



C R I M S O N

Halo

D A N I E L M A Y

Crimson Halo

Daniel May

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

CRIMSON HALO

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ALSO BY

About the Author

DEDICATION

To Charles, who just bought me a second coffee.

To the baristas at [redacted], who just gave me a cookie right out of the oven.

To Piper, obviously.

To Emily, obviously.

BLURB

When Seth walks into Drew's painting studio to kill him, Drew mistakes the vampire for someone finally answering his ad: 'ISO male figure model, comfortable working nude, think Michelangelo.'

The misunderstanding is far too hilarious for the infinitely bored Seth to pass up.

He agrees to pose for a series of portraits, but there's a snag; as a vampire sovereign, Seth needs to make a compelling excuse to his subjects for why he's spared the human's life.

Telling them he's claimed the artist as his chosen mate seems to do the trick.

When the excuse begins to feel more like the truth, Seth is unsettled by the development of feelings alien to his millennia on earth... and even more unsettled by the revelation that he is not the only dark hunter who has taken an interest in Drew.

Crimson Halo is a standalone MM paranormal vampire romance with thriller elements.

CONTENT WARNING

This is a disclaimer for certain common triggers which are prevalent enough in this book to warrant mention.

This is **not** an all inclusive list. It's impossible to list every possible trigger, and just because your specific trigger is not mentioned is not a guarantee it is never mentioned. I list only triggers which are either a) major themes of the book b) occur frequently enough to provide a potentially upsetting reader experience and/or c) are described in enough detail that they are considered graphic.

In this book you will find:

- General blood and gore (it's a vampire book, y'all)
- A main character suffering from mental illness, whose symptoms at times include hallucinations and delusions bordering on psychosis
- Use of and withdrawal from prescription medication
- Nightmarish images and visions
- Characters dying from terminal illness, other characters experiencing intense grief over their deaths
- General exploration of grief, loss, and mortality
- Eye mutilation

If at any point you find yourself uncomfortable to cope with the subject matter, feel free to put aside the book and look for something else to read.

CHAPTER ONE — SETH

Seth pulled his face out of his victim's neck and sighed.

The moon overhead shone like a beacon, reflecting off the blood on his lips and the dilated pupils of the man he had seized, who swayed, held up only by Seth's palm against his chest.

The vampire regarded his intended prey with an uncharacteristic glumness.

The human man was ideal; in his physical prime, in peak health but for an undiagnosed brain tumor that would choke out his life in a matter of months. Seth could sense the mass from the blood coursing around it, giving away its size and shape like water disrupted by a stone. The man had no immediate family who would miss him, was content enough in life, but not so brilliantly happy that it would be a shame to rob him of it. He was exactly what Seth had been seeking for the past month.

And yet Seth felt like Katie Vanderpool, the lead of his favorite television show — *Katie on Top*, about an enterprising young businesswoman attempting to 'have it all' in the oft-treacherous city of New York, who frequently bemoaned the bland food she was forced to consume due to a merciless diet culture.

He just wasn't feeling it.

Having drunk the minimum necessary to maintain full strength, Seth regarded his victim for a final moment, then deposited the man back on the park bench where he'd found him.

Seth sat down next to him and gazed restlessly out at the peace of the park. Lovely. Huge, blossoming trees drooping their branches almost to the ground. A fountain whispering softly in one of many small ponds. The flower beds had come into bloom recently, lining the paths with proud bursts of color, muted only a little by the dark of night.

“Do you ever get bored, Ja—” he began, then frowned. Jason? Joash? He knew he’d been given the name by his familiar, but these decades he didn’t much care about those details.

“Excuse me,” he said politely, and riffled through the man’s pockets until he found a wallet.

Coffee shop punch card (almost full). Credit card, debit card, credit card, credit card. Very battered old library card. Ah, driver’s license.

“Jacob,” read Seth, and looked at his victim, now starting to drool somewhat.

Well, he’d been close.

He put the driver’s license back into the wallet and the wallet back into Jacob’s breast pocket. Using the collar of the man’s jacket to wipe the spit off his chin, Seth set the man’s lolling head upright and put a touch of vampiric command into his voice when he asked again:

“Jacob, do you ever get bored?”

Seth imagined that human beings with their short, scurrying lives existed in a state of constant adrenaline. He of course couldn’t remember what it was like. Seth considered himself marvelously well adapted to the world — compared to certain other fossils — but he was extraordinarily old even by vampiric standards. He could only speculate about what lurked in the depths of human experience.

He was surprised when Jacob responded, “Oh yeah. All the time.”

Surprised, and then a little annoyed.

“How can you be bored?” he asked, nonplussed. “There are so many television shows.” He knew particularly well because he often let them play in his home without watching, in order to passively absorb the changing linguistic trends. As little as he actually cared for television — with the exception of *Katie on Top* — he had to admit it made continual adjustment to human conventions much simpler than in

centuries past. “More shows than you could watch in your lifetime.”

Well, particularly this man’s lifetime. That brain tumor might allow him to get through SVU if he did nothing but sit and watch until he keeled over.

“I don’t really watch TV,” said Jacob, in the dazed, hypnotic voice of someone under Command. “There are too many different streaming services now. I got tired of paying for them all and still never being able to find the movie I wanted.”

Seth didn’t quite get that, but then, his familiar was the one who had set up his television, and Tiffany was endlessly resourceful.

“What do you do in your free time, then?” asked Seth, finding that the initial novelty of this aberration — conversing with his prey — was already running dry. Maybe Jacob wasn’t a terribly interesting person.

“Masturbate, mostly,” said Jacob.

Well, that definitely wasn’t the panacea for existential dread Seth had been hoping for.

He eyed the passive throb of the carotid in Jacob’s throat.

He had come that night as a true vampire.

Not just to feed in the common, secret way... but to kill.

A rare pleasure.

He could almost taste that white light at the end of the man’s life, the flowering of that final burst, the heart’s last hiccup of vital essence. He could almost feel the soul passing over his lips, streaming around his face, emptying invisible into the unseen heavens above as the man sagged in death... ceasing to be Jacob. Ceasing to be a man at all.

These days, with such a plentiful human population, killing was unnecessary. A vampire could hypnotize and feed off half a dozen humans in a week, be perfectly well-fed, and have no bodies to hide. However, the bliss of that final suck, of swallowing to the last drop, was unmatched. All of his kind

were allotted the occasional kill — divvied out carefully, strictly, like a hunting license full of conditions regarding human age, health, sex — as their vampiric *right*.

It had been decades since Seth had exercised that right.

Some sovereigns claimed their right to human life two or three times a year. Those governors took positions in desolate places — cities with vast homeless encampments, impoverished towns without the will or resources to seek their missing citizens, dense populations where the vulnerable fell easily through the cracks — in order to feed freely, glutting themselves and currying favor by allowing their vampiric throng to take similar freedoms.

Seth was no better than them on any inherent level.

He was just old.

Compared to even the most brutal of the vampire sovereigns, Seth had been much worse in his youth. He remembered nothing of his first century but the taste of blood... the chaotic animal scrambling for it. He remembered nothing of his brief human life, which had likely lasted little longer than two decades. An absolutely meaningless length of time.

Nothing remained of the small human person who had once lived in this form — not even a name. ‘Seth’ had been given to him when he was perhaps close to a hundred and fifty years old, when his kind had finally dragged him, feral, from the gory wilderness, and civilized him.

“I’m an aberration, Jacob,” he said abruptly, letting his ruminations rise to his lips. “All infants are the same, regardless of species; without the guidance of a parent, they become quite insane. There’s nothing moral about it... it’s in the brain, the plasticity of it. The chemistry of growth. A child raised in silence will never learn to speak. Orphaned horses, fed with a bottle, become sociopathic. Most orphaned vampires live short lives of complete, barbaric insanity. If they don’t perish by their own hand, crawling out into the sun seeking blood like some poor animal crossing a busy highway,

they're put to the torch often by their own kind. A mercy, really."

The human Jacob looked vacantly at him for a moment, then repeated, "Vampire?"

Seth sighed.

He turned to the anemic, wobbling Jacob and endeavored to make a point the man could understand.

"I'm having an existential conflict, Jacob," he said. "When I was... 'born,' I was either created by accident, or abandoned on purpose. I've spent the vast majority of my life not caring one way or another. Lately, however, I keep finding myself distracted by that question. I'm restless. I've completely lost my appetite. I think perhaps I've run out of things to do with my life, and have nothing left to do but dwell on the past."

He found himself reaching a surprising revelation as he said the words out loud, and frowned.

It was an unpleasant revelation.

'Nothing left to do.'

"Have you tried Lamictal?" Jacob asked.

All right, end of encounter.

Seth tried to convince himself one last time to end the man's life, too, but his heart wasn't in it.

"You won't remember any of this conversation," he said, with vampiric command in his voice. "You won't remember my face, or that you were bitten. If you seek medical attention, don't consent to any head scans." Better for the man to live his last months without the taint of death upon them. "Do what makes you happy."

He thought of one more thing.

Fishing the wallet back out of the man's pocket, he found the coffee shop punch card, and punched the final holes in with the point of a canine tooth.

"Get a free latte on me," he said. "Try a pumpkin spice one." His familiar, Tiffany, seemed to enjoy those in particular.

“Let it be a comfort to you.”

He returned Jacob’s wallet to him and stood, slipping hands into pockets.

“Enjoy your death,” he said.

The man’s head bobbed, eyelids fluttering with the delirium of hypnosis on top of considerable blood loss.

“Good luck,” he slurred.

Seth shook his head at the moon.

The predator being wished luck by the prey — what a perversion of nature.

The sovereign vampire of Wilusa left his right to kill drowsing on the park bench, blood smell gradually fading among the force of flowers as distance grew between them.

—

The Wilusa of the New World had once been a tiny colonial patch, surrounded by thick black forests of tall pines. Once upon a time, the darkness of those forests had been an easy hiding place for vampire kind, and Wilusa a prime hunting ground at its core.

Over time, the little spring of humanity had been fattened on trade routes, passing mostly untouched by civil war, too small to ever be a target worth holding. In peace times, Wilusa had eventually developed into a sleepy little town. Modernizing. Adapting to the changing world.

The true boon to vampire kind arrived — electricity. Suddenly the night became a time of industry, of celebration. The once leery and firelit taverns lost their suspicion. Streetlights sprang up, horses gave way to cars, and the 20th century opened its arms and bared its throat.

His breed had learned the trick of living among humans wherever civilization became dense, whenever they could come and go without being witnessed as a stranger. As time went on, even in sleepy corners of the world like Wilusa, the task became simpler. The grand buildings humans constructed became shelters from the sun.

As people grew more siloed, sleeping in their own rooms, their own apartments, feeding became such a simple thing that the vampire reached an odd position — they no longer had to drain their prey to death out of necessity, uncertain when the next meal would come. They could drink from one human, then another, then another, leaving each one alive.

Electricity, industry, and the practice of frugal feeding allowed Seth and his kind to move in.

He still remembered the sense of giddy luxury that came with stepping foot in his own home — a house! A replica of the tantalizing dens of his prey, seductive not just in blood but in peculiarities. Blankets. Candles. Panes of window glass, fire domesticated and held captive in the hearth. A wondrously alien place, particularly to a vampire with no recollection of being human at all.

Of course they had stayed in houses, lived in them for periods of time, but not as *residents*. Not as owners. More like raccoons... squatting in an attic.

Seth's previous familiar, a woman named Grace, had been the one to facilitate purchase of the property. She had secured him legal government identification, arranged the signing and transfer of funds, and then it was *his*.

Sonder Home.

It had been a small estate when he purchased it, surrounded by a massive, sprawling lawn. Over time he had sold off the lawn in lots. The land was purposeless, required immense maintenance, and, worst of all, drew attention to the old stone colonial sitting in its pocket of hedgerows.

To his surprise, the lots he had sold bore fruit. Other houses soon sprouted up around him like mushrooms after a rain.

And so Sonder Home came to be — a looming gray face in a chattering neighborhood.

Seth had grown fond of those neighbors over time. At first, traveling to hunt outside of his immediate territory had been

an inconvenience, but it hadn't taken long for him to see the little lives passing around him as... pets, almost.

Or maybe more like a garden.

He had fertilized Wilusa like a garden. Silently nursed its industries, its places of education. What had once been a tiny colonial patch, an island lost in black forest, had blossomed under the care of its predator.

Then something very rude happened.

A neighboring city, growing unseen like some unchecked *fungus*, came upon his sleepy little town and swallowed it up.

What had once been Wilusa alone became — very suddenly, in the scale of vampire things — a *municipality* in the *greater metropolitan area* of a city which Seth actively refused to name or acknowledge in any way. He and Wilusa, and his Sonder Home, had been here first, and he would step into sunlight before recognizing the authority of that vile hydra.

...a stance that became awkward when he was elected as its sovereign.

Vampire politics was violence practiced at the speed of cold, thick molasses.

Deep down, vampires were just as cutthroat and ambitious as humans, but they lacked the limitations of a blink-and-you'll-miss-it lifespan. Without immediate need to act (lest you die a natural death without those gory ambitions realized), temptation to delay led to a peace born of procrastination.

You could always get revenge on your most hated enemy in another few decades, or seize power when there wasn't a riveting new trend in human music. Time was always on the vampire's side.

The result being that while most vampires *aspired* to positions of great power, very few ever bothered to drop their name into a ballot box.

Seth had been volunteered.

And, unfortunately, he had demonstrated excellent ‘herd maintenance’ skills in his careful nurturing of Wilusa.

When the vampires of the... city that would not be named reached and subsumed Seth’s territory, and found a vampire who had *not only* existed in quiet homeostasis with mankind for centuries, but actually lived among them unmolested, they were delighted to pass their bloated administrative duties onto him.

He didn’t mind the paperwork. (Honestly, his familiar did most of it these days, using some tool called ‘Excel spreadsheets.’) He didn’t even mind having to tear the head off an occasional rogue vampire.

What he did mind were his vampire ‘subjects.’

Seth, strolling in the moonlight, turned the corner of his street and stopped dead with one foot frozen in the air.

There, parked in front of Sonder Home, were two familiar cars.

One, of course, belonged to Tiffany. It looked like what Seth supposed most cars were supposed to look like. Longer than it was tall. Black. It had tires. It was a car.

The other car had tires also, but there the resemblance stopped. This one was bluntly shaped — boxy. It was orange. It was also covered in stickers.

Curtis.

Seth regretted not staying longer to chat with his abandoned dinner.

He lurked down the quiet night street and turned through the gap in the twisted hedgerows, pushing open a gate with a brand new metal sign that read ‘BEWARE OF DOG’ hanging on it.

A very stupid looking golden retriever gamboled out of the darkness, tail wagging up a storm, and threw itself on the ground at his feet in hello.

Seth stepped over the dog without a word and continued down the path to the front door.

It wasn't locked.

He slapped the door open, letting it bounce on its hinges, and the dog ran gleefully between his legs into the house.

His familiar, Tiffany, sat in the round foyer at what resembled a reception desk, and without looking up lifted her legs to let the dog pass.

Seth had no idea how old Tiffany was. She defied all his usual gauges for determining human age. She wasn't married. She didn't appear to go to school, though she sometimes claimed to be 'in class' on her phone or computer, and had her face hidden behind one or the other piece of technology at all times.

Tiffany was black, and short, and had long, braided hair. She dressed exclusively in black, hot pink, or plaid. At all times she wore enormous boots that gave her several extra inches of height, and also glasses. Though the frames were often different. Today, they were pink — as pink as the bubble of gum she popped just as the door closed behind Seth.

Behind her were twin spiral staircases, to her left a wall of mounted animal heads. She had hung her purse off the antlers of an enormous stag.

"Afternoon, boss," she said. "How was dinner?"

"Where did the dog come from?" he asked. Very calmly.

"Where do you think it came from?" She didn't look up from her phone.

"*CURTIS*," Seth thundered.

Up above, Curtis popped his head out over the staircase banister — a head adorned with the long, proud spike of a blue mohawk.

He leapt over the rail, landing light as a feather from the second story to drop onto the carpet next to Seth.

Beaming.

Curtis was pale Irish, unnecessarily tall, and very young — he had been excitedly planning the milestone of his upcoming

hundred and fiftieth birthday for two years. He was an absolute thorn in Seth's side, but not because of the usual youthful vampire problems. No; where most young vampires were simply gluttons — hard to keep from constant feeding, occasionally necessitating being locked in a dungeon for a few years — Curtis had matured from his voracious stage rapidly, and become obsessed with... blending in.

Familiars were necessary not only to perform daytime tasks a vampire could not, but to help them carve out a niche in the constantly changing world. To create modern excuses for their odd hours, to select clothing that didn't make them stand out.

Curtis insisted he didn't need one. (Which, of course, meant that the other household familiars spent precious time completing tasks for him in secret, behind his back.)

Curtis insisted that 'these days,' plenty of humans lived a nocturnal existence, and so why couldn't he imitate them, and pass as one of their kind?

Curtis claimed he could drive a car.

Wrong.

He crashed the hideous contraption on a monthly basis.

Curtis claimed he could hold down a job.

Wrong.

He frequently forgot he had one, showed up weeks after they had already replaced him, and had his heart broken — often leaving Seth on the hook to console him.

Perhaps most annoyingly, Curtis tried to keep up with modern technology, and badgered Seth to adopt that technology as well.

Seth had a rule. He only attempted to adopt new technology if it was either a matter of life and death, or if that technology had been around for at least three decades. Humans had a short attention span for their often very stupid inventions, and he refused to bother to learn something only for it to be abandoned. Let his familiar deal with that.

(Even after three decades, Seth sometimes turned up his nose. He was still angry that automobiles had lasted so long; he had been *sure* the stinking, noisy things were going to be a five minute fad. He only rarely stepped inside of one and he certainly never attempted to drive the awful things.)

Juveniles.

As greeting, Curtis put his fist out for Seth to — what, shake?

Seth smacked his hand away.

“What did I tell you about driving?” And, before Curtis could respond, “and why is there a dog?”

Curtis’s expression wilted at the first question, then turned brilliantly smiling again.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said,” Curtis began earnestly. Kneeling, he summoned the dog with a whistle, and the thing came crashing into his arms with gleeful abandon. “About how we can’t blend in. And I thought — you know what humans have, that vampires don’t?”

Seth put his hand to his forehead, looked up at the cheery chandelier dangling above Tiffany’s desk, and meditated on patience.

“Dogs!” Curtis continued with enthusiasm. “No one would ever believe a vampire had a dog. *Literally* ‘man’s best friend.’ It’s in the title.”

“Tell him what you named it, Curtis,” came another voice.

Face still raised towards the chandelier, Seth glanced sideways and down, to the woman leaning in the doorway to the adjacent hall. Smiling — but not like Curtis.

Lana’s was a wolfish smile.

Lana had been in Seth’s immediate ‘flock’ for the longest of his housemates. Perpetually, playfully mum about her exact age and origins, Seth could only guess — based on physical features and the flicker of an accent — that she had been born somewhere within the window and providence of the Ottoman Empire. Which didn’t narrow things down much at all.

Lana leaned heavily into the ‘seductress’ image, in what Seth perceived to be a very, very lengthy running joke between her and a friend she still corresponded with often and saw every few decades. Lipstick in whatever color was fashionable. Everything in whatever style was fashionable. For a while that had seemed to be a lot of animal furs, and then it had been a lot of satin, and then came round to animal prints again. In recent decades there had been a veer into pants for women, and Lana was no exception to that trend — though, Seth thought he had seen her in skirts again more often.

Human fashion was impossible to keep track of. Everything changed about Lana but her hair — thick, shining, dark as a moonless night — and that wolfish smile.

“His name is Ramen Noodle,” said Curtis.

Seth finally lowered his head, to look very deliberately at Tiffany, silently bidding her to tell him what the *hell* that meant.

He knew she sensed his stare, but she didn’t move her phone out of the way of her face. He saw her hands shaking silently with restrained laughter.

He whipped the look at Lana next.

She only smiled at him.

“How was feeding?” she asked. “Need any help moving the body?”

“No,” said Seth. “I left it alive.”

Her wolfish expression turned to surprise, and Seth pointed at Curtis.

“Get rid of that thing,” he said, putting a touch of sovereign command in his voice (which didn’t work as cleanly on vampires as it did humankind, but he was making a point). “And cut your hair.”

He left Curtis looking crestfallen behind him, ducking into the hall with Lana falling into step at his side.

They passed portrait after portrait, the walls hung with paintings of both figures and landscapes, plus the occasional

tapestry. Electric lights in the shape of candle clusters and candelabras lit their way. It was a cliché of a vampire's den; this part of the house had been decorated largely as a joke, while the rest of it was comfortably modern. (Or what Seth believed was considered 'modern,' at least.)

"What do you mean, you left it alive?" asked Lana, jabbing her elbow into Seth's rib. The comfortable poke of someone who could be considered a friend, after so much time passed in each other's company. "It's been over a decade since you drank someone to death. Exercising restraint is one thing, but I think you're beginning to slip into asceticism, boss."

'Boss.' She had begun to pick up that annoying habit from Tiffany.

"Isn't there something more important you can bother me about?" he asked, letting his tone be snippy. "There usually is."

"Actually, yeah," she said, and without warning, grasped his elbow and steered him into another room.

Here was a sitting room, what had once been a kind of morning nook designed to be swamped by sunlight. The windows had been boarded up and wallpapered over long ago, but recently, Seth's live-in compatriots had stripped off that wallpaper to expose the original window frames, then filled them with excellent paintings replicating a view of the gardens. Electric lights, their fixtures keenly hidden in the corners of the room, gave off warm light without a clear source, which Seth supposed could have been mistaken for sunlight. He didn't recall what real sunlight looked like, so the effect was lost on him.

Sitting by the windows in a plush red chair, reading a book, was Bruce — Seth's third and final vampire housemate.

Bruce had slunk into their territory under the cover of a storm only a few decades ago, and fed in silence and secrecy for two years until being noticed — which was quite a feat, given how closely Seth guarded his domain. Reserved, wary of company, Bruce had taken some convincing to move in. As a

housemate, and a subject, he followed rules to the letter and largely kept to himself.

Seth probably would never have seen Bruce at all, if not for Curtis.

The young vampire was the only thing that provoked Bruce. After Curtis's arrival, Bruce became a regular fixture in household meetings, slinking in with a long list of complaints. Curtis had left a skateboard in the hallway, and Bruce had tripped on it. Curtis had a new ringtone on his phone, and Bruce hated it. Curtis had tried to teach him the Macarena.

Seth fully expected him to open with a complaint about 'Ramen Noodle,' but instead, Bruce put his book away and cleared his throat in a way that suggested unease.

"We have a problem," said Bruce.

Seth knew that tone. The *'you, our sovereign, must perform a duty which none other dares to'* tone.

He plopped down on a chaise near the window. The moment he reclined, a silver cat materialized from under the furniture and leapt, purring, onto his chest. Seth supposed she must have been hiding from the dog.

The cat's name was Mercury, just as the last silver tabby had been named Mercury, and the silver tabby before her. Seth's previous familiar had brought the first Mercury home as a kitten, breaking her master's rule against pets out of frustration with vermin. The first Mercury had proven to be a powerful ratter — the ones that followed, not so much. But the cat had become a staple of Sonder Home, and thus whenever one aged out of existence, a new Mercury appeared, replaced covertly by Seth's familiar. He knew the difference, obviously, but he let the illusion of an undying companion persist unremarked upon.

This Mercury curled up at the top of Seth's chest and purred loudly enough that he had to push her down for whatever this important conversation was.

Bruce stood.

He stood, and the contrast between the two of them became remarkable. No one watching without context would have believed Seth was the sovereign and Bruce the subject; Seth was slight and appeared young, particularly with a cat cuddling on his chest. Bruce was imposing. Tall, bitten and turned as an older man, Bruce was frozen in a state of muscle and salt-and-pepper. Bearded. Gray-eyed. Square-jawed.

Tiffany had jokingly called him ‘Daddy’ once, prompting the rest of the household to pick it up for a few weeks, until Bruce had finally snapped and thrown a sofa through a wall with a bellow of *‘I AM NOBODY’S FATHER.’*

It had been the funniest thing Seth had witnessed in centuries.

Bruce did look distinctly daddish as he gazed broodingly at the painted ‘window.’

“There was an incident,” he said.

Seth resisted the urge to say *‘obviously.’* Ennui plucked at him; there was always some incident, wasn’t there?

“Gregor was witnessed feeding,” said Bruce tersely.

Seth frowned. “Gregor?”

“That idiot,” mocked Lana, having thrown herself into Bruce’s abandoned chair, picking up his book and riffling through it with little interest. “It was just a matter of time, honestly. He has all the composure of a fifty-year-old. Ought to be chained up in a basement like one.”

Gregor was a nearby subject, a vampire Seth didn’t particularly like but who seldom troubled them.

“Witnessed by how many?” asked Seth, beginning to rub his forehead and gaze at the ceiling already.

“Just one.”

Seth frowned. He looked down from the ceiling at the two of them. “Just one?” Irritation pricked him. “Gregor’s hypnosis isn’t that bad. He couldn’t bewitch a single witness to forget?”

Lana and Bruce both paused, exchanging a glance that Seth found strange.

“He was taken by surprise,” said Bruce.

Seth narrowed his eyes, waiting for them to elaborate. Neither seemed eager to do so. Lana remained stubbornly silent, and Bruce eventually — begrudgingly — continued.

“Apparently,” he said. “Gregor chipped an artery, made a mess of himself. A man walked right onto the scene, saw him dripping blood in the moonlight... then apologized for interrupting, and walked away.”

Seth stared at Bruce for a moment, then his frown deepened. “He what?”

“He must have been a drunk,” Lana speculated aloud. “Or mad. Or both.”

Seth tried to picture the scene — Gregor covered in blood, a strange human politely backpedaling — and found there was something quite funny about it. Not funny enough to make up for the annoyance, but still funny. He could imagine Gregor’s shock.

“Are we sure it wasn’t someone’s familiar out on a walk?” he asked. Half joking.

“Gregor sniffed him out eventually,” said Bruce, ignoring the poke of levity. “Unfortunately, not quickly enough.”

Seth’s sense of being father to hundreds of inept children returned, and he sighed.

Even for a clumsy vampire like Gregor, hypnotizing a simple witness was a fairly uncomplicated matter. It was only a moment’s work to erase the memory of twenty, thirty minutes. Even an hour.

However, anything beyond that became difficult.

Creating large gaps in a human’s memory was inherently destructive, like pulling one patch out of a quilt. All the connecting threads went loose and bedraggled.

Aside from the psychological effects, there was a degree of impracticality. A human who witnessed a vampire feeding was likely to run home in terror, to leave signs of their experience even if they didn't outright tell other people. If they skinned their knee on the run home, even after being hypnotized to forget, the skinned knee would still serve as a tether for the memory. Every time the human saw or felt the wound, they would struggle to remember how they got it.

Any more than an hour or two after becoming a witness, the human mind would begin to fill with those tethers. Reminders. A couch pushed in front of the door. A poorly boarded up window. A hysterical message left on a friend's phone machine.

At that point, attempting hypnotism was like performing brain surgery while blindfolded.

At that point, murder was the kinder option.

"You have my permission," Seth said dismissively, settling back against the chaise, petting the cat. He assumed that was why he had been summoned; except in emergencies, humans could only be killed with the blessing of a sovereign.

But Bruce and Lana exchanged that look again. That look that was somehow sheepish.

Lana finally spat it out, with a face like the words tasted acrid.

"None of us can reach him," she said. "The human is holed up in a church."

Seth didn't reply for a moment.

He had to suppress a smile... and a grimace.

Sitting up, he carefully relocated Mercury to the cushion beside him, and stood. He made a motion of dusting off his shirtfront.

"I'll take care of it."

—

Curtis, thankfully, had gone when Seth returned to the foyer.

The dog, however, remained.

He sat beside Tiffany, head in her lap, tail wagging furiously as he held absolutely still to let her rub his forehead and ears.

“So sweet,” she was cooing at him.

“It’s not staying,” said Seth.

“Mm hm,” she said, in that voice that said she thought he was full of shit. “Going out again, boss?”

“Yes, mother,” he said, meeting her sarcasm with his own. “Have you had time yet to—”

“Landscaper is coming by on Tuesday to put in the new boxwoods,” she said, sitting up and leaning an elbow on the desk, one finger in the air as she rattled off completed tasks. “Francisco is mowing the lawn tomorrow and will be around to supervise Tuesday. Dry cleaning will be delivered tomorrow and yes, they found your red vest. It was in with the slacks. Nathan’s familiar left a message asking if you were free sometime this year for mini golf, I told him you were undertaking a contemplation and would be in seclusion indefinitely.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Then could you—”

“I already let all the air out of Curtis’s tires,” she said. “And have a friend coming with a tow truck in the morning.”

“You are a blessing,” he said, with feeling.

“I know,” she said, dropping her executive assistant performance with a brilliant smile. She popped her gum and leaned over the counter. “For real, though, where are you going?”

“To kill somebody,” he said. He sighed in the heavy way he had resisted in front of his housemates, leaned on the counter and gazed up at the chandelier and its pointless sparkling.

“Do you ever get bored, Tiffany?”

“Not working for you,” she said, then propped her chin on her hand and thought again. “Well. Sometimes when Nathan’s familiar tries to sell me on the therapeutic qualities of putt-putt. Why? Are you finally bored?”

“Finally?” he echoed, cocking his head to look at her.

“If I were thousands of years old,” she said. “I’m sure I would have run out of things to do after I hit five hundred.”

“Is that why you don’t want to become a vampire?” Seth asked. He was genuinely curious.

In Seth’s experience, familiars adopted the job for one reason alone: the glimmer of immortality after a lifetime of good service.

Back in the darker, harder times of history, the work had been especially thankless. Brutal. There had been fewer phone calls, more hauling of bodies. Shipping coffins across the ocean, among crates of sacred native soil. Tricking or kidnapping victims. Guarding a cave, or a dungeon, or a basement during every daylight hour. No one would undertake something so gruesome or terrible for anything but a chance at eternal life.

However, these days the job came with more pros than cons.

Vampires no longer universally killed their prey, easing both the conscience and the workload of a servant. Modern construction and technology made it easier to lock the doors of a master’s resting place and be confident of their safety. A familiar could lock those doors, put up their feet, and binge TV until nightfall. It was easy and lucrative work — provided you worked for an older, more established vampire, whose pockets were centuries deep.

Still, Seth couldn’t understand someone being offered that final, sacred bite, and not even considering it.

“It’s not my thing,” said Tiffany simply. She had already begun to fiddle with her phone again, shiny painted nails tapping on its screen in a rhythm Seth had grown almost fond of since her hiring. “I’m not *that* goth.”

“Hm,” said Seth, feigning thoughtfulness, having no idea what she was talking about.

Truthfully, he had never turned a familiar.

They all asked for it. Most killed for it. They groveled at Seth’s feet, worshipped and *begged* for the gift of those teeth.

But then in the end, for some odd reason, they all lost their taste for it.

They had all passed into shadow... chosen not to accompany their master. Chosen to decay, sigh away into dust, into nothing. Eventually even he didn’t remember their names, their faces, and couldn’t begin to speculate about why they had changed their minds.

He knew it wasn’t just him. It was very rare to meet a vampire who had made the matter-of-fact transition, familiar to vampire. In fact, he would be hard-pressed to name a vampire who wasn’t born out of either love or a freak accident.

Maybe his kind were simply out of touch.

Maybe they lacked the common sense that humanity had — the knowledge of when to blow out the candle.

“I’m going out,” Seth said finally, decisively.

“Bring me back some Hot Cheetos,” said Tiffany.

“Yes, boss,” he retorted, and left his ‘servant’ laughing at her desk as he walked out the door. He slipped into shadow, into the shape of a darting wraith of the night, and took to the skies.

CHAPTER TWO — SETH

Years had passed since the Eucharist was last administered at the Church of the Holy Trinity, a modest white-painted rectangle, sandwiched between apartment buildings and made more claustrophobic by the presence of overgrown trees. The church's single, humble blue dome rose barely over the tops of those branches, just as its flecked and aging white face peeked down a pavestone path to the sidewalk. The neighborhood had once been heavily Orthodox, and its church an immigrant staple — but that had been long enough ago to slip out of human memory. All that remained of the neighborhood's roots were the church, a few old buildings, and a bakery that stubbornly persisted despite a crumbly exterior.

The bakery derailed Seth on his way to the church. Of course he couldn't eat human food, and didn't even possess a memory of its taste, but his powerful sense of smell made food a fascination. The hint of honey and pistachios seduced him out of the air, and he stepped out of shadow, and into human form to look into the window.

The neighborhood was tumultuous enough the baker had installed metal grilles, but potent spice poured out from between them, through the glass, and delighted Seth.

He smiled despite himself.

Humanity was ever changing, yet never far from the same race Seth had lived in silent lockstep with for centuries and centuries. They loved their baubles, their gold. They loved their buildings, whether stone or steel. They loved cinnamon, vanilla, walnut, aniseed, honey. As much as Seth was often exasperated by human innovation — he would never understand the point of roller skates — he often found himself warmed by their tendency to lapse always back into old ways.

He found the orthodoxy of the church equally comforting as he strode up the walk, hands in pockets.

The vampire passed under the archway of a meager courtyard, ducking the branch of an overgrown tree, and put

his foot on the front step of the Holy Trinity.

He opened the doors, stepped over the threshold... and closed the doors gently behind him.

No flames burst up around him.

His flesh didn't boil off his bones, nor his eyes pop from his sockets. His skeleton didn't turn to ash. He didn't come to a shrieking nightmare of an end, scalded out of existence by the Divine.

He wiped his feet politely on a mat and, folding his hands behind his back, admired the quiet little narthex. A slip of a chamber, not much more than a stopping place for parishioners to — once upon a time — grab service pamphlets or light candles. Here was a dish of sand, punctuated with the lumps of long burned-down candle wax, set before a row of wistfully gazing icons.

Seth breathed in the hard, sharp memory of incense that caked these walls, the power of worship straining free of the closed sanctuary doors.

A shudder ran from his feet to his ears.

All vampires loved mankind. *Breathed* mankind. They idolized their prey in the way that ancient man had painted deer on cave walls, made ritual figures of the hunt. Prey was no enemy... it was precious. It was life. Any vampire who matured past their first few hundred years came to adopt such sentiment.

But perhaps none were as sentimental as Seth.

And that was why *Seth* — one of the Great Ancients, the Sovereign of New World Wilusa, whose name was whispered in every knowing corner of the earth — could walk into a church.

It wasn't due to any special power.

No, it was only because he had the balls to step over the threshold.

Honestly, he hadn't learned that vampires 'couldn't' enter churches until he was already about seven hundred, after

having used many a church as resting place or sanctuary. He had certainly never burst into flames.

This was, Seth thought, one of the funniest vampire superstitions. His thought process was mathematical. If there was a loving God, then vampires obviously numbered among His creations. If there *was* no deity, only a cobbled together system of human superstition, then how could superstition harm a beast as powerful as a vampire?

Absurd.

And yet it was *incredibly* convenient for the others to believe that Seth alone, due to his power or his age, could step into the dwelling place of the Lord.

Convenient because it stoked tales of his strength — and convenient because it gave him a guaranteed place to escape from vampire bureaucracy.

Sometimes, he just preferred to be alone.

Idly running his fingers over the long-ago melted wax, Seth wondered if his victim had come for the same reasons.

Solitude?

More realistically, it was for protection.

Seth almost felt a flicker of sympathy for the poor creature. In any other town, in the territory of any other vampire, the witness would have been perfectly safe in a church. None would have dared hunt in those holy walls.

But Seth didn't care where he hunted.

He had lived his first few hundred years as a mindless, bewildered animal, stuffing its maw with blood without thought. He had lived hundreds more as a cunning predator, as a fisher for men's lives, thieving their final breaths. Even matured to civility, he was still an unkind thing.

A hungry and merciless thing.

A sense of fate struck him — fate that after failing to take human life earlier that night, a new human life would be thrust under his nose. Presented to him on a platter.

Seth pushed open the sanctuary doors.

He faltered.

Traditional orthodox icons lined the walls, the faces of the figures within them universally serene, their heads surrounded in the gold of their halos. Lit by votive stands full of blazing candles, the icons rejected the church's apparent abandonment.

And yet.

The heavy wooden pews had all been shoved to the sides of the room, leaving an open mouth to the front dais. There, the traditional altar had been ousted by a large painter's easel.

The way to the dais was lined with paintings, squares and strips of canvas stretched over roughshod and homemade looking frames. Disorder reigned themeless; still lifes of roses and marigolds sat among what looked like rushed, earnest depictions of roadkill and viscera. Here and there were reams of paper with human figures dashed upon them. These were just as rushed in appearance as the viscera — bold, almost frantic strokes of charcoal or graphite, bringing form to life with the fewest strokes possible.

More numerous than the visible works were the multitude of covered canvases, wrapped and stacked against the walls or atop the pews.

This was more than a painter's studio... it was a painter's hoard.

Seth found himself approaching the dais. His eye was drawn into the darkness on the largest canvas, set in a place of glory at the fore of the sanctuary, a painting which from a distance seemed to be nothing but an unformed landscape.

But, as Seth drew closer, the revelation of little details filled themselves in.

Most of the canvas was dominated by an incomplete backdrop of muddy green, brackish colors, deepening to black in the corners. The darkness was somehow primordial... not a simple swipe of dark paint, but a very intentional blend of pigments all obliterating each other.

That incomplete backdrop gave way from a dark earth to a muddy sky, similar in color but easily perceptible in the changed technique. A swirl, a fluff of the brush that suggested clouds. Here and there a tiny sliver of distant lighting.

And at the very peak of the scene, hung the sun.

Red as blood.

It was the perfect circle of that sun which had so hypnotized Seth.

It was as fully, naturally round as a fruit, something swollen into a circle and not shaped with a stencil. Somehow it *bulged* from the frame. Yet it was also crisp — and it was the crisp *perfection* of the red sun, the simplicity and dominance of its singular color, that turned the landscape below to an underworld delirium.

Seth stood inches from the canvas, fingers raised as if to touch it.

He felt... dazed.

Up close, the brush strokes bludgeoned him with an intimacy and understanding of the painter. He felt the intention behind each blow of color, the lashes of black and green forming the earth and sky, hewn yellows half lost in the murk, a muddy assortment that was yet dashed together with the speed of euphoric creation. Confidence. Vision, and revelation.

That sun... that red sun *was* utter revelation.

He could taste the exhilaration of the artist in the gleeful clarity of that simple red circle.

“Oh,” said an astonished voice. “You came!”

Seth turned.

There, in the space behind the pews, stood a young man holding a box of painting supplies.

Somehow — impossibly — Seth hadn't heard him enter.

The man wasn't too far gone from boyhood; he had a youthful color to him, and a slenderness that suggested his limbs had only recently finished adding length and hadn't yet

filled in with substance. His hair was dark, very short, and flecked with tiny spots of paint, perhaps tossed back upon his face by the rush of his work. His eyes were a light brown, or perhaps a kind of hazel, which welcomed the warm light of the candles. Although his skin was very pale, his cheeks and nose had a dust of dark, distinct freckles.

He was handsome enough. If he hadn't been bedraggled from his work, clearly lacking sleep and wearing paint-spattered overalls, he could have been polished into a beauty.

