melanie stood outside, dressed in a silky night-gown that hugged her as the wind wisped about. One of her shoulders was bare and goosepimpled. Trent opened his mouth to speak but did not know what to say. She giggled and placed two fingers against his lips. She walked in and pressed herself against him. Trent stepped back.

He said, “Won’t this upset your boyfriend?”

“That’s just something I tell guys until I know if I want them. Don’t you want me?”

You know you do! Said a voice from deep within his mind. Trent closed his eyes and turned from her. In a voice barely a whisper he said, “What I want is not always what is right. What we take is not always what we deserve.” He turned back to her and said, “Do not undervalue yourself, Melanie.”

He closed the door and again returned to the cot. Returned to his prayer.

CHAPTER THREE

Melanie woke the next morning a few hours before noon with sunlight pouring through her open blinds. It chased the darkness into the shadows. She stretched to ward off sleep, and reaching for her radio she turned on her favourite station, CBXJ. One of her least favourite songs was playing, and taking that as a sign to get out of bed she did just that. She showered quickly, and quietly so as not to disturb her mom. Her mother never woke before noon on a weekend, and wouldn't take kindly to starting today.

Besides, Melanie had other plans. Ones that did not include her Mom. Today she forewent her usual attire of sweats and a T-shirt for a pair of black shorts and a red halter top. As well, she painted on a light shade of pink lipstick and a touch of rouge to her cheeks; which was something she detested and normally reserved for social gatherings. With one final check in the mirror Melanie skipped downstairs and then outside to the guest-house. Last night may not have gone as planned, but seduction was her speciality. By the end of today she would have this man, just one more notch on her belt!

She knocked lightly the first time but harder the second. She waited longer before knocking a third time, but when no one answered she sighed and turned; screaming when she saw Trent behind her.

"I am sorry. I did not intend to frighten you," the stranger said, turning from her.

"It's okay. I just didn't expect you to be up and about."

"Nor I you," he looked over his shoulder at her, "were you coming to see me?"

"Uh, yeah." Melanie stepped back against the door. His fluid, almost mist-like movements frightened her, sending a tingle to her chest like when she sat too long and put a foot to sleep. "I remembered that you wanted to see your parents' grave, so I thought you might like a ride."

"Kindness such as yours is the greatest treasure from God." He walked to her and cupped his hand gently beneath her chin. Something inside her told her to run, to flee the stranger and never approach him again, but something in Trent's voice gave her the courage to stay.

"So, can I come?"

He looked at her Mom's bedroom window and sighed. "As long as you let me say good-bye alone, and do not approach the tombstone. Whether I am there or not."

"Deal," she squealed, blushing from her excitement.



Melanie drove the wagon down Ash street, which was the opposite way from the graveyard. Trent, sitting in the seat beside her, donned his heavy coat and kept his window shut. The hood of the car was hot enough to cook breakfast on, and her skin stuck to the bucket seat. She wondered how he could stand the heat.

"You can roll down your window if you want," she said, turning down the AM radio.

He smiled and rolled it down. "My mind must be a million miles away. It is rather hot."

"And where might your mind have gone?"

“It has been a long time since I was last here, but I recall the way to the cemetery. This is not east, we are headed west.”

“I’m sorry, I should’ve said something before. I want to pick up my friend Alix first. That way I can have company while you visit your grave.”

He looked at her sharply, his eyes as piercing as a hawk’s.

“I meant your parents’ grave, not yours.”

When Melanie had driven half-way down General Drive she stopped in front of a small green house. Turning to Trent she said, “Here we are! The only house in all of Minnow Creek that’s uglier than mine.”

“I’ll get in the back so you and your friend can sit with one another.”

“It’s okay. I like having you next to me,” she smiled. She paused and bit her lower lip. As she climbed from the Datsun she added, “Don’t ask her too many personal questions. She isn’t exactly open about herself, at least not with strangers.”

“I never press people for what they do not volunteer.”

“Wish I could say the same. Be right back.” Turning from the wagon she saw Alix coming down the walk. When she came close enough Melanie hugged her.

“Hi Alix. This is Trent,” she pointed to the man sitting inside the car.

“Hi,” Alix bent and leaned on the open window, her long blonde hair falling over her face. She opened the rear door, sat inside and strapped in. “So I hear you’re a student. What are you taking?”

“I attend a Christian school....”

“You’re not a fanatic, are you? We aren’t exactly believers.”

“And what are you?”

Melanie climbed back behind the wheel and boasted, “She’s a novelist. Her big seller is this period-piece, a romance, about a warrior who has fallen in love with this woman who’s lost her family.”

Alix blushed. “It’s not that big a deal. It’s barely keeping me afloat! But, hey, if you want to pad my royalty check you can always buy a copy. It’s called *Rancour*.”

“Odd title for a romance,” Trent said.

“That’s the name of the warrior.”

Trent looked at Alix with eyes as bright as lightning. He smiled and asked, “What will you two ladies be up to while I tend to my business?”

Melanie started driving down General Drive and glanced in the mirror at her friend. Alix shrugged.

“Why don’t we go to the fishing hole? We can pick up Trent after an hour, would that be enough time?”

She heard him sigh before saying, “I don’t know. Perhaps it would be best if I met you there.”

Melanie looked at him from the corner of her eyes and smiled. “It’s pretty far.”

“The walk will do me good.”

Melanie glanced in her rear-view at Alix who again shrugged.

“O-kay.”



Melanie watched as the stranger walked to the grave-site, his shoulder's slumped, his head bowed and his back hunched. He moved with a slight sway and had tucked his fists into deep pockets. He stopped at the gate and looked at Heaven through closed eyes, pausing as if he prayed for strength. When at last he walked through the gates Melanie thought she had seen him began to weep and, feeling her own eyes grow moist, she turned to look at the steering wheel.

"Mind telling me why he wanted to come here?" Alix asked, climbing into the front seat and slamming the door shut.

"He wanted to visit his parent's grave. They died a year and a half ago."

"And he's just coming now? That's strange. When my Dad phoned the school to tell me my mom had just died I flew right down to Winnipeg."

Melanie looked at her curiously. "You know, that's the first time you've ever mentioned your mother."

"She died of cancer seven years ago. I don't really like to talk about it."

"I know," Melanie took her hand and squeezed it, "and you don't have to. Let's go to the fishing hole."

Melanie drove to the highway, still biting her lower lip. Her fingers tapped on the steering wheel, but not in time with *Old Time Rock'n Roll* that played on the radio. When she drove past their turnoff she snapped back to reality.

Alix gave her the same look her mother did whenever she'd tried to cover-up a wrong-doing. "Is something on your mind?"

"No," denial never worked with her mom either, "yeah. I think you're right."

"About?" Alix asked, holding the door handle as Melanie slowed the wagon and U-turned.

"Trent. It's strange that his parents died so long ago and he's only come now."

"Maybe it was too painful. He's still a kid after all."

Melanie looked at her with one side of her lips curled. "He's probably the same age as me, y'know."

Alix laughed, again holding the door as Melanie turned into the dirt road that led to the fishing hole. "Then I guess he isn't *that* young. But seriously, you can see what I mean."

"Yeah, but..." Melanie pulled the wagon into an empty parking stall between two cars, "he doesn't seem like someone in mourning. He seems..."

"Intense," Alix whispered.

CHAPTER FOUR

Melanie watched a group of children survey the landscape as they constructed giant sand castles. But it wasn't their hands-turned-bulldozer she studied, nor was it the engine noises they made to which she listened. Her attention had drifted beyond the children's make-believe world, past the man-made oasis and even past the people around her.

"Earth to Melanie ... Earth to Melanie..." Alix chirped computer-style, waving her hand before her friend's glossy eyes.

"Huh? Oh. I'm sorry. I was just thinking, daydreaming I guess."

"It's okay girl. The hot dog vendor's here, and I wondered if you were hungry. Are you?"

"Well, no. How 'bout you go ahead and eat...."

"And what will you be doing?"

Melanie's eyes again turned glossy and her voice drew soft, almost distant when she said, "I'm going back to the graveyard."

"He's probably done by now."

"Then I'll meet him along the way," Melanie rose to her feet, "I'll be right back."

"Okay," Alix crossed her index finger beneath her nose.



Trent crouched on the well-kept lawn before the simple grave marker crafted from white marble with bold, black lettering. It rose three feet from the sod reading: "MARCIE AND DOUGLAS POWERS. TEARS CANNOT EXPRESS THE SADNESS OF YOUR LOSS."

Trent shuddered.

"Why have I been denied this fate? Is it not through death that we find Eternity?"

If you wish an end, then do just that. Stop being a coward and bring it about yourself! a Voice said from deep within his mind.

Trent stood and closed his eyes. Breathing deeply he did not banish the Voice away, but instead said, "Bravery comes in accepting God's Will when it does not meet our own. He would not have give me this burden had he not also given me the strength to carry it."

And does His Will include you joining the Dark?

"I don't know."

Does it include your corruption? That is what will happen should you join!

"It includes our witness. Now begone! I have much to do."

Trent stroked his hand over the grave and sighed. Opening his eyes he smiled and began the trek to the fishing hole.



Melanie found a parking stall right in front of the cemetery gates. As she exited the wagon an eerie feeling coveted her heart; it was not unlike a thunderstorm bringing an

abrupt end to a sunny day. She had been to the graveyard before, back in the eighth grade when some of her friends had thought it might be fun to tip some tombstones.

She saw Trent leave the gates, looking back as if to make sure no one had seen him. She didn't call to him and when he looked in her direction she hoped he wouldn't notice her. He didn't, and, as he walked the road toward the Fishing Hole, she wondered what secret he guarded and how she could learn it. She tightened her fists and pressed her nail's into her palms, hoping the pain might take away the thought.

Melanie approached the giant arch that housed two open iron gates, recalling how terrible she had felt after her vandalism spree. Maybe that was why her voyage through the gateway sent chills through her heart, or maybe it was the thought that there was something dangerous about that stranger. Alix seemed to know it, it was in her voice when she called Trent "intense."

Walking through the narrow cobblestone paths Melanie scanned each row of stone markers. She felt a thousand eyes taking hold over her, but whenever she spun she saw no one.

"This is too weird."

Then she glimpsed something that made her heart skip a beat.

POWERS FAMILY, a tall pillar read at the start of a row of markers. Melanie remembered her promise and considered turning back. It felt wrong to go back on her word and look at his parent's marker, but how would he know? It may even answer her questions of him and save her the trouble of making him talk about something that he may not wish to talk about. By breaking her promise she would actually be doing him a huge favour. And besides, so long as he never found out who was it hurting?

Melanie hesitated, but taking a deep breath she began her trek. She read each tombstone starting with the ones dating as far back as 1902, afraid as if with every word the world might open and swallow her. Especially when she found the one for Trent's parents.

"At least I know you're telling the truth," she whispered and, kneeling in the soft grass, she caressed the hard marble. She sighed, relaxed her muscles, and lay her suspicions to rest. Until she read the next marker:

"Trent Powers, presumed dead 1975."

Melanie rose and screamed. He wasn't Trent Powers! Who was he? Her mind raced as her eyes scanned the area for him, but he wasn't anywhere to be seen. Where is he? Melanie wondered.

"Oh my...! Alix!" she whispered, suddenly bolting for the wagon.



Alix chewed her hot-dog, staring over the manmade landscape that had, at one time, been a natural place for fish and toads. It was these moments that she missed Rancour most. She sighed as she finished the last of her meal. Alix felt a clump of sand hit her in the back of the head and spun. Robert, arms on hips, stood behind her with his gang. The leader stepped toward her, his bare chest rippling with muscle.

"Y'know you got me in shit th'other day, bitch."

"So that gives you the right to kick sand at me? Real tough guy!"

"Take it as a warning. Y'go talkin' to my Dad, I gotta hurt you."

“Leave me alone.”

Robert pointed at her, flexing his muscles. “Leave *me* alone.”

He walked away with his gang following as his shadow. Alix rubbed the back of her head, feeling a lump start to swell.

Then from behind she heard a deep voice say, “You handled that well.”

Alix turned and faced Trent. “Oh! Melanie just left to go get you, about five minutes ago.”

“Left? To the graveyard?” He closed his eyes and sighed.

“Yes....”

“That’s okay. I have done all that I came to do.” Opening his eyes his brow fell and he said, “You will say good-bye for me?”

“I think she’d like you to say it in person.”

Trent smiled and walked to her. He stroked his hair and said, “You are a good friend to her.”

“Avoiding saying good-bye will hurt her.”

“Avoidance. Isn’t it strange how we can warn each other of it, and yet not heed our own advice?”

Alix glared at him sidelong. “What do you mean by that?”

Trent looked at her eyes, not into them as much as through them and said, “Your book has an interesting name. I knew a man named that once, he was of the clan Wulfsign.”

Alix fell back a step. She said, never taking her eyes from the tall stranger, “How could you possibly know?”

Trent brushed her hair from her eyes. Smiling, he said as though he spoke to someone in need of comfort, “I know because I knew him, Alix,” he paused, and extended his hand. “You must be Ariana.”

Alix never took his hand. In a voice like shattered glass she said, “He died. *They* killed him.”

He hugged her. “I’m so sorry. I know what it is to have lost someone you love,” then he spun from her, his cape rising as if a storm had erupted beneath it. When the storm subsided he said, “Rancour would be glad to know that you have gone on with life.”

“He would be glad to know that I will avenge him!” Alix held her hands in fists that crafted a spiritual wall strong enough to withstand Time. But when Trent turned back to her, she fell a step back.

“Is that what you knew him as? When I knew him he was a man torn apart by the evil around him.”

“Because he was helpless against it.”

“Because it reminded him of the evil within him. Give yourself a gift he never had.”

“What?”

