Sing in me, Muse: A Collection of Original Fiction

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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Abstract:

Sometimes in the course of a class, students need supplementary materials to help them understand a subject. For this project, I created three short stories that can be used within a classroom setting as supplementary materials to works that are commonly read in English and humanities classes. The stories are meant to help students understand the plot events of the original work by making them more modern. The project also allowed me to explore my writing process, and learn more about myself as a writer.

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-I also want to thank my mother Dorothy, my brother Scott, my grandmother Elizabeth and my co-worker Leslie for being my “test audience” as well as editors.

-Finally I would like to thank the creators of two very invaluable websites Project Guttenberg and Babynames.com. Without these wonderful resources, this project would have likely never been completed.
Resources:

General resources:

Babynames.com June 18, 2009 (www.babynames.com)


Project Guttenberg June 18, 2009 (http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Main_Page)

Fire of Life:

Apuleius, Lucius The Golden Asse (http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/1666)

Perfection:

Ovid Metamorphoses (http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/26073)

Rex:

Sophocles Oedipus Trilogy (Oedipus Rex, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone)
(http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/31)

Quote Latin June 18, 2009 (http://www.quotelatin.com/)
Author's Statement

The idea for my senior honor's project is one that I have had for a very long time and this project presented me with the perfect opportunity to actually carry out the idea. When I was a junior in high school, my class read a selection from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. And not a single student in the class understood what it was about. We all managed to memorize passages from it, but when asked, no one could explain what those passages really meant.

My teacher, upon seeing several failed quizzes, tried to supplement the material with chapters from the book *A Walk across America* by Peter Jenkins. While these chapters were easier for us to understand than *Walden*, most of us didn’t see the connection between the two works. My teacher finally let it go, but encouraged us to read *Walden* at a later time.

Several months later, I was wandering around my local public library in search of something new to read when I stumbled across a young adult novel called *The Gospel According to Larry*. I picked it up, thinking that the cover looked interesting and it might be worth reading. I read it and enjoyed it, but it wasn’t until the very end of the novel that it hit me: this novel was *Walden* for teenagers, at least to some degree. I suddenly understood most of what Thoreau had been trying to say, and I couldn’t believe that I hadn’t understood it before.

I had thought this was a pretty interesting experience, but I basically put it out of my mind to focus on other things. However, every time I watched some of my classmates struggle to understand a novel or extract, I wondered if they’d have an easier time understanding it in a different form. Then, about four years later, when I was a junior at Ball State, Something happened that renewed my interest in the idea of expressing the ideas in stories and essays in
more accessible ways. At that time my sister was a senior in high school. It has been a tradition of sorts at our school that the first major literary work students read in senior AP English second semester is Homer’s epic poem *The Odyssey*. At this point, I had read the epic several times and considered it one of my favorite literary works. My sister was about to encounter the poem for the first time.

I watched my sister struggle through reading it, much as my classmates had, relying heavily on Spark Notes and similar resources to truly understand what was going on, like many of the other students in her class. I thought this a shame and tried to help her through it as best I could. I thought that she could use a book that would help her to understand more about *The Odyssey* than she could gather from Homer’s version, much like *The Gospel According to Larry* had done for me with *Walden*.

A few months later, I was scrabbling around trying to come up with an idea for my senior honors thesis. I knew that I wanted to do some kind of creative writing project, because this is something I enjoy and I wanted a final chance to do a creative writing project as a student, but couldn’t really come up with a concrete concept. By this point, my sister was a freshman at Ball State and in Honors 201 where she was, once again, reading some of my favorite works by the ancient Greek and Romans. And once again, she was having trouble understanding some of it. Then I realized that I could use that one idea from all those years ago for my project. I could write short stories that could be read by high school and college students as supplementary material to some of the works they read in English and humanities classes but struggle to understand.
I was left then with the question of what to use for my original source material. I saw two major options before me: the works of Classical Greece and Rome, like *The Odyssey*, or the works of William Shakespeare. Both were works that students often find troubling and hard to understand. Both were also works that I was very familiar with and enjoyed reading, and I wanted others to enjoy them as well. However, I have always been a strong supporter of the idea that to truly understand Shakespeare, one needs to see it performed, as it was meant to be when it was written. So I decided I would be better off writing short stories that were based on the myths that many Classical Greek and Roman works were based on.