Seth had seen so many human faces in his long life, he had long since become disinterested in beauty.

However, he found himself somehow bewitched.

Seth was even tongue-tied — struck still by the pure and unselfconscious *mess* of the human man, the way he smiled with pure welcome in his eyes, with a rosy warmth that made him seem catastrophically vulnerable.

Seth saw the painting reflected in its artist. Fearless. Innocent and unafraid.

The man dropped the box of supplies on a nearby pew and practically ran up the plinth steps, greeting Seth with a shining expression, the already-devoted eyes of someone visited by the divine.

“I thought no one saw the ad,” he said, and gushed. “But you're perfect! Wow.”

Seeing Seth's frozen face, the man stepped back, realizing his enthusiasm and going sheepish. He laughed at himself. “Sorry. Note to self: Cut down on the caffeine.” Glancing at the telltale cans of crushed energy drink off to the side, he added, “Also note to self: Pick up mess.”

When Seth's blank expression persisted, the man actually winced. It was a wince of apology, reminiscent of a kicked dog, oddly poignant. “Final note to self: Stop babbling at total strangers. You don't want to hear about my mess.” He ran a hand through his hair, pink with proper embarrassment now, but went on earnestly. “You're here about the ad.”

Well, Seth didn't know where the fuck to begin responding to any of that.

He nearly grabbed the youth and sank his teeth into his throat purely to cut off the stream of words, but that would have left far too many questions unanswered.

Namely:

“What ad?”

The man paused, looked at him with increased uncertainty, then tried another tentative smile. “For the life modeling? You know — ‘Male, between the age of twenty and fifty, physically fit.’ You’re *exactly* what I was picturing. Have you modeled before?”

“Modeled,” repeated Seth flatly, as if saying the words aloud would make sense of them.

“For paintings,” said the man. With even more uncertainty, but still hopeful, he turned and made a vague wave at the series of canvases. “I know it’s not the most professional studio, but I promise, it’s more comfortable than it looks. I have like five space heaters.”

Seth felt his lips twitch.

“What are you painting?” he asked.

The man hesitated, and then that light came back into his smile. Shy of his inspiration for just a second before the excitement burst free.

“It’s going to be a biblical study,” he said. “I was inspired by the Orthodox icons, you know, that Byzantine style, the practicality of the—” Pausing, hunting the word. “—the prayer object, that *thing* that you can hold in your hands.” He put out his empty, paint-stained hands as if to demonstrate. “The flatness of that Byzantine style, not naturalistic in appearance, seemingly not evocative, but *made* personal and evocative by its human functionality. Operational. Like prayer beads, like um, crochet hooks. Pictures of saints made not for the vanity of an artist, but for human hands. Do you know what I mean?”

Seth had no idea what he meant.

And yet, Seth was bewitched; everything from the man's gestures to his wild words, the jumping from idea to idea and the sparking light in his eyes, it was all fascinating. There was nothing of the dullness of most humans to this one. Where so many of them were lost in the vacancy of routine, this one was disorganized. Disheveled. Seth couldn't imagine him behind the wheel of a car, or staring into a TV set. This was the madness of a figure recognizable from any century — the plague-barkers, the street saints naked and starving and beatific even in a louse-ridden state. Someone alive with much more than his own humanity.

Seth couldn't tell if the man was insane, ingenious, or perhaps touched by the same divine finger that whispered about this old church.

"I think I follow you," he said.

The man beamed. "So *I* thought," he went on, with the rush of someone coming to a long awaited point. "What if you flipped it? What about taking the naturalistic portraiture of the Renaissance and later periods and then, instead of elevating the mundane, the mortal, you put that elevation of art right back into the icon? Right back to the handheld, the prayer object. The little cell phone to God. I thought — I just thought, that would be cool."

He fumbled through the end of his pitch, falling completely flat with another sudden flush of his cheeks. He ran his dirty fingers through his hair, bringing some of the straggle down to half cover his eyes. Hiding.

"Ah. Babbling at strangers again. My bad. Anyway, that's why I was looking for someone a bit Michelangelo."

"A bit Michelangelo," repeated Seth thoughtfully, watching the man redden even more at hearing his own words. "I see."

He predated Michelangelo by a great deal, had paid little mind to the evolution of human art throughout the centuries, and in fact only recalled the artist's name from television. (City of New York businesswoman, Katie Vanderpool, had dated a snobbish art dealer for much of season three. Seth had

hated the character, and rejoiced when he was arrested for money laundering in the season finale.)

Seth only knew enough about human art to smirk at the humor of the situation.

He had been there to witness the genius of Phidias and his contemporaries, seen the colossi of the Greeks rise, those bronze and chryselephantine glories. He'd seen, too, the images of gods rendered for temples and public altars and, yes, individuals and their homes... the handheld prayer object. Millennia old.

'Little cell phone to God.'

Humans never changed.

This small, fresh one understood his species completely.

Seth couldn't resist.

"What's your name?" he asked.

The artist looked at his predator with a brightening smile — a rabbit thinking it was making a friend of a hungry dog.

"Drew," he said. He almost offered his hand to shake, then recalled the grime on his fingers, and went to hide them in the pockets of his overalls. "What's yours?"

Seth caught the hand before Drew could hide it, claiming the handshake and feeling the lovely, warm pulse of blood in his palm.

He saw that same pulse of blood in those cheeks, the rosy pink of human life, a shyness framing the man's smile.

The vampire returned the smile without showing his teeth.

"I'm Seth," he said. "And no, I haven't modeled before. But I'd love to try."

CHAPTER THREE — DREW SKELLS

The coffee shop was about to close, and Drew could only hope they left the wifi on after they shut the doors.

Drew Skells sat in the back corner of the cafe, a tiny cup of espresso dwarfed between his big hands, shoulders half-hunched under his big gray hoodie. As if hunched shoulders could do anything to hide or diminish his solid frame.

Built now like a junkyard dog (with none of the intimidating air) from years of sweating off anxiety at the gym, he still dressed like he had as a scrawny, self-conscious fourteen-year-old. Oversized hoodie. Hole-y sweatpants. Track shoes worn and shabby from walking everywhere. An ancient backpack (full of all the material possessions he had to tote from place to place, since he didn't have a car) tried to serve as another layer of body armor. The weight of it tried to be comforting, just as he tried to derive comfort from the rapidly cooling cup between his palms.

Inescapable cold rolled up and down his spine.

He wondered absently if it was the chill of a coming panic attack, or the creep of winter.

As someone who lived a mostly nocturnal existence, he hadn't noticed the days growing shorter, but he had noticed the fractionally colder weather on a subconscious level — that animal level. His lizard brain was already preparing to tunnel and den up for months of ice.

Outside, the harvest moon loomed red, coming up over the buildings in an oversized trick of refracted light, looking like an omen.

Drew told himself that he just had to stave off the panic attack until after his video call.

And hoped again that the coffee shop forgot to turn off their wifi.

A polite cough came from the barista at the register as the hour turned over, and the few other stragglers looked up, remembering the time and breaking off their conversations to get up. Gather their things. Put their mugs and used plates in the tubs by the trash cans.

Drew was the last to file out, placing his tiny espresso cup on top of the stack of dishes, hefting his backpack over his shoulders and stepping out into an emptying parking lot.

A cold parking lot.

An early fall wind rippled over the concrete, stirring the bottoms of his old sweatpants and biting him through the holes. He shivered and hastily turned, trucking off the sidewalk and into a darkening alley. The lack of sun dropped the temperature even more behind the buildings, but, as he stepped into an alcove between dumpsters, at least there was no wind.

Drew dropped his backpack to the dirty ground, shuffled it to the side, and there he awkwardly sat, walled in between the dumpster of the coffee shop and an organic grocer's. He made himself comfortable (or at least, as comfortable as he could be in a freezing evening sandwiched between garbage), pulled his backpack onto his lap as an extra layer against the cold, and unzipped it.

Inside were most of his worldly possessions.

A laptop, almost a decade out of date, with several broken keys and a much-dented lid. The plug-in keyboard that went with it. A frayed charger for the laptop, and a bundle of other frayed chargers for his phone, chargers that sometimes chose to work and sometimes not. A gallon ziplock bag full of meds — prescription bottles, OTC painkillers and cold remedies, many with labels so worn they were barely legible — and several used-up chapsticks. Half a box of granola bars, a jumble of change and receipts.

And of course, sketchbooks.

He pulled one out, opened it to a blank page, and clipped a pen there. Ready to go.

Letting the promise of that blank page comfort him, he checked his phone, and winced.

35%.

There had been no available plugins in the coffee shop, and he had been too anxious to ask to borrow one. Now his nerves were biting him in the ass.

He hesitated; call for his ride and risk the battery, or save battery for his appointment and risk the ride?

It really wasn't a question.

Of the prescription bottles rattling around in his bag, several key ones were dangerously close to empty.

Drew waited for his appointment.

He waited in the increasing cold, the increasing dark. He checked the wifi once, assured himself that it was still on, and crossed his fingers it would remain.

Twelve minutes after their appointment 'start,' Alice called. The ringtone blared out in the still alley, making Drew's heart jump. He stuffed a headphone in one ear and swiped the call on immediately.

His psychiatrist — a nice-looking woman in her fifties, with silvering curly hair — smiled at him from behind a crack in his phone screen.

"Nice to see you," she said. "How are things going?"

Through his half-busted headphones, her voice sounded like it was coming from underwater, but he could still hear her.

"Good," he said, and went on in a rush. "Really pretty good, pretty much the same, you know, nothing new."

"Oh?"

He bit his tongue; he knew he had to wade through the formalities of the appointment, knew there was no way to get his meds refilled without going through the motions, but the low battery jeered at him. His pulse tried to race, and he tried to control it.

“Yeah,” he said. “You know, nothing new since last time.”

“Good,” she said. “Glad to hear it. Still living at Anna’s place?”

“Yep,” he said. “It’s nice. I have some furniture now. Not just sleeping on the mattress on the floor.”

He meant to joke, but the truth of his words made them no joke at all. Instead, he thought it came out sounding very pathetic.

“Good for you,” said Alice sincerely. “Her son still checking in on you?”

“Yep.”

Kostas was the reason Drew actually had furniture now; the burly Greek had simply bulldozed his way in the other week with a few equally burly, equally Greek men and set up an assembly line. As shockingly fast and efficient as a squad of ants, they’d hustled in a couch, bedframe, a number of chairs and tables, and a TV stand. Drew had stood there feeling half violated, half touched to the point of choking up. None of the men had acknowledged him except for Kostas, who simply orchestrated going-ons with a critical expression, then finally gave Drew a slap on the shoulder on their way out.

“He’s been really great,” said Drew.

“I’m happy to hear you’ve got some support in your life,” she said. Through the crack in his screen, he saw her make a note, and wondered if she was checking off a list.

‘Make sure Drew has other human beings around... check.’

“Still working?” she asked.

He hesitated.

“Kind of,” he said, then admitted, “Well, not really. Not for money.”

She paused in checking her list. “But you are still painting? Working on your art?”

“Yep,” he said. He nodded. “Always.”

“And the insurance payments,” she said. “Those are still coming in?”

“Yep.” He nodded again, like some kind of nodding robot.

“And those are still taking care of everything? Groceries, bills? Are you running into any financial issues? Any hardships?”

“Nope,” he said. His first ‘nope,’ and his first sort of lie.

The money he got from his late uncle’s life insurance came in regularly enough, and in large enough installments to keep him afloat, but he didn’t mention that the collections agencies had come knocking months ago. He wasn’t drowning by any means, but the question mark of ‘is it enough?’ had become a constant flutter in his throat.

Especially when the pills in those prescription bottles started to dwindle, and dwindle, even when he broke them into halves, or quarters.

“And have you been having any intrusive thoughts?” she asked.

“Nope.”

“Any delusions?”

“Nope.”

“Hallucinations?”

“Nope.”

He watched her scribble on her piece of paper.

‘Make sure Drew is not losing it again... check.’

She looked back up at the screen, and with a hint of a smile, asked, “Seen any upright dogs lately?”

He laughed, because he was supposed to laugh, but he really didn’t want to think of it at all.

His last bad spell had culminated in visions of black dogs walking casually across the street on their hind legs.

Drew was one of those fortunates who found it easy enough to discern between reality and what most would

experience as psychosis; he had been medically and emotionally stable for long enough that he was able to see bizarre, disturbing things and recognize them as harmless symptoms of a cluster of conditions.

That didn't make them any more pleasant to experience.

"Nothing new," he said, and technically he was telling the truth.

"Good," said Alice, scribbling. Checking things off.
"Good, good."

She paused, put her pen to her lip and pondered for a second, maybe trying to think of what she was missing. Something else to check off. Drew suppressed the urge to rush her on, just as he suppressed the desire to check his battery.

"What are you painting?" she asked.

The answer to that question could have eaten up a whole hour, and so Drew just shrugged and smiled, non-answering with a, "Oh, you know, just sketching lots of stuff. Thinking about exploring landscapes some more."

It was a boring enough subject that Alice, thankfully, dropped it.

"Sounds like fun," she said, still supportive.

"Yep." Nodding robot.

"Well." Pondering her list, coming up empty, Alice finally looked back at him. "Glad to hear nothing is new, nothing to be concerned about. Boring is great. You need all your regulars refilled, right?"

Finally.

"Right," said Drew, relief warming him even in the cold corner of the alley.

"All right." One final scratch on her paper, then she set down the pen. "I'll get those called in for you. If the pharmacy gives you any issues this time, call me back and I'll get it sorted ASAP."

"I appreciate that," he said, with feeling.

Alice smiled at him again, and this time the smile had more true human kindness in it, a quality that reached beyond the cracked screen. “You’re doing great,” she said. “I’m proud —”

“Hey Alice, I’m sorry, but my phone is dying,” he interrupted, embarrassed but also having reached his limit for both human interaction and feigned positivity. “I have to make another call.”

“No problem.” She waved him off. “My office is closed tomorrow but you have my cell if you need it. Take care, Drew.”

“Thanks,” he said.

The final wave of relief swept over him as her image disappeared. He slumped back against the cold brick, not even minding the chill it pushed through his clothes.

It was funny; no matter how many times they had the same boring, polite conversation, he was still haunted by a fear that one day she would suddenly cut him off. Say, *‘No, Drew I can’t fill that for you,’* or, *‘You need to come in for an appointment, I want to do another assessment,’* or something like that. Anything but the usual cheerful checking in and refilling of meds.

Outwardly grim as his life seemed, Drew really *was* happy. He had been on the right cocktail of mood stabilizers and benzodiazepines for long enough that his darker years felt very much in the past.

But every time those bottles inched close to empty, the anxiety rose up in him.

He glanced down at his sketchbook.

During the video call, he had doodled the beginning of a sketch: the oversized harvest moon as seen through the window of the coffee shop.

He felt better for having drawn it.

Closing his sketchbook, he returned to his phone, navigating to the sparse contact list. He tapped on the name

Kostas Alexandrou.

It rang once, and then his phone promptly died.

Drew stared at the dark screen for a moment, at the long crack on it.

He sighed.

He got up, hefting his backpack on once more, and adjusted its straps for the long trudge home.

Leaving the alley, he circled back around the front of the coffee shop and happened to glance inside.

Though most of the lights were off, he could still see the barista moving around, wiping down tables and shifting chairs.

He couldn't make out their features, but could see clearly the ring of blue light that encircled their head, outlining the ambiguous profile in brilliant azure.

Their halo.

Drew lingered for a moment, looking on.

Not all people had bright auras like this one. Most went about life with dim flutters of neutral colors about their heads, operating on what Drew could only assume was affectless routine. The 'halo' — as he had first referred to it in his head as a child — seemed to be a reflection of emotional state. Sometimes that emotion was clear, as when an angry man marched down the street with electric pink and black buzzing over his hairline. Sometimes the emotions were less clear, and Drew could only guess at what some abstract purple or gold mottling could mean.

This was why he lived his nocturnal existence. Why he evaded human interaction.

During the day, the bustling crowds overwhelmed him with color. The unique auras of each man, woman, and child crisscrossed with one another and clashed with sunlight, brightly painted cars, flashy advertisements. The world became a dizzying cacophony, bearable only from behind sunglasses.

At night the auras (the ‘halos’) were softened by darkness, and became like lanterns of the soul. Preceding each person as they came and went, as they appeared and disappeared on the street, below his window, in and out of shops.

Watching the azure halo of the barista vanish into a backroom, Drew felt something like wistfulness.

He knew on a deep and unshakeable level that his auras were not psychosis.

They had always been there — long before the earthquake of puberty shook loose whatever poor genes his parents had passed onto him, before the seeds of mental illness fruited among the lush bed of childhood trauma.

And when his more run of the mill hallucinations were gone, when the delusions had been medicated into tolerable background noise, the auras remained. Untouched by medication.

Privately, Drew suspected there was something divine about the halos — not ‘divine’ in a theistic sense, but ‘divine’ in some ancient and mystic way. ‘Divine’ in the way that most people found simple human connection at church, or the synagogue, or the mosque, either sharing in ritual or chatting over coffee and donuts. ‘Human connection’ was what Drew lacked most in his life, and the perception of these auras gave him a sort of comfort in that area. He may have been too socially clumsy for a job, or for daylight, but he could see the color of the soul. And that meant something.

Of course, he would never tell Alice that, or any other professional. Or any person at all, for that matter.

As the blue light vanished, Drew’s eyes flicked to the side, to the big community corkboard visible on the wall.

Towards the far edge of the board was a sheet of paper, a carefully typed ad with its bottom half cut into strips. Each strip contained his phone number.

Not a single strip had been touched.

He sighed.

Drew Skells pulled away from the coffee shop window. He adjusted his backpack one last time, and began the long walk home.

CHAPTER FOUR — DREW SKELLS

Divinity wasn't done with him that night.

Inspiration struck only blocks from his apartment, and when it did, it drew blood.

Drew cut through a familiar park, as usual. The neighborhood was not a superb one, and so the park was overgrown and not well maintained. Mulberry had grown feral through the bars of the arbor entryway and scattered its dark fruits all over the mossy pavestones. Ivy had half-eaten the tall brick walls, and hedges grew defiant, untamed, all the way to the top.

The centerpiece of the park, a huge fountain, somehow still ran. Its merry trickling masked the sloppy sounds of a nightmare until Drew rounded a corner and came around the vision.

There, on one of the old stone benches, two men were tangled up together.

They might have been kissing; Drew couldn't tell. He was blinded by a throbbing sunburst of an aura.

The man firmly holding the other wore a halo of brilliant, scarlet red. The colors pulsed in a way Drew had never seen before; normally auras were static unless the owner was in a chaotic mental state, and then their auras were equally chaotic. This was neither static nor chaotic. Instead, the vivid red seemed to open and close in rhythmic waves. Throb — an opening flood of bright red. Pulse — a sucking, dark maroon. All vibrating. Ecstatic.

It was like looking directly into a human heart, hypnotized by the push and pull of blood.

And Drew *was* hypnotized.

He stopped and stared, not seeing either man but instead bewitched by the overall picture. He had an impression of their

embrace as Baroque, frozen in motion. Great passion distilled to grasping hands, a tucked neck, a flash of expression that could have been either agony or gasping pleasure.

Then the haloed man turned his head, and the radiant glow ebbed enough to reveal a horror.

Blood seemed to streak down his lips.

There seemed, too, to be blood painting the neck and chest of the other man, who slumped against the stone bench in a strange stillness.

Alice's words suddenly returned to Drew.

'And have you been having any intrusive thoughts? Any delusions? Hallucinations?'

He almost cringed.

This hallucination would be a new one; he wasn't sure if it was better or worse than seeing dogs walking on their hind legs.

"I'm sorry," he said, dropping his gaze away from the men. Remembering too late not to trust his eyes. "My bad. I didn't mean to interrupt. I'll um... leave you to it."

He turned on his heel, feeling his face heat up, and quickly continued on his way out of the garden.

As he passed under the opposite arbor, shoes crunching on dropped mulberries, he mentally chastised himself.

And worried.

He hadn't witnessed such a clearly *wrong* version of reality in some time.

He tried to convince himself that it had been the halo that had thrown him off; he had never seen one that brilliant, and the color must have confused his eyes. It was already nighttime, the scene dominated by shadows and untrustworthy moonlight. It could have been an honest mistake and no hallucination at all.

The further he got from the park, the more Drew was certain he had hallucinated nothing.

Hallucinations didn't come and go so suddenly; he was sure that if he were entering a new, frightening phase of psychosis, that there would have been accompanying smaller delusions. Sporadic visual distortions. Voices. The pursuit of untraceable music.

But the night around him was normal.

The leaves rustled the trees, his scuffed sneakers crunched on acorn hats underfoot. The moon — now that it had gotten above the horizon — gave off a placid light.

Normal.

No... it had been no hallucination. He had only spooked himself, spooked the couple on the bench, and his suggestible mind had filled in the blanks with red.

Red...

Drew's fear of a psychotic slip faded, but his mind still lingered on what he had seen.

That halo.

Without his conscious intent, he found his feet cutting a street, headed for a new location.

His studio was not too much longer of a walk.

—

His 'studio' was actually the sanctuary of an old church, one which had shuttered its doors recently. Service had stuttered to a trickle and then stopped after the resident priest grew ill. When the priest decided to take his continued illness as a sign to retire, the greater church authorities (whoever it was that made these decisions) had apparently declined to send a replacement. The congregation had been too small.

It had once been Anna's church.

He had met many of the previous congregants at her hospital bed, as well as the janitorial staff, and the clergy members who looked the other way.

When the door closed, and other nearby churches absorbed the dissolving parish, Drew had ended up with the key.

Using that key, Drew let himself in through a back door, and — with the red halo still buzzing in his mind — set to work.

He had never seen an aura throb like that.

It compelled him.

He found his brush moving without conscious intent, following some outside influence, lost in a reverie.

The murky landscape he had begun earlier gained a new inhabitant.

A great, flaming red sun.

As if the sun had come to blister and subdue the earth, it dominated the canvas, enormous as the harvest moon had seemed as it crept up over the skyline. Drew could imagine, could almost *feel* the radiating heat, and that heat was as dazzling as what he had seen in the park.

He could only assume the throb of that halo had been sexual; he had seen how the auras reacted to strong emotions, strong sensations. But he'd never seen anything so *intense*. It was something that must have been missing from his own encounters.

It felt like a forbidden glimpse into intimacy he'd never experienced, and now he was entranced... almost bewitched.

His hand moved on his own.

He didn't know how long he spent at the easel, blending color and building the impression of that pulsing crimson. His mind was full of images — a boiling sun, a beating heart, a fat-petaled rose slowly unfurling. Blood, gore, viscera. The promise of a storm: 'Red skies at morning, sailor take warning.' Flushed cheeks, lips. A cluster of nested cardinals. Crimson and carmine.

When he finished, it was with the same lack of awareness. He suddenly found himself standing there with his brush dangling at his side, staring at the huge canvas.

The sun blared out at him, almost violent in its brilliance.

Or was it a sun?

Drew wasn't sure what he had painted. It could have been the sun, but it also could have been a great, featureless eye, or it could have been a burning meteor come to obliterate. It could have been a descending angel.

He liked that interpretation.

Feeling strangely satisfied, he turned and set down his brush, then glanced down at himself and snorted.

In his enthusiasm, he had gotten little flecks of red all over his hoodie.

That was fine; at this point, virtually all of his clothes were paint-stained to some degree.

Still. Maybe he could wash out the flecks that hadn't dried yet.

Pulling his hoodie off, Drew left the sanctuary and all its artistic refuse behind, heading through the narthex and down a set of dark stairs, into the wide room which used to be a meeting place for drinking coffee and teaching Sunday School classes. The furniture was all covered with plastic, the kitchen window shuttered, but the bathroom still unlocked and the water still running.

Drew managed to get a few of the wetter paint spots out before giving up and tossing the hoodie aside.

He braced his arms on the sink and observed his own reflection for a moment.

His own 'halo' swirled absently around his buzzed head. Black.

It wasn't a true black; no, this was the black of a 'black eye,' of a bruise. Deep purple, so dark it appeared black. And like a bruise, his aura, too, contained hints of other colors. The occasional flicker of yellow. Of green.

Faint. Fading out of sight as quickly as they could be spotted.

His aura had always been this color, for as long as he could remember. He had never seen another with a halo like his, but he had also ceased wondering the reason why. That his was unique was really not so unique; he had seen aberrations before. Strangers bearing peculiar auras with no match.

Drew imagined those aberrant strangers were like him — different. Broken, somehow? Or perhaps not broken, perhaps simply *created* different. Born different.

It no longer bothered him on an existential level.

But it did make him lonely.

Turning away from his lonely reflection, Drew shook out the somewhat damp hoodie and pulled it back on.

He trekked back up the stairs to the sanctuary.

He had nothing particular on his mind, only the idea that he ought to tidy up and return home.

And then he stepped through the sanctuary doors, looked up, and was nearly blinded.

A figure stood in front of his red-eyed landscape, a figure outlined in an aura that stretched from head to toe, absolutely dazzling. The aura was red at its core, but ebbed out to a ridge of pure and shining gold. It was in constant, fluid motion — the red center continually unfurling like a fractal, out into those gold ridges.

Flowering.

And on the very tips of the petals, on the fluttering fingertips of the aura, there lingered a purer light. A silvering white.

Divine.

For a moment, the brilliance of the aura covered its owner like a cloak... or perhaps folded wings.

Then Drew's vision adjusted.

His painter's eyes picked out the figure's outline, and he realized with a start — and a zing of excitement in his gut —

that the man's dimensions fit *perfectly* the description he had posted on bulletin boards across town.

His model had arrived.

“Oh! You came.”

His voice startled himself as well as the man on the dais, who turned, and Drew found himself driven compulsively forward to meet him.

“I thought no one saw the ad,” his mouth said. “But you're perfect.”

‘Perfect’ didn't begin to cover it.

As his eyes acclimated, and the aura faded somewhat, he saw the face underneath all that radiant color... and was knocked breathless.

The man couldn't have been much older than him, might in fact have been younger. Definitely not much past his mid twenties. Bare-faced, not even a hint of stubble. However he *was* a man; there was nothing youthful in his demeanor, or his expression. His eyes were a clear grey, and utterly cool. Practically without emotion.

His face was similarly cool, similarly emotionless... but not in a hard way. Not cold, not harsh. It bore the solid neutrality of carved marble. His bearing was equally still, equally poised, rigid yet fluid. Like a statue having gained sentience, he looked like he might move at any moment, or might never move again.

He was lovely. Full lips, dark eyelashes. Beardless, with light-colored curls, he should have been androgynous, and yet Drew could never have mistaken him for a woman. There was a masculine surety to him, the same self assurance that made Drew certain of his age.

He had one very distinct feature.

It was an otherwise lovely nose broken once — sharply, perfectly — halfway down its length.

A single flaw that made the rest of him all the more fascinating.

If Drew was dazzled by the man's appearance, the man seemed just as taken aback by him. His piercing eyes and faint frown suggested he hadn't expected to see this type of person suddenly burst into the sanctuary.

However, as Drew babbled — about his messy studio, about his project, about his inane artistic philosophies — the stranger seemed to warm.

Drew warmed, too.

The man was somehow easy to talk to; in the intensity of the halo, Drew didn't have to worry about eye contact. When he did catch the man's gaze, he didn't feel overly perceived. Didn't feel self-conscious, didn't feel observed, accused. An impression of the man's unreality persisted — as if he really were a statue, and not a man.

But it was a man who smiled, who took Drew's paint-dirtied hand to shake it.

His skin was cool. It was soft to the point of delicacy. The hand underneath, the trappings of bones and ligaments, had the artful strength and structure of a metal-girded skyscraper.

The handshake was kind. It was intimidating.

It was something else, too.

"I'm Seth." The man introduced himself.

Seth.

Drew was certain his reaction showed in his face, was equally certain that his hand betrayed him in its trembling.

The sparkling red and gold of Seth's halo seemed to creep in through the touch of their fingers, through the clasped palms. Drew thought he could feel it crawling up his arm, aching in the muscles there.

He had never been so aware of his own blood racing in his veins.

"I haven't modeled before," said Seth, "but I'd love to try."

Seth looked at Drew a long moment, and in that moment the aura seemed to furl back from his face, giving Drew a full

view of those lovely, marbled features.

Drew managed to muddle out some words.

“When are you free?” he asked.

Seth considered that, then smiled once more.

When he spoke, his voice was soft and light.

“I’m free now.”

CHAPTER FIVE — SETH

The human sat with notebook balanced on one knee, pen in hand, wearing an expression of such effortless concentration that Seth was charmed.

Seth reclined on the dais steps, propped on his elbows, watching Drew as intently as the man did his sketchbook.

It would only be a quick sketch or two, Drew had promised. Getting a profile, getting an idea, something like that. Seth had only half listened. The specifics of the man's plans didn't interest him as much as the man himself.

And the man himself was endearingly paradoxical.

The more Seth looked, the more points of paradox he found — or imagined he did.

The man was muscular. It was interesting muscle; Seth knew human bodies from feeding on them, knew precisely what each type would feel like under his teeth, and he tried to imagine this bite. The *pop* of skin.

However, it wasn't muscle built and sculpted in a gym, or aided with injections. It was a nervous kind of muscle. The muscle of long repetition, built on a foundation of anxious energy.

Drew's body told on him; there was tension in it, were visible knots in the tissue and a tremor down to his spine. He bent over his sketchbook in a kind of nervous hunch, as if trying to shrink all that muscle.

Fascinatingly, none of the nerves reached the end of his pen.

He was such a tremulous man, the sketch should have been a mess. Chicken scratch.

But his control was meticulous.

Somehow, each nervous twitch was not suppressed but *guided*, its energy expressed in a long flicking line or a sharp tick of changed direction.

And somehow, his heartbeat was completely level. Even.
Serene.

Curiosity piqued more and more, Seth thought about tasting that pulse, imagined what it might feel like running over his tongue. He was so intent on the thought, he didn't realize at first that Drew had asked him a question.

“What?”

Looking at him, the man's very pale face (a face Seth suspected hadn't seen sunlight in some time) was touched with pink.

“Do you mind?” Drew repeated himself, making a sheepish little turning gesture with his fingertip. “So I can get a more three quarters angle?”

“Of course.” Seth shifted his position on the steps, cast Drew another glance, this one somewhat coy and sideways. “Like this?” It was impossible not to be aware of the inherent romantic potential of the scene, and be amused by it. Late at night, two strangers alone, lit only by candles and the glow of Drew's space heater.

“Yep, thank you,” said Drew, flushing more and returning hastily to his sketchbook.

Fascinatingly, there was a gaping contrast between the man's gaze when he sketched, versus when he looked on with casual eyes.

Casually, Drew could barely hold eye contact. He seemed to be embarrassed to look at Seth, seemed almost horrified by their privacy, by the close and intimate quarters.

But when he drew, he became fearless.

He looked at Seth with intent, searching eyes. He picked out details and relayed them to the page unflinchingly. The man seemed to dissipate, his mind and body turning to a fine machine while he barely oversaw them.

It wasn't confidence.

It was the artist's evaporation of the self.

Seth had seen it before — the virtuoso violinist, the chess master, the trained dancer. Human beings losing themselves to the mindless rhythm of their chosen ritual.

And it intrigued Seth all the more.

Here was a rare, shiny pebble in the sand beach of humanity. He couldn't resist reaching down to pluck it up.

“How long have you been—” Seth paused a moment to select words, eyes flicking around the variety of mediums hinting at the mastery in progress. “—a practicing artist?”

Drew stopped sketching and looked up, blinking. Was he confused by the question, Seth wondered, or just disoriented by being stirred from his work?

“Oh.” Drew looked thoughtfully blank for a second, then scratched his head, managing to land a smudge of ink on the top of one ear. “Um. Well, I've been drawing since I was a kid. I was in my first show when I was fifteen, but that was kind of just a right time, right place, kind of thing.”

Seth waited, letting silence coax more out of him, and Drew succumbed.

Shifting on the pew for the first time, wincing a bit as he realized the stiffness of his legs, Drew went on. “I started university classes early... Um. That's where I got more refined at portraits, did some private work. Not much money, but that's 'practicing' isn't it?”

He looked at Seth as if for approval. Seth, who had no idea, gave him a broad and supportive smile.

The smile only seemed to make Drew more uneasy.

“I'm not a professional, or anything,” he said, as if he thought Seth was assessing his credentials. “This is just, you know... hobby stuff.”

The man gestured vaguely at the wealth of work surrounding them.

Seth almost scoffed aloud at what sounded like grossly obvious false modesty.

Then he realized that the man believed his words. Bewildered, Seth reassessed the scene again, and felt an odd mixture of... what? Scorn? Pity? Puzzlement?

His strongest sense was that humanity had moved beyond his understanding again.

He recognized the frenetic passion of an artist, of a master in the making — one of those souls compelled to some specific work as if driven to it by a whip.

But perhaps this was one of those eras where humanity itself was too frenetic to treasure those passions.

A pity.

Seth's feelings readjusted, from pity to a bland distancing; he didn't understand humans. He likely never would. That was fine.

"I see," he said.

Drew stared at him for what seemed like a rare unself-conscious moment.

"Do you—" He waffled over his words, just as Seth had. "—draw? Do art?"

He seemed to immediately regret the words, turning red again, but Seth barely registered their clumsiness.

Seth found himself frowning.

For the second time that night, a sense of unease went through him — the same unease that had seen his fangs slipping from his prey's throat, finding the moment suddenly pointless.

"No," he said. "I don't do anything."

Drew gazed at him. He looked hesitant, but he also looked... What was that expression?

Sympathetic?

Seth didn't have time to marvel at that idea — the idea of human sympathy for his immortal *parasitism* — because there came an odd sound suddenly, a light crunching from overhead.

They both looked up.

The ceiling, dark but for the barest flickering of candlelight, revealed nothing.

The sound had come from the roof.

“Tiles slide off the roof sometimes,” said Drew. “I walk over the broken ones on the ground whenever I come in through the back. I think squirrels get up there and move stuff around. Trying to nest, probably.”

His ears were not as good as Seth’s.

Seth heard the settling of two feet, the perching of a light human shape, settling into a cozy squat on the roof above. He heard the rustle of a windbreaker, the soft *snap* of synthetic fabric in a cold night breeze.

The cold touched Seth’s chest, and his jaw clenched.

He looked back at Drew, and saw the man staring at him, startled by the blunt hostility that had suddenly washed over his face.

Seth made it disappear, putting on a charming smile instead.

“It’s a beautiful church,” he said. “A pity to see it in a state of disrepair.”

“They’ll probably condemn it at some point,” said Drew, successfully distracted. He sighed. He looked over his sketch. “I’ll be bummed. I do good work here.”

“I’m sure you could do good work in a landfill,” snorted Seth. It was a very offhand, almost dismissive comment, but then Drew flushed, and Seth realized it had been a compliment. A wincingly earnest one.

“It’s late,” he began, thinking of the shoes on the roof and of herding Drew away from them, but the man interrupted with an exclamation.

“It’s late,” repeated Drew, as if coming to the realization on his own. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to keep you.” He began to hurriedly assemble his things.

“It’s no problem,” said Seth, eyeing the ceiling. “Did you get everything you needed?”

“Oh, yes.” Drew smiled at him, looking warmed by the recall of time spent sketching. “This is a great start. When are you free next?”

It was only then that Seth remembered why he had been sent here in the first place.

He wavered.

Well, of course he wasn’t going to *kill* the man. Not after spending this time absorbing him, absorbed *by* him. Seth was hooked. Intrigued.

It had been a long time since he’d been *interested* in something.

Still, his mind cast about for an excuse beyond ‘*I am the sovereign, I do as I please.*’

The fact that Drew had seemed undisturbed, had mentioned nothing odd, been only cheerful and focused on his art this whole time, suggested to Seth that the man had seen nothing after all.

Or at least, hadn’t gotten a good enough look to realize what he had observed.

That, or he was mad, Seth thought glibly.

Perhaps Gregor had only been spooked, and overreacted.

Seth wouldn’t have found that out of character for him.

“Any night is good for me,” he said, returning the smile.

The man didn’t question his choice of night over day. Instead, Drew paused, then asked (almost shyly), “Do you have a number I can text to set up times?”

Seth groaned inwardly.

He *had* a telephone. As sovereign he couldn’t not have a telephone number, not when vampires like Curtis were gleefully trying to adjust to the 21st century.

Of course, he didn't use the damned thing. It was in Tiffany's possession, either in her purse or perhaps locked in a drawer somewhere. He didn't recall what it looked like, let alone the number attached to it.

"Tell you what," said Seth. "How about you give me your number? I'll have my secretary set something up."

Drew blinked, as if Seth had said something very odd, but then accepted it.

"All right," he agreed.

He turned, tore a page carefully from the back of his sketchbook, and scrawled a series of numbers on it. He turned back, stepped forward. Held it out.

Seth stepped down from the dais for it, and as the air between them narrowed, he felt an inexplicable urge take him.

Without thinking, he reached up to wipe the smudge of ink from the man's ear.

It was a silly gesture; Drew had smudges of ink and tiny flecks all over him.

Seth didn't know why he did it.

He didn't know why he paused then, only that he felt strange; for a moment he felt like the painted red sun behind him was boring through his back, boiling his insides as if he had stepped out into real sunlight.

But it wasn't the dry heat he had imagined. It was a soft, tactile heat, like the popping of veins on his tongue, the warm silk of blood running down his chin.

For a moment Seth thought he was going to kill the man after all.

Not for any rational purpose, not for duty.

But because he wanted to.

Before Drew had a chance to react to the touch, Seth had already pulled away, the paper gripped tightly in his hand.

“I’ll have someone call,” he said briskly, and then went, sweeping his coat off the back of a pew and not looking back.

He stepped out into the cold.

He let the door fall shut behind him, scanned once for observers — no one about in this overgrown, tree-cluttered corner of the ghostly neighborhood — and then leapt soundlessly to the roof.

The moon had climbed high overhead. A few shreds of clouds were attempting to cross its face, but the luminous beams rained down undaunted.

Perched on the rooftop was a small figure.

Small not just in stature, but also hunched, hunkered down and coiled into itself like a bat wrapped in its wings, making itself all the smaller.

A bundled, little thing.

Innocuous.

“Blondie,” said Seth coldly.

The innocuous little thing turned its face coyly to him, looking over its shoulder and through a curtain of abused blond hair.

As he turned, the wind whipped at him.

His windbreaker, ice blue, snapped and rippled in protest, and his hair blew free of where he had tucked it in.

Blondie was named for his hair. In the moonlight, it appeared ghostly pale, but Seth knew that under house lights it would be a golden, honeyed color.

Pieces of it — perhaps half of the whole mane — were either braided or in knots. They were knots of neglect, like the mane of a feral horse. Seth supposed he bathed, for he didn’t stink, but he never made any apparent effort to untangle his hair. Nor did he appear to ever cut it; the ends were tattered, ragged, and would have fallen to near waist-length if not bundled up or wind-whipped.

As his blond hair billowed out in that wind, the beads in it clattered together.

Some of them were bones.

The face below it was lovely, and horrible.

Blondie had punched more holes in it since Seth had seen him last. There were three rings in his lower lip, unevenly spaced, and a great chip of metal in his left nostril. He wore several human pins through his eyebrows.