“Peace.” And then the stranger walked away, disappearing into the horizon.

Alix fell to her knees. “Why did you have to leave me so soon? Damn you Rancour!”

CHAPTER FIVE

“Who are you really?”

Trent never turned to face Melanie. Opening the guest-house door he sighed, closing his eyes from the piercing sun as it set.

“Answer me damn it! Why did you lie to me?”

Trent caught her reflection in a window; she stood straight with her fists clenched by her sides. He turned to her, but said nothing.

“I saw the grave. I know that Trent Powers is dead.”

“Did you read the entire tombstone?”

“I read all that I needed. What kind of sicko are you?”

“The kind who would not judge you nearly as fast as you have seen fit to judge me.” Trent walked to her and cupped his hand beneath her chin, staring deeply into her eyes.

“Why did you lie?”

“There is nothing that I can say that won’t seem a lie. Please, ask me nothing further.” Trent spun, his coat flailing into the air. “I will leave when the sun sets.”

Melanie stared after him as he entered the guest-house, perplexed by his odd behaviour.

“Melanie!” her mother called, waking her from her trance, “Mister Farcus is on the phone and wants to know if you can come into work. Jolene is sick.”

“Tell him I can be there in an hour.”



Melanie put on her Farcus cafe uniform and touched up her make-up before leaving for work, but half-way through her shift she wondered why she had bothered. Mister Farcus had called from Winnipeg and wouldn’t have known if she were in a pair of sweats and T-shirt, and Jolene was so happy to have been relieved that she wouldn’t have said a thing. The setting sun cast a bright shadow against the windows, reflecting off the dust that had descended on the shelves. Grabbing some Windex and a towel Melanie set to cleaning. The quiet did her good, it gave her a chance to sort out her thoughts.

But when the door-bell jingled, her thoughts fell back into disarray.

Melanie turned to the entryway and sang “Hello,” her voice cut short from Robert’s cold stare. He was followed by three of his gang; Kevin, Todd, and Owen. Her heart pumped fast and her breath drew short.

“That crazy bitch phoned my Dad again! What do I gotta do to teach her not to mess with me?”

“I didn’t tell her anything...”

“Next time you’ll tell her nothing.” Robert snapped his fingers and Owen threw his football jacket over the security camera. Kevin and Todd grabbed Melanie and threw her onto the counter. Ignoring her screams Owen ran to help hold her down.

Robert slapped her and said, “I tried to see who in her family I could hurt back, but her Dad’s in Headingly on manslaughter. Seems he killed a guy. As it turns out, you’re the only family she’s got. Lucky me.”



Trent started on the road that would take him away from Minnow Creek in much the same manner as he had left fifteen human years ago. He donned the same full length trench coat, runners and bell bottom pants, but this time he adorned a look of sorrow without hope. The first time he had left the town, his world, he did so with a stranger who called herself his sister. He had gone, leaving behind a friend whom he wished had been a sister, and had borne in his heart hope to return to his world with it unchanged.

Trent closed his eyes and raised his face to Heaven; falling to his knees. How could he have known so long ago that the death of the stranger whom he'd come to love as a sister would drive him to return to his lost world, or that when he returned the friend whom he had once wished was a sister would now be the stranger that drove him away?

Trent opened his eyes to look upon the Farcus Cafe. He recalled the first time he met Keelin, and with that pleasurable memory encamped in his heart he struggled to his feet.

"I will show through my actions that I shall continue your quest, dear sister."



Melanie screamed again, but the only witness to Robert's crew pinning her down was the mechanical eye blinded by the football jacket. Kevin held her wrists cuffed above her head, Todd held one leg, and Owen held the other. Her body shook as Robert caressed her hair, moving his seductive touch to her breasts.

"All ya had to do was tell her to leave me alone," he said, unbuttoning her shirt.

"Please don't..." Melanie cried, wishing she'd taken his threats seriously and told her mom.

"I'll have you screaming, and beggin' fer more." Robert unzipped his pants.

"Isn't life funny, how many circles we travel?" a voice whispered in their ears, though no one could see who had spoken.

"Who the hell was that?" Todd asked, slacking his grip on Melanie's leg. When she felt her ankle free she kicked him in the nose, and she reeled backward he yelled, "You bitch!"

But when he rose to grab her leg again a stranger stood in his way.

"Who the hell are you?"

The stranger stood as confidently as one who had seen the future first-hand. It unnerved them. His collar rose like the walls of a coliseum, and icy blue eyes burned within its pits like two gladiators ready for war. "Who am I?" the cloaked figure repeated, "perhaps you should ask *what* am I?"

Robert zipped up his pants and stepped away from Melanie. "Kick 'is ass Todd! He's that drifter from yesterday."

Todd lunged forward to grapple the stranger to the ground, but held only air. He fell against a stool and saw that his adversary had moved behind him. A hand grasped the back of his neck and lifted him from the floor.

Again a voice whispered in his ear: "You still have not inquired *what* I am."

"What the hell are you?" Todd asked, staring deep within the icy pools.

The stranger dropped him and spread his trench coat apart like wings. As he rose from the ground an eerie wind blew into the cafe, tearing the jingling door from its hinges and knocking down several stools. He grew fangs and, with a voice grating like Death Itself, he said, "I am the nightmare that woke you screaming as a child."

Todd was the first to bolt through the door with Robert, Kevin and Owen close on his heels. When they were gone the stranger settled to the ground, relaxing the wind as though it were a spiritual limb. He began picking up stools, laughing quietly.

Melanie couldn't move. Her arms and legs were free, but still she could not move. She lay against the counter staring at Trent as he cleaned the cafe, and moving her lips to speak no sounds came out. The man who had been a demon only moments earlier stopped, and looked at her with a smile.

"You needn't be afraid, Melanie. I was only practising."

"You're ... you're a..."

"A Kith," he said as though he were the one shocked by the realisation that the mythical creatures are real, "but I am not one to partake in blood-drinking, if that is what frightens you."

As Trent held his hand out, she looked upon it as if she expected it to lash at her. When she took it she cringed at his strong, yet gentle grasp.

"You are not hurt?"

"No."

"Good." Trent smiled, and sighed like he'd just lost his one true love. He started for the door. "You will apologise to Mister Farcus for me? I went a little overboard with the theatrics."

"You didn't come to see your parents grave, did you?"

"Not entirely, no."

"Then why...?"

He walked to her and caressed her cheek. "You look so much like your mother. It made me think that nothing had changed."

"You're him ... the friend she lost ... this is why she reads so many vampire horrors."

"I'm glad you know. Jen needs someone with whom she can be totally honest. How hard it must have been to have carried her secret for so long."

"But why did you come back?"

Trent grabbed a stool and sat upon it. Closing his eyes he sighed, and when he opened them he said, "Perhaps this would be better explained over a cup of coffee."

"Two cups." Melanie walked behind the counter and grabbed a couple mugs.

"I thought the coffee was off limits to employees."

"Mister Farcus is a bit eccentric, but I think his attention will be on the broken door."

"Eccentric? When his father owned this place it was a two-pump gas station and he made me mop the pavement."

"Mop pavement? That is weird." Melanie filled two cups with coffee and placed them on the counter. "You changed the subject."

"I thought it might relax you. I would hate to think that I permanently scarred you."

"Therapy's an 'in' thing anyway." Melanie smiled at the vampyre sitting before her. "I've never met anyone quite like you before. I can see why my mother was so heart-broken when you left her."

"And will you be as heart-broken?"

Melanie stared into her cup, smelling the almond aroma. "Why did you come?"

"There are two roads we can travel. It is up to us which one we choose, after all it is in God's Will to allow us to fail."

"But doesn't self-determination contradict God's omniscience? If He has a plan all laid out for us, how can we have free will?"

Trent smiled and reached for his mug. Steam rose from the hot liquid, but ignoring it he drank. Then he said: "He is Alpha and Omega, Beginning and End. We can trust what He says because He has seen it, not because He is a puppet master controlling mindless robots. He has always allowed us to choose whether we are a part of His plan."

Melanie held her mug to her lips and blew on it to cool the liquid. "But how can His plan succeed if we choose not to be a part of it?"

"Because none of us are so integral that the entire thing will end as a result of our rebellion."

"He took a chance leaving it up to us. What if things didn't lead to a better end?"

"He has intervened, Melanie. He gave us His Son to save us." Trent suddenly laughed, "Strange, isn't this? A Kith offering theological apologetics. Perhaps you would do better to read C.S. Lewis."

Melanie finally felt comfortable enough to sip her coffee, but cringed when it burned her mouth. "Ooo, hot!"

"You made that coffee, correct?"

"Yeah."

"You knew it would be hot, and to an extent you knew that was good. But uncontrolled that heat is bad, correct?"

"I guess."

"So you intervened. You blew on it to cool it down."

"What does this have to do with anything?"

"When God created us, He knew we would seek knowledge. Think of us as the coffee, and knowledge as its heat. To a certain extent, knowledge is good. When it gets out of hand God intervened; just as you blew on the coffee to cool it down, so did God give the world Jesus."

"Well, if I was God I certainly wouldn't have made the world if I knew it was going to rebel..."

"So if you had seen into the future and known that one sip would burn, you would not have made the entire pot of coffee?"

"That's not the same thing..."

"It's exactly the same. You can see a greater good from the coffee by allowing it some heat, even though one or two mouthfuls might burn you."

"Am I to believe that you returned to argue religion with me?"

The Kith's eyes grew distant, and the pupils opened like two long tunnels. "I came because I thought nothing had changed. I came because I could not see that there is a future, and it has come without me."

"I don't understand."

"I needed your mother's help, but, she has grown into a stranger ... just as I have, I suppose." He reached for her hands, but when she recoiled from him he did not persist.

"What help do you need? Can I help?"

Trent smiled and his eyes warmed. This time when he reached for her hands she accepted the gesture. “Your willingness to aid a stranger is wonderful, I will pray that you do not outgrow it. But take this advice: do not offer help before you know what the task is.”

“Okay, what is it?”

“There are three society’s of vampires: the Circle, Rogues, and the Dark. The Circle is a group that worships Christ, and both the others are ones that worship Pleasure. The Circle has learned of an evil Kith that is confused and does not know if it wants to worship Pleasure. I have volunteered to infiltrate the Dark as a Rogue and find this Kith and be a witness.”

“Why’d you need my mother?”

“I have to pose as an evil Kith. When they see that I do not drink blood they will know that I am not one of them. Some vampires have human slaves whom they drink from, and I wanted your mother to act as mine.”

“But she could have died. Two of you dying isn’t worth saving one life!”

Trent rose from his stool, holding tightly to her hand. “Christ will give us eternal life, Melanie. Without Him you will find death in an eternal grave.”

He then let go and turned from her, heading for the door. His shoulders slumped and he lowered his head, making Melanie want to call to him. She wished desperately to say something that would let this stranger know that she now thought of him as a friend, but when she opened her mouth she spoke silence. Silence cut short by his turning to her with an icy glare.

“Tonight before you sleep, pray for me at my grave.” And then he left, leaving her in a world she no longer understood.

Trent strolled down the dark highway, clenching his hands into tight fists deep with his pockets. The stars etched out a map for him, and a sliver of a moon hung to his right as a companion. Its light reflected upon the asphalt trail, making the row of trees that loomed from both sides appear as sinewy fingers that grabbed at him. It seemed proper to leave Minnow Creek this way; his trek down the narrow path was symbolic of his sojourn, and the luminous trees that of the evil which tempted him.

He remembered when he was five and he had lost his favourite red ball. A yearning had pounded in his chest with a need to find it, and a clamp crushed his heart with a wish that he’d taken better care of it. At the time, he thought the world would never survive such a terrible thing.

A cool breeze blew up his trench coat, nipping at his goose-bumped skin. Trent closed his eyes and clenched his teeth, wishing he could recall where he had lost that red ball. But he couldn’t, and even if he could what would it matter? The ball would not be the same. The elements would have changed it; the rain discolouring its crimson hue and the sun stealing its bounce. He probably wouldn’t even recognise it.

Trent fell to his knees and wept. When he had heard that Keelin was dead his first instinct was to run to Jen, just as he would have twenty human years ago. He romanticised about the two of them infiltrating the Dark and completing Keelin’s holy mission, but that was wrong. He wished it hadn’t taken seeing how the elements had changed her to see that.

“How could you leave me alone?” he whispered.

“You aren’t alone,” a voice responded from above him.

Trent opened his eyes and saw Melanie. She drove Jen’s Jeep and had stopped it, with motor running and headlights on high, beside where he stood. He realised how engrossed he’d become in self-pity that he had not sensed her.

“Why are you here?” he asked.

She knelt beside him and took his hands into hers. Trent felt her shake and, though her voice spoke steadily, the scent from her perspiration was that of fear. And yet her eyes, eyes that she locked with his like a chain to a prisoner, whispered a gentle strength.

“I want to come with you.”

“Am I to believe that our conversation conformed you?”

“No, but it did make me think that there are greater things than our own selfish desires.”

“Like?”

“Well, if there is someone in this evil society who wants to become good than that is important.”

“But you are a non-believer.”

“In God, but not in good. I believe in Something, I just don’t know what.”

Trent caressed her cheek. “Melanie, you have no idea what you are asking. If I take you with me you may die, and your mother would never forgive me for that.”

“But if you don’t take me you’ll fail and the Dark will kill you.” She waited for Trent to respond, and when he didn’t she added, “I know the risk.”

The Kith turned his back to her, nearly disappearing against the Cimmerian world. “How could I go on, knowing that Jen hates me?”

“Do you serve my mom, or your God? If you take me she may never forgive you but if you don’t, will your God forgive you?”

Trent turned to her and laughed. “You are as crafty as your mother. The Lord forgives all who ask, so long as you love Him with all your heart and soul.”