While writing my proposal and working on this project, I was asked several times why I was choosing to complete a creative writing project instead of a research paper, or some kind of chemistry experiment. After all, my major field of study is science. There are several reasons I chose a creative project rather than an analytical one. One reason was that I hadn't really decided what branch of chemistry I enjoyed the most and would actually like to perform independent research and experimentation in. At the time I proposed the project, I hadn't taken physical chemistry yet, so I didn't really know that this would turn out to be the area I would enjoy the most. On top of that is the fact that I really do not enjoy organic chemistry, which is a popular research choice.

Another reason I chose a creative project outside of chemistry is the simple fact that I am a chemistry major. I will be studying chemistry and working in the field for the rest of my life. I will be performing chemistry experiments until I retire. And, as much as I love chemistry, I didn't really want to waste one of my last opportunities to do something that I enjoyed doing, doing something I would be doing for the rest of my life. I also am not much of a laboratory
scientist. Perhaps this is because I haven’t found the right kind of laboratory yet, but as it stands, I really only spend as much time in lab as is required by class and would rather not spend extra time in that setting if it’s not needed.

Finally, one of the major reasons I chose this project is that fact that, for the last several semesters, the only kind of writings I have done have been analytical in nature. I have only had the opportunity to write creatively for my own pleasure, and even then not very often. About seventy five percent of what I’ve written at Ball State has consisted of laboratory reports, and there really is not any room for creative writing in my field. The Senior Honors Project allowed me one last chance to use my creative writing skills for school work. I have always loved to write and if a creative option is presented, I will always take it. I like the fact that I can chose to do something I enjoy for a grade, because it makes it seem much less like work and much more like something I would do outside of class.

This project took a great deal more work than I had originally anticipated it would. The first step was to choose which myths I wanted to write about. When I originally proposed the project, I knew I wanted to use *The Odyssey*, because it had been the inspiration, and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, because it contained so many myths. I then looked through some text books I still had at home from taking CC 205 (a world mythology course) the previous summer to see what myths I found inspiring. Once I had a list of myths that I knew had inspired some of the Classic poets and playwrights, as well as myself, I realized I needed to find a copy of the original source material to read through. This is when I found what turned out to be my most important resource, Project Guttenberg. Project Guttenberg is a website that has gathered up many of the classical works in the public domain and transferred them into e-book style documents so that
everyone can have easy access to the material. I downloaded the files and was able to read them on my laptop and a handheld reading device that I own, which enabled me to conveniently read the works at my convenience.

After reading the source material I had gathered, I sat down and plotted out the events of each work/myth to make sure that when I began writing my own versions I wouldn’t leave out anything crucial. After I had planned out the original events, I mapped out parallel events that would make up the plots of my own stories. I used these charts as a resource when I began to write the individual stories. By the time I had finished, I had about eight different charts to choose from. I knew that I would be unable to write them all, so I set a minimum number of stories to complete. After determining how much time it would likely take me to draft and polish my work, I decided I wanted to complete at least three stories, one for each credit hour I would receive for the project. Once I had the logistics worked out, I sat down to write the stories and planned to work out any other problems as they came up. In the end I spent quite a bit of time on five different stories, although only three were completed for the project.

“Fire of Life” was the first story I completed. This story was based on the myth of Cupid and Psyche, which is a short episode in the Latin work Metamorphoses, or the Golden Ass, by Lucius Apuleius. I knew from the beginning that I would likely write a story based on this myth because it was one of the very first myths I ever read. When I was in elementary school, I was placed in a specialized class for advanced students over the summer where we would study a specific subject during the few weeks we met. In third grade, our topic was mythology, and at the end of the class we put on a play: the myth of Cupid and Psyche. I played Psyche, mostly
because my name is at the beginning of the alphabet, so I got first choice. So this myth has real sentimental value for me and I wanted to use it for inspiration.

I decided that the best way for me to approach this story was from a fantasy angle. One of the important points in the original myth is that Psyche discovers Cupid’s wings although she hasn’t seen him. By making the story a fantasy, it enabled me to do something similar. This story started out with some inspiration from the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical *The Phantom of the Opera*, which I listened to extensively as I wrote the story. The feel and setting of the musical were the inspiration for the castle setting in the story, although most of the other inspiration from the music faded away as I completed the story and realized these sections didn’t really fit in with what I had written. The story ended up much longer than I had envisioned, which shaped the way the rest of my stories were written.