Worst and most bizarre of all, one eye was black — not the skin around it, but the eye itself. It appeared swamped with blood. Seth couldn't imagine the cause (Trauma? Intentional injury?) but found the sight completely noxious, like the mottling of features on a plague victim.

He pushed down a wave of intense disgust.

Of all his 'subjects,' this was the one he most loathed.

“Sovereign Seth,” said Blondie.

He had a gentle voice.

He was not a gentle creature.

“I heard you had come here,” he continued. “Eliminating pests. You could have asked my help, you know.”

Seth recalled that there had been a restructuring of territories recently; Blondie must have been moved to this one.

“We could have worked together,” said Blondie. He still spoke sweetly.

And then he laughed, and the sweetness dissolved into something grotesque, ecstatic.

“I could have flushed him out for you with fire,” he said, mutilated eye dancing with a manic imagining. “Wouldn't that have been lovely? A red sky and a bloody pavement. I could have cut you out a trophy.”

He twirled one finger in his long hair, clacking the bones together.

Seth found him absolutely revolting.

Blondie's age was unknown; he could have been barely a hundred or he could have been Seth's contemporary. The disorder of his mind could have pointed to either. It could also have been a natural defect, one present from birth and preserved after his transition.

Nobody knew, because nobody asked.

Blondie didn't live in a communal setting like Sonder Home. He didn't appear at any of the rare open meetings. As far as Seth knew, he didn't even have a familiar.

Any other vampire, Seth would have pitied.

But he'd met with this one too many times.

"If I ever want your help, I'll ask," he said flatly. "This is none of your concern. Begone."

Blondie did not go. His eyes narrowed.

"None of my concern?" he repeated. His voice seemed to snap shut, and became a low creep of words, barely audible. "You're in *my* house, O sovereign."

He cocked his head to the side, pierced lips curving in a vacant smile as he listened. "I can still hear the rats crawling inside. The big one is rustling around with his paper. Did he manage to fend you off?"

Seth set his jaw against the urge to violently reprimand Blondie for his tone. *Taunting* him.

"Do I need to tell you 'begone' twice?" he asked, his own tone soft, but promising domination.

Blondie didn't get the chance to doom himself; below them came the sound of opening doors, as Drew stepped out of his uncertain shelter.

Blondie's eyes — one blistered black, one with a rapidly dilating pupil — snapped in that direction. A predatory eagerness flashed upon his face.

In an instant Seth was across the roof, seizing Blondie by his throat.

He pinned the other vampire down flat on the damaged tiles. As the sound of Drew's footsteps faded away, moonlight fell fully on Blondie's face, and the extent of its disturbing features was revealed.

If any vampire fit the pulp horror descriptions of something 'undead,' it was him.

Though clearly an adult at the time of his turning, he had childish features. His eyes were large, his face heart-shaped with a singular dimple. There was as much strange innocence as lethal intent there. Even the multiple piercings and marred eye couldn't totally rob him of that innocence.

Except that Seth thought it wasn't really innocence at all.

It was only purity of intent — more animalistic than childlike.

Still, Blondie's pout was childlike, as he objected, "What? If you aren't going to kill him, no one gets to?"

Seth remembered his initial mission, and chilled.

Blondie would not be the only one out to hunt the artist. After all, Drew had supposedly witnessed their feeding. There was no room for debate. The safety of the broader coven was at large; Seth in particular was accountable as its sovereign.

But.

Something in him rebelled.

He was the sovereign. What point was there to his position if he never exercised its power?

More than that, Drew was the only interesting thing that had happened to him in well over a century.

Seth had found a curious light in a gray world, and had no intention of seeing it blotted out.

"I'm claiming mate's rights," he said calmly.

Blondie blinked.

Blondie stared at Seth, and even his blackened eye was incredulous.

Then he burst out laughing.

“Mazel tov,” he said.

CHAPTER SIX — DREW SKELLS

By the time Drew made it back to his place, he was dead on his feet.

His apartment was the back third of a converted house, and he entered via the alley, by a staircase that led up to his door. On the very first step, his legs protested. His limbs had gotten accustomed to the slow shuffle back home, and the variation in movement sent a song of aches pinging up and down his whole body.

His legs reprimanded him for missing his ride, and his shoulders ached from holding a brush up for what might have been hours. He couldn't recall how long he had painted until Seth arrived, but it must have been hours.

It felt like a journey of another hour to reach the top, entering the hall with a final wince and pulling his keys out as he slogged to his door.

Drew was surprised to find his door not only unlocked, but open a crack.

He froze.

He thought first, in a quick despair, there went all the furniture Kostas had carried in with his buddies. How was he going to explain that? What a horrible way to trample all over Kostas's generosity.

Then his thoughts changed, from simple robbery to caution.

What if the robber he'd so quickly imagined was still there?

Drew lowered his hand slowly from the door handle, and listened.

He didn't hear a thing.

He leaned closer to the door, turning his head, ear nearly touching the wood.

Nothing.

As he stood there, listening to silence, he should have grown more assured.

But that was not how Drew Skell's brain worked.

Instead, the silence supplied his imagination with a dark and empty canvas, and *instantly*, he had a picture.

He imagined in the dark a tall, strangely narrow figure, walking oddly between rooms. Not stealing. Investigating. Gathering smells, the proof of him. Wobbling a little as it walked.

Wobbling because it wasn't a human figure. It was a dog; a dog the height of a man on its two hind legs, not humanoid, but with a strange waist and with hips contorted to allow its upright amble.

Drew hadn't hallucinated one of the walking dogs for some time, but his mind still jumped to the fearful image.

As soon as fear touched him, for any reason, there were the walking dogs.

Looking for him. Waiting for him. Waiting, right now, for him to push open his door and lay eyes on the thing standing in his hallway.

Drew stood there paralyzed.

He could neither compel himself to walk away, nor to open the door and prove his silly brain wrong. It didn't matter that it was a delusion, or even that he *knew* it was a delusion; his body still insisted that there was a hideous and mortal danger drawing near.

Every inch of his height, each square centimeter of muscle, had begun to tremble.

Stupid, he chided himself. *Stupid, stupid. Open the door.*

His stomach growled. His shoulders ached from the backpack's burden.

But he was at a stalemate with his own mounting anxiety.

Trapped, he resorted instinctively to the little bottle of ‘as needed’ medication he kept in the side panel of his backpack.

It wasn’t until he had the bottle in his hand, ready to be brandished against his own anxiety like a sword in the face of a dragon, that Drew noted the odd clicking sound of a single pill jangling in the plastic. Looking down, he saw the single pill. Pink and lonely at the bottle’s bottom.

Oh yeah.

That had been his original reason for leaving the apartment in the first place; calling his doctor to have his protection refilled.

It had been such a long and surreal night, he had forgotten.

He actually laughed.

The sound popped out of him before he could control it, and he drew a sharp breath.

Before he could even worry that someone (or *something*) had heard him, there was the sound of footsteps, and his own front door was yanked open in front of him.

There stood Kostas.

Though no *taller* than Drew, he was much *more* overall. More muscular. Hairier. Louder. His movements were bigger, his bristly might unmistakable. He was bearlike — not in the gay sense of the word, but very much like a *real* bear. Something you wouldn’t want to run into pissed off in the woods.

“You didn’t lock your door,” reproved Kostas before Drew could speak.

His sharp features and dark eyes should have been intimidating, and they *were*... but in a grandmotherly way. Like he was going to smell Drew’s breath for booze or cigarettes, then smack him with a wooden spoon for causing worry.

“It’s late. Where were you?” He didn’t give Drew the chance before barking, “Get inside,” — still more like a grandmother than an angry Greek man — and holding open the door, looming in disapproval as Drew awkwardly ducked under his arm.

“Eat,” said Kostas with a final glower. “I brought kebabs.”

That explained his presence, even so late in the evening.

Kostas worked in a restaurant kitchen, and very frequently let himself into Drew’s apartment after closing hours (eleven or even midnight on peak nights, and even later if he and the other restaurant workers shared a drink after) with an obscene number of takeout bags dangling from his burly arms.

Drew had protested before, but Kostas was a bulldozer.

Their connection was an odd one.

Drew had been renting the place from Kostas’s mother, Anna, for about a year before the nice old woman got sick. Out of the sense of obligation born of proximity (and with plenty of free time as a recent dropout and general failure of society) Drew had spent hours in the hospital. Keeping her company. Running errands. Helping keep track of her medications when she was foggy, and the nurses busy.

She had passed, and it had been peaceful.

Drew didn’t recall feeling sad. He recalled that it took some time for his brain to adjust to her permanent absence; he would often find himself thinking of some errand he had to run for her, or witness a funny human interaction she’d enjoy hearing about — and then he’d remember.

Strange.

Strange, but not sad.

And then her son, a bear of a thirty-something named Kostas Alexandrou, had gotten out of prison.

When the glowering man had shown up at Drew’s door for the first time and shouldered his way inside, the immediate impression had been that he was there for an ass-kicking. Drew, having heard a few vague details about Anna’s

felonious son, imagined that Kostas had come to rip a block of drugs or cash out of the drywall. Something absurd like that. And he, dear god, was going to be a witness.

Instead, Kostas had brusquely set to fixing a sticky door. After that, he'd moved on to the kitchen, and spent an hour taking pictures and noting dimensions of everything that was broken or leaky. The plumbing, the oven, the refrigerator.

It would all be either fixed or replaced within the month.

Kostas had taken responsibility for Drew, with the same apparent sense of obligation that had kept Drew visiting the old woman in the hospital.

Drew had few acquaintances, no close friends, and not even close family, so he found it hard to classify the relationship. Harder still when Kostas showed no real interest in talking, only in being burly and frowning company, and in looking out for Drew's interests with a touch of menace about him.

Most times Kostas showed up with gifts of food, furniture, and frowns, then made himself scarce.

However this night, he stuck around.

Drew was half a plate deep into his kebabs and rice pilaf when he realized that not only was Kostas still on the couch, but that he wasn't showing any signs of getting up to go, either.

Glancing over at him, Drew thought Kostas looked like he was brooding heavily on something. Drew hemmed and hawed for a few minutes over whether or not a simple '*What's up?*' was too personal a line to broach. Before he could work up to it, Kostas broke the silence himself.

"Where have you been?" he asked again, and this time the irate-accusatory note was gone. He only inspected Drew with critical eyes. Very *judgmental* eyes, Drew thought, coming from a convicted felon.

Drew wavered another moment. Not generally a liar, he found himself caught between the embarrassment of missing

his ride home, and a desire to keep his sketch session to himself. The lie came out by accident.

“I had a date,” he said, pushing the rice pilaf around with his fork. “I didn’t realize you were waiting for me.”

He almost felt guilty for making Kostas wait up, but was more perplexed about why the man had waited at all. He had a key. Drew had frequently returned home to evidence of Kostas’s visits in the form of a filled fridge, replaced lightbulbs.

“They found Joey’s body earlier tonight,” said Kostas.

Drew paused with his fork in midair.

It took him a second to place Joey as a member of Kostas’s entourage, another to remember that yeah, that was right, Joey was the dishwasher. Not as tall or as burly as the others, always wearing a baseball cap turned backwards. Friendly guy. Smiled a lot, had a gap between his two front teeth, occasionally chewed tobacco.

Drew remembered that his halo had always been a cool, easy blue.

He was dead?

“His body?” Drew repeated. “Who found it? What happened?”

Kostas looked broodingly back at Drew, as if *he* were a suspect. He revealed nothing in his own face of his thoughts, his emotions.

“A runner in Abel Park,” said Kostas. “She tripped over him.”

Drew winced.

“That’s horrible,” he murmured, and put down his plate. Suddenly the kebabs had lost their appeal. He reached for his water instead. “How—” He paused, wondering if he even wanted to know the answer to the question, then pushed onward. “How did he die?”

He hoped the answer was something like ‘painlessly, from a sudden aneurysm.’

But he knew Kostas wouldn’t have been here, wearing that expression, if that had been the case.

“The police aren’t releasing any details,” said Kostas. “But the runner...”

Kostas paused, and his demeanor suddenly changed. Reaching into the breast pocket of his shirt, he fished out a cigarette, but didn’t light it, instead tucking it behind his ear. Fishing out a second, Kostas turned this one over between his large fingers, which appeared surprisingly delicate.

It was a bizarrely busy routine from the normally still, stoic Kostas.

“She’s still in the hospital,” said Kostas, and then tucked the second cigarette behind his other ear in a decisive gesture.

“Was she hurt?” Drew didn’t understand.

Kostas shook his head. “Traumatized,” he said.

Drew was silent a minute, wheels turning in his head. He tried to imagine what sort of death could hospitalize someone else, just from seeing the body. His imagination fell flat.

Abel Park was only a fifteen minute walk from the church where he’d just spent hours sketching.

His mind lit suddenly on a memory from earlier that night.

The bloody scene on the bench.

He had managed to forget it almost entirely.

For a second, horror paralyzed him — and then a fresh confusion began to settle in.

The park where he’d seen the blood wasn’t Abel. In fact, it lay in the complete opposite direction. And he had *so* convinced himself that what he’d seen had just been a trick of the light, a vivid fluke of the imagination, that even now he couldn’t bring himself to believe it had really been anything else.

He also knew that, whoever or *whatever* he'd seen on the bench, neither man had been Joey.

He would have recognized the aura.

Auras were like fingerprints, no two alike. Even when the color changed, or the intensity, or the shape, some part of his senses still recognized the intrinsic 'halo' beyond its individual elements.

But the coincidence was too much.

It couldn't be possible that he had seen a vision of blood on the very night a gruesome body was discovered, and that the two events were unconnected. His halos correlated with real, provable traits and conditions; he had watched Anna Alexandrou's purple light fading over the course of weeks until eventually it vanished, with a final flicker.

So if this vision correlated to a grisly death... what did that mean?

Was he seeing premonitions, now?

He felt increasingly nauseous, and doubted he would be able to get any more of the kebabs down that night.

"Do they have any leads on who did it?" he asked.

He didn't need to clarify if it had been murder or not, or ask if the person responsible had been caught.

There was only one reason Kostas Alexandrou would be waiting up for him, glowering over his lateness and the unlocked door.

"There was a similar murder a few months ago," said Kostas. He rubbed his fingertips together restlessly, as if wanting another cigarette to toy with. "And two years ago."

He didn't elaborate, but Drew sensed a depth of lore here. A story already alive in the community.

Maybe one Drew would have been aware of, if he moved among the daywalkers.

"I'll keep my door locked," he said, adding stupidly, "I keep a baseball bat in the closet."

Kostas gave him a look.

He didn't say that Joey had been about Drew's build, and considerably tougher. He didn't have to.

"How was your date?" Kostas asked instead, abruptly changing topic and tone.

Drew grabbed his plate and jumped up, all but bolting for the kitchen.

"Great kebabs! Thanks for stopping by, sorry it got to be so late. I've got to grab a shower and pass out but hey, text me next time you're coming over, we'll catch up, mumble mumble... Good night!"

—

Freshly showered (but still with a few ink shadows persisting on his arms) Drew lay in bed and stared up at the ceiling.

Well. He lay in his blankets.

On the floor.

The bed was to his side, a reassuring blockade between him and the closed door, while he lay with his back to the wall in a nest of everything he'd dragged down from the mattress.

Drew had gone for so long without a bed frame (or even a mattress) that he felt exposed up there. Most nights he slept on the bed anyway, pretending to be a normal and well-adjusted human being, but tonight his spirit was too uneasy.

He probably made for a sad sight — curled up in paint-ruined sweats and a hoodie, his not-small body tucked into the narrow space between wall and bed, shored up with a cocoon of blankets and pillows. The room was freezing, the floor especially so, and he'd put on an extra pair of socks as well as gloves. He scrolled on his cracked phone through cut-out fingertips.

Of course, his state wasn't really so pathetic.

There was a functional space heater closed off in the closet. It was like the comfort of the actual, physical bed; it

was more reassuring for Drew to know that the objects were *there* than to actually use them.

The idea of using them, of *getting* used to them, made him leery.

He wasn't likely to lose these little luxuries any time soon, but he thought it better to keep them at arm's length anyway.

Lying in his nest, Drew read about the murders.

With each new line, he regretted his choice.

There had been not just two similar murders, but three, making Joey fourth if they were connected.

And that connection *hadn't* been confirmed. Because the victims were different ages and races, were both men and women, it apparently hadn't looked like a pattern until recently; and then, only as a result of dubiously intentioned 'web sleuths' who managed to get access to certain details.

Details about the means of murder.

Drew had to stop reading, pull up a game app, and pilot serene koi fish in order to center himself again.

As he led his koi across the cracked screen, from one insect to another, he tried not to picture Joey at the time of his death.

So close to where he had been.

Seeking another distraction, Drew put on his phone's light, propped it against a wooden bed leg, and began to riffle through that day's sketches.

He turned the pages until he came to the strange man in the church.

Seth.

Drew's eyes followed the lines of Seth's figure, but in his head, that figure was masked with fluctuations of red and gold.

A crown of fire.

It *was* late.

The events of that evening began to pluck at him. His body was sore from walking, sore from the muscular tension of the sketch session. The food in his belly, gratefully received, felt heavier. His eyelids fluttered.

His thoughts fluttered, too.

He recalled the touch of Seth's fingers, wiping ink from his ear.

What an odd thing to do.

The touch haunted him; he pulled a blanket up over his ears, feeling hypersensitive in the cold.

Strangely, his recollection of the touch led back to those men on the bench.

Bleeding? Kissing?

A portent?

A horrible thought came to Drew — thankfully coming so late in the chain, so close to sleep, that he would not remember it.

The thought was:

If his hallucinatory vision of the bloody park had been a portent of Joey's murder... what, then, were his other hallucinations portents of?

What of the creeping black dog, walking about on its hind legs?

He was gone in sleep.

The last thing he recalled — which he wouldn't *really* recall at all the next morning — was the sound of some neighbor's wind chimes. Not bells. Not glass.

A soft, rippling *click. Clack. Clattering.*

CHAPTER SEVEN — SETH

By the time Seth returned to Sonder Home, it was nearly morning.

He dropped out of his flighted form at the front door, pushed it open, and was immediately greeted by the blare of a kazoo and a burst of confetti in his face.

Seth stood there, perfectly still, with confetti slowly settling over his shoulders.

He glared.

All of them had gathered in wait. Curtis — holding a tuft of balloons — stood at the fore with Lana, who had popped the confetti gun. Of course she would be the only one bold enough to do so.

Tiffany stood by posed and dressed like an English butler, which they probably all thought was hysterical, miming the slightly mournful expression perfectly and holding a cake.

Bruce sat on the stairs, holding the collar of one whining Ramen Noodle. He sat far enough back to communicate ‘I am *not* part of this’ and also clearly ‘I wouldn’t miss this for the world.’

Standing on the steps behind him was Francisco, Lana’s familiar, who must have just arrived. Handsome, Italian, and a sweetheart (her usual type), he held a pair of hedge clippers and wore a thoroughly bewildered expression.

Seth shut the door behind him.

“Blondie passed on the news?” he asked calmly.

“He sure did, you slut,” said Lana. She slung an arm around his shoulders. “Tell me; have you been seeing this guy behind all our backs for some time now, or did your execution just take a very erotic turn?”

“No way he was keeping a secret,” said Tiffany, dropping the somber butler expression to scoff. “He doesn’t take off a *shoe* without me knowing.”

Seth shot her a look, one which should have quelled any familiar, but it was much too late in their relationship for him to establish any kind of fear-based dominion. And she was clearly thrilled. This was possibly the most interesting thing her drab boss had done in years.

Curtis blew his kazoo again.

When Seth turned the ominous stare on him, Curtis smiled tentatively. “Congratulations,” he said.

Curtis’s earnestness was the final straw.

“For the sake of clarity,” said Seth, coldly untangling Lana’s arm from around his now glittery shoulders. “I will explain myself one time. After that, none of you are to harass or question me about my private affairs ever again. Is that clear?”

“But of course, o sovereign,” said Lana, stepping back to dip a humble curtsy.

The rest of them nodded.

And Seth, loathing Blondie in his heart more with every second, bullshitted them.

‘Mate’s rights’ was one of few near-sacred rights a vampire could claim. The first and foremost right was that of self determination — a vampire could choose to join a coven, or choose to live alone. They could choose their own philosophy about their condition, they could choose whether they kept a familiar. And they could choose whether to continue living as a vampire, or to perish.

Possibly the second most important right was this one.

No vampire could police the prey of others; only the local council and its laws could do that. Aside from familiars, humans could not be kept under vampiric protection. It was too easy for vampires to pick favorites, to grow fond of certain humans. If they were allowed to declare certain humans off limits from feeding, conflict was inevitable.

Mate’s right was the exception.

If a vampire fell in love with a human, they could make a claim on them. The claim was not for simple sexual relationships; it was a declaration that the vampire intended to turn their lover and remain bound for eternity... should their lover consent.

Seth had never claimed the right before.

He had not meant to claim it now.

He had only acted to keep the artist out of Blondie's teeth.

He might have told them so if Blondie hadn't called his bluff and sent word ahead, probably hoping to trap Seth in this exact situation, and it was the idea of Blondie's sneaky machinations that made him irate enough to double down.

Blondie knew that calling mate's rights was serious, that word would spread quickly, and that Seth's reputation would be tarnished if others knew he had claimed so lightly. They were not words to be uttered glibly.

Seth thought, and felt, a rare vulgarity.

Fuck him.

"It was love at first sight," said Seth flatly.

The others, who had been waiting for his explanation with grins, blinked. Puzzled en masse. Tiffany exchanged a look with Francisco on the stairs.

Seth had thought those 'magic words' (so frequently uttered on television) would be a suitable excuse.

Apparently not.

His mind flashed to Katie Vanderpool, assistant to the CEO of Garbagehaus Fashions Inc., explaining tearfully to her best friend:

'I felt something when we met. I only wanted to know what that something was. Isn't that enough?'

"I felt something when we met," said Seth, copying her word for word. "I only wanted to know what that something was. Isn't that enough?"

The rest of them turned thoughtful.

Only Francisco, who had definitely watched all seven seasons of *Katie on Top*, narrowed his eyes at Seth. Seth wasn't concerned; where Tiffany had a lax understanding of 'subordinate,' Francisco typically had the wisdom to keep his mouth shut, and Seth suspected that Francisco knew that *he* knew about the secret carrying-ons with Bruce.

...*God, what a rat's nest.*

"So... you did just meet?" Lana clarified, eyeballing Seth.

Lana would not be easy to convince. She knew him well, and she knew romance. His only advantage was that she had never seen him in any romantic setting, and so had nothing to compare his actions with now. There was no way to prove this *wasn't* what 'Seth in love' looked like.

"Yes, we just met," said Seth. He countered her look squarely. "I was questioning him to find out what he had seen. And then... I couldn't bring myself to kill him."

That wasn't entirely a lie.

Killing Drew wouldn't have been easy after their exchange, after sitting in silence under his gaze for so long.

But what Seth *really* couldn't bring himself to do was disrupt his own curiosity, his desire to see what work the man did. A fascination at the idea of seeing his own form turned to that of an idol.

Killing Drew would have returned Seth's world to the dreary gray of boredom.

"What did he see?" Bruce broke in; Bruce, the only one who seemed neither amused by the makeshift congratulations nor intrigued by Seth's claim. Instead, he stood up and looked over the heads of the others, to meet Seth's eyes with his very serious ones. "Gregor made it sound damning."

Seth didn't want to admit that he hadn't really pushed for an answer.

It still seemed impossible to him that the human could have witnessed anything 'damning' and then sketched in such

a carefree way.

“Nothing,” he said. “I’ll speak to Gregor about his concerns.”

If that answer didn’t satisfy Bruce, he said nothing about it.

“Did you bone?” asked Tiffany plainly.

The others collectively winced... and waited, all agog, for Seth’s response.

He frowned at her.

Tiffany only grinned back.

“You didn’t,” she said, with absolute (and well-earned) confidence. “You didn’t even ask him out, did you?”

Seth was beginning to dread his lie.

Not just because it was a *dangerous* lie, but because he could already see where this was going.

“No,” he said. Voice cool, eyes hostile. “I did not.”

Tiffany deposited her cake on the desk (Seth wondered where the cake had even come from, how she had wrangled it so quickly for comedic effect, and who on earth was going to eat it? The dog?) and grew faux-serious.

“If you need advice—” she began.

Sensing the waterfall of tips to come, Seth cut her off.

“If I need advice, I’ll come to you,” he said, making sure to heap a load of dry disdain on the words.

Her eyes sparkled in amusement.

...He wasn’t going to be free of her interference for long.

“It’s late,” he said, fixing the rest of them with a similarly cool look. “I have work to do.”

Sensing that their sovereign’s tolerance was waning, the others made themselves scarce. Lana made off down the hall looking in a fabulous mood, with Francisco hastily following, probably to double check the chore list. Curtis took his dog

with a final glance back at them, seeming a little bit confused, as if he weren't sure if they had been teasing Seth or actually celebrating. (God, he was young.)

Bruce lingered.

“There's something else,” he said.

He had the same serious air as when he'd briefed Seth about Drew, just hours earlier that night.

Seth resisted a sigh. How could there already be something else?

“All right,” he said, and turned to Tiffany. “Where's my phone?”

“Your phone?” she repeated.

“The cellular telephone,” he said. “It was gray.”

Bemused, Tiffany fished in her deep purse, then handed him a dense hunk of plastic.

Looking it over, Seth frowned.

“Shouldn't it have buttons?”

Wordlessly, Tiffany took it from him and opened it; the thing unfolded like a bizarre clam. Inside were the buttons and a little screen.

Unpleasant.

Seth hated it.

“Thank you,” he said, retrieving it, folding it shut, and sliding it into a pocket.

“You remember how to use it?” she asked.

“Of course,” he said.

He would ask Francisco.

He turned heel on Tiffany's amused expression, and followed Bruce on down the hall.

As they walked, the wheels of Seth's scheme were already turning.

He hadn't expected Blondie to have sicced the others on him so quickly. He thought he had handled the initial round of questions well, but there would be others. And there would be expectations. If it didn't look as though Seth were attempting to actually 'claim' the mate he had announced to them all, there would be suspicions.

The simplest thing to do, Seth thought, would be to simply sleep with Drew.

Flirtation was subjective. So was courtship. Sex was straightforward; no one, he expected, would challenge his feelings after that. He figured it would buy him a great deal of time — enough time, at least, for Drew to finish his portraits. After that, Seth wasn't sure what he would do, but he also wasn't sure if his interest would last beyond that point.

No use overthinking it now.

Seth expected Bruce to stop in the same room they had originally discussed Drew, but instead Bruce kept walking.

Seth followed him up a spiraling back stair, into a less-used quarter of the house that contained mostly storage. The library there had once been the office of his former familiar, Grace, who kept meticulous records of every bit of information the coven might need. Fake genealogies. Passports. Phony birth certificates. Wills, contracts, receipts from decades of uneaten groceries purchased to keep up an image.

Now, Tiffany and Francisco took care of the same work on their computers.

The paper archive remained.

Increasingly curious, Seth watched Bruce sort through a set of files close to the door. Recent ones.

Bruce finally pulled out a sheaf of papers and handed them over.

Seth flipped through.

They were primarily news articles, dating from the 1950s to just the previous year. Some had been directly cut from

newspapers, others printed off of internet websites. In amongst the articles were a few strange pages — copies of autopsy reports.

A few gruesome photographs.

“What’s this?” asked Seth. He took one of the photographs and turned it, trying to figure out exactly what body part he was looking at. The corpse was too disfigured to tell easily.

“The butcher of Elysium,” said Bruce.

Seth had to smile, though there was nothing funny about these pages.

The way humans named the murderous unknowns had always amused him. The butcher of this, the slasher of that.

“You’ve been keeping these?” he asked, looking up.

Bruce did not share Seth’s amusement. His already serious face was especially grave.

“There was another murder tonight,” said Bruce. “The same as the others.”

Seth’s smile faded. He raised his eyebrows and reinspected the photograph.

Elysium was one of many nearby towns that had gradually met and merged into the current conglomeration. Decades ago — not long for a vampire, but long for a brief human life — it had been plagued with murders. A years’ long streak of them. The ‘butcher’ had earned his name, then disappeared.

Except that, according to these records, he hadn’t really gone.

Similar murders had persisted sporadically in the decades since, not solely in Elysium but in most of the slowly congealing towns. Scattered.

“We already dismissed this,” said Seth, holding the folder out to Bruce. “No signs of exsanguination. Not one of ours.”

When the council first assembled and began assembling community records, they had noticed the pattern. Like all patterns of suspicious murders, it had been investigated to

ensure there was no rogue vampire to bring to leash. Modern autopsies had cooled concerns; with no sign of blood drained from the bodies, they had been able to put the killings aside as a human aberration.

Humans were responsible for far more horrific death than the creatures which hunted them.

“The first death was recorded in 1946,” said Bruce. “The most recent was this night. That’s too long a stretch for a human life.”

Seth was a little amused again, this time at Bruce’s seriousness, but he didn’t show it. “There could easily be two murderers,” he said, still holding out the folder. “Or three, or four. Humans keep poor records and love to ascribe patterns where there are none; I doubt the oldest and most recent killings were really anything alike.”

Bruce, oddly insistent, did not take the papers.

“I went to view the body,” he said.

Seth frowned.

“You broke into their buildings?”

What used to be a harmless endeavor was now a huge risk; humans kept cameras everywhere, these days.

“I wasn’t seen,” said Bruce. “Tiffany took their security offline and Francisco kept watch.”

Seth’s frown deepened.

This hadn’t been a small expedition; Bruce had enlisted not just Lana’s familiar, but Seth’s own. And he had done it in apparent secrecy.

Why?

“And what did you see?” Seth asked in clipped tones, voice nearly caustic.

Bruce was unafraid of his sovereign’s wrath.

“The chest was pulled open,” he said. “Not with human instruments, but bare hands. Someone was digging.”

Seth was silent a moment.

He trusted Bruce's eyes, and his instincts. He knew that this particular vampire would never harass him with meaningless things, that Bruce was level-headed and not paranoid. What he would have dismissed coming from others was hard to dismiss coming from Bruce.

And yet.

Vampiric strength could explain the gruesome rending of bone without tools. Vampiric longevity could explain the persistence of the crimes.

But it was ludicrous that a vampire would murder for a reason beyond feeding. Even a newborn, mad with bloodlust to the point of mutilating bodies, would have drained the corpses. Even an older individual, composed enough to choose their actions carefully, would have been hard pressed to rip open a body and *not* feed. Even Seth, at his age and with much-reduced appetite, would have found it difficult to resist.

"What do you want to do?" he asked finally. There was a reason Bruce had summoned him; he needed sovereign approval for something.

"To investigate," said Bruce. "It will require more breaking into human facilities; I'll need Tiffany's assistance to safely breach their security."

Seth mulled it over.

It seemed like an absurd risk to take.

He trusted Tiffany's expertise, but he wasn't as confident of Bruce's abilities. Even vampires who did their best to keep up with human technology and culture, with the aim of blending in, were rarely successful in 'passing' as one of them. It was why they needed familiars.

"I'll use Francisco if I need to speak with them," said Bruce, as if reading Seth's mind.

Seth smiled faintly. "How does Lana feel about you borrowing her man?"

"She can find another in a second," said Bruce.

He wasn't backing down, Seth saw.

"You can use Tiffany," Seth said finally. "But I'll have her report to me after, and I expect reports from you as well. If anything goes awry, that will be the end of it."

Bruce nodded his understanding. This time, when Seth offered him the folder, Bruce took it.

Seth paused, then.

"Tonight's murder," he began.

"It was at the park called 'Abel,'" said Bruce.

Seth placed the murder scene in his mental map of the town, and felt a strange shift in his gut.

Only blocks from where he had met the artist.

Seth was too old to be disturbed by coincidences, no matter how eerie. It was a simple matter of probability that, every once in a while, exceptionally suggestive events should seem to coincide, when in fact they had nothing to do with one another.

But this didn't sit right with him.

The whole night felt off, aberrant. He wondered if he had somehow intervened with the natural order of things by preventing Drew's death. Seth wasn't particularly spiritual, but he had also lived too long to believe that actions didn't have... echoes.

Ripples.

"Grace called," came another voice, breaking Seth from near reverie.

Seth looked up with a blink.

Tiffany stood in the doorway holding a phone. The professional air had settled back over her, and she looked quite serious.

"Grace?" he repeated, surprised. He hadn't heard from his last familiar in some time.

Tiffany paused, reluctant with her news. Finally she said, “She wanted to let you know that she’s moving to hospice.”

Seth’s sense of discontent settled in his stomach.

One of those photos still stuck out from a corner of the folder. A faceless splash of gore.

Even in the thorough destruction of those features, the disordered spray of teeth, Seth imagined he saw someone — something — smile at him.

CHAPTER EIGHT — DREW SKELLS

“I thought it was already filled?”

The pharmacist shook her head at him, not unsympathetically. He was not the first person she’d had this conversation with today, he could tell.

“It’s on backorder,” she said. “Supply chain issues. We probably won’t have it for another month.”

Drew stood at the pharmacy counter with a blankness descending upon him.

Another month.

In his head, the schedule of withdrawal symptoms rolled out.

“Do you know if...” He trailed off, finding he wasn’t sure what to even ask. “Would another pharmacy in town have it, maybe?”

The pharmacist looked at him pityingly, then checked something on her computer. He got the impression that she couldn’t help him, but felt bad saying so outright.

“It’s possible,” she said. “You might have your doctor try calling it in across town.”

She smiled, clearly trying to be helpful, but his sense of helplessness only grew.

Neither Alice’s office or the other pharmacy would open for another two days.

And he didn’t have a car.

He could possibly get a ride with Kostas, but when? He wasn’t ever sure of Kostas’s schedule, but knew he rarely saw him during typical business hours.

“Thanks,” he said, because he could think of nothing else to say. He tried to put a plucky expression on his face, as if he

was off to follow her advice, and put his hands in his pockets as he walked away down the fluorescent aisles.

He told himself that the tremble in his fingers was from the cold.

Cold had swept in while he slept away the daylight hours, and when he stepped outside the pharmacy doors back into the night, briskness slapped him in the face. He had neither hat nor gloves, because he was an idiot who forgot how quickly the seasons changed, and wouldn't let himself pay for new ones while he was *positive* he still had a few pairs in a drawer back at the apartment.

So with only a hoodie and a light jacket, he headed home again.

He tried not to feel as bitter as his heart wanted to be.

Tried not to feel sorry for himself about the cold, about the long and futile walk from the apartment and back. The freezing ears. The shake beginning in his fingertips, which he knew would soon crawl itself up his arms.

How soon? Days?

Hours?

He tried not to think about it.

Drew tried to make his mind carefully blank — a white canvas. A lack of color. A lack of thoughts, of feeling. Nothing but potential.

However as he pictured a canvas, he couldn't stop the picture from slowly warping, until what floated in his mind was his last painting at the church.

The backdrop of primordial sludge. Wasteland.

A drop of red sun.

Boring.

Blooming.

Obliterating.

The vision of the red sun grew brighter and brighter in front of him, banishing cold, filling his mind's eye—

And then a horn blared, and the red star coming towards him turned into headlights. Drew, halfway across the dark street, stared at the flash of color, of light, of noise, and was blank.

He didn't blink, but suddenly the car had gone.

No.

Suddenly he was ten feet away, standing on the sidewalk and watching the car blast past him, its horn still blaring.

He stood bewildered under a streetlight, trying to figure out what had happened.

“Wow!” came a voice. “Close one.”

Drew turned.

There, leaning ultra-casually against the streetlight pole, was a very strange boy.

He was dressed like he shopped exclusively out of thrift stores and dumpsters. He wore jeans with trashed knees, scuffed sneakers which had been expensive once upon a time, and a white and blue windbreaker. Over top of all of it was a fur coat (Faux? Probably), knee length and slightly raggedy. It was a huge swamp of a garment, much too large for its small-framed owner, who wore it bundled around him like a blanket.

Trailing out from the hood of his windbreaker was a cascade of long, blond hair.

He had many facial piercings, and he wore heart-shaped sunglasses.

Drew only stared at him for a moment, taking in the sight, and then snorted.

“Wasn't looking where I was going, I guess,” he said.

“Sure not,” said the boy, and they both smiled.

Drew felt an immediate sense of kinship. He could tell on sight that this kid was an odd one — his kind of odd. From the

tattered clothes to the quirky sunglasses worn at night, Drew recognized his own species.

He didn't feel self-conscious at all when he offered his hand and said, "I'm Drew."

The boy only laughed at the gesture. "Blondie," he said, and wrapped his fur coat more cozily around himself.

"You waiting for the bus?" Drew pointed at the nearby bus shelter. Its windows had been shattered recently; maybe why 'Blondie' was standing around nearby.

"The bus?" The boy laughed again. He seemed to think everything Drew said or did was funny, but his laughter wasn't cruel. Drew thought there was a note of delight in it, and wondered if the boy was lonely. His particular air of delight made it seem like he hadn't talked to anyone in a while.

From anyone else, the thought would have been wild speculation based on nothing but a minute's conversation, but Drew was a bit of an expert on loneliness.

"I don't take the bus," said Blondie, with an air of humoring him. "I just hang around here."

Drew raised his eyebrows.

'Here' was a poorly maintained micro mall, too little-used to even be shady. Half of the buildings sat empty, their windows covered in real estate stickers, and the few shops hanging in had limited hours. The pharmacy and a fast food drive-through were the only busy spots, and then only during specific times of day.

Now, only ten minutes from the pharmacy's close, with the sun having finished setting while Drew was inside, the mall was especially dead. The gray lots sat empty, and cold wind seemed to gather speed and strength over their flat surfaces.

Hang around here?

"You should probably find a better place to hang out," said Drew, working his cold hands deeper into his pockets. "Someone just got murdered not too far from here."

He hadn't been too personally apprehensive about the murder before; he didn't have much regard for his own safety, and was relatively confident that his auras would alert him to any murderous types. Now, though, the idea finally made him uneasy. He couldn't tell Blondie's age, especially under those sunglasses, but was positive the kid was younger than him. Maybe not even twenty.

Definitely young enough to need someone looking out for him.

Blondie had an odd reaction to the mention of the murder.

He didn't react at all for a moment. He didn't speak, or move. In fact, he went almost *eerily* still. There was something delayed about his response; when he spoke again, it was eerily like an animatronic puppet suddenly coming back to life.

"Murder?" he repeated. "That doesn't sound right." He smiled. "Are you sure it was murder?"

Drew felt his eyebrows rise again.

More amused, he asked, "Are you one of those true crime junkies?"

"I am," said Blondie, with an air of *'And what of it?'* "Aren't you? Isn't everyone?"

"I'm not," said Drew firmly. He knew what things his psyche could and couldn't handle, and after looking at those articles the other night, he was especially certain now that true crime was out of his realm of psychological comfort.

"If you're not into the research," said Blondie, with a strange smile. "Then how can you know it was murder?"

"Do you have another explanation for why they would be finding bodies?" asked Drew, increasingly amused by the creepy little creature. Thumbing over his shoulder, he said, "I have to walk home. There's a homeless assistance house on the way; you ought to tag along. It's supposed to be cold out tonight."