“I don’t want you to die.”

“Then you must do everything I say, and when we are done you will return home to your mother.”

“I promise!”

“First rule: never make promises.”

CHAPTER SIX

SEPTEMBER 2010

The sky appeared above as an opal chasm whose blackness was interrupted only by silvery flecks. At times clusters burst across the Heavens, later followed by solitary strays, but what they found at the end of such journeys was known only by myth. Was it Valhalla or Hades, or simply another Cimmerian ether? Did the destination matter, or was it the sojourn, though over in a flash, that held importance?

Jack sat before the campfire, amidst the people he called friends, and took another swig of beer. The chatter was meaningless, the gaiety pointless, the encounter just another of many. Jack looked up again, this time focusing on the stars that did not move, and wondered if those that deserted did so because they burnt out or were just fed up with their existence?

“Whose cabin is this anyway?” Todd asked, reaching for a jacket to protect him from the cool wind. The sound of waves lapped upon pebbled beaches from the nearby lake.

“I’m renting it for the summer,” Karen laughed and added, “I paid a \$300 damage deposit, so if you plan on getting wild you better chip in.”

They all did, including Jack. He again caught a glimpse of a shooting star. Standing, he stretched out his arms and groaned, “I’m getting sore. I’m going for a walk.”

“Beer run?” anyone could have said it.

Jack didn’t turn but did grab another beer from the cooler. He replied, “Just a walk.”

Footsteps rushed and fell in beside him. Out the corner of his eye he saw Audra. She pressed into him with her short, slender figure and rested her head on his arm. Jack did not respond, just kept on walking.

“You feel cold tonight,” she said.

Jack stopped. The fire could still be seen off in the distance, but their immediate surroundings were cast in a surreal shade of navy. He looked down into Audra’s eyes, she tilted her head so that all of her hair would flip over one shoulder. Jack pushed her away.

“Not tonight,” he said. “I don’t feel like it.”

She pressed in closer, rested her arms on his shoulders and whispered in a sultry tone, “That’s the beauty of us. No ties, no feelings.”

“I’m serious Audra.” He stepped away and stopped only when his foot sank ankle deep in the soft moss.

Neither was quite certain how long they stood just staring at one another. Later on they would recount the moment as a blip in their memories, but during the fact it seemed like forever. Audra tucked her hands into her pants pockets, sighed and looked up to where the celestial fireworks were still taking place. She sighed and shrugged.

Jack closed his eyes in a vain attempt to shut out the world. There was a nip in the air that seeped through his leather jacket and sent shivers cascading over his spine. The breeze carried the scent of fish that made Jack think of the fishing trips his father had promised to take him on. Promises long broken before they were muttered through drunken lips.

Jack took a swig of his beer.

“Are you happy?” he whispered so softly the words were barely audible over the lapping waves.

Audra smiled, a gesture so forced that the edges of her lips quivered. She looked up at him and shrugged. “Sure I’m happy. My life lacks nothing.”

“Mine does. My life lacks something and I don’t know what.”

There was another long pause. “Does it have to do with me?” she asked.

Jack reached out and brought her to him. “No, it has to do with me. I’m missing something and I cannot figure out what.”

“Then let me help you find it.” Audra kissed him long and deep. She moved his hands over her body then hers, through his hair and pressed herself tightly against him. Jack did not object, though he’d lied when he said the emptiness did not have to do with her.

Jack opened his eyes, gasped for breath and expected to feel his heart pound. But not even waking from a nightmare could bring life back to his immortal body, and leaving the affright he entered the waking dream. Blankets were tangled through his body like a pretzel and his mouth felt dry. There was a fireplace across from the bed black from ashes of neglect. Hot water ran through pipes above heating the stuffy air. Beside the bed, flush against the wall, was a bureau with full-sized mirror. Drawers were open and clothes strewn on top with very few still folded inside. The cement walls were barren and windowless, and they whistled from air seeping through cracks.

A soft tap on the door did not make him flinch even an inch. He hated his dreams, yet still preferred them to reality. He sat up while untangling himself from his sheets. Reaching for the ceramic lamp on the night-stand he pulled the rusted chain and dashed away the darkness. It stung his eyes at first, but long ago pain had become the closest thing to emotion that he dared tread. The tap on the door turned to a knock.

“I’m awake,” he yelled.

“’bout time,” said a young woman, maybe in her mid-twenties, as the door creaked open on rusted hinges. She was tiny, both in height and stature. She had brown eyes and hair, thin red lips and a nose like a button. Though thin, her form was curvy and well endowed, perfectly suited for the purpose life had given her.

“What time is it?” Jack asked.

“Almost Noon.”

“Noon? You mean Midnight.” Jack grabbed a gnarly pair of jeans from a chair and sat over the side of the bed. As the chair fell to the ground Jack put on the pants.

“Time is relative.” She picked up the chair and straddled it.

“When are you going to clean this place up?” There was an edge to his tone. He did not look at her.

“I didn’t know you wanted me to.” Her voice cracked.

“Do I look like I want to live in a pig-sty? Where’s my grey shirt?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered, her eyes wide and hands shaking.

“Bullshit!” Slapping her hard he stood and walked to stand before the mirror, though he cast no reflection.

Tammi collapsed to the floor. Rubbing her face she reached under the bed and produced the garment in question. Jack grabbed it and slipped into it. He headed for the door.

Tammi said, "You're supposed to go see Naztar."

Jack opened the door, paused in the frame, but walked out without a word.



"You are either a very egotistical man, or a very stupid one." Naztar, clad in an Armani, sat behind a large oak desk. A computer took up much of the space on the desk except where a cluster of papers was piled in the center. The Kith ignored his guests and turned to face a large window behind him, pulling on a chain that drew back large, heavy drapes. At one time the second story glass gave view to a densely treed park, but now it overlooked the busy street and shops that had destroyed nature's refuge.

Paintings adorned the walls, most dating as far back as the Dark Ages, all different save for having the same theme. In each a youthful woman, long red hair and eyes so green they took away one's breath, was featured so realistic it could have been a snapshot. In some she was merely sitting with her hair draped over her shoulders, but in most she was dancing to different backdrops. There was no shingle beneath to say who she might have been.

A fireplace, ablaze with life, brought heat to the modest quarters. The floor was hardwood and well taken care of, and before the desk were two Edwardian chairs occupied. In one sat Trent wearing the morbid signature attire of his kind: tapered jeans, silk dress shirt and a full-length trench coat. In the seat beside him sat Melanie, tanned complexion, short blue skirt and a white blouse. Her blonde hair was tucked beneath a baseball cap that read, "Winnipeg Blue Bombers." She was quite a contrast to the pale, sickly-looking Kith.

Naztar kept his back to his guests and said, "What makes you think you have anything I desire?"

"When you address me, you may call me Trent," he paused uncertain if his disrespect had gone too far or not far enough. He had never before seen Cimmerian Kith and only had legend and hearsay to go on. He continued when there was no comment from the Sage. "I have been a Rogue since my Begetting. I have accumulated many things, yet still I yearn for something more. My Pleasure is incomplete."

On the word "something" Naztar turned from the paned glass and meandered around the desk. Standing before the woman he took her hand and kissed it. "Such a beautiful blood-slave, how can your Pleasure not be complete?"

Rouge filled the woman's cheeks as Trent stood and picked up a leather satchel that was at his feet. He did not want too much attention on Melanie in case her fright gave away their masquerade. But it was not fright Trent sensed from her but excitement. Opening the bag he said, "I have been a collector of antiquities and have amassed quite a fortune."

The word "fortune" took Naztar's attention from the woman. Trent continued, "I desire a family with whom to share my wealth."

"Indeed." Naztar took the bag and returned to his desk.

“Those are yours, a gift from me. Should you desire more we can work out a partnership.” Trent sat back in his chair, feeling rather smug.

Naztar opened the bag and examined its contents. His eyes widened, his jaw dropped and had there been blood in his veins it would have boiled. Trent knew he had pushed too far, but before either could speak there was a knock on the door.

“You’re invited,” Naztar growled.



Hallways intertwined through the complex like a series of intricate mazes. To outsiders this Labyrinth was impressive, but Jack had become bored of it long ago. To him each path lead to a dead end, regardless of what lay beyond the door ahead. Opportunity and stalemate were kindred spirits, success and failure so closely linked they were married cousins. Grasping the handle to the portal before him he took pause. He never knocked, except when on business. But today he did not feel like business, nor like play, nor like anything in-between. But he knocked anyway, and entered only when asked to do so.

Jack hated this place. Naztar resembled too much the human businessman and not enough the Kith he was. His Sage sat behind his oak desk, and on the opposite side was a tall, thin vampire and his blood slave. She was stunning. Her beauty took Jack by surprise, and he smiled revealing two pointed teeth. This was the kind of woman who could make even a vampire blush.

“You summoned me,” he said without taking his gaze from the girl.

“That I did. Jack, this is Trent Powers and his blood-slave Melanie Snell.”

“Blood-slave?” In fluid movements Jack kneeled before her as if in proposal. She smiled as he took her hand, a touch like silk over naked flesh, and kissing it he said, “You have not been Begotten.”

“Nor shall she be!” Trent growled and rose.

Naztar chuckled though his face remained stern. “You would be wise to regard my Progeny with respect. The Age may have brought a breed of Kith who abhor murder, but I assure you that Jack is of the old school.”

The Sage stood and casually walked around the desk. As he did so Jack caught a devious, yet worried glint in his eye.

Naztar spoke, “He is a chip off the old block. He finds Pleasure in selfishness, power and dominance.”

Naztar walked to the fire and stoked it. He and Melanie were the only two who did not flinch.

“Challenge him and you will have more than you can afford to purchase.”

Jack stood and bowed to Trent. “On the contrary, I meant you no disrespect.”

When he rose he stood chest to chest with the newcomer and said, “Nor do I believe you would me. You are no longer a Rogue, we are brothers in the Dark.”

Trent did not back down, but there was a nervousness in his tone. “I apologise if I seemed imprudent, I do get testy when my supply is threatened. Could we be shown to our quarters?”

Naztar opened the door but Jack spoke, “There is an empty room beside my kitchen. You will bunk there.”

The Sage added, "Jack will show you the way, but first wait outside. I have business with my Progeny."

"Of course," Trent rose and followed his blood-slave out. After Naztar closed the door Jack sat in Melanie's chair and kicked his feet onto the desk.

"You didn't summon me for an introduction, did you?"

Naztar walked to his Progeny. "That's what I like about you, your intelligence." He slapped the boy's legs from the desk sending the papers beneath them to the ground.

"What I don't care for is your lack of respect."

"He's a Christian, that was the odd sensation you felt."

"I figured as much." Naztar turned his back and Jack knew it was to hide his fear.

"I won't kill this one."

Naztar's eyes widened. "Oh?"

"I will corrupt him. Make him like us."

"I shall allow that, but I suspect it will be tougher than you believe."

Jack stared into his father's thoughtful gaze a moment. "Why?"

Naztar sat in the chair Trent had occupied only moments ago, staring at a jewel-crested gauntlet from the satchel.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“What a rush!” Melanie pirouetted once her and Trent were alone in their quarters.

The Kith just smiled.

The room was the size of a Vancouver apartment. A glass door tucked into the left-hand corner opposite the entrance lead to the washroom that was theirs. Walls, painted eggshell white, were chipped and mildew stained. Shag carpet, filthy with years of dust, covered the floors, and the air had a stench that took back both vampire and human. Trent carried their bags to the bureau and sat on the bed.

“We share the kitchen outside with Jack. For future reference, don’t be too loud.”

“Except for the moaning and groaning?” She waited for a response. “Sorry, just trying to make us believable.” Melanie walked to the bed and sat beside the Kith. “Trust me enough to share?”

Trent sighed and looked thoughtful a moment. “We should clean this place, it’s disgusting.”

“Come on, don’t change the subject.” She squeezed closer to him. “Is it because sex is against your religion?”

“It’s because promiscuity doesn’t honour God.”

“What about Minnow Creek’s pastor with the two car garage? Does his wealth honour God?”

The Kith took her hand and gently squeezed it. “Having sex before marriage is no more a sin than accumulating wealth. But just because one man breaks a Law while feeling self-righteous for having kept another doesn’t give us license to do the same.”

“Damned if we do, damned if we don’t?”

“We are saved by grace through faith. Damned if we do, damned if we don’t have Christ.”

Melanie put her head on his shoulder and sighed. Just then there was a knock on the door as of someone kicking. Trent stood and paused, but with nothing left to say he went to the door and opened it. There he found a tiny woman struggling beneath the weight of a large mirror. The Kith grabbed it with no effort and the girl zipped around him.

“Thanks! It’s yours, for your blood-slave of course.” Laughing she held out her hand to Melanie. “I’m Tammi.”

Trent kicked the door closed and placed the mirror on the bureau. “I’m Trent and this is Melanie.”

Melanie shook Tammi’s hand and stared at a large bruise on the woman’s cheek. “What happened?”

Tammi stammered, “I hit myself on the glass. I’m such a klutz.” After an uncomfortable silence she became bubbly again. “I’m so glad to have another girl my age here!”

“You’re a blood-slave too?”

“Y’know, I really hate that title.” Tammi glanced into the looking-glass and her eyes widened. “Did – did I just see your reflection? It was only for a second, but....”

Trent smiled with pride. “Don’t be ridiculous. Now, will you please excuse us?”

“Uh, Naztar wants you in a meeting pronto. Can I show Melanie around?”
Trent nodded.

Corridors, lit by halogen lamps dimly igniting freshly laid hardwood floors and pharmacy-green painted walls, bustled with Kith. The décor was a good sign that no interior decorators had been Begotten, though it did seem that Jack’s corner was the only part still in ruins. Some rooms echoed with Heavy Metal, others with the electronic tunes of the day but most with orgasmic choruses. Out in plain sight men took up with men, women with women, and human with Kith. Trent became so preoccupied with trying not to see while appearing at ease that he lost his way.

Every door looked the same, every hallway just another passage to impropriety. He stopped, lost, surrounded by the very sinful nature from which he struggled to stay free. That was when it returned to him, when it came with the force of a megaton bomb. That voice from the deepest chasm of his subconscious.

Do not be appalled at the sight of your true nature.

Sweat beaded on Trent’s brow, his hands shook and fear held his fast. He did not know how much time had passed between the Voice and Jack coming to him.

Jack said, “It’s easy to get lost, you should have waited for me.”

Trent still shook but he forced a smile upon himself.

Jack walked the Labyrinth like a man lost in it forever. He did not consider which paths to take, nor did he regard his Kith when he passed them. They did regard him, though, Trent noticed. Most stopped speaking, many bowed their heads, all displayed fear as if it should pass for respect. Jack walked with his head held high, staring straight ahead parting the masses with his gaze. Chest puffed out and lips pursed. Trent knew this was a Kith worth fearing.

But what, he wondered most, was what the Voice in Jack’s conscience said to make him believe this was Pleasure? Was it even that which drove this vampire, or was his motivation something else so vile that not even the vampire could comprehend? A part of Trent wished he could spy into the desires of Jack’s heart, but the rest of him was thankful he could not. Then he thought of his own Voice and of how overpowering it had been when he was alone. Living amongst Christians he had experienced a sanctity in Enemy territory, but now he walked in the heart of Enemy lands. He now knew. And it terrified him to know this, if he did not change them they would change him.

“Fear,” Jack said without so much as blinking.

“Huh?” Trent wondered of his subconscious meandering had given him away.

“In every Kith who would call me brother, I see fear.” Jack stopped before an unmarked door and grasped its handle. It was brass and the lever kind, not the usual round handles found on other doors. Trent wondered why he now paid attention on such mundane details.

Jack continued, his gaze penetrating, “You must have wondered why the son of Cimmerian’s most powerful Sage does not have friendships, but now you know.” Jack placed his hand on Trent’s shoulder. “Now come.”

At one time this room was most probably the plant manager’s. A space dedicated to deciding the company’s future, and the welfare of those very people who made that

future possible. Its current use was not any different, it was still a place where the future of its occupants were decided. What changed was the product by the plant, or was it? Trent wondered. Greed is greed is greed.

He followed Jack inside the well-lit room. The floors were laid with grey-blue carpet, the walls painted with a neutral eggshell white, and there was a door diagonal to the entrance which seemed, from the scent, to house a kitchen. Dominant in this room was a V shaped table where Naztar sat. Three people on either side branched off in descending order of authority. Jack walked to stand obediently beside his father.

Trent started to fidget, but caught himself and stopped.

“Mr. Powers,” Naztar said with the elegance of a noble. “Allow me to introduce to you the other Sages. To my right is Josh, Keith and Stone. To my left: Johann, Robert and Claude. For you to be accepted into our family you must first be adopted by a Sage. Is there one who will do so?”

Silence. Not one of the seven spoke. Trent’s heart thundered nearly a beat a minute and he worried they might hear.

Jack said, “I am not a Sage, nor am I strong enough to challenge for a seat, but there are moments when strength is not determined by what one can do but by what one will do.”

Naztar asked, “And what will you do, Jack?”

Jack deserted his post and walked to Trent, purposefully taking the route to pass Claude. He smiled when he met Trent’s gaze and he said, “I am willing to make this man my brother.”

“This charade has gone on long enough!” Claude stopped abruptly but Trent did not see the reason why. He could only assume it was Naztar, for it was he who spoke next.

“It pleases me when Kith act as kith. We are brothers in the same blood, and what we call ourselves is no misnomer. I shall take Trent as my own and appoint Jack as his tutor.”

Then Jack slit his wrist with his nail and held it for Trent. He said, “Drink and be one with me.”

Trent did not know what to do. Did partaking in this ritual betray God, or would his faith protect him from such judgement? Many Voices shouted answers and rationalisations in his subconscious so loud and so fervently that Trent did not know to which he had listened when he finally made his decision. He was not even certain when exactly he had taken Jack’s arm and drank.

“You are now my brother,” Jack said when Trent had finished.

Naztar applauded, his grin like a child’s on a bountiful Christmas morning. “Now we will feast to celebrate this union of Cimmeria and Rogue.”

“If it pleases you,” Jack said, “I would like to replenish my blood with my slave.”

Naztar nodded and his Protégé left. Trent sat, trembling, blood still fresh on his lips. As servants brought food from the adjoining room he had but one voice left in his mind that said, “What have I done?”



Melanie followed Tammi through dimly lit corridors. The scent of incense saturated the air around her, and a hollow echo from her footsteps on the cement floor made her

feel isolated. She glanced at her companion who walked a few paces faster than herself; her strides short but quick, her shoulders held back, and her chest out. Yet her soft stare into nowhere betrayed sadness. Melanie considered asking what her story was, how she'd become a blood-slave and why, but she considered it only for a second. Only as long as it took her to remember that if Tammi told of her story than she'd be expected to tell of hers. And she had no idea what Trent wanted her to tell people of their meeting.

"In this room is where I want to show you," Tammi said.

"Okay," Melanie followed her through a door that lead onto a balcony. It was small. Large enough to hold only a few people, and it overlooked a busy street where man-made glitter flickered as if pining for their attention. Walking to the edge of the balcony Melanie leaned against the railing, her eyes locking with a city teeming with life.

"It's beautiful," she whispered, pulling her shirt tighter to ward off a cool wind that had risen.

"That's not what I wanted to show you. Up there, the stars, that's why I come here."

Melanie followed to where Tammi pointed, her eyes landing on a sky exploded with light. Tammi sighed, resting her head against her palm.

"You probably don't care much about this, and if you want to leave I'll understand."

Melanie leaned against the railing and looked at her new friend, whose eyes had caught a shooting star. "I love the stars. I can't imagine how anyone could not."

"No? Then welcome to the Dark where your life's goal is to find Pleasure. Nature is not something we think of here, at least not unless a profit can be made from it."

"So how come you're different?"

"Because at one time I had one of those stars in my heart."

Melanie saw a look in the girl's eyes so deep that she had to look away or risk being swallowed by it. She looked down at a gold ring. "I like your band."

"It was my mother's, or so I've been told. She gave me up for adoption, so it's not like I can ask."

"Must have been tough, but I'm sure she still loved you."

"She tried to abort me herself several times. Doctors said I was lucky to be alive. I used to believe that it was God who saved me."

"Used to?"

"I don't believe in anything anymore."

"Tammi!" a voice bellowed from behind.

Turning, they saw Jack standing in the doorway. "It's time you returned to our quarters, I need your blood."

"I'll see you later," she said, never looking away from the floor as she walked back inside.

"Bye," Melanie called, but the only one left to hear her was Jack.

He stood at the door, leaning against its frame. Cocking his head to the left he folded his arms in front of his chest and smiled; his lips crooked and one tooth hanging out.

"You're afraid."

Melanie turned her gaze back at the stars. "Why would you say that?"

"I can smell it."

"You smell my cold."

"If you feel chilled, come inside."

Melanie wondered what to say now. She didn't want to go near him, truth was he did frighten her, but would she be giving herself away if she didn't?

He chuckled. "There was a time when I, too, tried to enter a new life. One that I did not belong to."

A cloud covered sky cried melancholy over a world anticipating joy. Grass grew straight as pins like a moat around a three room building with a cement bridge over the green leading from road to door; above which was a placard, "We need to talk - God", swinging in tune with the wind. Glass walls gave an aquarium view of those inside who smiled, laughed and shook hands. Their greeting was gentle and respectful, each one not noticing the others Sunday attire.

Jack considered his Sunday attire. It was no different than that of his Monday, Tuesday, or any other day attire. He had on the same sneakers that Todd had spilt beer over, the same blue jeans he'd dropped a cigarette on and the same T-shirt and leather jacket he'd worn when he punched out the bouncer. *Why am I here*, he wondered. He recalled his conversation with Todd, his best friend since junior high, and wondered if his bud had been right.

"What the Hell you need that shit for?" he'd asked plainly.

Jack recalled that the bar had been crowded, they were standing with no where to sit, and he was on his third Blue. Audra, an on-again off-again fling, was dancing with some stranger on the dance floor. All in all, until this conversation, it was a night like any other.

"I just can't go on like this."

"You a cripple? You look well enough to me, so why go lookin' for a crutch?"

"I'm not looking for a crutch, I'm looking for a door. I don't belong here. I never have."

Todd signalled the waitress. "You need another beer."

"You aren't listening to me!" And that was when he'd pushed Todd, who bumped into a crowd of guys, thus beginning a fight that ended the night.

Taking a few steps forward he stopped, ran his hand through his hair, and spun to leave. There was a tall, cloaked figure looming behind him. His skin was nearly transparent, his eyes a shade of blue like the lake's in Jasper and a smile as empty as Jack's heart. They stared at one another until Jack said, "What?"

"I could ask you the same thing. What do you think to find here? What is it you seek? From what are you running?"

"I'm about to lose my patience pal."

"You will lose more than that should you venture within those walls. Your identity, your free will. You do not belong here."

Jack shook his head and turned to leave, but, faced with a young woman whose blonde hair and green eyes made him take pause, he stopped. The cloaked figure had disappeared.

"Hi," she said. At first Jack could not say anything, for rather than words his mind raced with images. Scenes of all the things he'd done and of how she'd despise him for it. If only, and when only, she knew of them.

The woman said, "Are you coming in?"

Jack considered again. "Uh, no. I was just..." he could no longer look at her.

"I'm Cecil. It would be wonderful if you came in. You could sit with me and I'll introduce you to everyone."

"Thanks. I'm Jack."

Cecil smiled and took his hand. Her skin on his felt strange, as if their union opened a door to a world flooded with light. But although the door was open, Jack still resided on that side of darkness. Sighing, he ran his free hand through his hair and followed the woman inside. It was strange being someplace where everyone who asked his name did not follow it with, "Turn to the left please." The faces smiled, eyes sparkled and whispers of "Have you accepted Christ as your personal saviour?" echoed around him. All in all it was different from anything he'd known before, and yet it was as familiar as if he'd come home. For the first time in Jack's life he felt truly happy.

Cecil led him into a room off the greeting area. "This is where we have our Bible studies, I'll introduce you to everyone." She let go of his hand and entered a large, spacious area with a table set with seven chairs, only one of which was empty. They sat boy-girl, boy-girl, boy-boy, with an empty seat between the two side by side males. Cecil walked up to the table and said, "This is Jack, he'd like to join us. Why don't we all introduce ourselves?"

They did:

"David," he was tall, thin and wiry. Small, round spectacles sat on his nose and his short black hair was cut as if under a bowl.

"Caitlin," who was a tall, plump girl in her mid-twenties. Long blonde hair rose high above her head and she wore many rings on her hands.

"Dan," the voice was deep and melodic. He was short, round and had rosy cheeks.

"Bella," the girl said as she snuggled closer to Dan. She looked like the feminine version of her boyfriend.

"Timothy ... never Tim." This man looked into his early thirties and was very tall and very fat.

"And I'm Phil, we'll quiz you on this later," he said and winked at Cecil who had laughed. This one was tall, slender and very muscular. His hair was receding but he could not have been older than twenty-nine, yet he wore a very expensive suit. Again Jack thought of his horrid attire.

Cecil took the empty seat as Phil reached behind him to a stack of chairs and placed one between himself and David. Jack sat, reluctantly, curious of the dynamic upon which he had stumbled and how he might influence it. The group opened their Bible's to begin their study, Phil letting Jack read from his, strengthening the voice that said, *You will never belong*. But he was here now, the first step in what appeared to be a long road ahead.

"What's going on here?" said another man from deeper within the hall.

Jack did not turn around, but stared into Melanie's eyes as if he were reading her mind. "I was just saying good-bye."

Trent stepped out from the dark corridor, his form appearing as if it were crafted by night. "Then do so and leave."

Jack walked to stand face to face with Trent. He smiled, and narrowed his eyes. "You remind me of someone."

"Do I?" Trent felt glad that his heart could not race when he was afraid.

“Have you ever had a true friend, one who read your thoughts because he shared them?”

“Before I became a Kith, yes.”

“Strange how we can be creatures of Pleasure, and only experience that kind of fellowship as a human.”

As Jack walked into the café he could not look above the floor. This place was a shadow of his former life; groups of people were laughing, a couple was on their first date and yet another was on their last. He wondered on his reasons for being there. Was he exchanging the smoke-laden clubs for the caffeine-aromatic café's because he was on a road to self-improvement, or was he just trying to live a life of perceived self-fulfilment? He suddenly became very aware that he was blocking the entrance.

He entered and stood in line. A man strummed guitar, but no words accompanied the chords. Two cash registers rang in the background as the line moved at a steady pace. There was a menu made out with chalk, advertising the various items; most of which were new to Jack.

“What can I get for you?” a young woman asked from behind the counter. She had long blonde hair and that look of innocence for which Jack so yearned to recapture. He smiled, ran his fingers through his hair, and shrugged.

“Coffee, I guess.”

“What size, light or dark?” her words echoed with impatient mutterings from the line-up.

“Uh, medium and light ... no, dark.” He threw down a two dollar bill.

Taking the fresh-brewed cup of coffee from the counter he then walked outside to the patio. For solitude he chose a table that was at the edge of the rest but still under the canopy. He sat. Held his mug. And wondered what the Hell he was doing. Was this the life he sought? One devoid of friends, of anything familiar, of what he recognised as life?