"You look colder than me," said Blondie with a laugh, but he came out from under the street light to join Drew anyway.

As he emerged, Drew noticed something curious.

He didn't have a halo.

No...

Drew frowned.

No, he did, but it was just a barely-there scrap of pale grey, trailing after him like a sad cloud.

“What are you looking at?”

At Blondie's word, Drew snapped his gaze back down to a normal level.

“Nice sky tonight,” he said, and hustled onward, heading down the sidewalk at a brisk pace.

Blondie looked at the sky, frowned in puzzlement, then followed.

Right on Drew's heels, Blondie elucidated.

“People drop dead all the time,” he said. “How do they know it's a murder?”

Drew assumed he was being playful, but wasn't sure the rules of the game.

He could have gotten into the articles he read, the descriptions of the scenes and the state of the bodies. He sensed that was what Blondie wanted, was baiting him into.

But he didn't want to revisit what he'd read, or think about Joey that way. Joey in that state. It felt like an assault on his memory, almost. Drew hadn't known him well, but he retained a memory of his warmth, of a goofy smile.

Drew evaded the topic.

“Do you live around here?” he asked, and was genuinely curious. He had never seen the kid before. He definitely would have remembered the hair, the piercings, and the general oddness. He also thought Blondie must have been a nightwalker like him; the boy's skin was pale as milk. Paler, even. Milk with most of the fat skimmed out, leaving little color behind.

“Sure.” Blondie shrugged. As he walked, he went out of his way to step on crunchy leaves and fallen acorn hats, seeming to do so without even thinking about it. Drew found it oddly adorable.

“I moved into the neighborhood recently,” said Blondie, hopping with both feet on a particularly large cluster of acorns. *Crunch*. “But I’ve lived around town for a while, in nearby towns.”

That sounded like a lot of moving for someone so young. Drew imagined the kid as a drifter, and was sympathetic.

He didn’t pry.

“How do you like the neighborhood?” he asked.

Lame smalltalk, maybe, but again driven by genuine curiosity.

Drew liked the neighborhood.

It was on the lower income side of town and therefore attracted ‘trashier’ elements, but as an unemployed basketcase, Drew considered himself one of those ‘trashy’ elements. He didn’t mind the cracked sidewalks, the poorly maintained roads, or the ruthless weed life that encroached on both. He didn’t even mind the gross human detritus he had to carefully avoid on his walks: the discarded trash, the cigarette butts, the occasional inexplicable condom.

There was a sense of community in the less-than-beautiful façade, he thought. It was like the apartment he rented; sure it was small, it was a little ugly, but it was how he had met Anna, and ended up at her bedside to keep her company as she faded. It was the connection that had gotten him his studio. And now it was the connection he kept with Kostas, who had brought him food and furniture, and who worried for him when there was a murderer on the loose.

In a better part of town, with the means to live there, Drew thought he probably would have spent all his time in a clean white apartment — a cube stacked on top of and in a line with dozens of other cubes — and seen no one. He never would have run into an odd stranger by a shattered bus shelter.

“It’s like any other neighborhood, isn’t it?” said Blondie. He didn’t look up from crunching leaves. “People live here. They have houses. They come, they go. They sleep, they eat. It’s all the same everywhere.”

Drew didn’t quite know how to respond to that.

He supposed the kid wasn’t wrong, but what an odd perspective.

“My turn to ask questions,” said Blondie suddenly, and looked up now with a smile. The lights of a solitary passing car flashed off his dark sunglasses. Turning to walk backwards, in front of Drew and looking back at him, hands clasped between back, Blondie seemed to scrutinize him.

“Are you sick?” asked Blondie suddenly.

Drew blinked.

Then he remembered Blondie had seen him coming out of the pharmacy. He imagined his expression must have been bleak then.

“Oh, just sick in the head,” Drew said, with half a smile.

He expected Blondie to either recognize a sensitive topic and change the subject, or possibly to commiserate. It was a generalization, but he thought Blondie looked like the type of chaotic youth who might have been on and off various psych meds for much of his life.

What he didn’t expect was confusion.

Blondie actually stopped walking. Drew had to stop, too, to avoid running into him.

A frown on his face, Blondie asked, “What do you mean, sick in the head?”

Drew paused, then twirled one finger in a circle beside his ear in the universal gesture for ‘*cuckoo, cuckoo.*’

“You know,” he said.

Blondie only continued to stare at him, expression inscrutable behind those dark glasses.

“I have a mental illness,” Drew finally stated in plain terms.

Blondie shocked him again.

“What’s that?” he asked.

Drew stared at him, as bewildered as the boy had seemed by his original statement. No. More bewildered.

“You know,” he said again, and fumbled over an actual definition. “When your brain does things wrong. Your body is fine but your thoughts...” How to put it? “It’s like your thoughts are broken. Maybe your emotions, too. Depending on what illness you have. There are lots of ways to be mentally ill. Schizophrenia, depression. You’ve heard of those, right?”

Blondie cocked his head, as if searching his memory. Then he asked, “What illness do you have?”

Drew paused.

It wasn’t that he was ashamed, exactly. He had spent too long in his reality, conquering its ghosts, to be truly scared of outward stigma.

But there *was* stigma.

Less ‘colorful’ mental illnesses (like depression or anxiety) were often met with callousness and misunderstanding, but typically not with fear.

Bring anything more exotic into the equation, and callousness turned to wariness. Misunderstanding turned to mistrust. It didn’t matter if you were a normal, rational person 95% of the time. People would always be viewing your words and actions through the lens of that other 5%.

But he told Blondie the truth.

“I have delusions, sometimes,” he said. “And every so often, hallucinations. They’re rare. They’re not dangerous.”

Blondie was silent a moment, and for that moment Drew feared the wariness must have planted its seed in him.

Then Blondie asked, very frankly, “What’s a delusion? A hallucination?”

Was he serious?

Drew wondered for a moment if Blondie was a native English speaker or not; he had no accent, and spoke with ease, but there were obviously huge gaps in his dictionary. Could he really have grown up without learning these words? Even if he had had a hard childhood, been one of those semi feral, frequently homeless kids, wouldn't he have at least *heard* about these things?

Drew almost couldn't believe that the kid didn't actually know, but he explained anyway.

"A delusion is when you believe something untrue," he said. "Something which contradicts reality, and which you believe even despite proof it isn't true. A hallucination is when you *perceive* something untrue with your senses. When you hear voices, or see things that aren't there. Things no one else can hear, or see, or smell, and so on. Things your brain tricks you into thinking are happening around you, or happening to you."

Blondie was quiet for long enough after the explanation that Drew asked, "Does that make sense?"

Blondie broke into an inexplicable smile.

"Me too!" he said, and laughed.

He turned and kept walking.

Bemused, Drew stood there a moment before shaking his head and following after.

"I see and hear all kinds of things," said Blondie, bizarrely cheerful. Maybe happy to find someone to relate to? "Things no one else can. The blood in the birds and squirrels. Their little heartbeats. I can hear your blood, too." He smiled at Drew, sparkling. "It's the best! I hear music wherever I go — the whole world's heart beating. Drums everywhere, every night."

This was the point where most people would probably be alarmed, Drew thought. Especially with a murderer on the loose. *'I can hear your blood?'* The horror scene was writing itself.

But he sensed nothing to fear from the odd Blondie.

And he knew what it was like to hear things, see things. It was usually a horrible and frightening experience, and there had never been anyone to talk to; even when deluded, Drew had known better than to confide in someone who might leave him, or lock him up.

There was something incredibly freeing about listening to Blondie detail his hallucinations. There was no fear in his voice — not of the hallucinations, and not fear that Drew would be disturbed and stop talking to him.

Drew found a degree of envy for the kid and his confidence.

“What do you hallucinate?” Blondie asked him.

“Well.” Drew felt he had to be honest, Blondie had been so forthcoming. “I see dogs, mostly,” he admitted. “Dogs walking on their hind legs. And I saw...” He paused a moment, then found himself describing what he had seen just the other night. “I saw some men kissing on a bench recently, and I hallucinated that one of them was covered in blood. It was running all down his neck and chest. And the other man... the other man had blood on his face. His mouth.”

He shook his head at the memory, then found Blondie looking keenly at him. Again, the exact expression was masked by those sunglasses, but Drew felt intensely scrutinized.

“Men covered in blood?” What sounded like amusement had crept into Blondie’s voice. “Blood on necks, blood on faces. Sounds like you saw a vampire feeding.”

Drew laughed.

“Speaking of feeding.” He nodded down the sidewalk.

Up ahead was the homeless assistance house: an old two-story with a broad porch, converted to a shelter in recent years. A line trailed out of the front doors; it must have been one of the times they served meals.

“I’m not sure if they’ll have any beds,” said Drew. “But you should be able to find a spot to sit in out of the cold, at least, and the food is good.”

Blondie glanced at the crowd without much apparent interest. Drew suspected the kid was more interested in chitchat than shelter.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” Blondie suddenly asked.

Drew looked at him in surprise. Again he found himself scrutinized.

The question came so out of blue, but had an almost rehearsed sound to it, as if Blondie had been meaning to ask the whole time and only just now remembered.

Drew cringed internally.

Maybe he had overdone it in trying to empathize with the kid. He was really not in a place to see *anyone*, and he had a very firm rule about not dating anyone under twenty-five. He doubted Blondie came close; in fact, he wasn’t even sure the kid was *legally* old enough to date.

At the thought, his cringe turned to sympathy.

Maybe Blondie had never had a real friend before. It could have been that he thought the only way to human connection was sexual. Drew had met plenty of people damaged that way.

The kindest thing to do was lie.

“I do have a boyfriend, actually,” he said.

Blondie didn’t look upset at all. Just curious. “What’s his name?”

Was this kid really calling his bluff?

Not remotely prepared for this line of questioning, Drew said the first name that popped into his head.

“Seth,” he said.

He immediately cringed internally, hard enough that he was going to be feeling it the next time he saw Seth again (if he did).

He told himself it was just because that was the last name he had had any meaningful interaction with, and was just thankful he hadn't accidentally said 'Kostas.'

"How long have you been together?" asked Blondie.

Was he really continuing the pop quiz?

Drew gamely answered.

"A few months."

He figured that had to be long enough to indicate things were serious — 'serious' enough for Blondie to step off.

And yet the kid kept looking keenly at him, like he was waiting for the wrong answer. Like there was something he expected to hear... or not hear.

"How does he feel about the...?" Blondie lifted his hand, twirled his finger in a circle beside his head in the same '*cuckoo, cuckoo*' gesture Drew had made earlier.

The reminder of their shared affliction brought out the sympathy in Drew again, and he found himself answering pseudo-honestly.

"I don't know," he said. "I haven't told him."

Blondie was unreadable for a moment, nothing but dark sunglasses and a face full of metal. Drew couldn't tell if he had passed or failed the test.

And then suddenly, Blondie was all smiles again.

"Well, good luck with that," he said, and sauntered towards the line.

Drew watched him go, utterly bemused.

Finally all he could do was shake his head.

Weird kid.

Not that he could talk, he supposed. He had been a weird kid, too. Wasn't far separated from those years.

Snugging his hood tighter around his cold ears, Drew turned to start on his way home. As he walked, he became

aware all over again of that tremor running through him. The threatening purr of coming withdrawal.

For some reason, he stopped at the end of the block and looked back.

Blondie was gone. No sign of him in the line.

Drew wasn't really surprised; he suspected the kid had been more interested in company than dinner.

He felt a little bad. If Blondie hadn't asked about boyfriends, he might have offered him the couch. Even now, he felt compelled to go back and search Blondie out, to at least give him a number *'in case you ever need help.'*

Basketcases had to look out for each other.

But Blondie was gone, and the night was only getting colder.

And Drew had a funny feeling that if the weird kid wanted to find him again, he would manage.

Drew went home.

—

To distract himself from the tremors, he took a hot bath, wrapped himself in the coziest old clothes and thickest comforter he owned, and sat down to sketch in the kitchen.

Picking at Kostas's leftovers, he doodled aimlessly.

A sketch of the pharmacy. The empty mall.

He sketched Blondie.

It wasn't a detailed portrait; Blondie had stayed on the move, all the features of him broken up by strange night lighting. Cars flashing by. Broken, dimmed street lamps.

Drew doodled an impression of big coat, small person, and long blond hair, and then his phone rang.

He answered with a rush of relief, expecting it to be Alice calling back, Alice to the rescue about his meds.

It was only as he put the phone to his ear that he realized the hour, and that it couldn't possibly have been her.

There was silence at the other end for a moment, and then he could have sworn he heard a muffled bicker.

“—just say hello.”

“—quiet!”

Baffled, Drew glanced at the number, then put the phone back to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Hello,” replied a voice, sounding almost irate. Then the person cleared their voice and said again, “Hello.” This time much more conversationally.

Drew recognized the voice. His face bloomed pink.

“This is Seth speaking,” said the voice on the phone. “Is Drew available?”

Why was he suddenly tongue tied?

...and why had Seth phrased it that way? This was a cell phone, not a business.

Who cares? Just answer!

“Yeah, this is Drew,” said Drew, thankful that the audio medium allowed him to bury his face in his sleeve and drop his head onto the table. “Hello.”

Make that four hello’s so far in the five second conversation.

What a disaster.

“When are you next available?” asked Seth. There was a strain in his voice.

The strained tone, and the muffled bicker from before, made Drew picture an annoying sibling tugging on Seth’s sleeve, and that made him realize he knew precisely nothing about the other man. He had been so hung up painting, so carried away by the mysticism of the evening, that he had asked exactly *zero* personal questions.

“Um.” Drew had to work through the mess of withdrawal tics stirring his brain, then through a wall of embarrassing

bashfulness, before he remembered that oh yeah. He had no schedule. He was a loser with no job or hobbies.

“Any time,” he said, with a *‘haha I know, I’m so lame’* laugh which was meant to be endearingly self aware, but came out pathetic and strange.

God, he wished he hadn’t said Seth’s name to the little blond twerp. He had completely jinxed himself. When sketching, it was so easy to forget the humanity under a subject, to see only shape and shadow and lovely form.

Now, the spell between artist and subject was broken. He had accidentally remembered that Seth was a man, and that he *liked* men.

“Any time,” repeated Seth, and it sounded like he was turned away from the phone.

Drew heard... another odd rustling noise, and muffled voices. Was Seth covering the phone with his hand? Drew remembered him referring to a secretary, imagined him checking a full schedule full of business appointments, and became aware all over again that he had asked Seth *nothing* about himself.

Seth returned.

“Can I text you a time?” he asked.

“Sure,” said Drew. “That works.”

“Great,” said Seth, and nothing else.

Drew waited, and in the silence sweated over whether or not *he* should say something else, and if so, what?

Then he realized how complete the silence was.

He pulled the phone from his ear and looked at a black screen.

Seth had hung up.

Drew stared for a second, too baffled to be offended or even to laugh.

What a strange guy.

Bemused, Drew put down his phone and riffled through the pages of his sketchbook until he came to the initial drawings of Seth's face.

He looked at it for the first time as a person's face, as something other than an idealization of lines taking shape.

A man's face.

Drew sighed, propping his chin in his palm, letting the sketchbook plop to the table where he gazed moodily at it, coming to an unhappy conclusion.

He's hot.

CHAPTER NINE — SETH

“Be straight with us,” said Tiffany. “Are you aiming to get in his pants tonight, or not?”

Seth sat on a stool, legs and arms crossed, jaw set.

He glowered up at Tiffany and Francisco, who were at a deadlock over the choice between a sweater and a button-down.

“When I said I would *accept* your suggestions,” he said icily. “I didn’t mean that I would submit to being a dress-up doll.”

“This isn’t dress-up,” said Francisco, and he wrested the button-down from Tiffany, who put up just enough resistance for comedic effect. There was a vein twitching in his temple. “You never realize how important buttons are until you accidentally punch someone in the face trying to peel out of your sweatshirt.”

To say that Seth’s patience was running thin would have been generous.

His initial logic had been that involving the others in his ‘romance’ would busy them bickering with one another, rather than gossiping about him. He’d also reasoned it would be much simpler to sell them on his claim if they were invested in assisting.

He hadn’t expected their usual respect for his sovereignty to dissipate *instantly*.

Lana had dropped off a load of books at his door like assigned reading material: the *Kama Sutra*, the *Ars Amatoria*, *The Joy of Sex*. Among others.

He would have taken it as a joke if there hadn’t been dozens of sticky notes and bookmarks in each book, puffing out the pages with helpful suggestions.

He remembered the pile with a disdainful twitch of the lip.

If he had wanted insight into her sex life, he would have dropped by her bedroom door on any given Tuesday.

He wished he had thought to say as much to her face, but his mind had gone too blank with... horror? Shock? Some human emotion, rarely stirred in the vampiric heart.

Curtis, ever on the cutting edge of human culture, had been too shy to deliver his suggestions in person. He had carefully typed them up, emailed them, printed out the email, and then slid the printout under Seth's bedroom door.

The suggestions included: matching tattoos, personalized perfume, personalized shirt, personalized boxers, edible underwear, 'gift of luxury vehicle,' and flowers.

Seth put the email in a drawer and resolved never to acknowledge he had ever received it.

Tiffany probably could have given him excellent advice if she hadn't been so committed to the bit.

Francisco was the only useful individual.

He was also the only one Seth knew for a fact was having sex on the regular with a specific partner.

While Lana was frolicking with a handsome new stranger each week, she was oblivious to the fact that her familiar had been fucking Bruce for months. Seth had overheard them once, made a mental note to avoid that part of the house at that time of day, *forever*, and filed the information away.

So when Francisco made unflinching eye contact with Seth for the first time in their history of interaction, told him, "If you think there's even a *chance* of sex, choose *easy to remove clothing*," with the certainty of a man burned by old mistakes, and handed him a button-down shirt (in an offensively bland gray flannel), Seth took the shirt.

He took the rest of what Francisco supplied, too:

"A condom." Francisco began to make a stack on the table in front of him. "A secondary, backup condom. Lube packets. Breath spray. Baby wipes. And these—" Francisco held up a tiny, palm-sized pouch. "These are hand warmers. Shake them

to activate them, then stick them in your pockets with your hands. That way you won't have cold fingers."

Seth eyeballed him.

He could only guess that 'cold fingers' had come up in those dalliances with Bruce.

"Fine," he said, and swept the lot into a pile. He found the assembly of items thoroughly unromantic, more like a war medic's kit than tools of love, but these suggestions actually did ring true to him. In the many seasons of *Katie on Top*, Seth had seen Katie stock her purse similarly on many key occasions.

With Francisco's practical experience, his own instincts, and multiple rewatches of *Katie on Top* serving as his foundation, Seth felt positive he could pull off a seduction.

Hundreds of millions of simple human beings managed it every day.

How hard could it be?

—

Very.

It could be very hard.

Seth had been propositioned enough times in his long life to be reasonably confident that he was attractive by human standards, and had largely assumed that as an attractive 'man' in an age of casual sex (That was the term, wasn't it? He was positive they didn't call it 'free love' anymore), making love would be as simple as intent.

Not so.

One tiny wrinkle proved almost immediately to be a genuine hurdle.

Truth be told, Seth had never had sex.

Not for lack of ability (he was sure) and not out of any chaste idealism, either.

He had simply never felt the urge in his many, many years on the earth.

He had always thought of sex as something functional — a means of producing children, continuing one's line. As an immortal being, he had no need to continue his line by other means. His would not be suddenly cut short by old age, starvation, ill health, or any of humanity's other frequent plagues.

The pleasure aspect he was *convinced* was greatly overstated. There were many things humans raved about which were, frankly, quite mundane.

It was reasonable; they lived short lives, they had limited experiences. A man who only ever saw ten paintings would obviously pick a favorite, one that he considered a peak work of art, but of course he would feel much differently if he was able to watch the evolution of painting over the course of centuries. He would likely find his initial favorite to be completely forgettable.

Seth was positive that humans would be much less obsessed with sex if they didn't have the deadline of mortality hurtling towards them, and if they weren't forced to spend each day toiling for sustenance. Of course such exhausted, ill-used creatures would cling to the quick bliss of an orgasm, just as they did their drugs and other petty vices.

His own needs were very different.

Of course, he knew the mechanics of sex well. He was well read in everything from romantic poetry to anatomical texts. He had witnessed the act (in its many forms) innumerable times over his millennia, from ancient cult orgies to modern pornography.

He considered himself educated (at least on a theoretical level). Far beyond simple penile penetration, he knew about oral sex, intercrural, frottage, other forms of 'bumping and grinding' (as he had once heard it called), foreplay, 'BDSM,' and any number of other sexual staples, as well as the fads which rose and fell over the centuries.

Seth sat on a cushion on the church floor.

With a light pointed at him, a ring of space heaters around him, the vampire sovereign perused the sexual encyclopedia in his head and tried not to feel irritated.

The painter stood at an easel with an expression of rapt focus.

An artist's focus, intent and totally absent of desire.

Although Drew was painting *him*, Seth still felt somehow ignored.

When Seth had first arrived (absent his housemates' absurd gift suggestions), Drew had already been in a state of extreme concentration. The cushion and space heaters had been arranged, his canvas and easel set up, paints and brushes laid out in crisp order, and he had directed Seth for the first of their portraits.

At the time, Seth might have noticed an odd air about the painter, if he hadn't been so keen on his mission.

When Drew's directives included undressing, Seth's confidence had soared. Here, he had thought, was the golden opportunity presenting itself, and so quickly!

Not so.

Now, posed sans everything but boxers (A silky, form-fitting brand of Francisco's selection), Seth realized with mounting disappointment that he had miscalculated.

Drew didn't so much as blink at any part of Seth's bared body. Of course he didn't, Seth thought, with mild disgust at his own faulty logic. Drew was a trained artist; he had probably seen and sketched so many naked bodies that they all blurred into one completely asexual concept. He could likely have been at eye level with a fully erect penis, inspecting it closely, and completely forgotten the purpose of the organ in his focus on shading it properly.

Seth may as well have been a basket of fruit.

He regarded the painter almost sourly.

Not only was the near-nudity no advantage, but it had also disarmed him. His coat, and its pockets full of vital equipment, lay now just out of easy reach.

Drew, on the other hand, was neatly bundled up.

He still wore a full coat over top of a sweatshirt. *Not* a button-down, Seth noted. He wondered if, by Francisco's logic, that meant Drew had no interest in taking his clothes off and therefore no interest in sex.

That, admittedly, was the most perplexing point to Seth.

He understood consent, and he meant to obtain it, but he was *baffled* by how people communicated it without 'ruining' the mood of a seduction or a spontaneous fling .

In *Katie on Top*, Katie and her girlfriends launched into sex without much preamble. One minute they would be having a simple conversation with an attractive man, and then either he or she would spontaneously kiss the other, and the kiss would segue seamlessly into sex. In the back of a car. The bathroom of an upscale art gallery.

Only occasionally a bedroom.

Seth knew that television did not always reflect reality, but he was certain people didn't straightforwardly ask, '*Do you want to have intercourse?*'

Perhaps there was some secret language of the eyes. Perhaps a special tone of the voice.

"Are you cold?" he asked, and tried to layer as much seduction as possible into the words, hoping for a clean implication of '*let me warm you up.*'

"I'm fine," said Drew, very quickly.

Almost defensively, Seth thought. Eyes narrowed, he observed and was certain that Drew shivered under his coat.

"Are you sure you don't need a break?" he cajoled. "Why don't you come sit by the space heaters?"

'Break' seemed to be the magic word.

“Oh!” said Drew, and turned immediately apologetic. “I’m sorry. We should have taken a break twenty minutes ago, I wasn’t even watching the clock.” He looked around the easel, for the first time seeming to look at Seth like a being and not a subject, and his expression was so sorrowful with apology that Seth felt bad for even asking. *He* certainly wasn’t tired. He could have sat in the pose for days and been unbothered.

“It’s all right,” Seth managed, but Drew was already away from his easel and digging through the bags he had brought.

“Here,” he said.

He joined Seth in the circle of space heaters, but as a host first, pushing a thick blanket on him, as well as a thermos and styrofoam takeout box before finally sitting down.

“Sorry,” said Drew, yet again. “I’m... I’ve been preoccupied.” He looked unhappily around. “Sorry I don’t have a real studio. I know it can get freezing in here; sometimes I paint with fingerless gloves. Do you want another blanket?”

“No, this is fine,” said Seth, wrapping the totally unnecessary blanket around his shoulders in hopes of stopping the flow of ‘sorry’s. “I’m really very warm.”

He had put both thermos and takeout box to the side, but now Drew picked them up and placed them in front of him again. Seth was reminded absurdly of a dog, sad-eyed, placing a ball at his feet.

“There’s hot chocolate,” said Drew. “And some Greek cookies. My landlord works at a restaurant and drops off leftovers sometimes. Well, my landlord’s son. Well, landlady. Actually, I guess he is technically my landlord since she passed... I should probably check my rental agreement. Anyway, the food is really good.”

Seth wasn’t listening. He hadn’t heard a word past ‘*Greek desserts.*’

He popped open the lid, and was delighted to see an array of pastries just like those he had smelled from the nearby bakery. Thin, crackly pastry dotted with pistachio and walnut,

dense with honey. Some were coated in chocolate, others in powdered sugar. The assortment was so charming, Seth found himself once again smitten with the entire human species.

“Beautiful,” he said, with great admiration.

He would always be transfixed by the amount of love and detail humans put into making food, something meant to be destroyed and consumed. He thought it was probably humanity’s most endearing trait.

“You like these?” asked Drew, sounding cheered.

“Oh, absolutely,” said Seth. “These are my favorites.”

Looking up, he saw Drew’s face finally warming, and felt his own face involuntarily echo the smile that grew there. He was touched, and felt suddenly pleased with himself. It was no seduction, but getting such a bright smile felt like a victory.

And then, too late, he realized he was expected to *eat* the things.

“Oh,” he said. “But I can’t have them.”

“What?” Drew blinked.

“I’m...” Seth cast about for an excuse. “...allergic.”

The smile going out of Drew’s face made Seth feel like he had stomped on the dog’s paw.

“I can go find something else,” said Drew.

“No. It’s fine.” Seth spoke quickly, before Drew could issue another apology. “I’m allergic to everything. I have a very specialized diet.”

Drew looked both mournful and confused.

“You’re allergic. But you said they’re your favorites?”

“Yes.” Seth clarified. “To look at.”

Drew stared at him.

Seth felt himself passing as less and less for human with every passing moment.

“I’d be happy to watch you eat it,” he offered.

Drew wasn't cheered by the offer, but an expression of such great mystification overtook his face that the puppy-sadness was, thankfully, banished.

"You... want to watch me eat it?"

Much too late, Seth thought he recalled something Tiffany had once told him. He felt suddenly certain that he had confessed to a fetish.

Drew broke out laughing.

"Sorry," he said yet again, but this time with smiles, shaking his head. "That's just, um..."

"Never mind," said Seth hotly. If he *had* been human, he was sure he would have been red-faced.

"No, here," said Drew, and reached out — expression earnest, eyes dancing with mischief — to pick up a cookie and take a bite. Powdered sugar drifted onto his jacket front. "How's that?"

Seth gave up on seduction completely.

He would have to admit failure and consult Lana. (Perhaps Bruce, first. Both had managed to take human lovers, but Bruce was less likely to cackle like a witch and say *'I knew you'd come.'*) If he was going to get anywhere with this 'affair,' he would need an expert.

Sitting back, Seth watched Drew enjoy himself, and settled in for some incredibly dry human small talk.

"Your landlady made them?" He barely recalled what the man had been saying.

Drew shook his head, swallowed, and wiped his mouth.

"Her son brought them," he said. "My landlady died, a couple months ago."

"Ah," said Seth. Death. One of the least interesting things that humans did. "I'm sorry. Were you close?" Last he'd heard, the landlord-tenant relationship was a fraught one, but Drew sounded somber.

“Kind of,” said Drew. He seemed to ponder the question, wiping powdered sugar thoughtlessly on his jacket. Seth suppressed a smile, amused and even endeared; it was clearly the gesture of someone used to wearing paint-spattered clothes.

“She was kind of like an aunt,” mused Drew. “A great aunt. Someone in the family you don’t really spend time with until the end. You know what I mean?”

Seth did not.

“Mm,” he said, trying to mimic Drew’s thoughtful tone.

“I didn’t know her very well, or for that long,” Drew went on. “She got very sick. I was her only tenant. I don’t really know how, but I ended up being there when she died. In the months leading up to it.” He paused. “She needed someone.”

“Mm,” said Seth again, not sure what type of response was warranted here. Sympathy? Congratulations?

“Anyway.” Drew picked up another cookie and concluded matter-of-factly, “She died of cancer.”

“Oh! I know someone dying of cancer.”

Seth’s voice came out inappropriately pleased sounding; he was just pleasantly startled by the common ground. When Drew looked at him quizzically, Seth schooled his expression into something more serious.

“It’s my...” Familiar. Servant. “...great aunt.”

“I’m sorry,” said Drew. The genuine sympathy in his voice made Seth’s attempts seem very pathetic. “How long does she have?”

Seth almost shrugged, then caught himself. *That* at least he knew was an inappropriate response.

Human mortality was such a temporal oddity to him. Often it surprised him to learn that some human was dead, when last he’d seen them they’d been in perfectly good health. The fact that he hadn’t seen them in decades rarely occurred to him. Other times, such as in Grace’s case, he was surprised to find a person still alive.

He had known and respected Grace for a long time... in the human measure of it. He had spent more years with her than any other human before.

It was both startling to remember she was alive, and strange to think of her as dying.

He recalled the word 'hospice.'

"Not long, I suppose," he said.

Drew reached out as if to pat an arm in sympathy, then seemed to remember Seth was mostly naked, and awkwardly delivered his pat to the cushion instead.

Seth almost smiled.

He noticed the tremor in Drew's fingers as the man pulled back — the same tremor that had been present all evening. It couldn't have been the cold, not while he was bundled up and so close to the space heaters.

There were shadows under his eyes, too. Marks of poor sleep.

Was it illness, Seth wondered? Malnutrition?

Impulsively, he reached out to take Drew's wrist.

It was only a gesture of curiosity. He only meant to lay a finger on Drew's pulse, to feel through it the rhythm of all the blood in his body and seek out the source of the weakness.

But as he took Drew's wrist, the painter froze.

Seth looked up.

Under his fingers was the ongoing tremor, and it was unusual. He thought he didn't feel any particular wrongness, just that Drew was shaky, and that his temperature was odd, but that was all Seth had time to feel.

Their eyes met. Drew flushed.

And under Seth's fingers, his pulse suddenly accelerated.

Seth *felt* Drew's blood throb, felt it not just by touch but through the very air between them, like a ripple in water.

The hunter in him opened its eyes, and Seth knew with all his predatory senses the loud, fast beat of Drew's heart in his chest, the breath coming short in his throat and lungs.

Just as he had done to others, perhaps millions of times in his life, Seth cupped the back of Drew's head and pulled him in.

But this time, instead of sinking his face into the heat of Drew's throat, Seth sank his mouth into the heat of Drew's lips.

It was the strangest feeling.

Seth was used to settling his mouth on human flesh and immediately being sated by it.

This time, the taste of human flesh only increased his hunger.

He resisted the urge to bite down. His resistance was challenged immediately as Drew shuddered, lips half-parting in the softest gasp, the vibrations of that rapid pulse rolling through his body... and into Seth's.

Seth got a hint of the softness within that mouth, a tantalizing heat teased by the velvet of his lips, and glimpsed madness.

He dropped Drew's wrist to drag him in by the front of his coat, pulling Drew onto his lap, and there, with one hand behind his head, one behind his back, Seth crushed the whole racing heat of Drew's body against his.

Drew moaned.

Seth drank him in.

This kissing, this clasping of body-to-body, was so like feeding. In those predatory moments Seth rarely touched more than the throats of his victims, but in the act of drinking their blood he could sense every corner of their body, every place touched by vessels.

Here, too, Seth could sense every corner of Drew's body, but without the interference of vampiric teeth, Drew's blood was thunder against him. The thunder coursed between their

lips, between every point of contact. It assuaged and caressed Seth's hunger as much as stoked it.

He needed more.

His predator self had forgotten everything of zippers and buttons, and would have torn Drew's clothes like paper. It was only the restraint born from thousands of years that allowed Seth to find the zipper on Drew's coat, drag it down, and push the garment off his shoulders.

Drew let it go. He made another sound, near-moan, at the apparent intention of undressing.

Seth felt the front of him for another zipper, or a line of buttons... and found only the flat, unhelpful face of a fucking pullover sweatshirt.

His self control lost one small battle against his greed.

He seized the bottom of Drew's sweatshirt, catching the shirt underneath as well, and dragged both up to just under his chin.

Seth released Drew's head and his mouth to look down, to keep the shirts pulled up while running both eyes and one curious hand up Drew's stomach.

Drew's chest was flushed. Seth could practically taste the blood through his skin, imagined that if he licked the dark spot he would.

Seth pressed his hand flat against the great well of Drew's heart, lying only centimeters away under the surface, and the power of it seemed almost overwhelming. He had never realized how much the human body was weakened by feeding... had never known what strength it normally possessed.

The power of that heart blazed like a sun under his palm.

Seth stroked over it, in awe, and in doing so accidentally skimmed Drew's nipple.

Drew gasped. His fingers clenched on Seth's shoulders.

For the first time reacting in any way that seemed voluntary, Drew twisted to the side and made to climb off of Seth, who of course seized him around the waist and would sooner kill him than let him go.

“What is it?” asked Seth. His voice came out bizarre, uneven like he had never heard it before.

“Feels good,” said Drew hoarsely, as if that explained trying to *leave* their intimate tangle. He was still uncommitted, turned to the side, one hand hooked almost pleadingly on Seth’s arm holding him captive.

Curious, Seth retraced the steps of his hand back to Drew’s nipple.

At the first touch, Drew revolted again, body bucking on top of Seth’s in a way that no longer seemed voluntary.

It was shame, Seth realized.

Shame at being so aroused. At experiencing a too-intense pleasure.

Seth held him deftly — an amusing sight, probably, a muscular man being wrangled by a much slighter one — and he rubbed, his fingers moving in a firm and steady circle around and atop Drew’s nipple.

Slowly, the escape attempts ceased, as Drew succumbed to the near-intolerable pleasure and melted into nothing.

He turned his face back to Seth’s with a moan of surrender, and Seth claimed his mouth with an absolutely intoxicating sense of satisfaction.

He rolled Drew’s nipple between his fingertips, caressed it unrelentingly while Drew twitched and shuddered, and Drew only kissed him.

If Seth hadn’t already claimed mate’s rights to spite Blondie, he would have claimed them now.

Claimed them with claws and teeth dug in, with the viciousness of a territorial thing of nightmares.

It was with a sense of pure *ownership* that Seth lowered his hand, following the course of heat and unseen blood down Drew's stomach.

And Drew allowed it as if he knew instinctively to honor Seth's claim.

He wore only sweatpants and boxers. No belt or zipper to stay Seth's hand.

His cock throbbed, seemed to beat and pulse against Seth's fingers like a second heart. Drew made a soft, tortured sound as Seth made his grip, and his thighs jerked together to squeeze almost defensively, but Seth already had a secure hold.

Seth dropped his lips from Drew's mouth and tucked them under his jaw as if to feed.

He rubbed Drew in gentle rhythm, following the guidance of his racing pulse, and sucked the skin above his defenseless jugular vein.

Drew didn't seem to mind the absence of the hand warmers.

He clung to Seth's wrist, and breathed in great jagged bursts, and Seth felt his pulse building, and building.

Seth followed the pulse. Firmed his grip. He stroked harder, faster.

Drew spread his thighs at the end, unclenching and opening them with a sound of miserable need, giving Seth full freedom to mercifully finish him.

Seth rubbed him thoroughly, to that final burst of moans, gasps, and then muffled almost-silence as Seth took his mouth again, kissed him with a near-rough assertion. The inside of Seth's hand now wet, sticky.

Drew went limp atop him.

His breath rattled. His body twitched.

Seth felt the course of the orgasm run through and out of Drew like water — the song of overtaxed blood vessels,

humming capillaries, jumping with activity.

Seth pulled his hand away and listened, head turned to the side, ear cocked.

Gradually the song slowed.

Drew sat up, breath still shaky on his lips. The pushed-up bundle of shirt and sweatshirt dropped to cover his chest once more, covering all the aroused splotches of color there... but not the ones on his throat.

Seth didn't know what he expected.

What he *didn't* expect was for Drew to suddenly jump up from his lap on shaky legs, face pale.

Averting his eyes from Seth's, Drew said, "I'm sorry. I have to leave."

He nearly tripped over the corner of a pew, banging his knee, and let out a sharp yelp of pain, but didn't let it stop him. Urgent enough to go even with a fresh limp, Drew grabbed his bag and headed for the door. He didn't so much as glance back at the man he had left mostly naked on the floor.

Nonplussed, Seth watched the door swing shut.

...what on earth had he done wrong?

CHAPTER TEN — DREW SKELLS

Drew lurched out of the church feeling like a demon had taken hold of him and was gleefully puppeteering his limbs, making them uncoordinated, nearly throwing him from the steps as he staggered down them.

He had been here before, in the stage of withdrawal where the tremors became so severe they all but crippled him.

Next would come delirium.

Normally he rode out the symptoms at home, in bed. Now, he stopped to white-knuckle grip a tree, and wondered if he was even going to *make it* home.

Misery settled over him, thicker than the agony of his symptoms, as he recalled just for a second the surprised look on Drew's face.

'It's not you, it's me,' was one thing. *'It's not you, it's my dependence on psychiatric drugs which are currently causing me to hallucinate.'*

Just after coming, finally breaking loose of that kiss and looking up in a dizzy haze, he had seen it.

A demonic face, staring in through a pane of unstained glass only a few feet away.

Black eyed. A face warped by the age and dirt of the glass... or perhaps that was only what its horrible face looked like.

It had been smiling.

In the past Drew might have been terrified of the face alone, might have rolled under a pew and stayed there, shaking, until the symptoms eased or shifted to a different flavor of suffering.

In the now, Drew was far more terrified of revealing the true extent of his madness to Seth.

Worse than terrified... he was ashamed.

He ached already to be back in Seth's arms. He wanted that human comfort, that incredible sense of security in being held. Seth had proved to be much stronger than his light frame suggested (that, or sickness had made Drew weak), and Drew imagined that strength surrounding him, enveloping him like the brilliant red and gold of Seth's halo.

It was as if the face had appeared just in time to gleefully remind him:

'You're not normal. You'll never be normal. What are you doing, hooking up with a beautiful stranger? What would he think, if he could see you now?'

One symptom of withdrawal was blurry vision, and the threat of tears made it even harder for Seth to see where he was going. He made it several blocks before realizing he had started in the wrong direction, and would have to backtrack.

The seeming impossibility of the task struck him, and Drew found himself a place out of view to fully succumb to his miserable state. Into the alley. Between and slightly under a set of craggy, uncared for shrubs.

Sandwiched there between plants, between houses, he was cold. He shivered. His muscles spasmed, throwing unpredictable jerks at him from all directions. His arm. His thigh muscle.

It would pass.

Just let it pass.

He told himself that his body had only panicked in response to a rapid heart rate, assumed the worst, and dumped adrenaline on him. The vision had been nothing. They never *were* anything. Nothing real, no face, no dogs walking on their hind legs, there was *nothing*.

"Hey. Whatcha doing in there?"

A familiar voice.

Drew lifted his face out of his hands.

Blondie squatted down just outside of the bushes. Still in those iconic heart-shaped sunglasses, with the big fur coat wrapped around him, this time the hood down. His hair sprawled all around his shoulders. It was knotted, twisty, braided in some places.

In Drew's withdrawal-addled state, he imagined he saw teeth braided into that hair.

He covered his face again, hearing his heart pound in his ears, almost as loudly as it had pounded in the church.

"Drew." Blondie's voice probed. "Are you sick? Is it your mental illness?"

He sounded only curious, not alarmed.

"Yes." Drew's words were lost, muffled, into his hands until he finally forced himself to draw them away. "I'm sick." Remembering the kid's bafflement over basic concepts before, he elaborated. "I ran out of my medicine."

"Oh." Blondie held his knees and appeared thoughtful. After a moment of pondering, he asked, "Do you need to go back to the pharmacy?"

Drew wanted to cry.

He thought about explaining it all to Blondie: prescriptions. Dosages. Tapering off. Chemical dependence. Insurance. Controlled substances. Up to date photo ID. Name brand versus generic. Coupons. Backorders.

The long stairway he climbed one after another, every month, in order to function even at his low level.

A long stair to fall down.

"I just need help getting home," he said. "My eyes are messed up. I hurt my leg."

Though he kept from breaking into outright tears — trying to appear stronger in front of the poor kid, who hadn't asked to see this — they still threatened in his voice.

God, he sounded pathetic.

"I'll help," said Blondie cheerfully.

He scooped in amongst the brush to help Drew out, taking him by the arm and towing him back onto his feet, back onto the pavement.

Drew shivered.

“Thanks,” he said.

Seeing his twitches and apparently mistaking them for cold alone, Blondie pulled off his oversized fur and tossed it over Drew’s shoulders. As he began to tuck Drew’s arms into the sleeves, Drew could only laugh bleakly at what an absurd picture they must have made.

“Thanks,” he said again.

He only managed one limping step before Blondie grabbed his arm and pulled it around his own shoulders.

Surprisingly strong for his diminutive size, Blondie began to help Drew down the street.

Drew would have been wary about the proximity if he had been in better shape. He still said, “Remember, I have a boyfriend.” It felt obligatory.

Blondie only laughed. He didn’t seem bothered. In fact he seemed in too high spirits altogether. Drew was the one in rough shape, but he wondered about the late hour, and remembered how Blondie had seemed to skip the shelter before. He wasn’t sleeping on the actual street, was he?

“What are you doing out so late?” he found himself asking. His teeth chattered, but he felt compelled to lecture. Maybe this was how Kostas had felt. “There’s still a possible murderer on the loose.”

Blondie scoffed. “What about you?” He turned the question back on Drew as they moved steadily along. “Shouldn’t you be scared?”

“I’m never scared of people,” said Drew.

Blondie glanced up at him through those sunglasses. From this angle, Drew could see a little more of his face; could see his pierced eyebrows fully, and the corner of one eye, the hint

of lashes. But it was too dark and his eyes too uncooperative to see more.

“Why not?” he asked.

Drew didn't know why he suddenly told the truth. He just did.

“I see halos,” he said. “People's auras. Shapes and colors that float around their heads. I can tell if someone is angry, or dangerous, or sick. I know what kind of person someone is before I even speak to them.”

Blondie paused. There was a little frown on his lips.

“You mean like a hallucination?” he asked, recalling the vocabulary he'd learned in their last conversation. “Like a delusion?”

The answer should have been ‘yes.’

Obviously it should have been yes. Obviously the man with a lengthy history of being deluded, of seeing and hearing things, the man off his medication, that man did not see halos of people's intent and personality.

Except that he did.

He always had.

He remembered Anna's colors fading at the end.

“No,” he said. “These are real.”

Blondie remained silent in thought for a few minutes as they limped along.

Suddenly, as they passed under a drooping cedar, Blondie asked, “What does mine look like?”

They came out from under the branches and Blondie stepped away to look up at him, as if to offer up a better view.

Drew was tongue tied for a minute.

Without his fur, Blondie looked especially small, an already short person who was narrow either from youth or malnutrition. His hair dominated his figure, streaming down

his back, with a few unkempt strands trailing over the front of his windbreaker like long tendrils.

His halo wasn't really one at all. It was barely a wisp... nothing but a sad grey vapor.

Drew had never seen anything like it.

He couldn't help comparing it to Seth's vibrant red and gold, that rich warmth.

He lied.

They stood adjacent a well tended garden, and Seth drew inspiration from a bright cluster of camellias.

"Pink," he said. "A bright, healthy pink. It's a good color."

"But what does it *mean*?" Blondie persisted, oddly aggressive. "What kind of person does it say I am?"

Drew, who knew the kid hardly at all, could only go off of what he had witnessed.

"Someone kind," he said. "Someone who helps others. A good person."

Blondie gave no response at all. He stood there, very still, in the center of the sidewalk. Not helping now. In fact, standing directly in Drew's way.

Finally, in a very strange voice, he said, "I am not a good person."

He said it with such certainty that Drew felt a chill.

Drew stared at him.

He really didn't know the kid at all.

Didn't know what things lurked in his past.

"Then," he said slowly. "Trying to be a good person, at least."

This seemed to ring truer to Blondie. After a moment, he slowly nodded his head.

Then, as if the strange moment had never passed, he briskly took Drew's arm over his shoulders and began helping

him along again.

They walked in silence.

Drew thought his symptoms were abating (at least for now) and could see the corner of his apartment not far up ahead. Relief coursed through him — relief, and gratitude. He would offer to let the kid crash on his couch after all, he thought, and give him free access to the fridge. It was the least he could do.

Looking down, watching his step over the damaged sidewalk, he noticed something.

“Your shoelace is untied,” he told Blondie.

“Hm?” Blondie glanced down, snorted, and said, “Oh.” They both stopped. He let go of Drew and bent down to tie his shoe.

They happened to stop beside a pile of trash set out for pickup. Drew’s eyes happened to stray to it.

Among the items was a tall mirror, its glass broken. Only one small piece had actually fallen out, leaving the rest of the fractured surface intact.

Drew looked at his distorted reflection.

He realized that his reflection stood alone.

Blondie straightened up beside him. “There,” he said.

There was still no one beside Drew in the mirror.

Drew stared, and a chill so cold it felt hot ran from his toes up into his scalp. All of a sudden he was struck by intense dizziness. His knees buckled, and Blondie easily caught him.

Still no second reflection.

Blondie led him on, out of the mirror’s range. As if noticing nothing strange at all, he asked Drew, “Have you told your boyfriend about your illness yet?”

Drew didn’t say a word.

You’re insane, his brain whispered. You’re gone. You’ve snapped.

“What color is his halo?” asked Blondie when Drew didn’t reply. “Seth’s halo?”

Drew still didn’t speak, and Blondie kept on conversationally... but with a hint of a laugh growing in his voice.

“What color halo do you think the killer would have?” he asked. “I would think red. Red like blood. Don’t you think so?”

He was definitely laughing now. No. It was more like a cackle.

They came to the front of the house, but Blondie didn’t stop there. Without needing to be directed, he took the path around to the back of the house, to the out-of-sight stairway Drew hadn’t told him about.

Come to think of it, Drew thought numbly. He hadn’t told Blondie where his apartment was to begin with. He hadn’t given a single direction the whole way here.

They came to the bottom step.

“Come on,” Blondie coached brightly. “You’re almost there.”

Drew couldn’t feel himself using his muscles. His feet managed to climb, step by step, but his entire body felt frozen.

“What’s wrong?” asked Blondie lazily as they reached the top. On the small deck there, he released Drew, who slumped against the railing. “You’re so quiet.”

“I’m insane,” whispered Drew, talking to himself, facing away from... what was it? A hallucination?

He recalled how Blondie had vanished from the line at the shelter. No one else had interacted with him. How had appeared out of the blue, disappeared and reappeared in the same way.

Right when the worst of his withdrawal symptoms had begun.

A person without a proper halo. With odd gaps in his vocabulary, prompting Drew to explain his illness, to confide in him.

As Drew's mind raced through the stacking evidence, a more horrifying conclusion presented itself to him.

Hadn't Seth appeared just as he had begun to clumsily taper his meds?

He thought about how Seth had so oddly refused the food, the hot chocolate. How he had seemed untouched by the cold. And how he had appeared, so startlingly perfect, just when Drew was seeking such a specific model?

Drew recalled just how perfect Seth had been.

How he had *felt*.

A wave of self loathing, pure nausea, washed over Drew.

Was this it, then? Had his mind finally made the jump from simple visions to this detailed, physical psychosis? Either option seemed impossible to him — impossible that he could hallucinate something with such detail, equally impossible that he could find a relatable friend so easily, and even more impossible that someone as perfect as Seth could appear out of nowhere... and want him.

"I'm a monster," he whispered, sick with his own vanity, his loneliness, and the madness they had conjured.

"You're a monster?" repeated Blondie from behind him, and broke into peals of wild laughter. "You are?" More laughter.

Then a strange curl of the voice, a growl that sounded nothing like him.

"Turn around," it said.

Drew heard movement behind him. The click of sunglasses, removed, being folded up and put away.

He imagined that if he turned around, Blondie would have grown the grinning, drooling head of a dog.

“Turn around,” said the voice again, and this time there was a strange element of command in it, something his mind could not resist.

His feet turned his body around.

There stood Blondie, just as he had been before, with the same slight frame and human head.

But his eyes were a wreck.

Drew was reminded of a picture he had seen: a domestic abuse victim showing the results of a beating, her entire face black and blue but her eyes worst of all... they had been full of blood.

Blondie’s eyes were nearly black with blood. It clouded the white sclera and pooled in front of the iris, masking the color. There *was* no color, was nothing but the purpling black of a bruise.

“What’s a monster?” asked Blondie.

He grinned, and his jaw cracked. It seemed to drop half an inch, gaping wider to display a mouthful of jagged, sharp teeth.

He pushed back his hair, beads and bones rattling, and Drew saw the evidence of deep scars vanishing into his hairline. Scars that ran around the length of his face... as if someone had tried to peel it off.

Then Blondie unzipped the front of his windbreaker.

The shirt underneath was tattered and stained with very old, long-dry blood.

Under the shirt were scars — dense pink keloids. Clusters of them. It was the marks of wound, after wound, after wound. Unending injury.

Blondie pressed a hand to his chest, and Drew saw that his nails were growing longer. Sharper.

“What’s a monster?” repeated Blondie, his voice distorted and animalistic.

He dug his nails into his flesh.

Blood bloomed suddenly between his fingers, but it was strangely thick and dark — like the blood of something that had died. The blood of a dead animal, its throat cut and sluggishly dripping.

The blood ran at a languorous pace down to his wrist, and began to drip upon the deck. Black.

Drew bolted.

Most hallucinations would have ended there, as soon as the door closed behind him.

This one did not.

Its weight slammed up against the door, harder than Blondie's small body should have been able to. There came a BAM BAM BAM like enormous hands slapping the door, a gleeful rhythm that suggested play, and then a violent rattling of the knob.

Blondie's distorted voice came in a singsong.

"If you'll answer my riddles three, I'll go away and let you be." Laughter. *"Say nothing and I'll count to four..."* The voice crept quieter, only to suddenly boom: *"...then crack the wood, and break the door!"*

The whole frame shook.

If Drew had been someone else, he might have screamed. Run for the hidden baseball bat. Called the police.

But the Drew Skells who had been plagued by his own brain for so long, who found he had no idea what around him was real or imagined at that moment, simply shut down.

The feeling that took him was almost calm.

He thought only, dully, that it didn't matter if the beautiful Seth was only a hallucination. Drew wished that he had stayed there, in his arms, hallucinating it still. Cloaked in the warm light of his halo.

He slumped down on the floor, against the wall, and watched the door shake. His body shook, too. He had no way

of knowing if the shakes were withdrawal, or terror. They had disconnected from his mind entirely.

He said nothing.

The sound of monstrous gnashing gradually faded, and the banging on the door stopped.

There were perhaps three minutes of complete silence.

Then there came a whisper:

“Are you still there, Drew?”

It was Blondie’s voice, almost back to normal. There was an air of concern in it, as if wondering if something had befallen Drew to make him go silent. A friend, checking on a friend.

Drew could imagine him just outside the door, small in only his windbreaker. Small and bloody.

“I’m still here,” said Drew.

Another moment of silence, and then Blondie asked in his original voice, sounding actually worried, “Do you have your medicine in there, Drew? You sound terrible.”

“I’ll have my medicine tomorrow,” said Drew wearily. “Or maybe... the day after that.”

After a second, Drew heard a final thump on the door — the sound, he realized, of a back hitting it and sliding down to sit on the ground. It was Blondie mirroring his sad, lonely position, just outside.

“Can you be cured?” Blondie asked.

Drew shook his head, then rested it back against the wall.. He closed his eyes.

“No,” he said.

“I can’t be cured, either,” said Blondie. “I’ll be like this forever.”

Drew managed to feel sorry for him. Whether he was real or not, pointed teeth and claws or not. There was something bitter and lost in him.

Lonely.

“What color is my halo, really?” asked Blondie.

“It’s grey,” Drew admitted to him finally. “It’s a nothing. It’s almost not even there.”

The voice didn’t come for another few minutes, and then Drew heard the sound of the kid, getting back to his feet.

“I’m sorry for blowing up,” Blondie said, and he really did sound contrite. “Drew?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t let him change you. Don’t let him make you like me.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN — SETH

“Go fish,” said Grace.

Dutifully, Seth drew a card.

The pack of cards were obscene, each depicting a different cartoon of a pornographic act. He inspected his new card, and the man on it, who was ejaculating onto the face of a beaming second man.

Normally Seth would hardly have glanced at the picture, but now he found himself dwelling on it.

It made him think of Drew.

He remembered the stickiness in his palm, and wondered what it would be like to experience that stickiness spurted all over one's face.

Before, he would have thought the idea uniquely and humanly grotesque. Now, he thought he might not mind it.

His own change of mind soured his mood more than the hospice surroundings.

It was unlike the hospital he had last seen Grace in. Here was quiet, more like a home environment, with a comfortable bed and few obnoxiously beeping machines. There were other patients (if that was the word for those on the verge of passing) in the wing, but they were out of earshot, and there was a sense of privacy.

Enough privacy for them to speak freely.

“Kill anyone fun lately?” asked Grace.

She had changed in her final days, though not in the way Seth had expected. He had anticipated a mental dwindling. Instead, Grace was sharper than ever, and much less severe. Where he remembered Grace as cutthroat, merciless and unfailing in her duties, now she appeared nearly playful as she prodded him.

He eyeballed her.

Physically, he could see the dwindling.

Once a handsome enough woman — plain-featured compared to Lana, but with a loveliness born of charm and ease of smiling — she had fully succumbed to that pre-death withering. Her hair, once a woody brown, was completely white. Her skin was nearly as white. Seth could see what seemed like every vein in her body. He wondered if he would have been able to see her organs if she lifted her shirt and blanket; that was just how thin her skin appeared now. There was no muscle tone and very little fat. She seemed not skeletal to him, but fetal — as if instead of aging, she had regressed into something childlike and undeveloped, much smaller, and just as unable to care for herself.

Only her eyes were unchanged; hazel, they glinted wickedly as she needled her old master.

Seth found the contrast disturbing.

He wondered if he would have found her appearance so jarring if he hadn't just had an intimate encounter with a human, and become so aware of the life in them. Drew's life had been brilliant, scalding hot... as if it could have burned Seth.

Grace's life was nothing but that tiny flicker that lived in her eyes, and beat still in her chest.

“Hey.” Turning stern, Grace put down her cards and was blunt with him. “What’s the matter with you? You come to visit and then you just sit there sulking. You didn’t even laugh at the cards. Are you really so sad I’m dying?”

She clearly didn't believe it, and wasn't offended.

They had known each other for longer than some human lifetimes. She knew his heart perhaps better than anyone, in a way that transcended master and servant. ‘Familiar’ implied servility, and in many cases it was, but Seth had never forgotten his dependence on humans. This human in particular.

He didn't bother to pretend with Grace. She would spot pretense from him in a moment.

“I have some trouble,” he said vaguely. “Sovereign duties.”

She sighed in a heavy, somewhat patronizing way, and made a clucking noise that meant ‘oh, Seth.’ He was well familiar with the noise. She had made it whenever there was a body to move, a bloodstained car to make disappear, or any other familiar-relegated tasks.

“Always sovereign duties with you,” she said. “You’ve been around how many thousand years? When are you ever in your life going to have some fun?”

“That’s rich, coming from someone who spent her life picking up after me.” He frowned and began picking up cards, shuffling them back into a smutty deck.

Grace laughed. “I had plenty of fun,” she said, mischief back in her eyes. “When your back was turned. You slept through the day; you didn’t see the gentleman callers.”

Seth winced away the mental image of his familiar entertaining ‘gentleman callers.’

“I’m having fun,” he said, speaking defensively and revealing too much. “I’m lying to the entire fold just to amuse myself.”

“Oh?” Grace laughed, and the amount of doubt in her laugh was insulting enough that Seth dug himself deeper.

“I am,” he said, though it was absurd of him to have to justify himself to a simple human, in *particular* one who was going to be dead in a matter of months. “I declared mate’s rights on a human man.”

This time, Grace laughed hard enough that her laughter descended into coughing, and a nurse materialized from behind the curtained door to check on her — and glare at Seth, who had already received a hard stare for the odd visiting hours.

Grace drank some water and waved the nurse away.

“Please,” she said, as the nurse disappeared back behind the curtain. “I need to know the story behind this. The *whole*

story.”

And Seth told her.

There was no harm in confessing to someone who would die soon, he thought. He was also sure that even if Grace made a sudden recovery, she would never tell his secrets to the fold, no matter how many vampiric laws he was breaking.

When he finished his summary (skipping the explicit details), Grace covered her face and began making odd sounds.

Seth was alarmed for a second, nearly reached for the call light, then realized she was stifling more laughter.

He sat back, crossed his arms, and scowled.

“Fine,” he said coolly. “Have your laugh.”

Eventually Grace got control of herself, wiped the corners of her eyes, and gave Seth a broad smile that recalled his best memories of her. Grace at her strongest.

“How can you be so old, and so simple?” she asked, and clucked again. “You’re awfully naive, for a creature that’s lived thousands of years.”

“What do you mean?” He narrowed his eyes at her.

“You,” she said, savoring the words, “are in love.”

He wasn’t amused.

“You’re awfully certain of yourself, for a creature that’s lived barely ninety years,” he said, a touch of poison in his voice. “How would you know such a thing?”

“I know you,” she said, with a placid confidence he found infuriating. “I know love. I know the look.”

“You were never married,” he pointed out. “How much can you know?”

“What does that have to do with love?” She playfully wagged one of the dirty playing cards at him. “Why this man? Because he appeals to your vanity? Your artistic sensibilities?”

“The latter,” he said flatly. ““This man’ is an incredible talent. His brushwork is rough, but fluid, and transcends simple technique. He’s a prodigy. He’s strange, the way genius is strange. I’ve known countless humans... none like this one.”

Grace didn’t argue, only looked at him with mischievously sparkling eyes.

He realized with disgust that she thought he was proving her point.

“When are you dying again?” he asked, rudely changing the subject. “Tiffany said they weren’t sure.”

Unbothered, Grace shrugged. “Soon,” was all she said. “Not quite yet.”

She was very glib. Curious despite his annoyance with her, Seth asked, “How do you feel about it?”

She considered the question. “About dying, you mean? Or being dead?”

“Is there a difference?” he asked.

“Dying is a process,” she said. “Death is a condition. I’m dying slowly, now. I think the rest of it will be easy. I have my comforts here. Drugs — the good stuff. I like the nurses. And sometimes I have company.” Her eyes twinkled at him.

“And death?”

Here she paused.

“You’re not afraid?” he pressed.

Grace remained quiet for a moment, and he wondered if he had disturbed her — and then she suddenly leaned forward, snatching at the air.

She pretended to pull a coin out of his ear and presented it with aplomb.

“Maggie taught me some magic tricks,” she said.

“Maggie?” he repeated, exasperated.

“That very sweet nurse. The one who doesn’t like you.”

Seth was about to give up on his questions and say good-bye when he took another glance at the coin, and was startled.

“Is that...?”

She held it out to him, and he took it.

“You remember,” she said. For the first time, she sounded sincere. Touched.

The coin was an ancient one, struck sometime during the reign of the Roman emperor Augustus. It had been one of many in a bag, a threadbare pouch Seth had kept tucked into his clothes in one of the darkest points of his long existence... right before he'd met Grace.

The bag of coins had been his first payment to her.

A supplication, really. He had been in pitiable condition, starved and exhausted, monstrous in appearance. Grace, very young at the time, had found him as a creature, a cursed thing offering a bag of dusty old coins.

“You kept them,” he murmured, turning the coin over in his fingers.

“I kept one,” she corrected. “The rest I sold. Bought myself a very nice dress with the money. Remember that green velvet?”

Seth thought he did.

“You can have this one back,” she said, and patted his hand. An appropriately grandmotherly gesture for her age and appearance, he still recognized it as playfully patronizing, coming from her. “I’m not going to need it. Use it to buy your boyfriend a present, or take him out somewhere nice.”

“I’m not sure he’d be interested,” said Seth. Where he had let the encounter fade to black in his previous summary, he now admitted, “He ran off after... when we had finished. I don’t know why.” After another pause, he finally reluctantly gave up his main concern, the one that had been nudging at him since leaving the church: “What if I scared him off?”

Grace snorted.

He scowled at her.

“Vampire or no,” she said. “You’re not as scary as you think.” Another hand pat, this one more sincere. “Go apologize.”

“Apologize for what?” he asked. “For being a vampire?”

“For being rude,” she said, sounding very confident that he had been.

...and she was probably right.

“Fine.” Seth got up from his chair, but hesitated before pocketing the coin or pulling on his coat.

Taking one more look at Grace, so fragile and withered in what would be her deathbed, he found himself extending the old offer again.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “It’s not too late, you know. I know others who were turned in a worse state. The transformation will burn out the cancer. You’ll be restored.”

Grace smiled at him.

This time there was no mockery in it, nothing playful and nothing young. Nothing of the Grace he had known for so long — what felt like centuries, what felt like only days — and who had served him so well.

Who had once saved him.

Hers was the smile of an old woman.

Full of peace.

“Good-bye, Seth,” she said.

“Good-bye, Grace.”

—

Seth stood outside the hospice building and looked up at the sky, taking stock of time.

The night was still so young.

This time of the year, every night felt increasingly full of potential. The predator’s confidence ran through him, knowing

he had hours and hours to hunt. To take his time. Select the right victim, pace his meal appropriately.

Savor it.

But as Seth examined his hunger, he found that it wasn't blood he thirsted for.

'*Go apologize,*' Grace had told him.

He wondered if the apology would resolve itself the same way he had seen so frequently in *Katie on Top*... with the protagonist in an amorous tangle.

What had once seemed like idle — even frivolous — entertainment to Seth now filled his mind with ideas. Images.

Vivid ones.

“O sovereign...”

A voice came lilting through the air, and Seth's teeth clicked instantly together.

He looked up.

There, on the roof of the hospice, skulking among the shadows of trees... was another shadow.

Blondie's blood-ruined eyes glittered down at him.

A sense of revulsion flooded Seth, and on its heels was the ember of anger, bubbling in his gut.

Was that little viper stalking him? Had he come to the hospice specifically to harass Seth, to delight in provoking his sovereign?

“What are you doing here?” Seth's voice was naked of any pretense, full of a truly deadly venom and ready to strike the foul thing from the roof. Blondie had worn through Seth's sense of obligation in dealing with his subjects. The cur had made a mistake coming so close to Grace; if Blondie thought he could needle him with that proximity, he would find that there were unpleasant consequences for doing so.

“I just thought you ought to know,” said Blondie from his nest of shadows, “that your chosen mate isn't doing too well.”

Seth's hot anger turned to a full body chill.

Something much worse than rage seized him, and in a soundless rush he leapt to the top of the roof, diving into Blondie's hiding spot to wrap a hand in his vile hair, knotting fingers alongside bone and bead. He dragged Blondie out of the darkness by the hair, onto the naked roof under the bright moonlight. Grabbing Blondie's throat then, Seth lifted him effortlessly up to slam against the stone chimney.

Blondie clutched at Seth's hands and hissed and spat, snarl-faced, exactly like some horrible animal.

"What did you do?" demanded Seth.

He relaxed his fingers just enough to let Blondie speak, but not enough to release him, keeping him dangling with feet struggling to touch the ground.

Blondie didn't speak, but instead transfigured his face into a full-featured sneer. He snapped his teeth together hard, loud, clicking them like the jaws of a trap.

Seth's revulsion was enough he nearly dropped the creature, but then he looked down.

Recent blood dotted the familiar blue windbreaker.

Fear did not come to Seth naturally; he had felt it only a dozen of times during his lengthy existence, and had no basis of comparison for knowing if what he felt was similar to what humans experienced. He experienced it only as a strong aversion, an element of self preservation that came much like hunger.

There was no hunger in this moment of fear.

Only a strange breathlessness.

A cutting breathlessness, like the air had turned to daggers, and each moment sawed into him.

"If you've harmed him." His own voice was full of darkness, as jagged and as deep as a rocky grave. He felt his teeth moving in his mouth, the growth of fangs, and saw the points of his fingernails lengthen. Narrow. As the claws

formed, they sank directly into Blondie's neck. "If you've harmed him, I will dedicate ten centuries to your slaughter."

Blondie barked at him. Not quite a laugh. A hideous sound.

"You think I'm that stupid?" he asked. "Oh you must *adore* him, sovereign, to have become so completely obtuse."

Seth let him drop.

His claws raked the side of Blondie's neck as he slipped down, and Blondie clapped a hand over the wound with a hiss that was probably more anger than pain.

Blondie made no attempt to rise. He stayed on the ground, glowering, his ruined eyes especially malevolent in their blood spots. Seth was sure now that the discoloration was a result of injury; he imagined with great pleasure that Blondie had sparred with others and been soundly beaten by them.

"One can so easily see where the name Seth gets its sterling reputation," said Blondie, his voice turned to a mocking singsong. "A vampire of such scholarship, such placid wisdom. He does so carry the sageness of millennia upon his shoulders."

"Silence," spat Seth. "Tell me your business."

"My business is what I told you." Blondie goaded with his sneer, with his blackened eyes. "I spoke truthfully; the man isn't well. I suppose it's my fault that he's of the weaker species? The damn things love to catch cold and die. If you're going to fuck one, then at least learn to take care of it."

Blondie suddenly bit his tongue and spat blood; Seth twisted to dodge it, and in that advantageous moment Blondie rolled off of the roof.

Seth looked over the edge, but Blondie was already gone.

All that remained of him was the fresh blood he'd spat, glistening in the moonlight atop the hospice roof. Dark, rotten blood.

CHAPTER TWELVE — SETH

Seth had learned Drew's address from Tiffany as a matter of record, compiling information that would be relevant in maintaining his lie. He had never intended to go there.

He went there now.

He didn't know what he expected to find when he broke the lock and stepped inside, didn't bother to consider whether he should or shouldn't enter.

He only knew that Drew was within, and that he should go to him. The compulsion to go to him was the same kind of ineffable compulsion as feeding, as resting, as every other natural drive that ruled a vampire. He asked no questions of himself.

He walked the apartment silently until he came to a door. Closed.

Drew was within.

Seth pushed open the door.

At first look, there was no one inside. The bed lay empty, pushed up near the far wall, and there was little else in the room. A space heater sat in the center emanating a soft glow.

Seth stood before the heater, hand hovering over its warmth.

The hunter in him whispered:

Someone is hiding.

Seth turned his head, looked at the shadow of the empty bed, and then heard it.

Shaky breathing.

He left the heater. Grasping a bedpost, he pulled the whole heavy piece of furniture effortlessly aside.

There, in what had been a tiny gap between bed and wall, lay the painter.

Even though he was wrapped in many blankets, and appeared to be wearing several layers of clothing underneath, Drew trembled with such force that Seth could see it through all the fruitless covers. There was sweat beading on his forehead and soaked into his hair. He appeared delirious; he had no reaction to the bed's movement and, as Seth approached, looked up with no alarm. Only vacant dizziness.

He was so pale.

As Seth knelt beside him, that fear welled again, knife-sharp and choking.

The painter was as pale as Grace had been.

Seth knelt there empty of intent, too transfixed by his own horror to move. Drew was the one who acted; reaching out, he wrapped his fingers in the front of Seth's coat, and pulled Seth closer as he sat shakily up.

Drew pressed his face into Seth's neck, wrapped an arm around his chest, and clung there, trembling.

Seth didn't move.

Something in his mind, or perhaps his soul, came up against a barrier. He couldn't discern the shape of it, nor the size, nor the substance. He felt strange... like a man who had been walking the same straight path for a long time only to suddenly be startled, looking side to side for the first time, and realizing that the path ran through a lush garden. Realizing that if he liked, he could step off of the path. Into the grass.

Did he want to step into the grass?

Among the flowers?

He put a hand to the back of Drew's head and felt how chilled it was with sweat. In unthinking response he pulled up one of the blankets, pressed it to the back of Drew's neck.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Feeling Drew so close for a second time, Seth sought a source of the sickness, and for a second time found nothing.

“I’m fine,” said Drew, teeth chattering. His fingers spasmed against Seth’s back. “I just need my meds.”

Seth was quiet for a second. He touched Drew’s head again, and this time he let the touch be a stroke, running the backs of his knuckles in a gentle brush behind Drew’s ear.

“Drew, where can I find this medication?”

—

Seth didn’t need to take the same measures as Bruce had, calling upon Tiffany and Francisco to help him move in secret in human places.

Seth was far more ancient, and more powerful

He entered the pharmacy as a vapor.

Smokelike, he bypassed mortal securities, taking form again once in the farthest back room. Shelves of pills, boxes of medication, innumerable names and labels all stared out at him as he began to peruse.

He would have searched every row, every box if he’d needed to.

Fortunately... he was not alone in the store.

A girl walked in to find him there. An employee — a young pharmacist, by her dress — she carried a ring of keys and a small plastic music player. Seth could hear the drum beats coming from the wires that ran into her ears.

She looked up, saw him, and froze.

The fear in her expression swelled; her pupils shrank to their smallest point.

Seth had not bothered to enforce any particular form, and wore his emotional state as the face of a beast’s. Fanged. Red-eyed.

It was no human creature who looked back at her.

Nor was it a human creature that reached out with will alone, that iron will forged by millennia, the wrap a fist of vampiric command around her mind.

“Find me this drug,” he ordered, and held out the bottle he had taken from Drew. Small. Orange. Empty.

Her mind gripped by him, the pharmacist took the bottle in a daze and staggered down the rows. She went through the motions of drawing out the pills, filling the little orange bottle until it overflowed and she stood there vacantly, tablets bouncing around her ankles.

Seth’s power of command was normally much subtler, but tonight he couldn’t wield it as anything less than a fist.

When the pharmacist finally staggered back to him, trying to close the cap over the too-full container, the wounds of Seth’s too-tight grip were becoming evident. Spit bubbled at the corner of her mouth and her eyes were vacant. As Seth looked on, he saw blood suddenly run out of her nose. It flowed quickly over her lips to her chin and began to drip, spattering rapidly over the clean white floor.

Seth felt the urge to close his psychic hand.

To crush her mind like a bruised fruit.

He felt violent towards her; he felt a general violence, a cold and unlikable desire for *harm* which extended towards any creature in the universe. Any creature but the man he had left lying in that room.

The cold feeling of Drew’s skin haunted him.

The knowledge of Drew’s sickness, and his inability to cure it, made Seth like something rabid.

Vicious.

He took the bottle, brushed off the top excess, and clicked the lid on top.

“You will remember nothing,” he said.

The pharmacist’s head bobbed. Her throat made a gulping motion.

Her blood dripped among the spilled pills, the clean white floor quickly becoming a gory mess.

Seth's eyes flickered along the wall, seeking out security cameras.

Everywhere his eyes touched, plastic suddenly melted and electronics sparked. Down through the net of wires — and the web of even wireless transmission — technology shorted, and popped, and died.

Seth didn't require the aid of a familiar to move unseen among humans. He had been obliterating memories of himself for thousands of years.

As he took his leave, the pharmacist slumped on the counter, putting a hand to her face and looking at her bloody palm, dazed and empty of all thought. Only speechless horror remained.

There would be no record of his presence.

—

“Drew.”

The painter had returned to his shuddering bundle beside the wall, but he was not sleeping. When he turned his head, showing his pale and sweaty face, Seth guessed from the shadows around his haunted eyes that sleep had been eluding him for some time.

Seth sat on the floor beside him. He put down a glass of water, and proffered the bottle.

Drew stared at him. There was delirium in his eyes still, but delirium alongside a more rational confusion — albeit one crippled by his condition. Seth could see the man trying to make sense of his presence, almost squinting at him, as if he were too bright to look at.

“I found your medication,” said Seth. He took Drew's hand and pressed the bottle into it.

Drew struggled up to lean against the wall, body fighting him.

He managed to get the bottle open before his arm suddenly spasmed. His hand jerked to the side, and pills scattered everywhere.

It would have been better if he had burst into tears.

Instead, he simply sat there, dead-eyed and unsurprised. He had no reaction at all, not even disappointment. It was the learned blankness of someone who had suffered too much — suffered enough that he'd learned not to fight it.

Seth's heart burned.

He felt in agony; he was certain it was agony now, and thought it would be better to be burned alive rather than watch this little human scene. Where before he had been charmed by Drew's human strangeness, then fascinated, then hungry for, now Seth was reminded brutally that 'human' also meant 'fragile.' Mortal. Helpless. As helpless in the face of chemicals and his own destructive mental processes as he would have been helpless to resist Seth's teeth.

"Don't worry," said Seth. "I'll clean it up."

He took the bottle and fished out a single pill.

Reaching up, he gently cupped Drew's face — ignoring how horribly cold it felt — and pressed the pill to his lips.

Their eyes met.

Though delirious, Drew seemed to achieve some kind of clarity in that moment at least. Seth saw an awareness in his gaze. Puzzlement, still, but also... a relief. A gratitude.

And recognition.

Seth saw that the gratitude was for *him* specifically, that the relief was at being in *his* presence, and realized that this was some new kind of desire. Something that had little to do with the body.

No one had ever looked at Seth in that way before.

And occurred to him — for the first time in his life — that he was unworthy of it.

Silently he pulled away, put the glass of water to Drew's lips, and helped him swallow.

A different relief came over the man's face then, and he faded back from Seth, leaning heavily against the wall. It

seemed that he would drop at any moment.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

Impulsively, Seth reached for him.

He wrapped his arms around Drew to lift him up and set him on the bed, pushing it back into its previous place and beginning to fix the blankets, the comforter. He searched and found another two pillows in a closet, pulled off their dusty cases, then tucked them under Drew’s head.

Drew watched him with glassy eyes. He was silent.

Seth sat on the edge of the bed and examined his handiwork. He felt he was missing something, some obvious human comfort. He sorted through his recollections of familiars, of television scenes, things he had read and seen and thought he understood.

“Do you need anything else?” he finally asked.

The answer came in a shaky whisper.

“Can you stay?”

Seth was quiet a moment.

The night was still fairly young. He had plenty of time, and it would be reassuring to watch the man sleep. To see his color improve.

“I can stay,” he said.

After another awkward pause, Seth turned his body and lay down beside Drew. He looked up at the drab ceiling. The window’s shutters were drawn, but one slat was broken, letting through a thin sliver of streetlight that pulsed with a passing car.

He kept a polite distance of several inches, but Drew rolled over and wormed unrepentantly up close to him.

Extricating one arm from his blankets, he wrapped it around Seth’s chest, and pressed his face into his side.

Seth lay absolutely still.

The spontaneity that had gripped him at the church abandoned him now.

With Drew pressed so close, Seth could feel the rhythm of his blood, his breathing. Even through the many blankets.

He thought he could feel the *loneliness* in Drew. It was in the curl of his fingers, how they clutched Seth's shirtfront with such determination even as they trembled. It was in the way he was so shameless now, when he had been so ashamed in the church.

Seth turned.

He put his arm around Drew's waist and moved in closer to him, eliminating any space between their bodies as if he intended to warm Drew from some freezing cold. He rested his chin on top of the man's head, securing him. Feeling the flutter of Drew's breath on his throat.

Drew sank into his grasp with a long exhale. Release. He went limp, soft.

Seth had never felt someone become so willingly vulnerable.

Even his prey, he realized now, had a rigidity of tension, of paralyzed fight still in them. He hadn't recognized it until this moment.

His mind resolved in that instant.

Seth's will was iron, his decisions stone which did not weather. He was the oldest living thing on this earth, and he was absolute. Unchangeable.

He took this human into the dark folds of his heart, and there, his feelings became as immutable as his soul.

He wouldn't have called it 'love.'

Love, he thought, was a small thing, formed in the narrow space of finite human lives. Love was a rush of infatuation and attraction, a connection that served long enough to bear and raise children. He didn't minimize or mock the idea, but it was not of *him*. Not of his kind.

He took Drew to live in his soul and, as long as Seth lived, so, too, would live the memory of Drew in his arms. The softness of him. The gentleness of Seth's feelings towards him.

Night crept.

Drew's tremors gradually stopped, and the man succumbed to the deepest sleep. His breath was slow and regular against Seth's throat.

Seth had meant to stay only a while. He had meant to see Drew to sleep, assure himself of the man's improvement, and then slip away before sunrise.

Sunrise threatened.

Seth stayed.

For the first time in a long time, he lay where he could see the sun turn the shutters from gray to peach. The sliver of streetlight turned to a white hot arrow, a deadly stripe of morning pinned to the far wall.

Seth watched the threat of annihilation rise outside Drew's bedroom window, and felt nothing but soft peace.

He turned his face back to the man's hair, lips resting on his forehead, and closed his eyes.

Vampires did not sleep as humans did. They did not dream.

But as Seth lay there, he imagined that he dreamed, and that his dreams were good.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN — DREW SKELLS

Drew returned to the waking world accompanied by an intense feeling of disorientation.

It wasn't just one night's sleep he was waking up from, but several full days and nights of delirium.

Opening his eyes to find himself cuddled up in bed with the ethereal Seth, Drew wondered if he wasn't still delirious.

Well, the shakes were gone. The insomnia had lost its grip on him. Even his stomach felt good enough to growl. All signs pointed to a proper return to coherent consciousness.

And yet Seth's eyelashes were long, his hair soft and curly and lamb-colored, his face lovely to the point of angelic, and his arm was wrapped around Drew.

That didn't seem right.

Staring Seth in his sleeping face, Drew realized he was much easier to look at than he had been before. Drew's eyes had already adjusted to the halo during their figure sessions, but now he found the aura much softer. Maybe it was because he was so close — as if he were inside the halo, too.

But contemplating the halo roused unpleasant rememberings.

Drew's memory of the last twenty-four hours was blurry; he had been too sick for events to stick properly in his mind. What he thought he recalled seemed impossible. They had to be hallucinations... albeit the most powerful ones he'd ever experienced.