“Can I join you?” It was Cecil standing beside him with a medium sized cup topped with whipping cream. She had her purse slung over her shoulder, and wore a white hand knitted sweater with a long, black skirt. Her hair was tied back in a pony tail and her lipstick was fresh. But it was her scent that most caught Jack, that of roses. He smiled.

“Of course you can join me. What brings you here?”

She smiled wide and could not look at him. Mumbling she started to say, “Just wanted a cup of Java,” but at the tail end of her words she just shrugged.

“I'm glad you're here.” He sipped his drink and tried to hide that it burned his lips. “I was starting to feel a little alone in the world.”

“What you need is a hobby. Something to keep you occupied.”

“And what's yours?” Jack asked, taking her sudden fit of giggles as a sign that it was something interesting. He urged, “Come on now, you have to tell me.”

“I collect stamps.”

“Huh.” He wasn't sure if he could feign interest in that, no matter how cute Cecil was. But when she started laughing he realised she was playing him.

“I was only kidding. I'm into archery, I started shooting competitively about five years ago.”

"Wow. I never would have guessed that. I sort of have a hobby too, I guess."

"Not really great with committing, are you?"

"I'm the kind of guy who can't even stay on one radio station for the duration of a song, even if I like it, for fear that a better song may be just down the dial."

Cecil grinned. "You're trying to change the subject."

"I thought I just did."

"Nice try! Now what's this hobby of yours?"

There was a moment while his face turned crimson. He considered, then said, "I write poetry."

"What?"

He sighed. "I write poetry." Nothing was said between them so Jack decided to add, "I'm not coming out of the closet here, I'm a heterosexual guy who happens to write poetry."

She laughed. "I never thought you were gay! Can I see some?"

"Uhhhh, yeah." He reached inside his pocket and produced what he'd crafted last night. Staring at the folded paper he sighed and handed it to her. Cecil opened it carefully and read it. When she finished there was a pregnant pause and another smile. He said, "I know it isn't great, except maybe in a greeting card kind of way, but it's mine."

Cecil read:

"Try"

*My heart does not need one more day
To know your love's the only way
We'll go this path now hand in hand
We need not fear nor ever now land*

*The skies around have turned to blue
The sun that shines, shines anew
And though the clouds may come again
Our love will stay long past the end*

*But if night comes and all turns dark
We need not fear to follow our spark
Our love will lead a way together
The end won't come, not now nor ever*

*Fear of hurt so strong in our eyes
Please take my hand, say you'll try
We know love lasts in so very few
So take this chance, for this be true*

She looked at him, smiling, and whispered, "It's wonderful Jack."

He reached out and caressed her cheek with the back of his fingers. They were both silent now, each one realising that more was happening than either had considered

possible. Jack sat back in his chair, wishing that his conscience would leave him be to become one with this moment.

“Cecil was the closest friend I’d ever had before I became Kith.”

Trent pretended to stare off the balcony at the bright neon lights. But out the corner of his eye he watched Jack speak of this woman through stern lips and narrowed eyes. He wondered what she could have done that was so awful, certainly a broken heart did not justify his current life.

Trent considered carefully what to say. “Do you feel the emptiness as well, Jack?”

“I do.” He raised his right hand and ran it through his hair. As he did so his sleeve fell to his elbow and he said, “What do you say that you and I recapture that kind of companionship now that our consciences are at rest?”

Trent opened his mouth to speak, but suddenly grabbed Jack’s wrist. On it he saw a band woven from red and black string.

“Where did you get such a thing?” Trent’s eyes burned.

Jack turned his wrist to fog and released himself. He stepped into the hallway and from the din he answered: “I took it from a woman I killed.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Melanie shut the door to their quarters, curious of why Trent hadn't said anything. He paced in the tiny room, holding his head between his palms and clenching his eyes shut. He frightened her, and she wondered why he was so upset. She considered asking, but decided not to. But there was one thing on her mind that she could not ignore.

"They know who we are, Trent."

The Kith said nothing. She scanned the room with hopes of starting a conversation, and stopped when her eyes landed on the mirror.

"Trent! You have a reflection!"

But when he opened his eyes to see it the image disappeared. He grabbed a nearby chair and threw it into it, shattering the glass. Melanie backed away, stopped only by the door. Trent's anger abated when he saw his image in her eyes; a reflection of her fear, not his soul.

"What manner of madness have I trapped myself in?" He collapsed onto the bed, the tail end of his words muffled as he covered his face in his palms.

Melanie took a step near him, and when he didn't lash out she took another. He raised his face from out of his palms, the tears still falling from his chin. He smiled.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. It's just ... but I...."

Melanie relaxed, her heart slowed and her muscles melted.

"They know who we are. They know you are a Christian, and they think I am too." She walked to the bed and sat next to him, wrapping one arm around his shoulders and wiping away the tears with the other. She smiled and gave him a gentle hug.

"We have to leave."

"No. No one knows us."

"How can you say that?"

Trent met her gaze, their face inches away, each feeling the other's hot breath against their lips.

Trent whispered, "Do not question me."

Melanie felt a shiver pass through her; as if a Spirit were cast out from the Kith next to her. Cold sweat perspired on her brow and she had a strange sensation to kiss him. A quiet voice whispered deep in her mind, not loud enough for her to hear but loud enough to know what it wanted of her.

She reached out for his knee, and when he did not back away she caressed her other hand down his spine. She leaned in to kiss him, and when their lips touched she moved her hand from his knee to his crotch. But when she put her tongue in his mouth he leapt away.

"No, Melanie! I still belong to God."

"I? -I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me."

He smiled and turned back to her, closing his eyes and sighing.

And then he kissed her. Mouth on mouth, tongue against tongue, a sensation like none Melanie had ever believed possible



Jack sat inside Naztar's office, his feet upon the desk and a smile gracing his lips. He watched his Sage, a Kith nervous for the first time, yet so intent on revenge that he ignored all other emotions. *Who do you hate so much?* Jack wondered.

"I wasn't sure where Trent came from until today. He is the brother of Keelin, the last Rogue to attempt conversion."

Naztar picked up his son by the throat and slammed him against a wall. Jack did not see it coming, nor had he any immediate response for such an uncharacteristic action. The Sage growled, "That is an insinuation you must know, not assume. How can you think to know the mind of a Christian so well?"

"Because I tried to be one of them."

The room was large and spacious. Walls were adorned with images; renderings of a long-haired fellow in tattered clothes ministering to people who appeared to be just like him. Mixed into those scenes were paintings of that same fellow nailed to a cross, yet still ministering to those who betrayed him. One stood out. It was of this man wearing a crown of thorns, out of each needle blood dripped. His hands were bound and his face forlorn, beneath read the caption: "What has God done for me?"

Jack sat alone at a table large enough to have ten chairs around it. Outside in the sanctuary music, live musicians whom he'd begun to call friends, played tunes unfamiliar to him. He sat hunched over the table, his hands clasped to an NIV translation of the Holy Bible. The music continued, and so long as it did so would his solace.

There was a voice within him, one he could not hear but knew as "intuition", that told him he did not belong here. He was a fraud, he was exactly the thing they preached against. And once these truth seekers learned of who he was they would shun him. Jack looked at the pictures of the messianic figure and felt the voice say, "Yes, Him too." Sighing, Jack returned his gaze to the book lying before him.

The music stopped. The first person to enter was Cecil, who smiled when she saw Jack. Following her was David and Caitlin, Dan and Bella, Timothy and lastly, Phil. Cecil sat between the latter two men on the opposite side from Jack. Jack was not certain why she never sat with him when in the company of her friends, but that voice told him this was further proof that he did not belong here.

David said, taking out a Bible of his own along with a folder that read: Studies for the Growing Christian. "Hi Jack. Really good to see you again. How was your week?"

That voice emerged in his mind again. It told him that this inquiry was an attempt to discredit him, to prove that he was not Christian enough to be here.

Jack answered, "My week rocked, eh. You?"

"I had a lot of studying to do for mid-terms."

That voice again: *Hear that? A shot because you are not an educated man.* Jack sighed and wondered why everything went silent. He wished he could leave.

Tim broke the stillness. "Has everyone turned in their forms for camp this weekend?"

Jack gave Cecil a perplexed look and she said, "Every Thanksgiving weekend we have a camp for the youth. It's a lot of fun, you should come."

"It costs twenty-five bucks," Phil added.

Another shot, Jack thought. Then aloud he said, "I think I can handle that."

"Oh," Tim sounded surprised. "Well, if you want to come I'll get you a form to fill out. Remind me after service."

Jack wondered what exactly he was getting himself into. It seemed to him that if they really wanted him to come they would have told him sooner. But they hadn't, and he wondered why.

Naztar let his son go and sat behind his desk. "So kill him, don't tell me you have gone soft."

"No, Father, I have not." Jack returned to his chair and kicked his feet upon the desk. Both Kiths glared at one another, until Naztar focused on the computer before him.

"Then what is it?"

"I want to know why he is here."

"To avenge his sister."

"It is not that way with Christians. There is more, and I want to know what."

A long, winding dirt road led from the highway to a football size green field. The road was narrow, cast over by shadows and had deep tire impressions from past travellers. Some impressions stayed true, others veered near the edge while many ran off into the ditch. Jack wondered if he would stay true on his road. Unlike those whom he followed his car was large and powerful, meant more for a hard, fast life than the practicality from which he now demanded. He sighed.

"You are going to love this camp," Cecil exclaimed from the passenger seat. "We come here every Thanksgiving weekend, and it's such a blast."

Jack said nothing as he pulled off the road and into the field. He parked in line with all the other cars, smiled at his passenger and considered his predicament. With all their talk of acceptance, of unconditional love and freedom of sin through Christ, what would they do should they be told of everything of his past (including those things he only recently admitted to himself).

"I think I maybe want to give my testimony at the fire tonight," he said, breaking his silence.

She gave him that empathetic look and smiled sweetly. "You don't have to."

"I do. I want a life with honesty, one that I never have to be afraid of what you might learn of me."

Reaching out she hugged him and whispered, "You never have to be afraid, Jack."

He held her back, ignoring the voice that said this would be their last embrace.

Jack watched from a distance a bonfire cutting through a seemingly impenetrable darkness. Red flames flickered from a blue base, sending shards of ashes into the air. Tiny specs of fire competed high above with the stars, but each one relinquished with a snapping sound. The Heavens mastered the night with a bright white moon crowded against the busy stars. Jack's vision returned to the fire below, where silhouettes of youths and leaders clambered for warmth.

“And where do you belong, Jack?” It was that cloaked figure again. “In the Heavens following blindly or within the flames as a man of his own destiny?”

Jack did not face the stranger. He stayed fixated on the group of people whom he wanted so much to call friends.

The figure said, “If only you belonged, but you do not. The names of those who are saved are written, you are not among them.”

“You cannot tempt me.”

He laughed. “I don’t need to tempt you. All I need is to echo your thoughts, and remind you of who you are.”

Jack turned to face this stranger but he was nowhere to be seen. The only sound were those of crickets and frogs, the only vision was that of the fire that awaited him. He sighed, pulled his long hair into a pony-tail and walked to the future.

The flames flickered bright and blinded those around it to their surroundings. Cecil shared a blanket with two of the teenage girls, and from them sat the rest of the leaders interspersed with youths. Jack sat across the fire from Cecil, beside Bella and Dan. He sighed.

Tim began, “Welcome to the first night of youth camp. After a short study of Mark 7:14-23, we’ll toast marshmallows by this wonderful fire. Let’s all thank Phil for his craftsmanship.” There was applause. “First let’s pray, then we’ll have a testimony by...” he looked quizzical.

“Jack,” said Cecil.

“Sorry,” Tim continued without even making eye contact with Jack who’s thoughts rambled with regrets. Then after a short prayer he said, “Now we can hear the testimony.”

All eyes were upon him now, all ears waiting to have their questions of him answered. Jack took a deep breath, looked up to the stars, but could not see them for the flames before him.

“My name is Jack Calloway and I grew up in the Core of Winnipeg. My parents divorced when I was a kid, and my single Mom raised me. When I was fourteen I decided to live with my Dad, even though he was an abusive alcoholic.” Jack felt his voice cut off and his heart swell with emotions that he’d forgotten even existed. Tears swelled in his eyes, purging from his soul anger, hatred and regret. He could not look into anyone’s eyes as he said, “The first night I was there my Dad got drunk and forced his wife to have sex with him. She was screaming for him to stop, and rather than do something about it I put on headphones and blasted my tunes. I let it happen and ran back to live with my Mom the next day.

“A year later I was so filled with self-hatred that I began drinking. Becoming my father was a way of punishing myself for not stopping my Dad that night. I got into a lot of fights as a way to release my anger, but nothing I did was ever enough. I still don’t think I deserve redemption.”

Jack broke down and let the tears flow freely. The people around him were silent, save for Bella who embraced him and said, “It’s okay.”

He rose, walked off away from the fire, beneath the stars, against the night. And he did so alone. Jack stumbled in the darkness until he came behind a deserted cabin. Leaning against its wall he slid to the sod below. Again the stranger found him: “I tried to warn

you. These Christians know nothing of the secular world except what they read in books or see in movies. It does not matter if your heart has changed, they will forever see you as tarnished by their prejudice.”

“Why can’t you leave me alone?” Jack sobbed.

“You and I are men cut from the same cloth.”

“We are nothing alike.”

“Then where are those others in whose trust you so foolishly believed?”

Jack looked up but the man was gone. He was in total solitude, but he could hear the songs of those to whom he’d just poured his heart. The most distinct voice was Cecil’s as she belted out words of forgiveness and redemption. He wondered what to do.

Naztar looked away from the screen at his Progeny. He folded his arms in front of his chest and sighed; his eyes narrowing as if he were trying to see through him.

“What if he is here to convert us?”

“Christians do not convert those like us. You taught me that.”