But he couldn't help recalling what Seth's halo had looked like when he appeared with the meds.

Not red-gold, but almost black... a black that was really a very dark, almost iron gray.

But it was normal now. Familiar.

Drew decided to discard all his memories of the previous night.

...except, perhaps, the kiss (and more) at the church.

Recalling *that*, Drew became properly mortified.

The biggest indicator that he was fully aware now — and not deluded, not hallucinating, not dreaming — was that he felt disgusting.

He was fully aware not just of reality, but of the fact that he had withdrawal-sweated through all his clothes. His mouth tasted like something had crawled into it and died. He needed no less than two glasses of water, ten minutes of teeth brushing, a shot of mouthwash, and to spend about an hour with a loofah and hot water to manually scrub and scald the grime from his body.

Thinking he might be able to slip away unnoticed, and clean up before Seth awoke, Drew slowly began to shift away.

When he went to carefully lift Seth's arm, he frowned.

The thing was locked into place.

He recalled how surprisingly strong Seth had seemed in the church, and ignored the flutter that memory gave him.

He continued to try and extricate himself for several minutes, with no luck.

He finally looked upon Seth's face with suspicion.

“You're awake, aren't you?”

Seth opened one eye a sliver.

The gleam of his pale grey eye made a shiver go down Drew's spine.

Drew opened his mouth. Words did not come out.

Seth's half-open eye flicked down to his lips, and he began to shift forward.

Hastily, before Seth could try to kiss his nightmare morning mouth, Drew blurted out, “Thanks for getting me drugs.”

Silence. Seth still seemed to be considering going in for the kiss, but gave Drew's words a brief attention.

"Funny," said Drew, and forced out a manual, "Ha ha. You know, uh, I don't actually remember how that all happened. I must have been really out of it."

To put things mildly.

Seth opened both eyes now.

"You called me," he said, and finally released Drew's waist, propping himself up on an elbow to recline more conversationally. "You really don't remember?"

Drew pretended to search his memory, knowing there was nothing there. He did *not* remember, but he still said a vague, "Oh yeah."

"You did seem very disoriented," said Seth. "You might have forgotten some things. Maybe imagined some others."

Again, putting it mildly.

"You called me," explained Seth casually, "and asked me to come over. You said you needed help getting your medication."

"Oh," said Drew.

Despite a strong feeling he didn't want to know, he couldn't resist asking, "So hey, um. Where *did* you get it?"

"There was a full bottle under some furniture," said Seth. "You must have dropped it at some point and it rolled away where you couldn't see."

If he was lying, he was a very smooth liar.

Drew didn't buy it, but he did have to admit it was possible, even plausible. He had lost bottles of meds in the past, had even found them under furniture lost exactly the way Seth described. There had been times when he wasn't taking his meds, or skipped enough doses to accrue a full script's worth. There absolutely could have been a whole bottle hiding from him in the mess of the apartment.

It was definitely plausible enough for him to *pretend* it was true.

And, considering the other options for how Seth might have obtained a controlled substance in such a short space of time, Drew was fine pretending.

“Well,” he said. “Thank you.”

Silence followed.

Seth appeared very comfortable in the silence, but Drew’s mind began to melt very quickly.

He hadn’t shared a bed in... how long? Years. He hadn’t had sex in an astonishingly long time, let alone sex that resulted in this kind of intimacy. There was no other word for it. The small, dim space of his room was *intimate*, the closeness of their bodies, the way Seth had come to his aid... and then stayed.

Drew no longer knew the usual progression of things, but he knew that going from sketching, to sucking face and giving a handjob, to sharing a bed and cuddling through a bout of delirium, was an extremely accelerated version of courtship.

...*was* this courtship?

It was hard to imagine Seth doing all of the above and *not* having romantic intentions.

And yet he hadn’t voiced any.

And it would be surreal for there to be a romance with no prelude between two people who knew *nothing* about each other. Who was Seth? What was his last name? What did he do for work? *Did* he work? He had a secretary and he dressed well, so Drew had imagined there was money involved, but Drew had also seen no sign of a car. What kind of person had money but no car? What kind of person worked but had the freedom to spend nights getting sketched and rescuing basketcases?

Thank god, Seth derailed his train of thought by speaking up.

“I haven’t known you long,” said Seth. His light eyes were intent on Drew’s face. “But I don’t want to be casual.”

Chills.

The surety in Seth’s voice was spooky — overly proprietary, but in a sexy way.

Except... the words struck Drew as oddly familiar.

Trying to place them, he realized they sounded suspiciously like lines from *Katie on Top*, a trashy show Anna had watched reruns of in the hospital. Drew had largely tuned it out, so he couldn’t be certain.

A coincidence, he decided.

“Oh,” he said, almost reverent. He felt his face smiling stupidly. “Okay.” A few moments’ thoughts later, he politely clarified, “What does that mean, exactly?”

He thought he saw Seth’s eye tic.

“The usual,” said Seth.

Okay. Not super helpful.

Drew probed again. “You mean, like dating?”

“Yes,” said Seth immediately, seizing on the word. “Dating. To the exclusion of others.”

“Okay,” said Drew. He couldn’t seem to stop saying the word, or smiling like an idiot. The moment was cute. Wasn’t it? Weird as hell, but cute.

As vague as the agreement was, Seth seemed confident that all necessary things had been clarified.

Confident enough to lean forward, lips parting.

Drew dodged the kiss just in time. Missing his mouth, Seth got his neck instead. He didn’t seem deterred. Drew felt the soft movements of Seth’s lips begin just below his ear. Half nuzzling. Half nibbling.

Oh. He meant *business* business.

Drew felt the drawstring of his pants go slack before he even realized Seth had reached for it, and felt his dick respond

hopefully underneath.

Drew tucked his hips back, scooching his business out of reach, and flattened a hand on Seth's advancing chest.

He was both surprised and intensely aroused when his firm hand did little to hold back Seth — who apparently intended to pick up right where they had left off in the church.

“Wait,” he said.

Seth paused. He pulled back and searched Drew's face with an odd frown. Not upset... annoyed, maybe. But not with Drew. It was the frown of someone intent on a particularly tricky puzzle.

“You don't want to have sex?” he asked.

“No, I *absolutely* do,” said Drew, being maybe a little more emphatic than was appropriate. “But I, uh. I just think I need a shower first.”

It was possible he hadn't been at his freshest even before a night of withdrawal sweats.

“Ah.” Seth's eyes narrowed. He nodded, seeming to understand. “You want to freshen up first.”

The way he said it, it was as if he were pulling tips from a field guide about sexual encounters.

He also made it sound like Drew was going to go douche with Febreze.

“Sure,” said Drew helplessly.

Something seemed to occur to Seth then. “Do you want me to shower as well?”

“No, you're fine.” Drew's face burned. He didn't know why *he* was the one so mortified by Seth's unusual — albeit courteous — questions, only that there was something almost gentlemanly about them. Something that made him feel...

Courted? God, *was* this courtship? Someone offering to scrub their taint for you?

Seth looked and smelled immaculate, somehow even despite a night spent wrapped around Drew.

“I’ll be quick,” he said, and finally managed to worm his way out of Seth’s arms — zipping his pants back up, red-faced, as he went.

On autopilot, he started pulling clean clothes out of his dresser, pausing to reach for the blinds.

“Don’t,” said Seth sharply.

Drew looked back. Seth sat on the edge of the bed, and his expression had become suddenly dark.

Drew lowered his hand slowly from the blinds.

“I have...” Seth paused. “...a natural light sensitivity.”

Well, that explained why he had seemed so unbothered by Drew’s nocturnal schedule.

Drew did find it a little funny that Seth should have both extreme food allergies *and* an apparent allergy to the sun. The poor guy was plagued with ailments — maybe as many as Drew, only different kinds.

“No problem,” said Drew. “I prefer the dark, anyway. The day is too busy for me.”

Grabbing a towel, he made for the door, adding, “If there’s anything you can eat in my fridge, you’re welcome to it.”

As he stepped out into the hall, he checked and closed blinds as he went, making sure there wasn’t a peep of sunlight coming through. It was probably overkill, but he suddenly felt very conscious of having a ‘guest,’ as well as very conscious of his apartment being a sad mess.

However, he supposed Seth had been there last night. He had probably already seen the worst of it.

Drew still tried to hastily clean up some of the kitchen before Seth followed. Shove some tupperware in the cupboard, wedge the half-stuck trashcan lid shut.

Sweeping some old mail off the table, then beginning to pick up a number of discarded coats and towels tossed over the

backs of chairs, he suddenly had to pause.

He put down the bundle of mail and armful of clothes.

He held at arm's length a coat — a fur coat.

A chill rippled through him.

Blondie's coat.

He remembered a horrific blur of black eyes, sharp teeth, and the sound and sight of his front doorknob rattling.

He couldn't imagine any of it had been real, but also couldn't quite believe he had hallucinated *that* intensely. There had to be some seed of truth at the core of it. He supposed he must have had Blondie walk him home after all. Must have borrowed his coat.

Had they argued?

That might have explained the nightmarish fragments that remained to him; emotional conflict turned into psychic horror.

His phone buzzed on the table.

Folding Blondie's coat temporarily over his arm, Drew picked up his phone and scrolled awkwardly via the broken screen. He had a text from Kostas — no, several texts. Most were links to news articles. Only one was an actual message:

'Be careful.'

Drew clicked on one link, then made a face and closed it. He tried another.

They were all articles about murder. Another body had been found just that previous night and immediately connected to Joey's death. Speculation had begun to flower in the media, clamoring with theories about a serial killer, or killers. Drew saw reference to a 'Butcher of Elysium' and the words 'possible copycat,' and then had to stop.

It was all too gruesome. His mind was already a dark enough place.

He shot off Kostas a single indicator that he was still alive: A thumbs up emoji.

“What’s that?”

Drew turned his head.

Seth stood in the doorway to the kitchen, eyes fixed oddly on Drew’s arms; Drew realized he was still holding Blondie’s fur coat.

He let out an awkward laugh and flopped the coat back over its chair. “Friend’s coat,” he said. “Just borrowed it.”

No offense to Blondie and his tastes — the coat looked good on him. But Drew winced at the mental image of himself dressed like that, and winced more at the idea that Seth would picture anything similar.

“Do you want anything to eat?” he asked, quickly changing the subject and opening the fridge. “Drink? I don’t know if you can have anything, but—”

“No, thank you,” said Seth.

Seth stood in the kitchen looking out of place in a very odd, specific way... almost like he had been cut and pasted into the setting, and didn’t really fit. He had looked appropriate in the church, and under the dim bulb of Drew’s half-broken bedroom light.

In the full light of the kitchen, it struck Drew that Seth really was a strange looking person. The angularity of his features had been softened in other settings; now they looked harsh. Still lovely, but more like the features of a sculpture. Rigid. He was sculpture-pale, too, Drew noted. Not too unlike marble.

It was eerie.

But then, Drew reasoned, nobody really looked good under fluorescents.

“I’ll just, um. I’ll just take my shower then.” He pointed unnecessarily at the bathroom door. “And meet you back in my room. Cool?”

What an insane way to say *‘be right back, sex soon!’*

Seth didn't register that it was strange. He only nodded, turned, and disappeared back down the hall.

Presumably to wait in Drew's bed for the aforementioned sex.

A very strange guy, and very possibly a criminal involved in drugs.

But, Drew reasoned, at least not the serial killer being mentioned in the news. The 'Butcher of Elysium' had struck just the night before, when Seth had been busy spooning with a twitchy, sweaty basketcase.

Jesus, what an alibi.

—

Once actually in the shower, alone with his own thoughts, Drew might have dwelled on the murders. The bizarre, vivid hallucinations. The physical presence of Blondie's coat. The question of exactly how Seth had ended up in his apartment, coming to his aid.

And it wasn't that Drew *wasn't* concerned about any of those things.

However. He was accustomed to living in a state of varying fear and confusion. What would have been incredibly disturbing and a source of alarm for most people, faded into the background for Drew, who was fixated instead on a much more novel feeling.

Holy shit, he thought.

He was going to have sex.

The reality of it settled over him, a reality propped up by the memory of Seth's hands on him before. Seth's unyielding grip. The assertiveness of his touch, the insistent rubbing of his nipples, the way he had compelled Drew to tolerate the intolerable.

Drew didn't think he had ever been so effortlessly manhandled. If Seth considered himself anything as mundane as a 'dom,' he transcended the title. There was no performance

or ego involved in his actions... only a dazzlingly hot clarity of intent.

Drew had never been especially invested in concepts like ‘dominant’ or ‘submissive’; most of it struck him as slightly embarrassing roleplay.

Now, the appeal struck him like Newton’s apple, landing on his head and delivering a thunderclap of understanding.

Yep. He would take whatever else ‘manhandling’ Seth had to offer.

Scrubbing his body with the vigor of someone contaminated by a lab experiment, Drew wracked his brain for a plan of action.

Okay, to start, he would suck his dick.

That was easy. Add it to the list.

...god. Did he even remember how to suck dick?

A handjob? He could definitely manage a handjob.

His skin was red from scrubbing by the time he finally had a mental map, and the water getting cold when he turned it off. He had taken much longer than he’d promised Seth, but he told himself that the delay was part of the whole tease. It was about *pacing*.

Made bold by his planning, Drew didn’t pull on even the pair of clean boxers he’d brought out.

Leaving the pile of clothes by the sink, Drew left the bathroom wearing nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist.

His boldness survived as far as his room.

Presenting himself in the doorway, Drew found Seth sitting up in bed skimming through a sketchbook. The man looked placidly interested.

Then Seth looked up and settled his eyes on Drew.

He put the sketchbook aside.

It was not quite the gaze Drew had hoped to provoke; he had anticipated hungry eyes, eager ones.

But Seth's expression was much more intense than hunger.

Seth's eyes *absorbed* Drew. Seth's gaze settled on him like a heavy shadow, almost tangible. Drew felt that if he opened his mouth he might feel that gaze on his tongue.

The intensity of it wasn't just an intensity of desire; there was a bizarre impression that Seth had never seen a body like his before, or at least never bothered to take a real look.

Drew felt... exoticized? Alienated? Admired?

All of it at once.

And... desired.

He came slowly closer to the bed, as oddly timid as he was also oddly drawn. He came to Seth like someone bewitched, silently mounting the bed, and then Seth's lap.

Seth examined him with his eyes only a moment longer, and then put his hands on Drew's waist.

Seth's hands were light, and somehow they stayed light, but they moved Drew with blunt speed and force. Dragged down from his chaste half-hover, Drew was suddenly clasped directly against Seth's body, every part of him lighting up with heat as they touched. In less than a heartbeat, bewilderingly fast, Seth had Drew in his arms.

Proprietary again. Grasping with a possessive ownership, something that would have been greed if it hadn't been so complete in its surety of entitlement.

Drew's plans blinked out of mind, out with a shuddering exhale before Seth claimed his lips.

Seth yanked the towel down with no pretense.

Drew didn't have even a second to react before Seth's fingers arced over his ass, each hand taking one half to trace the shape of it, following the curve, squeezing with a deliberateness that was as much exploration as it was tactile pleasure.

Drew had no chance of hiding the rock hard erection now bulging against Seth's stomach.

Nor did he have a chance at hiding his involuntary physical response to the ass-grab, both thighs clenching around Seth to drive groin-first right at him in a total, shameless, hasn't-been-fucked-in-years, dry hump.

Anything but discouraged, Seth gathered him only closer, with two hard handfuls of ass.

They didn't say a word. They didn't have to.

Drew heard what Seth was saying with every grab, each new, groping handful of his flesh, lips landing on Drew's chin, jaw, half of his mouth all with equal rough savour.

It was possession.

Stamping him with touch, taste.

Drew knew this stranger hardly at all, and yet his body was in complete agreement, and his mind not far behind.

Seth's hands said, *'This is mine, this part also, this belongs to me, all of this belongs to me.'*

And Drew's hips rocking, cock rubbing up and down against Seth's stomach, back arched and ass up for ease of grabbing, all of it said, *'Yes. Yours.'*

Through the vacant-minded haze, Drew's will managed to get his hands on the bottom of Seth's shirt, and he pulled it up. Seth immediately tore it off, tossed it away, and dragged Drew's body back to his.

Feeling his cock pulse against the bare flesh of Seth's stomach, Drew truly moaned.

His will had fresh fuel.

He urgently opened the front of Seth's pants, unabashedly breathy with eagerness, and tried to fish him out.

With that same unreal strength and speed, Seth in just a moment managed to lift Drew up, push down his own clothes, and kick both pants and boxers away with such vigor that they hit the opposite wall and dropped to the ground.

And Seth pulled Drew back to him, and they brushed together below.

Bare. Scalding.

It was almost too much for Drew.

His body reacted as it had in the church, trying to climb away, but Seth knew this trick.

Seth held Drew down with effortless strength. Bringing him back to where Drew's cock pressed flush to Seth's stomach, thighs both spread and clenched around Seth's waist, Seth adjusted himself.

Seth thrust up, and his naked cock pushed between Drew's legs. Head guiding, nudging, it brushed over the terrain of his taint, past his entrance before Drew could gasp at the contact.

His cock settled between Drew's buttocks — already clenched tight with shock — and began to thrust.

Slowly.

But hard.

The shaft rubbed against his *everything*, tormenting the site of penetration and sending red-hot shocks deep into Drew's body.

Initially overwhelmed, he was taken by instinct again.

Looping his arms around Seth's neck, breath shaking in his chest, Drew rocked his hips down. Back.

Feeling Seth's cock glide on him.

Silky, hot, hard. Forging between his buttocks with unmistakable purpose.

He had to drop his face from Seth's kisses, pressing his forehead instead to Seth's chest and letting out an absolutely wretched moan.

Seth paused.

“What is it?” he asked.

His breath was not as rough as Drew's, but he sounded strange, still. Simultaneously very present and very far away.

'What is it?'

What the hell was wrong with him? As if he wasn't actively trying to drive Drew insane.

"I was going to say no penetration," said Drew. "I mean I am. I am saying it."

He lifted his head, looked at Seth to find him looking back with a small frown. That puzzled one again.

"Then, no penetration," said Seth. He seemed mystified that Drew would interrupt to make the point. "That's fine."

"Oh, you asshole," breathed Drew, his sheer frustration coming out in another moan.

If Seth had been pushy, been too needy about it, Drew would have become nervous enough to stick to his initial resolution. No penetrative sex with strangers. No penetrative sex with strangers. Don't do it, Drew. Don't.

But Seth was considerate, and didn't push, and let Drew lead.

And Drew was an idiot who needed it bad.

He licked his fingers and reached back, sliding them under Seth's dick to stroke his own entrance.

A fruitless gesture that would, probably, do nothing to help.

Turning his hand, he gripped Seth's cock.

Here, at least, he had retained some muscle memory.

He rose an inch, angled his body and Seth's cock precisely, and sank gently. Carefully.

The head bulged against his entrance, going nowhere. He almost whimpered.

Need, frustration, fear of taking it, fear of not having it, all bounced around in his head.

He felt like an idiot. He felt desperate.

And he couldn't stop himself.

He was too drugged on Seth's mouth, on that touch which was both assertive and gentle. Too overwhelmed by him, drowned in him.

He wanted — and wanted *desperately* — to give Seth *proof* of that silently established ownership.

This time he spat into his fingers, swiped it around the swollen glans, and carefully bore down again.

The head slipped in with a sudden shock of pain, splitting him.

Drew groaned.

“Drew,” said Seth.

Drew didn't know if the words that followed would have been encouragement to give up, or to continue. He didn't find out, because he planted his lips back on Seth's again, and kissed with a determination that nearly matched Seth's initial aggression.

He better arched his back, spread his legs, and let his own body weight slowly do the work of unwisely taking his first dick in years.

The pain of the initial split was replaced by a milder sting, and that sting quickly became edged out by a growing ache. Not a bad ache. A good one... a throbbing that centered around Seth's cock gradually spreading him open, growing with every inch. Not contained to direct contact alone, the ache expanded into Drew's spine, the muscles of his ass and thighs, his lower back. It was a paralyzing, shuddering pleasure that kept spreading until it reached his feet and head, and as he finally took the last inch, the creep of pleasure encompassed the farthest points of him, and his toes curled, and his eyes rolled back into his head.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN — SETH

Seth's sense of mastery fluctuated wildly.

Given his inexperience, he felt witchlike for the ease at which he could manipulate Drew's pleasure.

He knew the man in his arms utterly, understood him utterly. The course of Drew's blood, Drew's breath, told Seth everything. Drew's body told on itself, thrummed its own quivering and enjoyment, and all Seth need do was listen... and follow.

His *own* body didn't even occur to him for much of it.

He had an erection, and was pleased about that because of Drew's reaction to it. In particular Drew's reaction when Seth pressed that erection between his legs. Rubbing it up against him, thrusting in such a way that the length of it stroked him. Seth felt Drew's reaction in a particular spot, a locus of nerves and shivering, guilty-good feeling, and so of course Seth rubbed against it.

Seth was so caught up in acting *on* Drew, possessing and pleasing him, that he was utterly unprepared for Drew's initiative.

Seth understood the functionality of intercourse. He understood penetration; knew objectively that it was pleasurable, that most men sought to perform it.

Theory and experience had never a wider gulf between them.

Drew took him with a moan, and 'take' was the right verb. Seth *felt* seized. The physical link between their bodies forged itself, and in a moment, he went from his own, secure person to some sort of... dreamy component.

The sense of feeling the path and power of Drew's blood, that vampiric sense, was swamped by a sense of connection that felt utterly *un-vampiric*.

Drew gasped and shuddered on top of him, and Seth gasped and shuddered in the exact same paroxysm underneath.

Their lips found each other's instinctively.

Seth was shocked by the bliss of it, by the pleasure crawling up and down his whole body. He was as shocked by how intensely he felt Drew's pleasure — not just in the racing of his blood, but in the pulsing of his body around Seth, squeezing and flexing in desperate rhythm, each movement another ecstatic blow to Seth's nerves,

He was shocked most of all by the *emotions*.

He understood the soup of chemicals and hormones that governed human feeling, knew he wasn't wholly immune to them. Their species shared many emotions, many of the *basest* feelings and desires.

But this overcame him, the flood of... what should he have called it? 'Affection' was a poor word, and yet lust was far too simplistic.

It was an increasing, deepening well of physical obsession. A want, a need for every inch of Drew's body, every corner of his person. It was all mastered by an extreme resistance to the idea of physical separation. Seth would have protested separation fiercely — and not just because it put an end to pleasure.

He touched, he kissed, he moved, all without a single conscious thought in his head. He didn't need a thought. He had the freedom that was purity of intent; he kissed Drew without thinking, only because he wanted it, wanted Drew's lips and the soft, hot shuddering of his breath, so exquisitely unlike the heat of feeding... and yet just as sweet.

Perhaps sweeter.

Before the experience, Seth might have been horrified by all of these things on an objective level. They were all so alien to him. So utterly without precedent.

It might have disturbed him, to think about being so eclipsed. Being synced with another creature. Sharing their breath. Their pleasure. Giving, receiving, taking.

But he was unafraid. Undisturbed.

The greed was comfortable and familiar.

He was greedy, and he took from Drew, fed from him in every way but his blood.

Drew was just as hungry.

—

Speech must have seemed as fruitless to Drew as it did to Seth. Both lay there silent for a while, even after prying their bodies apart and lying down in Drew's mess of blankets.

Seth found his mind had changed about 'love.'

He had thought it was a small, human thing limited by the shortness of their lives. Now, he realized he had done the math completely wrong; feelings were not *limited* by the shortness of human lives, but enhanced by it. Maximized.

He would allow 'love' into his vocabulary now.

Though — he thought, glancing sidelong at Drew — if he took his television seriously, it was a word best kept to oneself for a time.

At some point Drew mumbled, "Sorry if I drift off. Still tired from yesterday. You can wake me up."

"All right," said Seth, with no intention of doing so.

Drew did fall asleep.

He slept so heavily, he might have seemed near death to another observer.

But Seth could see, could feel all the blood alive inside of him.

He rested the back of his hand gently against Drew's throat. The pulse there beat evenly. Perfect. The breath in his windpipe was slow and steady, just like the rise and fall of his chest. His color was good. The dark freckles still stood out on his pale skin, but it was now a pallor suffused with the faint rosiness of life, instead of the melting wax of the night before.

The shadows under his eyes remained dark. They had not been formed in a single night, and would not fade in a single day's sleep. Seeing Drew in peace now, Seth became aware of precisely how disturbed the man had been before; not just in those moments of delirium, but even in their first meeting.

Seth recalled the chaotic strokes of the painting that had initially dazzled him.

Murky background. Red sun.

Brilliant. Disturbing. Full of a trembling revelation.

Before, Seth had admired it, and been fascinated by its shaky creator.

Now, he thought of the work with some sadness.

As Seth reclined there in contemplation, the little slice of light on the wall — from the broken blind — slowly drifted upwards as the sun's position changed.

Hours passed.

He did nothing but watch Drew sleep.

Satisfied by the pure peace of it on a deep, visceral level.

He had accomplished this, he thought. He had brought the man peace. He had made him well. He had given him pleasure.

He couldn't recall when last he had done such good work.

Seth was still watching while the light on the shades faded, going from cream to pale grey again, then dark grey, and then turned an artificial white once more in a blink as the streetlights came on.

The second the streetlights turned on, there came a tap on the window.

It was a light tap, easily mistaken for something like an acorn falling and bouncing off the glass, but Seth heard the intention behind it.

Heard the sound of feet touching down softly on the roof above.

Murderous intent boiled up in him fast as water touched by lightning, and all the love in his heart turned to a hard and razor-honed weapon.

He had thought before that the mindless animal of a newborn vampire was the most deadly thing on earth.

Now he knew that a mated vampire was far deadlier, and hardly more rational.

Teeth growing to deadly points in his mouth, fingers curling and softly cracking in hideous growth, Seth eyed the ceiling and listened. Would he hear the sound of a windbreaker, snapping in the night air?

He did not. Instead, he heard a second pair of feet, and the low murmur of two familiar voices.

Soundlessly Seth slipped from the bed.

Fading to a vapor, he slipped through the tiny cracks of the window frame and rose with the cold wind.

Reaching the top of the building, he took his shape again, and there knelt, glowering at the two figures standing before him.

“What do you want?” he asked tersely.

Seeing their sovereign’s state, Bruce and Lana exchanged wary glances.

“You didn’t come home last morning,” said Lana.

His lip curled.

His protective rage melted into a spiky irritation at being disturbed.

“Is that it?” he scoffed. He straightened up. “What, you were concerned I was dead?”

“No,” said Bruce.

Bruce’s tone checked Seth; it was cold. There was no concern in it at all. Bruce was never warm, but he never sounded this blunt and hard, either.

Almost confrontational.

“What is it, then?” asked Seth impatiently.

“Did you go to the pharmacy on 49th last night?” asked Lana.

Lana was the one asking, but it was Bruce’s eyes that Seth felt — hard, scrutinizing eyes.

“I did,” admitted Seth freely.

He knew that he had been reckless. He might even have been foolhardy. However, he was confident he had broken no laws; he had ensured there would be no evidence.

He said so.

“All their cameras and computers are destroyed,” he said. “There was only one human, and I cleared her memory.”

“Yes,” said Lana, and suddenly her voice had an unhappy spike in it. Not quite anger. More irritation — annoyance at whatever inconvenience he had brought down on them. “You cleared it. You cleared *all of it*. The girl is currently in the hospital, a babbling moron who can’t read or write, or even remember her name.”

“The cameras were melted,” said Bruce. “The humans have chalked it up to a freak electrical problem, but they can’t explain the girl’s condition.”

Seth was processing that when Bruce suddenly added, with a bite in his voice, “You’re lucky the murders overshadowed this in the news. You put us all at risk.”

Oh, was that it?

Seth realized that they had come not to check on him, not even to inform him, really, but to *tell him off*. Bruce in particular had a self righteous storm in his face, some strong sense of justice having been offended.

Seth’s lip curled.

Blondie was carousing about like a madman, idiots like Gregor were being spotted feeding by humans, and they came to chide *him*? To sternly reprimand *him*, their sovereign, the sovereign of the whole cursed fold? These petty vampires with

only a few centennia behind them, come to Seth, sitting on his grand throne of true antiquity, to prod him with pointless little sticks?

He laughed.

“Shall I apologize?” he asked, with a grand sneer. “Would you like me to follow you down to the council floor, head held low in penitence, and beg, and weep, for the forgiveness of my subjects?”

Whatever reaction they had been expecting, it hadn't been complete disdain.

Bruce's eyes widened in shock, then flashed red in sudden anger. His hands convulsed into fists.

“You are beholden to your subjects,” he said, with a telling growl in his throat.

He wasn't wrong. In fact, he was so totally correct that it infuriated Seth all the more.

Why should he be beholden to such useless, pitiful, and often stupid creatures? Seth may as well have been a human familiar, the amount of time he spent cleaning up their messes.

How many times had one of them made a sloppy error, and Seth been tasked with its resolution?

Wasn't that how he had met Drew in the first place, going to slaughter an innocent man because of a subject's mistake?

And now, the single time he dared step out of line, to take a risk in order to protect *that which was his by right*, he should be taken immediately to task?

“And have you appointed yourself to punish me, Bruce?” he asked, his unrepentant sneer turning almost sweet. “Will *you* drag me before the council yourself?”

Both challenge and mockery were clear in his voice, and the challenge especially in his eyes.

Bruce's surprise magnified — and then his anger followed suit. His feet inched apart, better bracing himself. As if, Seth

noted with amusement, he thought to prepare himself for battle.

Battle?

In Seth's long reign, there had been only a handful of vampiric duels; what was comparatively common in other far flung places was a rarity here.

Rare, he had always thought, because of their fear of him.

It was not an active fear. He did not *frighten* his subjects. He did not frighten anyone — not humans, not familiars, and not other vampires. To frighten was to exude a pointless loudness, to be more like Blondie.

Seth did not need to make noises.

He was too ancient, too polished in their arts.

“If you think you know my station so well—” Seth began.

He didn't get the chance to finish, and Bruce didn't get the chance to respond before a noise interrupted.

Likely it would have ended in nothing but scowls; Lana probably would have snapped at them to knock it off in another moment.

But as another distraction came, Seth still had a sense that there would be an ugliness between them — Bruce's eyes still smoldered as he looked away, and he had not backed down.

It was the noise of a car that had distracted them.

A familiar car.

Seth cringed, walked to the edge of the roof, and looked down to see Curtis's automotive abomination trundling towards them down the street.

“I thought I told Tiffany to have the tires off,” he grumbled.

A moment later, he realized Tiffany was the one driving.

An odd premonition plucked a chord in his gut.

He frowned.

Without a word to the other two he flew down to the ground, lighting near the car just as it sputtered to a halt. Tiffany turned off the key, and the engine died gratefully.

Out of the car came the rest of the household: Curtis, looking glum (perhaps about being made to ride in the backseat of his own car), then Francisco and Tiffany, who shared a common expression.

For a moment Seth thought that they had come as part of the reprimand-Seth intervention, but upon seeing their faces, he knew they had not.

“What is it?” asked Lana as she and Bruce landed. She spoke to her familiar, but Francisco didn’t seem to notice; his eyes lingered on Bruce.

Tiffany looked only at Seth.

Among all his talents, Seth was not telepathic, but in that moment he felt she spoke wordlessly to him. Perhaps they had simply come to know each other well enough that speech wasn’t always necessary.

Or perhaps he had just been expecting this.

He felt the anger go out of his chest, a dying flame, and there was not enough air to raise it again. There was nothing but doldrums inside of him — an emptiness, like a cleared carcass.

“Grace?” he said.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN — SETH

The hospice bed was already empty, Grace's effects cleared and consolidated in a box in another room.

Seth heard them vacuuming what had been her room, the brusque sounds of human industry, and guessed that they would fill her space by the next morning.

He silently sifted through the things she had left behind here. There was much other property, from cars to homes to material objects (he had left her well off, after all), but these were the few personal objects she'd chosen to bring to her death.

A comfortable shawl in her favorite emerald green.

A scented candle — green apple.

A pack of dirty playing cards.

A book about basic sleight of hand tricks — perhaps a present from the nurse who hadn't liked him.

A neat stack of paperbacks. He didn't recognize them, didn't know the names, but realized they must have been her favorites. They were very old. The pages were yellowed, some of them dog-eared. As Seth picked them up in turn and skimmed through, he found places where she had underlined or marked favorite passages.

Moby Dick. White Fang. The Jungle.

He picked up an especially thin volume, standing out by its lack of dog-earing and general absence of abuse. This one must have been new, he thought. Maybe she had been reading it for the first time, here in her hospice bed.

Curious, he flipped to the only marked page, and found a single line underlined:

'It was written I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice.'

The book slipped out of his hands and landed with a soft crumple on the hospice floor.

The horror of it all sprung to Seth's throat and swelled there like a scream, but his mouth didn't open to let it out.

Before the previous night, he had not known love, and upon learning it, love had descended on him with a trembling awe.

Now he learned grief, and the lesson of it leaned upon him with the same crushing weight.

He did not crumble, did not scream, did not flee, because he understood that this feeling would come with him.

It was as inescapable as the sun in an empty desert.

There was nowhere to hide from it, and there was no cure. It was not a sickness but a wound, a gaping, billowing blow to the chest that left ribbons of flesh surrounding a gory pocket. Blood did not pour, because he was bloodless. Without blood, the wound was barren — naked. He felt the humiliated need to cover it, to cover himself and his weakness.

The ingrained instinct of many decades came to him: the impulse to seek out Grace for help.

And yet Grace was gone.

He had had so little to say to her before, and now his mind flooded with the things he could no longer say.

It was bewildering to him that she should have gone *now*, gone just as he had such revelations of human emotion, and could have shared them with her. She had served a cold, unfeeling creature — not an unkind one, not an unfair one, but a creature still.

A nightmare.

She would have been so happy for him. His mind rang with that knowledge. She would have been delighted and amused at how long it had taken him to realize such basics of human feeling. She would have cackled, mocked him as only a well-loved servant could get away with mockery.

He had been robbed of that mockery.

And Grace had been robbed of the revelation that her hard work had not been for nothing — that she had served a living being, and not a simple monster.

“Seth?”

He slowly turned his head.

Tiffany stood there, holding the dropped paperback in her hand. Her expression suggested no shock at his condition, only sympathy, and the kind of sympathy stationed in action.

She had been in action since they arrived, dealing with the paperwork and minutiae of death in this modern century. Seth, who considered himself normally well adapted to the times, felt lost in this rush. Where was the shroud? Where was the priest? Who would dig her grave? When the hospice workers tried to put papers into his hands, he only stared at them. Tiffany had stepped in; as Grace had always stepped in.

“What?” he replied, voice empty of affect.

“You’re recorded as next of kin,” she said. “You need to sign these before they can release her body to the funeral home.”

Meaningless words.

“Fine. Find me a pen.”

Tiffany already had one.

She handed it to him along with a clipboard full of papers, and pointed to each space in need of a signature. He put an X on each line, eyes meandering over the pages without reading them, thinking nothing.

He suddenly stopped, eyes catching on one detail.

“This is wrong,” he said, voice sharp. He lifted his pen from the page. “That’s not her name.”

The page read ‘*Sophia Hastings*,’ not ‘*Grace Hastings*.’

“Who is Sophia?” he asked.

Tiffany paused.

He looked at her, saw a reluctance to answer at such a time, and heat rose in his face.

“Answer me,” he said, cold as a vampiric master should be.

With a glance at the door to make sure no staff overheard, Tiffany explained.

“You have two false birth certificates under her,” she said in a low voice, watching his face for the ramifications of her words. “When she had been your familiar long enough to pass as your mother, she had a certificate made marking you as her son. Eventually that became unrealistic, so she had new documents forged, identical but for the dates. You were still Grace’s ‘son,’ but she became Sophia — Grace’s mother. She forged a death certificate for her old name, new papers for her new one.. Your grandmother.”

He stood in silence for a moment.

He wondered how long she had been living under a false name. Had it been recently? Or had it been decades ago? He had a very youthful appearance; it must have been years ago. Many years, for a human.

He had stolen her whole life, he realized almost tranquilly.

Next of kin.

Grace had never married. She had had no husband, no children. Whatever blood family remained was lost to her, an ocean of secrecy and faked deaths away.

There was no one to sign for her body but a vampire.

And now, because of him, she had even lost her name.

She would be buried under a mask.

He handed the documents back to Tiffany only partly signed.

“I may as well have killed her myself,” he said.

It was a listless, matter-of-fact observation, remarkably serene given the way his insides roared, but Tiffany responded sharply.

“Shut up,” she said.

He looked at her, startled, and was more startled by her glare.

“What would Grace have thought, hearing you talk like that?” she demanded.

There were more words in her, he could see them, and maybe they would have made a difference.

But Tiffany was interrupted.

“Excuse me,” said a nurse at the door. They both turned, and standing behind her was the tall, somber figure of Bruce.

Seth rarely saw him outside of the politely warm lamps of Sonder Home, or cushioned under moonlight, and had never seen him under the harshness of artificial lighting. The fluorescents were still strange and new, novel to Seth’s old eyes, and he found their glare generally unpleasant.

Observing Bruce in those fluorescents now, the other vampire looked laughably inhuman. His features were sharp — knifelike. He did not have Seth’s pallor, but his skin was still smooth, polished as no human’s was. His eyes had the guarded, watchful quality of a predator, and the nurse standing beside him was visibly tense.

Observing Bruce, Seth thought that this was how *he* must have appeared to the nurses. To the pharmacist.

Ghostly. Maybe their minds hadn’t made the stretch to ‘inhuman,’ but certainly some instinct in them said ‘eerie,’ said ‘unwell,’ said ‘other.’ Certainly they must have found him hard to look upon.

“What do you want?” Seth asked softly.

Bruce did not recognize the danger he was in.

“I’m sorry about...” Bruce began, and then let his voice fade out. He must have realized already what Seth had been oblivious of — that Grace may have lived and died under a different name, and Bruce didn’t know it. “Can I speak to you?”

If he meant to apologize, Seth thought, he would get nothing but teeth.

Silently he thrust the pen back at Tiffany, and left the room and its pitiful box of effects behind.

Bruce led him suspiciously far from the room, as if meaning to put distance between them and listening ears. It was in a narrow hall the he finally stopped. To their right was an enclosed courtyard, its pavestones flush with red and gold from the coming winter. Probably meant to be a place of comfort for the aggrieved, thought Seth.

Seth placed a fingertip to the glass, feeling the cold. Watching how his touch left no mark behind.

“Tell me your business,” he said.

“We weren’t able to conclude our conversation earlier,” said Bruce.

Seth’s lip curled. “You had more to say?” There was a withering amusement in his voice.

“It’s about the murders,” said Bruce.

Seth’s rage spiked.

This, still?

This, *now*?

That a handful should find themselves dead struck him as all the more meaningless now, in fact. That he should be expected to care, to have feeling, when his feeling for Grace had come far too late, and when the immensity of that feeling was almost intolerable. Should he mourn *each one*?

As vile as Blondie was, he had said it best: ‘The damn things love to catch cold and die.’

But Seth was too choked with spite to respond before Bruce went on.