Naztar leaned a bit in his chair and rubbed the bottom of his chin. “Do you have a plan?”

Jack rose and walked to the window. He stared at the planks as though he stared at a world beyond. He imitated his father by folding his arms across his chest, but instead of a sigh he growled: “I have had a plan since the moment I heard Keelin scream to him for help.”

“Get your blood-slave Trent, we’re going drinking.”

Trent stood before the stove, stirring a crock-pot of various meats and vegetables. He glanced over his shoulder at Jack who stood at the door-way, with Tammi clinging to his waist.

“I just started cooking.”

“What’s the matter?” Jack marched to the stove and leaned on it, “Afraid I’ll see what a lush you are?”

Jack brushed his hand through his hair, and as his sleeve fell down his forearm Keelin’s band caught Trent’s eye. The Kith cook tightened his grip on the ladle and said, “Give us awhile to get ready.”

Jack grinned.

Melanie slumped into her cushioned chair and stared at her reflection in the mirror. Images flashed into her mind from the night before, but they were not in chronological order. It were as if her memory had been diced and mixed in a bowl, and it confused her.

She remembered the first time Matt touched her. She’d felt apprehensive, unsure if she really wanted it. He’d told her that her feelings were a product of Society, and that she should have free will to make her own choice. Their souls belonged to no one but themselves, and therefore good and evil existed only in the boundary of their hearts. And how bad could something be that felt so good?

Trent's hands on her had transformed her veins to wires, and the electricity his touch generated was too high a voltage for them. He had felt so right and yet had stopped himself. His good and evil, according to Matt's logic, was brainwashing by Society. But Trent cared for his principles so much that he'd die for them. Whereas Matt ... she'd never forgive the bastard for cheating on her.

Right, wrong, good, evil ... what were they to her? Was it the deed that was wrong, or the person with whom she had shared it? She sighed, and buried her face in her palms.

Trent burst through the door from the common room. Melanie looked up at him, saw he carried a bowl of piping hot stew, and sat back in her chair.

He threw the bowl onto the bureau, oblivious that it spilled. "Eat up and get dressed. We're going out."

He had that same tone in his voice and glint in his eye as when he'd seen Jack's ring. She opened her mouth to speak but chose not to when he glared at her. Grabbing the spoon she dumped some into her mouth, but spit it out.

"Ouch!" she cried and stood.

Trent grabbed the bowl and threw it into the trash. "We have no time for that. Just get ready." He walked to her closet, sifted through her clothes, and picked out a see-through dress. "Wear this with your black underwear and heels. Do your hair frizzy and wild...."

"Okay, Trent, I got it, you want me to look sexy. Just where are we going?"

He marched to the chair that she'd been sitting in, moved it to a wall, and sat facing her. "To a night club. Jack wants us to get drunk with him."

"You've got to pretend to be wasted? Have you ever been?" She forced a smile, but the edges of her lips fought against it.

Trent breathed hard and clenched his fists. His eyes glossed over with a crimson shield, and his eye-teeth turned into fangs. "Just get ready," he snarled.

Thicker even than the smoky air was the beat from the music cast out by multiple speakers set strategically around the room. Melanie leaned against a gold railing that made up the edge of the wet-bar, donning the garb Trent had demanded she wear. She had also put on black lipstick and eyeliner, and had painted her nails with black. She swayed her hips to the beat of the music.

Trent stood on her right, arms crossed over his chest, and eyes panning the crowded room as an animal surveying its territory. The club, ironically named "Blood Transfusion," was hot but her Kith "Sage" wore his long trench coat, dress shirt, Jeans, and boots.

Tammi had her arms crossed over her chest as well, but it seemed more a gesture to hide her body than to display dominance. She wore a tight black miniskirt, bra and spiked heels; obviously a command from her "commander." As for Jack, he wore an outdated Ozzy T-shirt and ripped Jeans. As was the entire club, they were all clad in black.

The waitress came around again with shooters: Blood Clot, Artery, and Anaemia. But Melanie declined. She'd already had more than enough and the last thing she wanted was to get loose in the tongue.

Jack stopped the barmaid and held up four fingers, pointing at the Blood Clots. Melanie shivered from the thought of the strange texture those had, and glanced at Trent when Jack put two in front of her.

“Just like when we were mortal, isn’t it?”

Jack sat at his usual table on the café patio. Rain poured from the grey sky but the moist air was warm. Unlike the covered sky the white loose leaf before Jack remained blank. His mind raced with thoughts, so many that he could not settle on one. He reached for the steaming cup of Java, one for which he now need only say “the regular” to get, and brought it to his lips.

He considered for a moment his friendship with Cecil. Their bond was based on truth; he had nothing to hide from her because he did not hide anything from her. Then he thought of Audra, a friendship based on mutual blindness. They had nothing to hide because they shared nothing; each one afraid of the other seeing into their soul.

Jack picked up his pen and scrawled a few words onto paper. As he did so he wondered why his conscience relaxed when he was with Audra but fought when he was with Cecil. Could it be that he does not belong in the house of God, did his presence risk corrupting them all? Would they elevate him or would he drag them down?

“So this is what you’ve been up to,” Audra said as she walked from the downpour to sit across from Jack.

“Did I welcome you? There’s plenty of empty seats inside.”

Audra stared at him with her lips pursed in a pout. Her long dark hair was wet and clingy against her round face and her nose was crinkled. Taking out a smoke she mumbled, “Guess I don’t have to ask if you’ve been avoiding me.” Then for him to hear: “I came to tell you it’s Cindy’s birthday at the Puzzle.”

“Thanks. Message delivered.” Jack never looked away from the lined paper before him.

Audra stood and turned to leave. But facing Jack she said, “Are all your holy roller friends as judgmental as you?”

Jack looked up, closed his eyes and sighed. “Sorry. I guess when you never called, well, it hurt me.”

“You could have called.”

“I’ve been going through something.”

She sat again. “Care to talk?”

Jack folded his binder and capped his pen. “Since when did we ever talk about anything?”

“Piss off Jack! I came here because I thought we were friends, but if you’ve become too good for me then to Hell with you!”

She stormed off leaving Jack speechless to stare after her. Resting his elbows on the table he leaned his head into his palms and wondered what was becoming of his life.



Music. Drums pounding, guitars wailing and a baritone howl tying the two together. Jack cranked the volume up a notch and walked to the window. The sky was only a shade

darker than his room, but outside a light rain that had only begun illuminated the ground. Jack pressed his palm against the pane, sighed and grit his teeth. The world outside manifested what was his life: the darkness which rained its frozen mourning insulated the life that grew upon the Earth, just as hatred protected what was inside Jack. He wondered how long it would take before the frost suffocated the spirit rather than sheltered it.

Another scream, but this time it was not from the music. This one was more powerful than the Heavy Metal. Jack gave the volume another crank. Somewhere amidst the song a phone rang, and one ring before the machine would have picked up Jack grabbed the receiver. He sighed again.

"Hello?"

"Jack?" a man screamed over the music from his end of the line.

"Yeah. Todd? Where are you?"

"*At the Puzzle ... turn down your tunes man, I can hardly hear you.*"

Jack said nothing. Then he whispered, "Can't."

"*What? Is something happening?*"

Jack turned down the music and a shouting rose from the floor below. "The couple below me are fighting again."

"*Shit. Look, we're all at the Puzzle, why don't you come down?*"

"Can't."

"*Why, you aren't allowed to have friends outside your Church?*"

"No, I'm supposed to meet Cecil. You sound like Audra."

"*She's here.*"

"Oh."

"*I'll grab a table away from her. Come on man, you're not doing anything wrong just hangin' out.*"

"I'll be there. Right after I call Cecil."

"*Ask her to come.*"

"I'm not telling her where I'm going. I'll say I'm going to the café and need to be alone."

Jack said good-bye and placed the handset onto the cradle. The noise from the couple below grew louder, making Jack wish he could afford a home with thicker walls. He picked up the receiver and considered what he was about to do. He was about to consciously lie to someone with whom he had shared a total honesty.

Bringing the phone to his ear Jack dialled and waited.

"Hello?" Cecil said from the other end.

"Hey, it's Jack. Listen, I can't make it tonight. Let's do this tomorrow, okay?"

"*Okay, where are you going?*"

"Just out."

"*Where?*"

"*Would you get off my case? Jesus, you'd think I was the fallen angel himself!*"

"*That was unnecessary, and don't take the Lord's name in vain!*"

"Relax! I'll call you tomorrow, okay?"

"*Maybe it would be easier on you if you just never called!*"

“What?”

Jack slammed down the phone and cursed under his breath. A woman started hollering from below as he gathered his coat, keys and wallet. Leaving the apartment he walked down the hall and ran down the stairs to the first floor. The man who lived below him was leaving also and tried bumping Jack out of the way to get to the door first. Jack grabbed him and slammed him against the wall.

“Buddy, you may pick on your wife but you’d best think twice with me.”

“Fuck you,” the man said and punched Jack in the face.

“That all you got?” Jack hit and hit hard. Twice in the jaw, once in the gut. The man went down.

Filled with rage Jack stormed from the building.

He glared at her, the crimson still locked where an icy blue had once reigned.

She grabbed them, shot them down, and swayed. Jack walked around her to stand before her Sage.

“How about you Trent? Are you ready for a drink.”

There was one star in the sky whose brightness masked all others. A grey swirl of cloud covered much of the sky, save for an island of black where that lone star shone. Below the ether the air was calm, yet saturated with the scent of Columbia. A café, hidden within the midst of retail outlets, grocers and a movie complex, acted like a magnet with its aroma as its pulling force. Tables, overstuffed chairs and couches filled within and without onto a patio for the overflow. Cecil sat alone at the table where she often found Jack reading. The large cup of coffee, half drunk, was on the table before her. A muffin lay untouched beside it.

“Did you think he’d change?” a deep voice said from behind.

Cecil did not turn. She stayed focused on the mug, the table, and the empty chair. A tall, slender but well-muscled man walked around to the vacant seat. Pulling it back he tossed his long, dark hair away from his eyes with one hand. Cecil immediately grabbed the chair with her foot and yanked it back flush with the table.

She growled, “It’s taken.”

“By who? By Jack?”

Cecil could not meet the dark gaze that studied her.

He forced the chair free and sat. “I’m Todd. Jack’s best friend.”

“If you are, then why not encourage him? He’s becoming such a great person!”

“I’ve news for you lady, to some he has always been a great person. And not one of anyone’s making.”

“You make it sound like we’re manipulating him.”

“Aren’t you? Will you ever see beyond his past? Tell me you’re not afraid that his past won’t become his present?”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because Jack is losing the people who accept him for who he is, and he’s gaining friends who accept him in spite of who he was.”

“You don’t get it.”

“No? Then why are you here? Where is it that you think Jack is, and why can’t you trust him there?”

Cecil opened her mouth to speak in her defence but Todd rose. She finally looked up into his eyes and saw by his smile that he was mocking her. As he walked away an intense dislike grew in her heart, but it was not for him. It was for the mistrust she felt for Jack.

Trent stared at the glasses before him. He listened to the multitude of Voices in his mind until they chorused into one. Finally he said, “I am.”

“Then follow me.”

Jack grabbed Tammi and marched to the shooter bar. Melanie felt Trent grab her arm and pull her to follow, and she wondered how he planned to fake a blood-drink. The evil Kith spoke to the bartender and handed him some money. The bartender pressed a button beneath his counter, and a door swung open on the wall. The four of them filed inside.

Jack stood outside the building for a moment longer. Neon lights from a sign that read “Puzzle” pierced the night with a myriad of colours: red, yellow, and green. This shroud shone over the lone man who stood beneath it. The doorway, innocent enough, was the entrance to the Pandora’s box where he would find a dream. An apparition far removed from Heaven. His leather jacket was unzipped halfway, a forest-green dress shirt peeked from beneath, and blue jeans hugged his torso. He tucked his bare hands into shallow pockets as the wind tossed about his long brown hair. The cold wrapped him in an icy embrace, and when he sighed that embrace grew tighter.

Jack took a step forward, followed by another and another. His shoes made a hollow sound against the night, but not nearly as hollow as the thump of his heart. He reached out for the door handle, shuddered from tremors the music inside made, and suddenly words consumed his thoughts:

*As time goes on we do forget
Love we lost; our every regret
Our shattered dreams, our broken hearts
The endless nights we spent apart*

Jack opened the door, but before he entered a voice said from behind: “Such sorrow for a man seeking Pleasure.”

Jack glanced over his shoulder and saw a tall man clad in a black trench coat. “Do I know you?”

The stranger crossed his arms. He grinned, a deep chuckle rising from his diaphragm, and as his eyes narrowed Jack had the distinct feeling he was being sized up for dinner. The man clad in black asked, “Tell me what you desire, and I will deliver that to you.”

“And who are you, The Prince of Darkness? If I sell you my soul will you make all my dreams come true?”

“Precisely.”

“Holy shit this world is full of freaks.” Jack flipped him his middle finger, added: “Fuck you man,” and entered. He forced his way against the music, into the smoky darkness,

where projectors cast nonsensical images of varying colours and shapes against the walls. Those strange forms, twisting against their black screen, seemingly gave embodiment to the turmoil in his soul. Lava lamps suspended from rafters twisted and people scattered about the almost barren interior crowded against a single counter. They fought against one another for the attention of whoever stood behind it, and that person offered himself to whomever asked. And that was not at all unlike Jack's dream.

He spied his friends tucked against a corner and, as he pushed his way through the crowd toward them, Jack glanced at the dance floor. He saw Cindy, a crowd of strange men, and ... her. His heart pounded against his chest in time with the music. He closed his eyes to try and regain control over his breathing that had suddenly become a chore, but when he opened them she was still there. His only consolation was that she had not noticed him. He continued toward his friends.