“This is a list of missing persons,” said Bruce, pulling a piece of paper from his coat and handing it over. “I took it from a detective’s desk. They’re investigating these as possibly related to the killings.”

'Missing persons?' Not even more bodies?

Seth took the paper and impatiently skimmed it.

Just a list of names. None that he recognized, none that stood out in any way.

He looked to Bruce for the next step of the presentation, but nothing came. Bruce only looked levelly back at him — level, but intent. As if waiting for Seth to explain something to *him*.

Irritated, Seth held up the paper, names turned to Bruce.

“All right, what’s the wrinkle?” he asked impatiently. “I don’t see it.”

If this was some sort of test, or puzzle, he thought poisonously, he was going to snap Bruce’s neck.

“They’re yours,” said Bruce. “Your victims.”

Seth stared at him.

He turned the words over in his head for a moment, trying to make sense of them, and then looked at the sheet again, if it the truth might be obvious there.

He didn’t understand.

“My victims?”

Bruce remained neutral in expression as he elaborated.

“They’re all people you fed upon,” he said, “at some point in the last few years.”

Seth looked blankly once more at him, then at the paper, and then looked out the window, frowning. Mind scanning for relevance.

The names of all their ‘victims’ were recorded. The fold kept careful track of the humans that were fed upon, and by who. It was important to ‘tend the herd,’ to maintain a healthy population... among other reasons.

To ensure that vampires did not cross lines and hunt outside of their territory. To ensure that vampires did not overglut themselves, become greedy. And, perhaps most

importantly, to ensure that if any humans became suspicious and began acting oddly, the problem could be cut out at its source.

That was what had brought him to Drew.

But Seth didn't recall any of his prey personally; he might have recalled faces, if he had been shown them, but names?

"The dead were also from your count," said Bruce.

Seth looked from the window to his face once more, and realized what Bruce had been scrutinizing his reaction for.

Guilt.

Seth felt his face twist in a strange smile.

"Oh," he said. "You think I'm responsible."

That, he thought distantly, explained some of Bruce's almost *righteous* anger earlier that evening. The pointing out of his 'sovereign duty.' Bruce's daring in confronting him over a comparatively small offense.

Because Bruce, in his little game of detective, had found himself a suspect.

How *thrilling* for him.

"Bruce," he said, taking the paper and beginning to fold it carefully lengthwise. "If you think I'm guilty of these murders, why not ask me earlier? Don't you think it's a mite safer, making such accusations in the presence of others?"

The hallway was so empty. Still and dark at the time of night. The only light came from the October-shaded courtyard.

"You are the sovereign," said Bruce. "True or false, it could be a blow to your reputation. To the fold as a whole."

"I see," said Seth serenely. He folded the paper in half again. Into quarters. "So, you thought you would do me the favor of privacy, that I would be grateful for the opportunity to explain myself. Is that it?"

Bruce watched him carefully.

“If it is true,” he began. “Everyone needn’t know. We can resolve things quietly. It’s understandable that after so many years—”

“*Understandable?*” Seth’s serenity broke, like the glass on a mirror, and he let out a wild laugh. “You thought I would thank you for your *understanding*, didn’t you? For your *protection?*” As Seth spat out the words, he shredded the paper, and scattered them on the floor.

Bruce stared at the pieces of paper, looking as shocked as if Seth had shredded real human lives in front of his face, and it was his pure sensitivity that sent Seth into a sudden rage.

“You think if I wanted to kill, that I would not slaughter in front of all your faces?” he snarled. “You think I would need to *hide* my disregard for their little lives?”

Where before he had treasured the shortness, the quirks of human existence, Seth found it all suddenly repellent, useless, meaningless *noise*.

The people and their deaths meant so little to him, meant nothing compared to his grief. He had not known them.

He did not care that they had died. He did not care who had killed them.

“You told me it wasn’t one of ours,” said Bruce suddenly. “You didn’t want an investigation. You haven’t claimed the right to kill in years.” He listed what had clearly been his building points of suspicion, the black marks against Seth, with more and more of that righteous sense of justification in his voice. Taller than Seth, he stepped forward to try and tower over him, and looked down with accusation in his eyes.

Seth seized him by the throat and hurled him down the hall.

Bruce flew through the air, past closed and open doors, to finally smash against the far wall almost forty feet away.

Seth was upon him again in an instant.

Baring his teeth in Bruce’s dazed face, he snarled like a beast.

“If you want to be sovereign, playing human shepherd isn’t going to get you there,” he said, voice contorting along with the monstrous changes in his body. *“There is only one ladder to heaven, Bruce, and its rungs are slick with blood. Do you wish to climb it?”*

He laughed, and he sounded insane. Inhuman. It was the barking of a dog, the cackle of a hyena.

Behind him came a human scream. Seth barely heard it. He was aware of lights, of noises and running feet, but he didn’t care about discovery. He didn’t care about witnesses. He no longer cared about anything at all.

He might have stopped there, might have simply left Bruce against the dented wall and turned, disappeared into the night.

But there came a fierce BANG from the ruckus.

At the instant of the BANG, Seth felt something strange; an odd cold spot entering his side.

He looked down, frowning, and pulled open his coat to see a fresh red stain welling under his arm.

He looked over his shoulder.

Francisco stood there, Francisco the gardener and handyman, Lana’s surprisingly capable eye candy, the backbone of the nuts-and-bolts of Sonder Home. He held a gun. Not a very recent invention, generally speaking, but modern in this form. Small. Metallic. Easy to hide under clothing, able to punch fatal wounds in flesh.

Seth had been stabbed before. Men had stabbed him, had cut him with their knives. He had been bitten and clawed by other vampires. He had once been half-crushed by tumbling stones in a cave where he lay sleeping.

He had never been shot.

It wasn’t the bullet that provoked him, but Francisco’s eyes.

They were full of the same blame that lived in Bruce’s.

Eyes that said, *‘You.’*

Seth tore his shirt, ripped into his own flesh, and pulled out the bullet. He flicked it away, laughing as Francisco's bold, protective face gave way to horror.

And then he lunged at Francisco.

He meant to kill him.

He would have killed him, would have taken his first human life in decades, if Bruce hadn't snapped from his reverie of transfixed justice.

Suddenly just as inhuman, features boiling into those of a demon's, Bruce flew up from the ground. His teeth buried themselves in Seth's shoulder and brought him down — just a breath from murdering the man.

The duel lasted only seconds. To the humans it must have appeared like animals, the way dogs could go from placid to maiming each other in an unpreventable heartbeat. There were no points, there was no strategy or technique. There was nothing but a roil of limbs, smoke, and gouting blood.

And then it was over, and Bruce lay on the ground in the shape of a man, gasping.

His blood ran down Seth's chin and coated his hands up to the elbow.

Seth stood there, expression serene once more, with all of his angelic features returned to him.

His clothes were half-shredded, but the skin that showed was unmarked either by tooth or claw. Only Francisco's bullet had left its hole. The only blood of Seth's trickled down from that point; the rest of the blood was Bruce's.

The people who had been there initially, or who had followed the horrible sounds and gathered in shock, all stood as if mesmerized by their fear. Seth had called Bruce 'shepherd' and now, looking at the many open mouths and vacant eyes, Seth felt more vehemently, *violently*, that these *were* sheep. Cattle. They were prey, they were livestock, and he was every predator in the world. He was the snake, he was the dog, he was the silent cat and the merciless weasel. He had bitten and fed from the throat of all humanity — not

individuals, not names on a list, but an *ocean* of these things, these creatures with their sloppy, grasping art, tripping over their histories and their music, clumsy, *stupid* things.

He was drunk on another vampire's blood, and yet he was not satiated.

He licked the blood off his teeth and eyed the rest of them.

“Seth.”

Tiffany's voice broke through for the second time that night.

His eyes flicked to her, and she seemed to dissolve out of the indistinguishable mass of human beings as an individual.

There was no fear in her eyes. Nor was there blame. She stood there unarmed, unshaken, and looked upon him with a sadness.

Unprompted, her words returned to him, loud as if she had spoken them to him once more, directly in his ear.

‘What would Grace have thought?’

Grace, he thought, and the agony of grief bit down on his soul again, and he knew that none of his rage, none of his indignity had been anything but grief.

‘It was written I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice.’

“Lana is on her way,” said Tiffany.

He understood it as a warning, and a release.

Lana would see to the cleaning of the scene. The care of Bruce.

Lana would be prepared to pick up this battle, and Lana did not have Bruce's shepherd's soul.

He gave Tiffany a nod, and then disappeared into vapor.

—

The cold night air caressed him as he moved formless within it.

The hospice far behind, he abandoned even the city, rising up into the clouds. It was especially cold, here. Snow was hoping to form up in these clouds. This snowfall might not make it to earth, Seth thought, but winter was moving quickly on the land. Their early autumn would fall to an earlier winter.

Seth could have been free of all his bland duties, then. He could have been free of his city. His housemates. His crimes.

He could have floated on the wind to wherever the snow fell, and discover new centuries in a different world.

He wanted to.

But Seth was no longer free to do as he wanted; he had placed his claim on Drew, and the memory of their sweet night together called to him.

Just as clearly came fear's whisper.

He had not killed those people, it reminded him.

Someone had.

Or, more likely... some *thing*.

Some *thing* which had been haunting Seth's steps. Targeting that which he had tasted.

Seth thought of the vile rattle of bones and beads, and of the fur coat dangling over a chair in Drew's kitchen.

He remembered Blondie's words again.

'I suppose it's my fault that he's of the weaker species? The damn things love to catch cold and die.'

Seth gave up the bliss of being a vaporous nothing, grew dark wings and red eyes, and descended from the clouds like the foulest snowdrop.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN — DREW SKELLS

Drew trudged back from the 24/7 grocery store with two heavy bags of cleaning supplies.

The purpose of the supplies was twofold: one, to make his apartment less of a shameful hovel in case Seth ever came back, and two, to distract himself from the gnawing question of where the *hell* had Seth gone?

A guy dipping after sex was hardly earth-shattering behavior, but most of them didn't make so many romantic gestures first.

And none of them managed to somehow double lock the door behind them without a key.

Drew would have guessed that Seth had gone out the window if it wasn't broken.

Another night, Drew might have questioned his sanity, might have wondered if he had only dreamed or hallucinated the whole thing.

But Drew was sick of questioning his reality.

Occasional visions of creepy dogs was one thing, but this blitz of monsters, of blood, of sex, all amounted too damn much. Drew didn't just *decide* he was sane, but he *did* decide to start taking everything at face value and to respond appropriately.

Because fuck it.

However...

Drew reached his bottom step and looked moodily up at the dark window.

His new flippant attitude towards this nightmare world did not also extend to emotional flippancy.

Waking up alone had hurt.

Even after spending *years* sleeping alone, just two nights with Seth had accustomed him immediately to that comfort... and then he'd had it yanked out from under him.

He didn't necessarily think that Seth had hit him up for sex and ditched in a forever-free, fuckboy kind of way.

Seth was weird enough of a guy that this behavior made a certain amount of sense for him.

He might not even think he had done anything rude.

Drew wouldn't have been surprised if Seth showed up for their next painting session with a ring and no warning.

As Drew made his way up the steps to his apartment, keys jingling, he wondered if he couldn't do better. Kostas had to have some single friends, right? Probably less handsome, but at this point Drew thought he could live without handsome.

He let himself in.

He made it to the kitchen without bothering to turn on a light, arms too full to easily reach the switch. Finally he deposited the bags on the kitchen counter with a whoosh of breath, reached up and flicked on the stove light.

It illuminated a still figure, sitting completely immobile at the table.

Drew let out a string of deafening profanities.

In his mad lunge for the main light, he scattered half the cleaning supplies off the counter and onto the floor, and nearly fell flat tripping over them before he finally slapped the switch.

The light blinked on.

Seth sat at the kitchen table, watching him. Emotions unreadable.

"Jesus Christ," said Drew weakly, then more powerfully, "Jesus *Christ!* You scared the shit out of me. Why the hell are you just sitting in the dark?"

"I was waiting for you," said Seth.

Drew would have noted an eerie quality to Seth's voice if he hadn't been so busy trying to get his heart rate down.

For a split second, he had been sure it would be Blondie sitting at his table.

He hadn't seen the kid since the terrifying episode from the other night, and didn't want to.

In his relief, he didn't even question why Seth's halo hadn't announced his presence in the dark. Drew had gotten used to its brilliance while they lay together before, had started to tune it out, and now he didn't notice that it was much dimmed. That it was a dark and smoky gray.

He turned and began picking things up and putting them away.

Bent over, he said, "I won't even ask how you got in; I assume you got a key from the same place you got my meds." He was annoyed enough to be more straightforward than before. "I don't really mind, but if you're going to keep escalating with the shady shit, I have to warn you that I have a very protective landlord—"

He straightened up, box of sponges in hand, and jumped to find Seth standing directly next to him.

Before he could say another 'Jesus Christ,' Seth pushed him up against the counter and kissed his mouth.

Drew lost the thread of his irritation almost immediately.

Seth was a strange and addictive kisser; he managed to be gentle (or at least, careful) while still making his desires incredibly clear. He pressed his lower body to Drew's, just as he pressed their lips together, and Drew responded as hungrily as he had before.

It was very hard to remember what to be salty about, with Seth's hands climbing his chest again.

Then Drew realized something odd.

It wasn't the strange urgency to Seth's kiss, though he *was* strangely urgent. Almost desperate.

It was the material of Seth's shirt.

Familiar.

Drew pulled back and looked down, and was mystified when his eyes confirmed what his hands had already felt.

"Why are you wearing my clothes?" he asked.

"Mine got dirty," said Seth.

That, thought Drew, was a lie. Or not quite the truth. It felt like a throwaway line; like Seth wasn't even particularly trying to deceive him.

Puzzled, Drew inspected his face, and then realized with a jolt what he should have noticed immediately.

"Your halo," he murmured.

Seth frowned. "My what?"

But Drew had already lost track of their conversation, too disturbed by the cloud of gray that welled up overhead. It seemed to be coming out of Seth like dark smoke, as if the golden fire of his usual halo had been blown out, and his head was now only a spent matchstick.

"What happened?" he asked, and looked Seth in the eyes.

For a moment Seth only stared at him.

Drew saw disturbing, rapid changes go through Seth's pale eyes. In them was the truth, were events and words and explanations. So much. So many. Such a rush of held-back information that Drew was almost dizzied by it.

Who was Seth, to have such a vast world of secrets inside him?

Seth opened his mouth, and a cracking truth came out.

"My mother died," he said.

Drew heard the truth in it, knew it as such, and yet Seth didn't seem to fully realize it himself. He stared not at Drew but at a piece of wall just beyond his head, his pupils shrinking.

"Seth," whispered Drew. "I'm so sorry."

He gently grasped Seth by the arms. “What happened?”

“She was sick,” said Seth, still looking away, looking at something not there. “I told you. Cancer.”

Drew thought, then frowned.

“Wasn’t that your aunt?” he asked.

Seth tore his eyes back to Drew’s, and was suddenly, vitally intent on him.

“You need to come with me,” said Seth. “Come with me, to the church.”

“Why?” Drew felt something in the pit of his stomach, something like fear at the look in Seth’s eyes.

He didn’t want to go with him.

“I want to pray,” said Seth. A glassy faced lie. “I want to go pray for her, in that church. Will you please come?”

His mouth shaped the word ‘please’ but there was no suggestion of pleading in either his tone or expression.

Seeing Drew’s disturbed look, his hesitation, Seth made a promise. “I’ll explain everything to you,” he said, and this, Drew thought, was not a lie.

“Okay,” said Drew. “I’ll go.”

—

The closer they came to the church, the more certain Drew became that he had made a mistake.

Seth held him rigidly by the hand. It was not a gesture of comfort — either to give or receive — but a leash, all but dragging Drew along at speed.

Seth didn’t speak to him, only kept both eyes scanning their surroundings. Watching out for something. Someone?

Drew might have speculated that Seth had a deep criminal involvement after all, that he had gotten himself twisted up in some kind of deadly turf war — except that Seth didn’t merely watch the roads, the sidewalks.

Mostly, Seth seemed to watch the sky.

He was looking out for rain, Drew told himself. The night sky was heavy with clouds, rendering the stars invisible. It was cold enough, Drew thought an early snow was even a possibility. That was what Seth was watching for. It must have been.

When the church came into view, Seth's grip tightened to the point it was painful.

Drew found he didn't dare say anything. Not about the grip, not about Seth's mother (aunt?), not about anything at all.

A growing fear had closed his throat.

Once inside, Seth finally relaxed.

He released Drew's aching hand and went ahead, lighting candles.

Drew followed slowly. His feelings mixed; part of him wanted to duck out the door and make a run for it, to call Kostas. A bigger part of him was compelled to go along with Seth — both to receive the offered explanation, and to comfort him.

Even with a growing sense of general fear, he did not fear Seth.

In the sanctuary, Seth turned on only one of the lights they used for painting, and then sat in a front pew to gaze up at the abandoned altar's icons.

No, Drew realized. Not the icons.

Seth gazed at the last painting Drew had been working on before they met. A murky landscape with a red orb plunging, meteorlike, towards it. Drew had pushed the canvas aside to make room on the dais, but it still took up a great deal of space.

Drew hesitated, then took a seat beside Seth.

He carefully reached for his hand.

Seth let Drew pick it up, gazing at the painting with an increasing look of relief in his expression.

"You'll be safe here," he murmured.

“Safe from what?” asked Drew.

Seth went still.

For several long moments he remained completely still — inhumanly still. A statue without breath or pulse.

Then his head slowly turned. Just his head.

The eyes he fixed on Drew were terrible.

Drew could see the secrets boiling there again, rippling hot in those silvery eyes like volcanic steam. Like the breath of the primordial earth, cracking open for the first time.

“Safe,” whispered Seth, “from the bestial things of the night.”

Drew didn’t say a word.

He waited for Seth to continue, to elaborate. There was more meaning than that, he was sure. It was more than what Seth said.

His heart had already begun violently pounding.

“You know them already,” said Seth, still watching Drew. Eyes still churning with the violence of ancient vapors. “You have seen them.”

“I haven’t seen anything.” Drew denied it immediately. His heart pounded so loudly, he was sure Seth could hear.

Not a flicker of change in Seth’s expression.

“You met one at its dinner,” he said. “It was drinking blood. It saw you. It knew you. You thought it was something else, something innocuous. You left. But you were followed.”

‘Followed.’

Drew recalled his vision at the park.

He shook his head. He denied it.

“No,” he said. “No, I didn’t see anything.”

Seth watched him still, his eyes the only thing alive in a face that seemed made of stone. Utterly without expression. Candlelit, flickering but motionless underneath it, like a statue.

“You met another,” said Seth. “It wears the shape of a boy. It hides its true face under long hair, behind human clothing. Its true face—”

“I didn’t,” said Drew. “Don’t. Don’t tell me.”

He couldn’t bear to hear it, couldn’t bear to picture the thing he thought he remembered, didn’t want to see it again.

Seth ignored his protests completely. “Its true face is that of a dog,” he said. “A cur. A mutated and feral outcast that lives on the edge of the forest, just beyond the safety of the fire. It waits there — mankind’s discard. It walks on two legs, not four, and yet it could never be mistaken for human.”

Drew’s heartbeat nearly drowned out Seth’s words, the final whisper:

“You will know him by his eyes.”

“*No!*” Drew burst out.

He leapt to his feet, barely able to stand upright on trembling legs, but too horrified to stay and sit beside Seth.

“None of it is real,” he said, hearing tears in his voice and realizing they were in his eyes, too. “None of it is true. I imagined all of those things. My brain is sick, I’m sick. This is sick.”

Seth watched him without reply, waiting for Drew’s reaction to play itself out.

“Sick.” Drew’s breath sucked in and out between his lips, hyperventilating. “You’re sick, too. Why would you say that? How could you know that?”

He had asked the question Seth was waiting for.

“I know,” said Seth, “because I am one of those creatures.”

Silence between them.

Silence in the church, silence in the streets outside, the whole terrain of the night deafened by horror, revelation, and the cotton stuffing of gray cloud.

Silence but for Drew's shuddering breath. His heart, beating itself to pieces against his ribs.

Seth's eyes.

Truly they were the only thing living in his face, and they were terrible. Like glass marbles in the head of a taxidermy beast, reflecting fire.

But there was no fire.

This light came from within, and Seth's eyes seemed to glow as he spoke, softly.

"I was alive when the Great Pyramid of Giza still bore its face of gleaming white stone," he said. "I saw the Colossus of Rhodes before it toppled. I walked the earth the same thirty-some years as Christ, though I did not know him. I knew few people, and no gods. The ways of both were strange to me. I did not live as a man, Drew, until very recently."

Drew didn't know what his face suggested. Disbelief? Seth searched it a moment before going on.

"I spoke uncharitably of my brother," said Seth. "Blondie is a monster, true, but mine is a breed of monsters. Even the oldest of us cannot outgrow our nature. I have lived so long alongside man now... I think I have forgotten myself."

A long, musing pause.

"I did not always live as a man, before," he said again. His eyes finally moved from Drew's face, drifting not to the landscape... but to his own portrait, loosely begun on another stretch of canvas.

"I lived as an animal, often," he said, looking on his own face, faithfully depicted. "I lived in shadow and I took prey, and I had no language. I don't know where I was born, or what my name was. My times of taking a name, taking up a human tongue, and living among them — those were rare bursts of intellect, coming only every few hundred years. Like the first animal to crawl out of the ocean... only I crawled back in. In and out again, many times."

He fell silent.

It seemed that his message to Drew had deteriorated into something introspective. A flicker of emotion came back into his face, and Drew thought that it was sadness.

Without meaning to, Drew took a step forward.

Seth's eyes returned sharply to him.

Drew stopped with a jolt, pinned by those livid eyes.

"This is the longest such period of my life," said Seth, voice softening considerably. "I have made friends among your kind. I have even fallen in love. But the water..."

Seth turned his whole head now, as if flinching, and he touched his temples and murmured, "I can hear the voice of the ocean, Drew. Dark and sunless. Eclipse. I am tempted by the hindbrain. It would be so simple to return... and yet, impossible."

The luminescence of his eyes gleamed between his fingers, two slivers of light in a growing furl of dark black smoke, gazing at Drew.

'I have even fallen in love.'

Drew moved slowly. Drawn by impulse, by the same feeling that had led to a first kiss in this very room, he came to sit beside Seth.

The dark cloud of Seth's halo sifted around both of their heads, obscuring the rest of the dimly lit, candle-glimmering church nave.

Seth didn't take his hands away from his face, and so Drew found himself without anything to hold, to try and grip in comfort.

He reached out to awkwardly grip Seth's knee instead.

His head sang with the absurdity of this all — Seth's words, his own pathetic attempt at comforting someone who was either monster, liar, or yet another headcase — and allowed a calm to come over him. The helpless calm of someone succumbing to inescapable delusions.

"You're in love?" he found himself asking.

Seth laughed.

The sound, shockingly human, shockingly light, echoed through the nave.

Seth lowered his hands and looked at Drew with his full face, asking, “Where’s your awe and horror? That, or your denial?”

“You’re grieving,” said Drew. “I don’t think you’re in your right mind. But... I’m rarely in my right mind. Maybe it’s some kind of destiny. We can be the same... we can suffer the same way.”

Now that Seth’s hands were down, Drew tentatively reached for one, only for Seth to pull it away.

“The same,” repeated Seth.

Drew saw a thought forming in his face. Saw it building up, just like those smoky columns pouring out of his head. Columns pouring faster and faster all of a sudden. Rising taller. As powerful as Seth’s halo had been on their first meeting, the darkness grew until it reached the ceiling, and there began to spread out, like the flashover of a house fire.

“We could be the same,” whispered Seth, and suddenly he grabbed Drew’s hand, and his grip was just as hard as it had been before the church doors. Drew tried to pull instinctively away, but Seth’s strength was immutable.

“Let go,” said Drew. Fear was in his limbs again, trembling.

There was a horrible light in Seth’s face.

The darkness of his halo wasn’t near-black now — it *was* black. Black as a chemical fire. Big, toxic clouds pouring off of him. Drew thought he might choke.

In the mass of it all were Seth’s luminescent eyes, their soft grey as brilliant as marble shining under moonlight, almost opalescent.

“I made a mistake with Grace,” he whispered.

He was changing in front of Drew’s eyes.

Drew might have blamed the smoke for obscuring Seth's features, but the hand gripping his wrist was changing just as rapidly.

Seth's face became drawn, lines sharpening, making him appear almost gaunt. Growing deep shadows in pitted cheeks, in the root of his nose between his eyes.

His fingers grew longer, and his nails became sharp, all of his hand curling into something cruel and claw-like.

"There is a whole world out there, waiting to kill you," said Seth. "If it's not the law and hunger of my own kind, it's a crushing car, it's a cancer, it's a man with a weapon. Don't you fear it, Drew? Doesn't your life feel *small*?"

In between his words, his teeth had become sharp. They seemed a thousand sharp points, all the softness of his mouth gone and taken over with hungry barbs.

"Don't you realize how fragile you are?" asked Seth, and his voice was desperate, even plaintive. Even sad.

But it was a sadness on top of a voice quickly distorting.

A voice filling with animal bass, guttural harshness in the throat.

"Let go of me," said Drew, and he was begging now.

He tried to get up off the pew, to drag himself free, but Seth only followed him up. As Drew backed away, Seth came with him. The black clouds of the tainted halo dragged behind him like a cape.

The closer candles of the room threw Seth's face into fresh relief, and all of his polished beauty was gone — he was still lovely, still refined, but it was the refinement of a being made perfectly for violence. The same perfection of the white shark, of the anaconda. Creatures evolved in antiquity, surviving unchanged as predators.

"I should have turned her," said the creature, and grief overlaid the inhuman racket his voice had become. Jangling burrs of words. "I let her die, Drew. I let her die."

Drew's human compassion had fled him; nothing but terror ruled his actions now. He reached out for the nearest thing at hand and flung it at Seth.

Seth flicked the lamp away without a blink. Eyes fixed on Drew's face, he seized the front of his shirt and pulled him close. When Drew struggled mightily, Seth let him drag them both down to the floor, and there knelt atop him, pinning down his fight.

"Get off." There were tears in Drew's voice. He heard them, and he felt them rolling down his cheeks.

It was all too horrible.

He could see and feel Seth's grief all too well, believed it just as he had seen and believed Blondie's sadness. It was the same loneliness. The same despair. He had felt it, too — dark times curled up in the corner of some room, screaming silently into his sleeve, screaming so hard he was blind, but making no sound at all. Feeling himself the most insane, the most inhuman man.

It hurt, he knew it hurt.

They were the same. Human or inhuman, he was already one of them, and the nightmare of the idea washed over him with another soundless scream.

He wanted to reach for Seth, to comfort him.

He wanted to get away, he wanted to strike him with something hard and fatal, he wanted to drive his fingernails into those haunting and opalescent eyes.

"Get off of me," he begged, weeping.

"It won't hurt," promised Seth. "I would never hurt you. Let me give you this gift, let me help you, let me fix you."

His eyes.

They were mad.

They were haunted.

'Help you. Fix you.'

Sheer revulsion gave Drew a strength he didn't know he had, an existential horror the likes of which he had read about in books and only now understood. His whole *being* rebelled.

"I don't want to be like you," he cried, and his cry became a snarl that made that revulsion clear. "I'd rather die. I'd rather be dead."

For a moment, Seth's expression cleared. He looked shocked, and his grip loosened.

Drew's hand scrabbled for something else. Found something they had knocked to the floor in the struggle.

He seized the frame of a painting and brought it up, aiming directly for Seth's head.

Seth stopped it, claws scooping through the canvas and catching on the frame. Rage flickered on his face — then died.

Seth stared at the ruined painting.

And suddenly, he was gone.

As suddenly as if he had never been there.

The only proof was in Drew's panicked panting, the bruising imprints on his wrist, and the mess scattered all around.

Shocked out of his sobs, Drew sat up and wiped his face. Bewildered, he looked about the nave for Seth, or some proof of where he had gone.

Nothing.

Drew reached for the painting Seth had left facedown. Its canvas flapped as Drew picked it up, and he carefully folded it over back into place. Seeing the picture, his face crumpled.

It was his painting of Seth.

Tranquil, reclining. Almost angelic.

Exactly what Drew had been searching for.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN — SETH

'I don't want to be like you.'

Seth heard the words again, again.

'I'd rather die. I'd rather be dead.'

Seth thought that he would rather die, rather be dead, than feel as he did now.

He had seen many a vampire suicide in his millennia, and always been puzzled by it. It was only now that he understood... understood that it wasn't the weight of so many years that drove others to madness, wasn't an inability to adjust to new times.

It was despair.

And he had never tasted it before.

He tasted it now, galling and bitter as dead blood, and saw again Drew's look of horror. A horror that bordered on hate.

Hate.

Seth staggered out of the church like a drunk, head spinning, his fingers still opening and closing as if they were tearing into his own portrait repeatedly.

It took him a minute to realize that the odd sound he was hearing... was laughter.

He turned his head slowly, becoming aware only then of a figure standing on the roof. As Seth's head turned, the figure bent over, allowing their full face to come into range of a streetlight.

Blondie leered down at him with the grin of a rabid jester.

"That went very well for you," he said. His voice was rich with smugness, velvety with the pleasure of having witnessed Seth's fall. "*'I'd rather die. I'd rather be dead than like you.'*" He rolled the words around in his mouth as if they were

delicious. “That must have chipped even your stony heart, o sovereign.”

Blondie must have known what he was risking, and decided the risk was well worth it to torment Seth at that moment.

Fine.

Seth leapt to the roof almost placidly, seized Blondie by his hateful throat, and tore him down to the ground.

Slamming Blondie to the earth, Seth simply throttled him for a moment, enjoying watching his gaspy struggles with the ice-blood of a human psychopath. Intent formed in his mind glassily, distantly.

So many times before, he had wanted to kill Blondie.

He had no desire to kill him now.

He only wanted to see suffering. To breed fear. He wanted to see pain, pain greater than his.

But as he eased up on Blondie’s throat, the cur only burst into broken laughter.

Hoarse but unafraid, Blondie threw his laughter directly into Seth’s face.

“Didn’t I tell you to take better care of it?” he said. “You were so busy worrying that others might swoop in and kill your love, you forgot that he might *hate* you for what you are.” Those last words were delivered with a viciousness, and his eyes glinted like his teeth, making a whole faceful of pointed menace. “You never thought that *you* might ruin it, did you?” All of Blondie’s laughter melted so quickly into poisonous disdain.

Seth had never realized before how much Blondie hated him, how specific and how *pure* that hatred was.

When Blondie barked another laugh, it wasn’t just with the disdain of an enemy, but a personal disgust at Seth’s failure.

“Perfect Seth,” mocked Blondie. “So well-loved, so admired. How does it feel, to be down in the dirt with the rest

of us?” He leered with every tooth, his jaw cracking and gnashing that mess of fangs. “Do you still feel you’re better than me?”

Seth stared at the creature below him for a moment, then said a soft, “Oh. I see.”

Blondie’s grin, that drunk-on-his-own-victory smile, flickered.

“You think we’re the same, is that it?” Seth asked. His voice was almost gentle, but the hand that gripped Blondie’s jaw was not. “My failure comforts you, because you want company in *your* failure? It must be a relief. You, who have always dwelt in a place of rejection, in the underbelly of the world, seeing someone else decline briefly into your state? Yes... a relief.”

Blondie’s smile slipped further.

“I had wondered,” said Seth, his voice thoughtful with icy philosophy, “*why* you sought him out.

At first, I thought you were targeting me. Threatening *me*. But that isn’t it at all, is it?”

Blondie stared up at him, expression having gone frigid. Ugly.

“It’s because he’s kind,” said Seth. “And more than that... because he is sick. You thought you might befriend him, didn’t you? You thought he might forgive you your nature, that he might even *like* you, because he is sick? Because he does not understand the world around him?”

“We *are* friends,” hissed Blondie.

He grabbed back at Seth for the first time, claws snatching to draw blood.

Seth had been waiting for the right moment. It came now.

He blocked Blondie’s claws, bent back his arms, and rent a vicious blow to his face.

It was not the tearing, ripping attack he had inflicted on Bruce, because this was no duel. This was *violence*.

Seth hurt. He *wanted* to hurt. Desired it more at that moment than he had ever desired blood.

There was a cracking sound. Bone. Blondie clutched his face, expression betraying more shock than hurt.

“I have lived for almost *three thousand years*,” said Seth, and he could no longer keep his voice soft. Revulsion crept into it, just as it had crept unmistakably into Drew’s. “I have slept in coffins full of plague rats, taken refuge in body pits. I have seen pogroms and witch burnings, slaves crucified along the Appian Way. My stomach is strong, cur. And yet you disgust me. I am *revolted* by you, more than I have ever been revolted by something human in origin.”

Something flickered in Blondie’s eyes. Something, some pain, that satisfied Seth immensely.

Seth easily deflected another attack, and this time instead of striking back, he grabbed Blondie by his hair. He shook him viciously by it, then slammed his head down onto the ground. Once. Twice. A third time. Each more violent than the last.

Blondie stopped fighting. He blinked up, dazed, into the clouds thick overhead. One of his already-traumatized eyes leaked a trail of blood, running down his cheek.

“Do you know why?” asked Seth, hand still fisted tight in his hair. “It’s because there is something *missing* in you. Something which all other thinking creatures possess, and you do not. I think you even know it.”

Blondie didn’t say a word. The cackling glee had left him entirely.

Seth should have been satisfied by that.

He was not.

“Isn’t that why you are so *loud*?” he asked, through gritted teeth. “Isn’t that why you make yourself so hateful, so *intolerable* to be around? You would rather be hated for something false, something obvious, than risk discovery. But I see you, and I know you... even under all of this.”

With a great, cruel twist, he forcibly tore a chunk of Blondie's matted hair from his scalp, releasing his grip as he did and letting Blondie's head drop back to the earth.

Seth held up the long blond tangle, giving him a look at it, then tossed the clump away like so much garbage.

Finally, some sense of satisfaction came to him.

The despair that had been so torturous felt far away now.

He was pleasantly numbed. He felt distant, quiet.

And then Blondie spoke.

"Hurt me all you want," he said. "Insult me all you want." His voice was suddenly very strange to Seth; there was something in it almost shaped of pity. "But it won't stop him dying."

He lifted his eyes to Seth's.

"He'll die," said Blondie serenely. "Tomorrow, or seventy years from now. It's too late for you. He doesn't want your 'gift.' If you force it on him, he'll hate you for an eternity. So he'll die. One day he'll be gone, and you'll be without him as long as you live. And then you'll be like me, Seth." He wiped his eyes, fixed them on Seth, looked upon him fully and completely, with words completing in a low hiss. "With something *missing*."

Seth need to *hurt*, to vent his hurt, turned sideways. His world went uneven in front of his eyes, vertigo striking him like a hammer. His rage was so caustic, it passed through him like a wash of acid, and left his mind naked, and calm.

He cupped Blondie's face in his hands.

He touched his thumbs to Blondie's eyelashes, felt them flutter.

He thrust his thumbs down, burying them with a deep, cruel twist.

Blondie screamed.

It was almost noiseless. His mouth gaped open, his body bucked in shock, and his scuffed sneakers scabbled in the dirt.

He didn't reach for his face, but instead dug his clawed fingertips into the ground, as if too horrified to reach up and feel for the damage.

Seth dislodged his thumbs, released Blondie's head to drop back to the earth.

He leaned down to put his mouth next to Blondie's ear.

"If you were to walk through those church doors," he whispered. "Flame would take you, and obliterate you from this earth. There is a difference between us, you *pestilence*. I am the oldest thing in this world. I have sat in the presence of khans and kings, fed in the shadow of the Taj Mahal, walked the ten thousand Li of China's Great Wall. I have seen the rise and fall of more empires than are known to man, and I know the truths of this world. Know this, *Blondie*." He let the false name drop from his lips like venom. "The earth has a way of purging itself of things like yourself. No matter the state of my despair, don't you *dare* consider us equal."

He got up from the ground, wiping his bloody thumbs on the front of his shirt.

"Never show yourself in front of me again," he said calmly. "Or I will kill you."

He left Blondie behind.

He left his own lies behind, his own rage and self righteous indignation, all the falsehoods of his being.

Because they had both been right.

Blondie knew the agonies of their breed from experience, but Drew had understood it, too, with the instinct of a lamb coming face to face with a wolf.

'I don't want to be like you.'

'I'd rather die. I'd rather be dead.'

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN — SETH

The path up to Sonder Home had been a place of peace and reprieve for so long now.

Not long in consideration of his entire life, but long in the sense of what had happened living here.

He had never had so many companions.

He hadn't realized that they were that, 'companions,' and that he had welcomed even the mosquito buzz of their little quibbles and habits. He hadn't realized that he cared for them until now, walking up the path, he found he didn't know if they would welcome him any longer.

Would the house be barred to him?

It was not.

Seth opened the door, shut it behind him, and it produced an echo up to the ceiling, climbing the twin staircases.

It was a strange contrast to the last time he had walked through those doors and found them all waiting. Eager to annoy him.

Now there was only Tiffany.

She sat at her desk as usual and, for once, looked industrious rather than carefree. She was at work hand-writing a document, and she seemed tired. He noted that one of her nails was chipped and that she had removed much of her makeup. The lack of color around her eyes made her look younger, and more studious. She resembled a girl doing homework more than an aide to a monster.

She looked up.

There was a flutter of relief in her eyes.

"You came back," she said. "I thought you might be gone."

"Where are the others?"

"I'm not sure," she admitted, and he saw that something was troubling her. Something more than what she had

witnessed at the hospice, something separate from her concerns about Seth. “You just missed Lana and Bruce; they were waiting to see if you would come back, too. They got a call and took off. I thought it might have been from you.”

Waiting to seize him and see to his punishment, he supposed. To bring him before the fold.

“I didn’t call them,” he said.

“Of course not,” said Tiffany drily. “I have your phone.” And she pulled it out and set it on the table.

He paused a moment before asking, “How is Bruce?”

“Pissed,” she said. “But already half healed. I think he was angrier you went after Francisco than he was about having his throat slashed.”

Seth imagined he would have been equally ‘pissed’ in Bruce’s position.

He wondered if Bruce loved Francisco, as he loved Drew, and the whole situation felt freshly tragic, and horrible. How different might things have been if he had bothered to wonder it before? If he had sought Bruce’s help?

“The hospice staff? The nurses?”

“They don’t remember a thing,” she said. “We’ll continue to monitor them, see what happens, but it looks like they’ll all be allowed to live.”

‘We.’

Tiffany counted herself so easily as one of them.

How could she say ‘we’ without blinking, after witnessing him at the hospice?

In the moment’s quiet, she inspected his face, and her own softened a bit, losing some of its steady professionalism.

“You look terrible,” she said. “Did something else happen?”

He remembered Drew’s terrified face, the frantic scrambling to get away from him. The person Seth loved,

fighting him. Fighting like an animal in their last, frenetic moments before death. Begging him.

He remembered Blondie's giddy mockery. And his scream.

"I need you to make out a document," he said.

"What kind of document?"

"A will," he said. "I'm confessing to the murders, and I expect they will execute me for it."