*But if time passes and you still remember
The love you shared with no surrender
What would you do should I come by
Could you love again; would it be truth or lie?*

"Hey," Jack grunted as he sat next to Todd, the tallest of his companions.

"We are going to have fun tonight!" Todd never looked at his friend, he only nodded, as was the customary greeting in these establishments, and glanced toward the dance floor. Jack's eyes followed his friend's vision; again he saw her. She was wearing a tight body suit that advertised her slender figure. Her nails were painted a solid black and her hair was done up in pig-tails. She moved in such a way that the men around her were ensnared as if by enchantment, just as Jack was. He looked at his watch, sighed, and cursed under his breath.

"I said," Todd spoke louder, "we are going to have fun tonight!" but when he looked at his friend and saw the bulge over his eye he muttered, "What the hell happened?"

"Where are the others?" Jack's eyes never left her; she still had not noticed him. Todd shook his head and pointed to another table at the other end of the room. Without a word Jack made his way there, where three people sat along a cushioned bench that rimmed a "U" shaped booth. Two girls smiled and waved, and the lone male just nodded. Jack did not sit.

"Hey, where's the birthday girl?"

"Cindy's dancing. Everybody's on the floor."

"I know. I saw ... everyone ... else." He hoped the tone in his voice didn't give away his emotions.

"Jack!" a voice squealed from behind, and he knew it was she.

*Could you look in my eyes and see my soul
Could you see past the surface beneath the role
Into a heart which kindness crafted
For a love not even time outlasted*

Jack painted on a smile and was suddenly thankful for the dark, smoky atmosphere. Blood burned in his cheeks and the ends of his lips had begun to quiver. He looked at his watch again and wondered just how short he could make this appearance.

“Hey Audra. Where’s the birthday girl?”

“Still dancing.” Audra squeezed up next to him, closed her eyes and swayed to the music. Whether she hadn’t noticed his bruise or simply didn’t care Jack wasn’t certain.

“I see you’ve been drinking.” Jack wanted to move away from her. It was a mistake to be this close, to feel her warmth against him, warmth that masked the cold within.

“So where’s Cecil?” Her voice sounded indifferent, so much so that Jack had to look at her, into her grin to remind himself that she didn’t give a damn. When he met her brown eyes he paused; it was as if they were magical balls that transfixed whatever dared meet them, but when she smiled she did so as if to release him. Jack wondered why she asked, why she pretended to care, and why she included him in this game.

“She’s not coming.” Jack paused as Audra pressed closer to him. *Tell her why*, he thought. But he only said, “She ... has to work.”

“Oh. That’s too bad.” Her lips were next to his ear and she had wrapped her arm around his. Jack wished he could push her away, wished he could tell her he was not entrapped by her charm, but most of all he wished he could give in to her freely. And that when she gave in to him she did so only with him. Jack was suddenly glad Cecil hadn’t come, and shame flushed into him. Shame for not having the resolve to stay away from Audra, and for wanting her next to him so badly. But mostly his shame was derived from knowing he had to give in to her, for as much as it killed him to have her this near it would be worse to watch her with someone else.

“I take it you’re in need of a leaning post tonight?”

Audra giggled and leaned her head against his shoulder. “I’m going to get a drink, you coming?”

Jack didn’t answer. Her hands had moved onto his in such a way that it could have been unintentional, but he knew it wasn’t. The tips of her fingers rested upon his knuckles, her palm against the back of his hand. He fought against this. To him having her fingers interlock with his was like inserting a key into a lock, one whose portal held back such an abundance of emotion it would be like setting free water from a dam. To her, taking his hands was just advancement in the game to Level Two, a bond without emotion. A game whose prize was control. He cursed himself as he opened his fingers and accepted her embrace.

*What can I do, to make you see
Just how much, you mean to me
If I took your hand, and held you tight
Would this in your heart be wrong or right?*

Jack rose from the booth, hand in hand with Audra. She leaned on him hard, and stumbled a bit as she walked. He caught her from falling and bumping into other patrons as he escorted her to the bartender. Audra released him and leaned against the bar. She asked, “Am I buying you one?”

A bottle on the shelf caught Jack's attention. Not because of what it held, nor because it was Audra's favourite, but because it caught his reflection. It wasn't a proud man who stared through the glass, but one without self-respect. One that gave in to the pleasure of the moment, and ignored the pain that the rest of Time offered. He felt her finger beneath his chin beckoning him to look at her; her skin was warm against his complexion. Slowly he turned to face her, forcing a smile from his quivering lips, and nodded.

"Good," she answered. And to the bartender: "Two Zambooka."

As the shots were placed on the counter Jack felt a hand on his shoulder. As he turned he heard Todd shout over the music, "Come on man, doesn't it give you peace to bed the chicks and drink the booze?"

Jack pushed him away, and glanced at Audra through the corner of his eye. She appeared not to have heard, although the ends of her lips curled as if she fought a smile. Jack glared at Todd. "It's my life, okay?"

"Cecil doesn't give a damn about you. All you ever were was the heathen who needed saving. What do you see in her?"

"We're friends."

"Are you?"

"You don't understand."

"You're right, I don't."

Jack said nothing and turned back to Audra. Todd yelled, "Maybe you should think about who your friends are!"

As Jack leaned on the counter Audra handed him a shot glass. She smiled, leaned on him and said, "Bottoms up!"

"Yeah, bottoms up." Jack slammed the liquid down and looked deep into Audra's eyes. She laughed, loudly over the music, and pushed him away. Jack watched her as she grabbed the first guy nearby, walked him to the dance floor and ground her hips against his in time to the music.

"What the fuck am I doing?" Jack muttered. Then to the bartender, "A coke. Just a coke."

"Tell me what it is you want to do, and I'll make that dream come true."

Jack turned and saw the stranger from outside. "Who the fuck are you, and why the hell are you talking to me? You a faggot?"

"Perhaps I am the Prince of Darkness. What price would you put on your soul?" On the word price he paid for the drink just then placed on the counter.

"The whole world has gone crazy," Jack whispered. He sighed, shoved the stranger and grabbed the drink. He walked to his table.

"You don't know when to say good-bye, do you?"

Audra's voice stopped him cold. Jack had his one hand grasped on his beverage and his other tense by his side. He didn't turn when he asked, "What difference would it make if I did say goodbye?"

Audra didn't answer. Jack turned and saw by her misty eyes that there was no more playfulness between them. He whispered, "Careful. When you look at me like that, I almost think you care."

"I do Jack." Another pause, then softly she added, "But I can't when you go all holy roller with me?"

"You can go Holy Roller with me."

Audra placed her hand on her hips and her eyes turned cold. "Can't you see you're just a project to them?"

"Careful. You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

Jack sighed, and said softly, "Pushing me away."

Audra laughed. "Big deal. To me you're just another guy."

"Just another guy, huh?"

"That's right. After you're gone, I'll just sit with one of the other men. It makes no difference to me who it is."

Jack closed his eyes and breathed hard. When he again looked upon the girl before him, he didn't know if he saw the friend he'd developed a crush on or the vixen who had broken his heart. He reached out and caressed her cheek, but when she didn't respond he took his hand away.

"I really hope you're being honest with yourself."

"You're the one who's not being honest."

"If you let me leave, then you let go of me forever."

"And what's so special that I should want you?"

Jack leaned so he could whisper into her ear: "The thing that makes me different is that I loved you as a friend first." He stepped away and looked into her glossy eyes. Her lips parted but before she could speak he said, "I guess you're right. You don't feel the same."

And then he left, into the cold, alone. With only the song that echoed in his mind for company:

*When all is lost, and no one's near
We'll look at our world, an empty sphere
The time we wasted, with pain and sorrow
Wish we'd lived for now, with no tomorrow*

"I waited at the café. Todd came by," the voice was Cecil's, not Audra's.

"Oh." Jack did not turn to face the woman behind him. Instead he focused on the music, the darkness and the empty shot glasses before him. Four empty chairs surrounded the round table, each one adorned with jackets and purses.

She spoke again, "I didn't want to believe you were here."

"Then why'd you come?" Jack leaned forward, his hand stretching over the shot glasses. He wrapped his fingers around an octagonal shaped glass filled with cola. Slowly he brought it to his lips, but before sipping from it he said, "You came because you knew I was here, and you're speaking to me because you think I've fallen."

Just then the music changed. The thump thump of the dance music faded into a soft, angelic voice singing of heartbreak. Beneath the tunes a hiss accompanied smoke pouring onto the dance floor. The area was paired with lovers, each holding the other as if to hold together their shattered emotions. Jack sighed, sipped his drink and stood. He still did not

turn to her. His back faced the tears that had begun to stream down her cheeks. Cecil reached out with her hand but froze inched from Jack's shoulder. The feeling was not unlike standing next to a bonfire, Jack's tense muscles much like the flickering flames. Her mouth opened but there was nothing to say. Relaxing her hand back by her side Cecil sighed, turned and started to walk away.

Jack said, "You never believed in me."

She looked over her shoulder and saw him facing her. He looked like James Dean clad in a black leather jacket, white T-shirt and blue jeans. His shoulders slumped to the right and his left thumb was hooked into his pocket. Grease held his hair slicked back into a pony tail, and his lips were pursed. His voice quivered when he said, "All your talk of friendship and respect, yet you never had any for me."

"I respected you. We were friends." Cecil tried to take a step forward but it was as if a wall were erected between them. A wall through which they could see, hear and speak but not pass. The song ended and another melody began in its place.

Jack stepped forward, destroying the spiritual barrier. He walked up to Cecil, reached out for her cheek but stopped when she flinched. Slowly he brought the backside of his fingers up to caress her cheek. Then he traced her lips with his thumb.

"To you I will never be anything but the man I once was. And since he no longer exists, to you neither do I."

The song changed. The beat was fast. Jack and Cecil stared at one another in silence. Jack sighed and walked out the exit.

A red lamp shed an eerie glow over black painted walls. Leather couches scattered about the area were occupied with men and women entangled with each other in various positions, and moans echoed in the smoky air. She saw Jack point to two empty couches, and Tammi climb onto one. She glanced at Trent who nudged her toward one, and reluctantly she climbed on. She looked over at her friend who had taken off her skirt, and then at Jack who had his head between her legs.

Trent mounted her, his crimson eyes boring through her light blue. Ones. She wished the room would stop spinning, even lying down it seemed as if she might fall a thousand feet.

"Please don't bite me," she whispered.

"Kiths don't bite blood-slaves."

"Then how do they," she felt his cold hand slip inside her, "oh no..."

"Do you want Pleasure, Melanie? Invite me to you."

"I don't understand," she could hear Tammi's groans echoing above the others, "I thought you brought me here so you wouldn't have to do this."

"Invite me to you..."

"I thought Christ didn't allow this..."

Trent lashed out and grabbed her neck. The room stopped spinning and she stared into her Sage's eyes, seeing in them the fires of Hell.

He growled, "You will never speak that name to me again."

CHAPTER NINE

Melanie heard the light knock again. Her head pounded and her throat burned, but all that had happened was but a blur. Beside her lay Trent, asleep with the slumber of the dead. She wished she could have chuckled at her choice of words, but instead she desired to make it true. The knock came again, this time louder.

Melanie remembered how she'd felt when she'd caught Matt with Carol, and wished she felt even half as good about the Kith. As the drunkenness washed away and the hangover began, she recalled how she and Trent had fucked. Not made love, not even had sex. They had fucked. She invited him to her, his strange darkness exciting her, and bringing out a part of her she wished she'd never known.

One that took Pleasure over virtue.

You would have made a great Kith, she'd heard a Voice say.

The knocked banged this time. *Should I answer it?* She wondered.

She pulled off her covers and swung her legs over the side of the bed, flinching when her bare feet met the icy floor. Biting her lip she wondered who could be knocking, and considered waking Trent. She glanced at the clock and saw that it was a little after one PM.

She slipped into a pair of Jeans and a T-shirt, sliding her feet inside fuzzy slippers. Taking one more look at Trent she decided not to wake him, and opening the door she saw Jack and Tammi.

"Hi," Melanie said, squinting to ward off the light from the hallway.

Tammi looked at her feet and forced a smile from her trembling lips. She mouthed "Hello," but no sound came from her. Jack stepped inside.

Jack walked the street, hands tucked into deep pockets, with no idea where he was going. He heard Cecil yell for him, but he was far enough down the dark alley that she would not find him. He did not suspect that she would look long before going home. A force tugged on him to return to the Puzzle, to give into Audra and surrender to her game of seduction. Jack stopped, and as a blue fog swirled about him he cursed the darkness.

Then he heard the stranger say from behind, "Such hatred can make you weak, or the most powerful man alive. Which will you choose?"

"What the fuck," Jack whispered, as he turned to face ... nothing. An empty street covered by fresh snowfall, disturbed only by his own footsteps, lay behind him. A strange bluish mist coated the snow, and a bright moon burned through the thick overcast sky. Jack shook his head and continued to walk, but after taking only a few steps he stopped.

"Where the fuck am I going?" he mumbled. Not Todd's; not back to the club. Suddenly a strong, Northerly wind struck, seemingly pushing him toward an alley. The mist was undisturbed by the air. Jack looked down the lane and saw the cloaked figure.

"Where is your Sage?" he asked.

Melanie stepped aside and stumbled. Trent stirred and sat up. "What is the meaning of this?"

Jack clicked on the light and glanced at the busted mirror. He smiled.

“Once a month we have a ‘switch,’” the evil Kith strolled to Melanie, and caressing beneath her chin he said, “and since we are neighbours it is us who will trade.”

Melanie looked hard at Trent, unsure of what Jack meant. She had her suspicions, but prayed it was not what raced through her mind. Trent stood and walked to Jack. The two Kiths looked strangely similar, as if related somehow, especially in their eyes.

Trent asked, “What do you mean by ‘trade?’”

“I mean for one night you take my blood-slave, and I take yours. It is the way of the Dark.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then your Forever ends.”

Melanie gasped, and hoped neither Kith heard. *I know the risks*, she had said. Just now realising that she never really did. She met Trent’s eyes and saw in them sadness, a disappointment that failure had come so soon. Surely he wasn’t taken so much by vengeance that he would condone this act?

But when Jack brushed his wavy hair away from his eyes, as if to purposefully display Keelin’s wristband, she heard Trent say:

“Fine. But no harm had better come to her.”

Melanie’s heart stopped. She looked at Tammi who still stared at the floor, at Trent who glared at Jack, and lastly at Jack himself. He smiled and held his hand out to her.

“Coming?”

Trent watched Melanie leave with Jack. She glanced at him before shutting the door, a tear from her eye a plea for help. He ignored it and instead focused on the Voice within his mind.

You belong to me. You have always belonged to me. Trent nodded and clenched his hands. *I will grant you vengeance.*

He closed his eyes and turned around, opening them to look upon the frail girl who sat on his bed. She spread her legs open and slid off her red spandex. Her body shivered as she slipped off the T-shirt she wore, but when she started to unclasp her bra Trent stopped her.

He gently grabbed her wrists with one hand and brought her face to look at him by caressing her chin. The icy blue in his eyes melted away, leaving them in strands of tears. He suddenly remembered how he’d felt when Billy Bender beat him up, and of his anger when Jen was raped.

“He did this to you?” Trent asked, each one of his tears landing on a bruise scattered throughout the girl’s body.

She nodded.

Trent knelt before her and placed his hands on her knees. She looked away and shut her eyes, but when he closed her legs and lifted her spandex to cover them she looked at him with a tear caught in an eyelash.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“I don’t understand. Jack said I had to give myself to you.”

Trent rose and turned his back to her. His shoulders slumped and he sighed. “No, Tammi, you don’t.”

“Are you going to hit me?”

Trent turned back to her and saw that she had begun to weep. He walked to the bed and sat. "No, I will not lay a hand upon you."

"But when Jack doesn't get enough blood he...."

"He is a part of the Dark, I am not," the Kith rose, walking to stand before the broken mirror, "Or am I? Am I saved by Christ's blood, or damned by man's?"

"You're a Christian? How can a Kith...."

"Be anything but evil? It is by the very nature of our evil that makes us need Christ so much. But can I be forgiven after my sin? I don't expect you to understand."

"I do, or at least I once did. Until God deserted me, too."

Trent listened to her voice crack, and smiled. Looking upward at the ceiling he said, "Tammi, He never deserted us. God sent me here to find a lost sheep."

"Was it me?"

"It was *us*. It was us!"

"How?"

Trent met her gaze and embraced her. "By the part of Him that stayed in you."

CHAPTER TEN

Jack shut the door to his chambers and Melanie stood facing Tammi's bureau mirror with her back to him. She wrapped her arms around herself, massaging the goose-bumps on her flesh. She wondered which she preferred, to partake in the blood-drink or to be killed? Staring into the mirror she scanned the reflection, pretending that, as in the mirror, she was alone.

She cringed when Jack brushed his hand through her hair.

He slid one arm around her waist and gently turned her to him with his other. He pressed her close and backed her against the bureau, pushing his hard flesh against her. She couldn't look at him, and when he started kissing her neck she closed her eyes.

She tried to stall by keeping him talking. "How did you become a Kith?"

Audra sat in the booth, leaning against a guy she had just met, laughing at everything he said. Cindy and her boyfriend were locked together at the tongue, and as the alcohol in Audra made the room spin she suddenly found herself kissing the man who had been a stranger only moments earlier.

Music swarmed around them; over her back, through her hair, across her breasts. Audra pressed herself closer to the stranger and straddled one of his legs. Closing her thighs tighter she rocked against his thigh while caressing his back. A sober part of her inquired as to how far she would take this game, but what stopped her was a voice: "And aren't we a cosy pair?"

Audra opened her eyes and broke the liplock with the stranger. He had one hand up her shirt and his other on her thigh. But what stole her attention was Jack who sat perched upon the bench, hovering over them like a vulture. She remembered seeing him earlier in the evening, and felt satisfaction that he had fallen victim to her game. She also noticed how different he appeared. His hair was wet and slicked back. His eyes were bright and lively. And the bruise on his cheek had healed. But that was of no importance.

"Have you come to play my game?"

"Play your game?" Jack laughed and Audra thought it was a different person who was using Jack's body like a dummy. He said, "I have come to win it."

"Oh really?" Audra said as she climbed off her partner. But the man she was with grabbed her back to him and glared at Jack. "Get the fuck lost," he shouted.

Jack laughed again. It was then that Audra fully met his gaze, and realised that this was not the person she had known as "Jack". This was a stranger; this man was dangerous.

And as a gale of wind rose from within that laughter all entrances blew closed. The music stopped. The lights came up. And the last thing these patrons would ever hear again was a grating voice say, seemingly coming from Jack's aura and not the man himself:

"And now the game truly begins."

He whispered, "Why are you so afraid? Doesn't Trent give you Pleasure when he takes your blood?"

Jack slipped his hand between them and unbuttoned her jeans. As he unzipped them he said, "Is it because you have never given him blood?"

Melanie bit her lip and hopped onto the bureau. Her body trembled and she perspired, but as much as she didn't want this more so did she not wish to die. Jack slid off his pants and she wrapped her legs around his waist. He reached beneath her shirt and she kissed him, cringing as she felt his fangs grow. He pulled off her panties and massaged her, but he did not penetrate. He stopped kissing her and met her eye to eye.

A tear fell from her and she said, "You can't – it's that time of the month."

Jack smiled and, as he brought his face between her thighs, he said, "I know."

Melanie closed her eyes and ground her teeth. She felt the Kith's hot breath and heard, "Touch her and I'll end your Forever," but the voice was not Jack's.

Trent stood in the doorway, clad in his black trench coat. He had his hands tucked in his pockets and his shoulders were tight. His eyebrows hung low over two fiery eyes, and beneath his pursed lips he locked his teeth.

Jack stood, kissed Melanie on the lips, and faced Trent. "Has the Christian come to die?"

When Trent stepped into the room Melanie noticed that Tammi cowered behind him. Jack lashed out with one hand and grabbed Melanie's throat, pushing his index finger and thumb beneath her jaw bone. She pulled on his wrist but was unable to budge him. Candle-light flickered in Trent's long, pointed teeth. That same glow burned in Jack's eyes. Melanie started to choke.

Trent said, "I will not betray God, Jack. I will not fight you."

Jack held out his hand to the girl that hid behind the Christian. "Come to me, Tammi. Show this follower who your god is."

Tammi stepped around Trent and when the Kith touched her shoulder she turned to him. A smile crossed her lips, followed by a tear that ran down her cheek. With small steps she walked to Jack. The evil Kith smiled.

"I don't know what you hoped to gain, Christian, but whatever it was, you lost. Your kind never win."

"Thought you had a class," a voice said from behind.

Cecil kneeled on the wet sod where, before her, a marker read: "Jack Calloway. 1968-1988. A Victim of the Puzzle Slaughter". There were no flowers save the ones she'd planted, nor had the dirt been disturbed except by her footsteps. The only companion was the clouds that always shed as if to hide the tears with rain and her sobs with its patter. So when the man had come it was no wonder she jumped from surprise. But she did not turn to see who it was.

"I'm taking time off to grieve."

"Grieve?" His voice sounded closer, and familiar. Even over the water that fell Cecil could hear him walk beside her. He knelt and said, "There is a fable of two men walking through the woods. When a bear attacks them, the thinner one runs and climbs a tree. The larger one, unable to perform such a feat, falls to the ground and plays dead.

"The bear approaches the large man and sniffs, but does nothing to him. After the animal is gone the thin one climbs down and returns to the road. He says, 'We really learned a lesson about bears today.'

“The large man replies, ‘I learned that I need friends who won’t desert me the first sign of danger.’”

“What do you know of it?”

“I echo your thoughts. You stopped being my friend, you lost your right to grieve.”

“Jack?” she said, her voice nearly failing. Turning to the man beside her she stared into eyes so blue they could only be his. But unlike the first time she had met him there was no light in them. Muscles around his lips appeared frozen in a snarl and the complexion of his skin was nearly transparent. Cecil desired to reach out and caress his cheek, like he did their first date, but something held her back. Something stopped her.

He stood but kept his gaze locked on her. A long, black trench coat clung heavily to his thin, muscular frame. Taking a few steps forward he walked over the gravemarker and answered, “Are you relieved that I am proof of an afterlife, or repulsed that I am ranked with that Angel banished to Earth?” He chuckled like a man gone insane, but still sane enough to recall sanity. “I am neither.”

Cecil lost all fear. For one brief instant she saw him for the man he could have been and ran to him. Wrapped her arms around him. And wept into his chest. But he pushed her away, so hard that she fell to the ground. Then he leapt, seemingly flying through the air to land before her.

He spoke: “I am not alive, but neither am I not dead. You have no idea the evil within me, but I tell you this: it is the one that you planted. Your friendship could have saved me, but instead your indifference has damned me.”

“Please Jack ... no.”

He stood, shoved his fists into pockets and walked away. Back into the rain, into the darkness, into a place that he had once said he feared most of all would own him.

Trent never looked away from Tammi as he said, “Set them free and I will give myself freely to you.”

“Tammi,” Jack tightened his grip on Melanie’s throat, “do you want to be free?”

She looked one last time at Trent and then at her Sage. With a voice as soft as fresh-woven silk she said, “Yes. Yes, I do.”

Melanie watched as the veins on her captor’s arm bulged. She tried to scream, but was only able to get enough air to stay conscious. Jack’s eyes turned crimson, but he let Melanie go. She fell to her knees, tears falling from her eyes and blood dripping from her nose. Tammi rushed beside her and said, “Come on!”

Melanie followed her to the door, stopping to face the Christian. At first he did not look at her, but stayed transfixed into the mirror where her soul reflected but his did not.

“Can you ever forgive me?” he asked.

Melanie reached out for his cheek. “I wish I’d known you as my Mother did. I wish...”

“That I hadn’t...”

Melanie placed her fingers on his lips, wrapped her arms around him, and cried. “Can’t you escape?”

“Yes. But then Jack will kill you two.”

“How can you believe in a god that won’t save you?”

Trent met her eyes and rubbed her cheek. As a blood-red tear crawled from his icy-stare he said, "He has saved me. 'Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.'¹ He saved me through sacrifice, and now that is how he will also save you."

"But?"

"I will pray that you seek Eternity. That is His true gift to you."

She brushed his lips with her fingers and he kissed them. Again he asked, "Can you forgive me?"

"Yes," she said as Tammi tugged on her arm. "I forgive you, and I ask that Christ come into my heart. I will serve Him where you cannot."

¹ Matt 10:39 (NIV)

EPILOGUE

Cecil kneeled in the damp sod. In one hand she held a spade, and in the other a handful of the weeds that had grown so thick they nearly covered a stone marker that read, "Jack Calloway. Presumed dead in the Puzzle slaughter." Six pots rested on either side of the stone, in each a colourful arrangement of flowers. It had rained recently, leaving the earth heavy and hard to manage. But even when it seemed fruitless Cecil worked to make the site clean.

The sun replaced dark clouds and had turned the evening hot and humid. Leftover rainfall could still be heard running down eavesdroughs and dripping from rooftops. From somewhere in the east, the scent carried by a slight breeze, hamburgers were being barbecued. A tear fell from Cecil's eyes into a fresh hole dug for the first potted plants.

"I checked the coffee shop, but you weren't there."

The voice sent a million shivers throughout her spine. It was not unlike water freezing in a crack in the sidewalk and splitting a mass of cement in two. She dared not turn to see who it was, she dared not stop her task. But she also could not ignore the presence who added, "Actually, the café wasn't there either."

Standing on her knees Cecil turned slowly and saw a tall but muscular man, early twenties, sporting a silk dress shirt, tapered dress pants and full length trench coat. His long, dark hair was tied back and over his eyes were mirrored sunglasses. His skin was pale, his face sombre and his shoulders slumped as if encumbered by a heavy burden. She tried to speak his name but no sound emitted from her lips.

"yes, it's me. I was passing through town and wanted to say good-bye."

"My word, you haven't changed ... you're still young." This time she was able to speak, but she felt as though the scene were unfolding in a dream.

Jack walked to the marker, kneeled and ran his finger over the stone. Though there did not appear to be a cloud in the sky rain fell through the bright sunlight. To the stone Jack said, "On that day I truly died," and then to Cecil, "But today I am reborn."

"The last time I saw you in the graveyard, I convinced myself it was a dream." She shivered from the rain that had soaked her clothes. She did not know when her tears had joined the downpour, but noticed them only when Jack reached out to wipe them away.

"Your dream was my nightmare. But Christ woke me from it, He sent me a messenger and now I am a sheep returned to the flock."

Cecil leaped and embraced him. She burst into uncontrolled sobs as she buried her face into his shoulder. "I'm so sorry. I never should have deserted you!"

"And I should have been more patient. I will forgive you, will you do the same for me?"

The rain ceased. Sunlight sparked in every pool of water. Cecil smiled and kissed Jack on the cheek. "I do. What brought this change in you?"

"I killed a man. I killed a man who would die for me although I was still a sinner, where few men would die even for a good man. I thought that no one would die for a wicked man."

Jack stood and turned. He walked off, head bowed and hands tucked deep into pockets. He did not know where to go, who to find, nor what to seek. But he did know that to honour God is to have Him honour you, and that would be enough.

This EBook has been brought to you by James McCann,
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