—

Tiffany didn't immediately object. She did as he requested, as was her default, but Seth could see the words of argument tumbling about in her head.

The argument would come, he knew.

And he would pretend to listen.

They stood in the library... Grace's old office. Tiffany went through old files, pulling out documents, papers, folders. Seth perused the shelves — aimlessly, he thought — until he found something he hadn't realized he was looking for.

He pulled a dusty photo album from a shelf towards the back.

He unzipped the cover and opened to the front page.

A young woman, scarcely out of girlhood, sat in the front picture. This was before she began wearing makeup, and she appeared particularly plain-featured, unremarkable... but for the cunning eyes and haughty, clever smile that had made her intriguing to so many men. Even at a young age she looked sharp as a sphinx.

Beside her was a dense black blur, a set of clothing wrapped around a flaw in the photo.

Seth's kind did not appear in mirrors. Not glass, not ancient bronze. The only way to view their reflection was in still water; Lana kept a special basin in her room for this purpose, and applied makeup in it.

Once, cameras had also failed to capture their images.

It was only in very recent years — the past couple of decades — that photography had advanced enough to take a picture.

Seth turned the pages slowly, taking time to inspect each image.

As the years passed, the woman in them grew older. Her girlishness turned to sharp confidence, her haughty smile tamed to a smirk that was almost demure in its restraint.

The fashions changed with her age, Grace boldly emulating starlets of the times as the wealth he'd brought her accumulated. Her hair took on different arrangements of curls and waves, her neckline dipped up and down, her lipstick changed color and pattern of application.

And beside her, the dark smudge grew clearer.

It began to take on shape. Limbs, then fingers. A faceless head. A profile.

And eventually there sat Grace — perhaps about fifty, resplendent in her favorite emerald green — and beside her, a man Seth rarely saw and therefore found difficult to recognize as himself.

A colorless man. Pale-skinned, curly hair ash-blond in color. Eyes light grey. Dressed in what Grace had deemed appropriate for picture taking at the time: a dark blue denim jacket.

Young, but not a boy. Grown, but not mature. A man floating somewhere on the cusp of thirty with a narrow build, long and delicate fingers, and only a few distinctive features. A prominent Adam's apple on a long, swannish neck. A nose broken precisely in the center, its unevenness marring the otherwise neat symmetry of his face.

Someone who looked like he might grow into a handsome man in time. One who never would.

They did look like mother and son, he thought.

He and Grace shared few features and had little family resemblance, but he wore the sullen, impatient look of any

child being made to sit for a picture by a parent.

He gazed bored, off to the side at something out of frame, while Grace positively glowed at the camera.

She had been excited about this one, he remembered. She'd bought the device on a whim after seeing a compelling display at some store. He recalled waking from his slumber to her waiting up for him. That gleam in her eye. A broad grin on her face.

She had been convinced that *this* camera would be the one to capture his image for the first time.

She had been right.

He remembered her elation, and his own impatience with the whole thing. His dread at knowing that this meant there would be *so many more* pictures to follow.

And there had been.

He kept turning pages. A half smile, half grimace grew on his lips.

The vacation pictures.

She had insisted that they travel as others did, arguing on one hand that it would be useful photographic evidence of his 'humanity,' on another hand saying that he *must* see the countryside, and that he spent too much time locked in his home.

He was sure that she had taken him as an excuse — so that *she* could travel freely, and see all the great sights she so raved about. *He* had already seen sights more incredible than that which existed in the world any longer.

But it had been a reprieve from his duties.

He turned page after page, recalling those trips.

The Grand Canyon. The Rocky Mountains. The Pacific Ocean. So many places, great and small, iconic spots and little-seen snatches of wilderness in between.

It was strange... at the time he had not enjoyed himself.

Now, looking back, he found that there were good memories after all.

He would have liked to have seen those things again.

He would have liked to have shown Grace the photo album, to tell her *'I did enjoy myself after all,'* and *'Thank you.'*

And he would have liked to have shown them to Drew.

“All right,” said Tiffany abruptly, dropping a stack of documents onto a desk. He turned the corner back to her and she leveled her eyes at him. “Who and what are you naming in your will?”

“All of it, to Drew,” he said.

It was a material nothing. It was meaningless in the face of what he had done to Drew, how he had frightened him, and what he had revealed of himself.

But Seth's feelings still throbbed in his chest with no exit. He couldn't hold that which he loved. Couldn't whisper into Drew's neck, couldn't kiss his mouth.

He couldn't bear not to send this form of love to him.

Leave it to him.

Apology, confession, protection.

Good-bye.

“In whatever format is most useful to him,” clarified Seth, murmuring, thinking on trivial human matters. “Money, assets. I trust you to execute this well, without my oversight.” That reminded him. “And set yourself a percentage, of course,” he added as an afterthought. “Whatever you need to be comfortable.”

He looked to see if she was making notes.

Tiffany only gazed at him, not even having picked up the pen.

There was sympathy in her eyes.

“Drew ended things?” she asked.

Seth gritted his teeth. He turned away. He faced the rows of books, unseeing, his eyes tripping over their spines.

“I revealed myself,” he said. “I tried to turn him.”

“He was frightened?” asked Tiffany from behind him.

Seth stood still for a moment.

Then he turned back, looked at Tiffany sitting there so fragile and unprotected. Defenseless. Not even thinking of carrying a weapon, of putting up her guard between them, even after what she had witnessed at the hospice.

“I don’t frighten you?” he whispered.

He felt the changes start to shift in his face. The sharpening of the teeth in his mouth.

He did not move from his spot by the shelves, but he gazed at her as a monster, as a predator of her kind.

He could hear her blood beating. The movement of her lungs.

He could have been on her in an instant, slain her before she was even aware of his movement.

“I would have killed Francisco, if Bruce had been a second slower,” he said. “Bruce, I maimed easily, just as I maimed another vampire I met this night. He mocked me, and I sank my thumbs into his eyes and ruined them. You are no vampire, Tiffany. How would you save yourself?”

He advanced towards the desk.

He watched for a change in her expression, listened to an uptick in her pulse, in her breathing.

There was a change... but not what he expected.

Seth stopped before the desk, frowning, and Tiffany looked up from the blank will, met his gaze.

“Do you realize,” she said, “that if you go through with this, all of us will suffer what you feel now?”

He didn’t say a word. He stared at her.

Finally, into the silence, he dropped a flat, “You think you know *how I feel?*”

She didn’t give his rage time to burst into flames.

“You think you’re the first person to lose a loved one?” she asked. “The first person to have their heart broken?”

His hands curled into fists. They trembled.

“I am not a person,” he whispered, and leaned over the table, towards her. “I am a *vampire*. I am a *pestilence*, I am a *flea* the earth has failed to shake off.” He suddenly braced his palms on the table, nails curling and digging into it, raking the wood. He gritted his teeth, all the sharp edges. He loomed over her like a wraith.

“You know what he said?” Seth’s mind still sang with the words. “He said he would rather die than become like me. Grace *chose* to die rather than become like me. You don’t even want to be one of my kind. It’s because you *know*, you know what Drew does now, what Grace learned and why she chose to die. It’s because we are *life-eaters*, Tiffany. Even when we do not kill, we devour life. We *take* it. I took her life, and I would have taken his.”

He felt a wetness on his cheeks.

A drop fell and splattered between his hands, between the furrowed marks on the table.

“You didn’t kill her,” said Tiffany. She was not gentle. She was not afraid. She looked at Seth the way that Grace always had — as if she knew already what he would do. As if she knew exactly what he was, how he fit into the world.

“I did,” he said. His voice had shrunk. “I did kill her.”

“You did not kill her,” said Tiffany, each word emphatic. “And you did not kill those people. Seth, Grace chose her life, and she chose her death. She decided it was her time. She picked a hospice that was generous with the morphine, and the night after she got to say good-bye to you, she overrode the control on her morphine pump and drifted cheerfully away.”

Seth stared at Tiffany’s face, reading the truth in it.

Tiffany stared right back — almost glowered. Beaming her truth directly at him.

“I saw to Grace’s every need at the end,” she said. “You left her *insanely* wealthy; she could have had anything she wanted. She could have replaced every organ in her body and drawn things out another decade. She could have died in France, in Dubai. You gave her all of that. You *gave* her that life. It was her choice to die here, to die near you. To see you one last time. You were her life’s labor, Seth.”

Suddenly Tiffany’s voice caught. She wiped her eye in a swift, mechanical gesture, and Seth realized why she wasn’t wearing eye makeup.

“She was proud,” said Tiffany, and her vehemence gave way to a tearful croak. “She was so proud of you. Fuck. I almost made it through the whole fucking speech, god damn...”

Tiffany dropped all pretense, turned away from him entirely, and fished through her purse until she found a tissue.

She blew her nose while he stood there, nonplussed.

“You’re an idiot,” croaked Tiffany. “*I am a vampire, I am a flea.*’ Jesus, Seth. I know writing break-up poetry is a normal stage of grief, but *Jesus.*”

The wind had been knocked so suddenly out of his sails, Seth could only blink and feel oddly offended. There was no more anger, only indignation.

“It’s not poetry.” He gave her a black look. “I frightened him, Tiffany. I *terrified* him.”

“Because you’re a fucking vampire, and you did the vampire equivalent of asking ‘will you marry me?’ after like, a week!” Tiffany put up a hand in a half-bewildered, half-exasperated ‘I don’t even know what to do with you’ gesture. “Of course you scared the shit out of him! For someone who’s been alive for thousands of years, you have the *patience* of a flea.”

She loudly blew her nose.

He stood there with all of his anger, his grief, his mass of feeling — all of it dampened as if it had tripped and fallen facefirst into a pillow.

“Life is messy, Seth,” said Tiffany, and now she sounded pissed, probably about being made to cry. “Really fucking messy. If I’m going to have to talk you off a ledge every time you get dumped, I quit. I’ll go update my LinkedIn right now.”

“You won’t have to quit, once they execute me for the murders,” he said, though now he said it almost sullenly, the great sense of scale-balancing gone.

“You won’t be executed for any murders,” came another voice.

They both looked up, turned their heads.

Bruce stood in the doorway, wearing a long coat that covered all wounds but a deep one still slowly healing in his throat. Behind him was Lana, and they wore twin expressions — disturbed ones.

Seth eyed them, looking for any sign of their anger towards him, but found none.

He came to a conclusion.

“You identified the killer?”

“Curtis did,” said Lana.

Seth and Tiffany exchanged raised eyebrows.

Curtis appeared, wedging himself between the other two mohawk-first. Rather than excited by whatever these new developments were, he looked deeply anxious.

He had one hand in his pocket, the other wrapped around the collar of Ramen Noodle, as the dog strained frantically to get free and go say hello to Tiffany.

“I found the bodies,” said Curtis. He looked at Lana and Bruce as if hoping one of them would tell the story, would take over for his role in the grim saga. Neither relieved him.

“Where?” asked Tiffany, just as Seth asked, “How?”

“On the edge of town.” Curtis looked unhappier and unhappier. “I was taking Noodle for a walk, and he got off the leash. When I managed to call him back...” Curtis shrugged helplessly. “He had a bone.”

“A human femur,” clarified Bruce.

“Eugh.” Tiffany flinched, giving an involuntary shudder.

Seth saw a truth waiting on their faces, the thing that disturbed them.

“And how did you identify the killer?” he asked. Surely whoever, whatever it was, they did not linger.

“Most of the bodies were badly decomposed,” said Lana. “But the most recent was still in a state of rigor, and tightly gripping something in his fingers.”

Curtis took his hand from his pocket, held it out.

He held a clump of blond hair matted with bone and wooden beads.

CHAPTER NINETEEN — DREW SKELLS

Drew didn't have more than ten minutes alone with his feelings.

And there were too many of them.

As fear ebbed, something like grief came in. Grief. Guilt? Horror, and not horror over what he had seen.

Drew found himself trembling. He thought he had probably not stopped shaking since they entered the church, but now it was a different kind of tremble; it felt like fighting back tears.

Would he ever see Seth again?

The terror, that need to escape which had ruled him so completely, now left him so very alone. The nightmare of Seth's face still hung in front of his eyes, and yet Drew wanted to rewind the whole struggle, to say the right words and somehow change things.

Having seen the monster inside of Seth, Drew could now only recall the humanness of him, that which had been so soft, and strange, and sweet. Seth had not been a monster when he had gotten Drew his pills. He had not been a monster when he had held Drew through the withdrawal.

If Drew could have, he would have reminded Seth of that now. Reminded them both.

But Seth had gone.

Drew didn't have time to dwell.

He heard a strange sound — a rattling at the distant back doors.

With hope in his throat, he got up, turned to look back at the shadowy entrance to the nave. Could it be that Seth would have returned so quickly? Maybe he had. Maybe he would appear looking human again, looking shaken and sad, and

Drew would go to him, and they would sit and they would talk.

But... it didn't sound like Seth.

Drew heard the doors creak, then bounce softly open, as softly as if a light wind had pushed them.

Then footsteps.

Not steady footsteps — uncertain ones. Drew heard them pause at the threshold, then heard a soft, snuffling sound. Tears?

Then he heard shoes scuffling on the carpet that lay in the entryway, just inside the door.

They suddenly stopped.

Drew stood frozen, and felt a preternatural certainty that the owner of those shoes had frozen, too. He could imagine them standing there, in the dark of that short hall, waiting.

Waiting for what?

Then they screamed.

It was a horrible, *raw* scream, not that of a human or even an animal. It was nails on a chalkboard, it was rage and despair knotted together and dragged through a throat, ropelike and choking.

Drew's blood went ice cold.

The scream broke.

He heard lurching, broken steps.

Instinctively Drew ducked down behind the pew, looking out of the top at the shadowy entrance to the nave. Heart pounding. Body full of ice.

A shape came moving slowly, hunched, out of the shadows.

In the dim light, bent over, the shape was only recognizable as human from the waist down. Above that, it had wrapped its arms around its head, its shoulders. The resulting shape cast against the wall was *exactly* that of the

upright dog Drew had imagined so often in his worst moments. Something unnatural... something ill-made, something maimed at the moment of its creation.

Drew moved very slowly, backing away down the pew in complete silence until he reached one of his canvases, and slipped behind it.

As the thing limped closer to the front of the sanctuary, light grew over it.

Drew's heart lurched at the sight of blond hair. A blue windbreaker.

Blondie moved slowly, carefully, feeling his way with his feet. He missed the fallen lamp and tripped over it, crashing down, catching himself on his hands with a rough huff of breath. Instead of getting up again, he moved forward on hands and knees, feeling with hands that Drew saw trembled violently.

The gray of his halo floated above him like a ghost.

When Blondie's hands reached the bottom of the dais, he stopped.

He stayed there, perfectly still but for his trembling, for many long moments. Drew couldn't see his face, only the profile of it, couldn't read his expression.

Then Blondie tipped his head up. He seemed to stare up at the broken icons, and then turned his head left, right. There was a sense of disorientation in his movement.

Drew realized he was blind.

Horror, pity, and a dread curiosity raced through Drew.

Very slowly, he began to move behind the canvas, only to freeze again.

"I can hear you," creaked Blondie.

Drew stood like a statue.

"I can hear your blood pumping," said Blondie. "Your heart is pounding."

His voice sounded strange. Drew thought for a beat that he had damaged it with that horrible scream, and then Blondie gave a loud, snotty sniff.

Drew realized it was tears in his voice.

Though Drew's body screamed for him to run, a sense of pity rooted him there, and he remembered Seth's misery. Seth's grief.

And he remembered Blondie's plea, out of the haze of discordant withdrawal memories:

'Don't let him change you. Don't let him make you like me.'

Blondie had tried to warn him.

"Are you okay?" Drew whispered.

Blondie didn't reply.

He stared — or seemed to stare — up in the direction of the icons, and wept quietly to himself.

"He said the church would burn me... where is that fire?" The words were not for Drew, who did not understand them. Blondie whimpered as pitifully as a wounded dog. "Why did he lie to me? Why would he lie...?"

Drew started to move; he didn't know if he meant to run, or to comfort the creature bent like a supplicant at the dais, but he didn't get the chance to decide.

Blondie immediately whipped his head around to face Drew, and in the light of the nearest candles, Drew saw it.

There was blood where his eyes should have been.

And it was the blood Drew remembered from his apartment deck — thick, dark, and slow. One sluggish trail ran down Blondie's cheek, like a tear.

"He only meant to protect you," said Blondie, eerily tranquil, staring at Drew without seeing him. He seemed to marvel at his own words, at the idea. "He is terrible to *protect* you. How does it feel, to be loved?"

What should have been some kind of rhetorical sneer was not. Blondie asked Drew it genuinely, with real curiosity in his voice.

“Do you feel it on you?” asked Blondie. “I’ve been told that you can feel sunlight, that it’s warm on your skin. Is love like that?”

“You don’t remember sunlight?” Drew found himself asking.

Blondie paused... then his jaw made an ominous click.

Drew remembered how those jaws had gaped open, full of teeth, and swallowed hard.

“I don’t know if I remember,” whispered Blondie. “But when I kill people, it *feels* familiar. The heat of blood... it’s warm with the sun of their insides.”

Drew’s mouth dried.

“How many...” There was no way to put it, no way he couldn’t ask. “How many people have you killed?”

“I don’t kill to *feed*,” said Blondie suddenly, defensively. His voice became a hiss, as if Drew had accused him of violating some taboo. “I’m only looking. Looking...”

He turned his face down as if to inspect his hands, wiggling his fingers and cocking his head. Was he regaining some vision?

“What are you looking for?” Drew asked.

He sensed that he sat atop some volcano, that underneath him was a wall of gory flame, and destruction waited a wrong step away.

But a stronger sense — that of dreaded destiny — pulled him along.

“There is something *missing* in you,” Blondie said, in a voice mocking someone else’s words, and just as quickly turning to despair. “He’s right. He said it, and yet I already knew. Did you know, Drew? How can someone tell, just from looking at me? That I’m empty?”

Tearful again.

“Empty of what?” asked Drew.

A full body shudder went through Blondie, as powerful as rapture.

“The sun,” he whispered. “The sun... the light, it has gone out in me. I have been blown out like a candle, Drew.” Distress. “Someone *did* this to me.” He shot his dreadful gaze suddenly towards Drew. “You’ve *seen* it.” He grabbed his head once more, digging his nails convulsively into his scalp. “No halo. No color. No light. All around me I see the sun beating in others, I sense the warmth of it, but I can never *find* it, *no matter how hard I look.*” His words turned to snarl, fingers clawing.

Drew recalled the news, the graphic descriptions of bodies found torn open.

“Blondie.” He tried to keep his voice level. “Where are you looking for it?”

“It hides in the chest,” said Blondie. “Behind the heart, or under the ribs... I’m not sure. But I’ve felt it! I’ve *felt* the heat, I swear I glimpsed light once, but the sun always disappears when they die. Every single time.”

Despair. Blondie kept squeezing at his head, pulling now at his hair and whimpering again like a dog.

“Blondie.”

Despite every rational thought, every natural instinct, Drew came out from behind his canvas shield and slowly approached.

He bent beside Blondie, as he wished he had been able to with Seth, and tried to reassure him even as the horrific images of those crimes swirled in his head.

“Blondie, there’s nothing there,” he said gently. “We’re not different. There’s nothing inside but organs. The body naturally produces heat, that’s all.”

“That’s not true,” snapped Blondie. “I know it’s not true.”

“How do you know?” asked Drew, keeping his voice calm, trying not to look at Blondie’s maimed eyes or think of his sharp teeth. “Blondie, remember when we talked about hallucinations? Delusions? Sometimes your brain tricks you into thinking things that aren’t true. Seeing things that aren’t real.”

Blondie wavered, and for a moment Drew thought he had reached him — only for Blondie to slip into a fresh pocket of despair.

And rage.

“I do know,” snarled Blondie, and his face became a mask of fury — the features of it contorted, sharpened, and there were the teeth, here came the sound of his jaw cracking wider, and the hand that flew out to seize Drew’s arm was claw-tipped and hard as stone. “I know because I’ve looked *in me*.”

As he transfigured, his eyes suddenly blazed — in the pits of blood Drew saw two brilliant pinpricks of light.

Blondie pulled open his windbreaker, his shredded shirt, and underneath were the same horrible scars Drew had witnessed before.

Marks of claws.

Signs of digging.

“I’m empty,” said Blondie, and repeated himself as if in a daze, chanting, “Empty, empty.”

Drew could think of nothing to say. Terror cleared his mind, and he felt nothing but immense pity, immense sadness, and his chest ached as if there *were* some hot star trying to free itself.

He could think only that this could have been him.

“You’re like me,” said Blondie, clutching Drew’s shirt with sudden insistence, sounding desperate, plaintive, terribly hopeful. He pleaded, “We’re the same. Remember? Sick. You know I’m right. You saw my color. Please, don’t lie to me. You *know*.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you,” said Drew, finding that he was almost pleading, too. Of course there was something wrong with Blondie — he was a murderer, he was a vampire, he was morphing in front of Drew’s eyes. And yet he was somehow a child. He was somehow an innocent. “You’re going to be okay,” he found himself saying. “We can figure this out, okay?”

He might have been able to talk Blondie down. He would have kept trying forever.

Let this be fixable.

Let it all be fixable, not just here, but with Seth, with everything, everyone. Let it all be as simple as apologies, sincerity, medicine, effort.

But as Blondie’s eyes healed in front of him, Blondie looked at the room anew.

His eyes settled on the landscape Drew had painted the night he met Seth.

That murky, primordial darkness.

The blaze of an obliterating red sun, burning down with all the heat and color of blood.

Blondie shrieked.

“*Liar*,” he cried, voice wrecking the air, agony livid on his beastly face. “There it is, *there it is*, *THERE IT IS!*”

The ghost of his halo burst around his head — no longer grey, but all the colors and speed of a mad carousel, gouts of rainbow shooting out to spiral around them, opal whites and liquid pinks, ultraviolet, searing cyan, and in the center of it all was Blondie’s white face, his open mouth and the wall of advancing sharp teeth.

And then there was nothing.

CHAPTER TWENTY — SETH

The sky was already violet when Seth reached the church, a violet paling to the point of danger just as he stepped through the closed doors.

A strange refuge for a vampire.

He reflected on that for a moment, with the glassy calm of someone without hope. Someone removed from the horror of their moment.

The church nave was deadly with sunlight, passing through the stained glass at sharp angles that dappled the floor with pools of deadly color, forcing Seth to take a circuitous path through the sanctuary.

Eyes on the floor to find that safe path, Seth stopped when he came to the first spot of blood.

He stared at it.

It was fresh, he thought.

He had missed the vital moment by perhaps only minutes.

Though he kept his eyes on the ground, taking step after careful step, he could smell the great quantity of blood. He could smell the difference between aortic and capillary blood. He didn't smell viscera, nor any foul organs.

It had been a clean and precise violence.

He heard a telltale rasping. Very soft.

A sluggish heartbeat.

Both sounds were difficult to hear under a constant, low weeping.

Seth came to Blondie, who lay in the center of the aisle. The sunlight hadn't reached the creature yet, but he made no attempt to hide from its advance. Curled up into a small and bloody ball, he covered his face and wept.

He didn't look up at Seth, and Seth didn't spare a moment for him.

He stepped over the pitiful bundle and continued on his way.

When Seth came to the dais, he shouldered off his coat. He sat on the top step, next to where Drew lay, and carefully draped the coat over him. Covering the cruel wounds, the deep red pockets of his chest.

Drew's eyes flickered open. There was disoriented fear in them for a moment, as if expecting his attack to continue. Seth smoothed a hand gently over Drew's forehead, and he seemed to recognize the gesture, his eyes softening.

There was little evidence of a struggle.

Evidence of brutality, yes; blood was splattered on Drew's paintings, on the high icons themselves. So much blood.

And yes none on Drew's hands.

They lay, pale, outside the bounds of Seth's coat. Dirty only with a spot or two of paint.

Seth reached down and took one of those hands.

Absently, he linked their fingers, and recalled the way they had trembled before. How Drew's whole body had trembled with that sickness.

Drew didn't tremble now. He was very still.

The taking of his hand seemed to wake him somewhat, and then his eyes widened. He tilted his head, looking up with visible effort, and saw who had him.

"It's all right," said Seth, because he knew it was a thing that humans said to one another. He had heard it so often from the mouths of people, television characters, even other vampires, that to him the phrase bordered on meaningless.

It was meaningless now.

"I'm not here to turn you," reassured Seth, when Drew's worry seemed to persist, and those words then seemed to relieve him. Drew's face softened once more.

And it was only in that moment, with those words, that the horror of grief finally descended upon Seth. Total. Dizzying.

He's dying, whispered a voice in Seth's soul. He's dying, and he'll be lost forever. But you can stop it. You can save him.

Seth was not strong.

He might have defied Drew's wishes. Might have done it and accepted Drew's hate, accepted the loss of his affections, been content that at least the man he loved was still alive in the world.

It was not the strength of Seth's promises that kept him from dropping his head, sinking his fangs into Drew's throat and changing him

It was not the things Drew had said, the way Drew had begged him. It was not the lessons Seth had learned from Grace, the things Tiffany had lectured him on.

It was the sight of Blondie.

The thing which had torn Drew apart lay weeping still, convulsing with sobs that looked choked and small, and yet ran powerfully into every muscle of his body. He was a thing stricken — with guilt, Seth wondered? With regret? Self pity?

In all likelihood, Seth thought that whatever gripped Blondie offered no thoughts at all. No... nothing so merciful as the clarity of thoughts. Not even the relief of knowing one's vices, one's being.

When a creeping finger of sunrise finally reached Blondie's leg, he spasmed and made a hoarse, awful noise of pain, but seemed unable to move.

Unable... or unwilling.

Sitting there, watching him, Seth smelled flesh burning and saw a tendril of smoke begin to rise.

He recalled hollowly how he had baited Blondie to the front step of the church, never thinking the creature would dare to even touch the front door.

And there Blondie lay. Beginning to burn.

For the first time, Seth pitied him.

For the first time, he understood why a creature might close the door on the great adventure of life.

He would not wish this on Drew.

He would not wish this on anyone.

It would have been very simple to sit there, to hold the man he loved, and watch the creature which had killed him gradually burn to ash.

But Seth did not follow his mistakes to their inevitable conclusion.

Making a gentle pillow for Drew's head with his sweater, Seth went to the weeping, writhing vampire on the floor. Seizing Blondie's ankles, he dragged him out of the path of the sunlight and into the shadow of safety near the dais.

Blondie made no move to either help himself or to resist. He only clung to his own body still, wrapped up as if around a torturous wound in *his* chest, and wept.

He wept tears of blood, and the dark thickness of that blood told Seth what he should have already realized on his own.

Blondie had not fed for a long, long time.

The agony of such starvation, Seth thought, would have driven any vampire mad, no matter their original state.

He had never bothered to know Blondie well.

Had never bothered to look past that which he found repulsive.

And he was sovereign.

"I'm sorry," he said.

The flat nothings of the words disappeared into the acidic sunlight of the church nave.

Blondie did not look up, did not respond, did not unfurl.

Seth returned to Drew.

He very gently took Drew's head into his lap, as he had seen human lovers do before, and imitated the stroking of hair.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Again, the words faded. His gestures faded. All of it felt empty, imitative.

Seth sat there in the emptiness, feeling alone, feeling cold, feeling like the very cold, very quiet Drew was already laying in a grave somewhere far away.

He lowered his forehead to Drew’s, closed his eyes, and recalled their meeting.

‘I was inspired by the practicality of the prayer object... that thing that you can hold in your hands. Pictures of saints made not for the vanity of an artist, but for human hands. Do you know what I mean?’

Far too late, Seth grasped Drew’s brilliant meaning.

“I will learn from this,” he whispered. “I will remember you. I will do better.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE — DREW SKELLS

Drew hung onto sleep for much longer than he would have normally, purely because, as he reached the shallows of consciousness, he became absolutely certain that he had slept past his alarm. His sleep schedule was already complete chaos. This mistake would probably put him back on an unholy schedule of waking up at 2 AM.

Mistake already made, crime already committed, Drew determined to keep that commitment. The longer he stayed asleep, the longer it was until he had to open his eyes and check the dreaded clock.

...as soon as he made up his mind, lying there with eyes closed suddenly felt like the most tearfully boring thing in the world.

He allowed himself to drift reluctantly to the surface, and was suddenly startled by a number of *loud* complaints from his body.

Ow, ow.

Pain, soreness, stiffness, mild nausea. He ached from the bottoms of his feet to the roots of his hair, a collectively *horrible* sensation so shocking that his eyes popped the rest of the way open.

Ah. That explained it.

Around him were all the cheerful, beeping mechanisms of a hospital room, and the crisp white blanket covering his body *definitely* did not belong to him.

His first thought was close to triumphant.

So he *hadn't* missed his alarm!

Triumph turned to puzzlement, to disgruntlement.

Before he could even catch up to worrying about what he was doing in the hospital, he found himself scowling at the

TV. Although muted, he recognized the show immediately as *Katie on Top* — the same trash show that Anna had watched constantly from her deathbed. He even recognized the episode; this was the one where the (infuriatingly hapless) main character lost her boss's freshly groomed prize poodle.

Did the hospitals have some kind of contract with the stations, to force patients to watch it?

Sourly, Drew looked away, and then froze.

Seth sat in a chair by the bed, so completely unmoving that Drew hadn't registered his presence until that moment.

His stillness was unnatural. and so was everything else about him. In the hospital lights he was *so* brightly white, his skin so practically poreless and his eyes so close to luminescent, that Drew had no idea how he hadn't clocked the guy as 'yep, vampire,' instantly upon meeting him.

Seth was watching *Katie on Top* with what could only be called inhuman focus.

But as Drew woke to stare at him, Seth broke his gaze from the screen, and looked back.

For a minute the two of them simply stared at each other.

Seth was unreadable.

Drew eventually broke the silence.

"Huh," he said. "Weird." Pause. "You thought, I thought for sure I was dead. Wasn't I dying?"

"I was fairly certain you were," said Seth, with his own pause. Both of them equally awkward. "It turns out humans are much better at saving lives than they used to be."

His poker face yielded somewhat, and he looked somewhere between thoughtful and mystified.

Drew's lip twitched.

"You're smiling," observed Seth, eyes narrowing.

"I'm just thinking," said Drew, "about how much more sense you make now, knowing you're a vampire."

“What do you mean?” asked Seth, puzzlement taking on the qualities of a frown.

“The, you know...” Drew made a noncommittal noise. “Your ‘food allergies.’ ‘Sunlight sensitivity.’” Suddenly the irresistible twitch of his lips had become a grin. “You didn’t seem very familiar with phones.”

The closer Drew inched to laughter, the more cross Seth seemed to become.

“Yes, let’s all laugh at the silly vampire for not keeping up with every single development in the oh-so-smooth course of human history,” he said, in the same disdainful manner as a cat presented with a tub of water. “Is that your final reaction to the fact that I’m a ‘creature of the night?’” He crooked his fingers in sarcastic quotes. “The last time we spoke, you seemed...” He paused, and the levity in the air wilted. A small wrinkle appeared in the center of his forehead. “Disturbed.”

“Last time we spoke, you had much sharper teeth,” said Drew. Outwardly glib, but remembering it with a chill.

Seth paused, then looked away.

“I’m sorry for that,” he said, voice quiet. “My behavior was inexcusable. I was grieving.” After another moment, he murmured, “I suppose I still am.”

“Your mother?” asked Drew, recalling what Seth had said, had contradicted himself in saying. “Or was it your aunt?”

Seth looked back at him, smiled wanly.

“My familiar,” he said. “A human servant. She cared for me for many years. In many ways, she was like my mother. I didn’t expect to feel so much at her passing; I’ve had many familiars. Their deaths did not trouble me so.”

That raised a question.

“You’ve had many familiars,” said Drew. “So you must be old enough to have outlived a few humans, at least.” He wondered if the question was impolite, like it might be asked of a person, but plunged ahead anyway. He was simply *too* curious. “How old are you?”

Seth only gazed at him, saying nothing.

“Over a hundred?” Drew asked. When Seth said nothing still, “Over two hundred?” Still no response. “Over *three* hundred?”

Seth interrupted that line of questioning. “There will be plenty of time to tell you about my life,” he said, putting a kind but effective stoppage on that topic for now. “How do you feel?”

Drew thought about it for a moment.

“Not great,” he admitted.

The pain itself wasn't bad; he supposed the IV in his arm was feeding some kind of painkiller to him, and suspected also that that was one factor in his calm. What bothered him was the stiffness of lying in bed for what must have been some time, and the mysteriousness of the bandages covering his torso from the clavicle down. He remembered little of the attack, of what had been done, and didn't want to.

“What happened?” he asked finally.

“I found you.” Seth put it simply. “I could do nothing; the sun had come up. The other familiars of my household called the ambulance for you. One escorted you to the hospital, the other helped me to escape. She — Tiffany — watched you here until I was able to come. She told me you had surgery, blood transfusions. Other things I do not understand.” Again a mild disgust, annoyance at the changing landscape of human technology. “In essence, you will be fine.”

The word ‘household’ raised another series of questions, but Drew pushed them away.

“That's good,” he said, feeling stupid saying so. What else would it be? “But I really mean... Why did he attack me? Blondie. That's what he said his name was. I don't understand what happened.”

Seth was quiet almost a full minute before responding.

“He was sick,” said Seth finally. His eyes brooded across the room, fixed on nothing. “He had not been feeding. He

was..." Another pause, then Seth spoke with a heaviness that had a degree of guilt in it. "He's been responsible for a great number of murders. I didn't realize it was him. I didn't realize it was a vampire at all."

Drew remembered the first meeting with Blondie, the way the boy had flirted around the topic of those murders. He felt a chill.

Seth continued an explanation. As he spoke, Drew had a sense that he had been dwelling on the words before being asked, and that he was musing on his answers even as he gave them.

"To be a vampire is to hunger for blood," said Seth. "*Life's* blood. My kind has learned that it is possible to feed without taking that life's blood, to leave a victim hypnotized and weak but otherwise little harmed. It is, however, unnatural to us. It requires guidance to learn this self control."

Drew had to bite down on his tongue to keep from asking a dozen more questions. He held his silence painfully.

"There is a phenomenon that sometimes occurs," continued Seth, looking increasingly grim. "A vampire who has not learned this restraint balks at his nature as a murderer. He tries to suppress his hunger; he avoids feeding. It leads to the madness of starvation. The problem compounds itself; the more he tries to resist, the hungrier he becomes, and all the more insane. If he attempts to feed only a little, to leave a living victim, he fails. He cannot control himself. Frightened by that lack of control, he becomes like a rabid animal, which fears water because it cannot swallow. The very blood that could cure his madness becomes the source of it."

Drew remembered his own withdrawal, and swallowed hard. He tried to imagine being so sick over something like food, like water, and could not.

"So," he ventured. "That was why Blondie was hallucinating, why he killed those people? Why he attacked me?"

“I’m not sure,” admitted Seth. “It’s impossible to know whether his particular madness came about this way, or whether he was unwell from the start, and self-imposed starvation was a consequence of the ready state of his mind. We don’t know. We won’t know, until he has been made well. At least... well physically.”

Drew dreaded the answer, but still asked, “Will he be killed?”

Seth spoke of other vampires, spoke of secrecy. Drew imagined a dark cabal, a court of vampires who might execute one of their own. From Seth’s response, his mental image probably wasn’t far from the truth.

“He may be,” said Seth. “But I will do everything in my power to prevent it. He is my mistake; I am responsible for the crimes that he committed, because I did not help him. Because I did not see it.”

The look on Seth’s face was so troubled that Drew tried to sit up on impulse, wanting to reach for his hand. He found immediately (and painfully) that his body was not ready for such a thing. He dropped back onto his pillows with a hiss of pain.

Seth immediately moved to his side, concern on his face. Drew happily took advantage of the proximity to reach for his hand.

It was only once he had clasped Seth’s hand that they both seemed to realize the elephant in the room, that thing which they had maybe both been avoiding.

“So...” Drew milled about for the right words. “Now that I’m still alive.”

“Now that you’re still alive,” repeated Seth, prompting him when he did not immediately continue.

“Now that I’m still alive, and I’ve told you I don’t want to be a vampire.” Among other unkind things, Drew thought, and cringed internally. “Is that it?”

Seth only looked at him for a moment, with apparent puzzlement.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, like...” God. Drew wished that whatever was in that IV was stronger, strong enough to give him a drunken boldness. “Do you still want to like... date?”

When Seth only looked more mystified, Drew tried pathetically to clarify.

“You know, like, ‘see each other.’” How had Seth put it in the apartment? “‘Not be casual.’ Like... continue our whole ‘thing.’”

His meaning finally seemed to dawn on Seth, despite the inane phrasing.

“You would want to?” asked Seth, seeming amazed. “Even though I’m a vampire?”

“‘Vampire’ is not a dealbreaker for me,” said Drew, marveling at the absurdity of his words as he said them. “I wasn’t sure if *you* would want to.”

Seth seemed increasingly baffled by Drew’s words, then indignant.

“My feelings are not as weak as that,” he said. “As long as you exist on this earth, I will love you. I have no choice in the matter; if you’ll have me, then I want you.”

Drew’s heart fluttered. He was at once overwhelmed and deeply flustered.

“You know, ‘love’ is a really strong word for two people who haven’t even known each other two weeks,” he pointed out, dodging the wealth of his feelings, trying not to reveal them.

“I am a vampire,” said Seth flatly, and again he was almost disdainful, as if Drew had said something mildly offensive to him. “I have no small feelings. I have no interest in ‘flings.’”

He said the word ‘flings’ like it was a foreign word he had found in a dictionary, and hadn’t wholly grasped yet.

Drew found it adorable. He bit his lip to hide a smile that might have offended Seth more.

So this is a vampire, he thought to himself. Or at least, this vampire.

Out of place in the world. Somewhat haughty. Full of love, but unsure what to do with it.

Drew managed to get a grip on Seth's shirt, pulling him down. He was sure Seth could have resisted, but still felt victorious in bringing him close enough to kiss.

Kissing *was* a little strange now, with the memory of all those teeth. Drew was tempted to feel for them with his tongue. He suppressed the urge.

He would get used to it.

He released Seth, but Seth didn't straighten up.

Instead, Seth gently cradled his head, and kissed him deeper, with all the carefulness of someone holding a thing that was fragile, that was priceless.

When Seth finally released him, Drew was almost without words.

Seth pulled back and searched his face. Seth's brows knit. He was waiting for words. Some final mark of consent, of commitment.

"When I'm healed enough to get back in the studio," said Drew. "How do you feel about doing some tasteful nudes?"

The bad joke fell hopelessly flat as Seth answered with complete seriousness.

"I've never posed nude," he said. "But I'm willing to try." Then his eyes fell on Drew with significance. "You won't get distracted?"

"Not if you don't *try* to distract me," said Drew warily, sensing a challenge.

Seth smiled.

Thanks for reading! Seth and Drew may return in future works. To stay in the loop, [sign up for my newsletter](#) and grab

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About the Author

Daniel May writes MM romance and erotica with a focus on dark contemporary, kink, and BDSM. Originally a lover of sci-fi and fantasy, he turned his sights on the erotic as a joke that went over surprisingly well. He also writes under Augustus Roth.

Read more at [Daniel May's site](#).