The next story I turned to was one that I have not completed. I had decided to write a story about the myth of Orestes and Electra, based on the play cycle by Aeschylus. I chose this play cycle mostly because I came up with a really interesting idea on how to re-tell it. The story was to be about two siblings in foster care who, just before they turn eighteen, enter into some form of shared dreams where they relive the tragic events of their lives in a fantastical setting. The idea for this came from several essays I read during the colloquium on fairytales I took, where I encountered the idea that fairy tales allow children to “destroy” what is bad about themselves or their parents through fantasy. This method allowed me to have the “children” perform the murder of their mother without actually committing the murder. However, as I worked on the story, I found that I had written myself into a corner. After several re-writes, I put
the story to the side in favor of some of the other works so that I might actually have something complete for the project.

As I read through Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, I found that most of the myths just did not inspire me to write. I really couldn’t find ways to adapt the tales, with one exception. I allowed myself to focus on the tale of Adonis. I know this myth has been a popular one for a long time and has been retold by many authors and poets. I wanted to make sure I included the birth of Adonis as well as the love affair with Venus.

It took me quite awhile to work out a plan to re-tell this myth. Finally, during one of my biology classes, I hit upon the idea of genetic engineering. I decided that this myth lent itself perfectly to this kind of story, which is how I ended up with “Perfection.” I found inspiration in several different science fiction books and short stories, including Kate Wilhelm’s *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* and Brian Aldiss’s “Super-Toys Last All Summer Long.” The voices of Dr. Scott’s conscience were heavily inspired by the season finale of *House*, because I found Anne Dudek and Hugh Laurie’s performances absolutely chilling and the specific moment where the camera pans to show Anne Dudek basically whispering in his ear really stayed with me.

Somehow, without really meaning to, I ended up with two science fiction stories, although they are very different. In a process similar to that I experienced in planning the Cupid and Psyche tale, I knew early on that I wanted to find a way to adapt Sophocles’ Oedipus trilogy into a short story. This play cycle was the first I’d ever read and I really enjoyed it. This is another myth that took a bit of thought about how to adapt it.

I finally hit upon an idea when I remembered how someone had once described Asimov’s *Foundation Trilogy* to me: the rise and fall of the Roman Empire in space. I realized that giving
the events of the Oedipus trilogy a science fiction setting would really make an interesting story. “Rex” was the last story I started writing and it almost didn’t get written at all. However, just after I finished my exams back in May, my brother and I went to see the new Star Trek movie, and I found myself inspired to continue working on this story. The movie was amazing and I found it very visually stimulating, so I continued to call upon it when I found myself stuck on this story. The film, along with the original television series, helped inspire the locations and some of the alien races I created for my story.

The other story that I didn’t manage to finish was the one I had been most excited to work on. I wanted to find a way to adapt The Odyssey into a short story, and I found a good idea almost right away. My idea was to focus on the story of a soldier after the Vietnam War who is trying to find himself and return home to his family, with all the fantastical elements of The Odyssey being fantasies in his mind from drug use. I was heavily inspired by the music of Billy Joel, especially in the form of the musical Movin’ Out, which includes a similar plot for one of the characters during the second act. I plotted everything out in great detail, and when I pulled it out to start writing the story, I realized just how long just my story plot was even before I had begun writing. I started trimming it down. And trimming and trimming and trimming until I realized that to make it a short story would really just be a great disservice to not only the original source material, but to my own inspiration as well. So I set this idea aside and chose to focus on stories that allowed themselves to be adapted to short stories better.

Once I completed a solid working draft of a story, I sent a copy to Dr. Lindberg to read and comment on. I also gave copies to some of my friends and family as a “test audience” just so that I could have some more opinions on the stories. Some of them read all three, while some
of them read only one. Some of them knew what the project was about, while others just thought they were doing me a quick favor unrelated to school. Some of them gave me great feedback, especially in terms of spelling and grammar, while I never heard back from some of them. I did take their comments into account when thinking about my final draft of the stories, although most of them just gave me verbal feedback, so I don’t really have copies of the comments to include with my project.

I learned a great deal about myself as a writer during this project, especially from my two “failed” stories. The stories “failed” for very different reasons. With my story based on the Aeschylus plays, I found myself with a bad case of writers block. However, I was so determined to finish this story that I just couldn’t let myself set it aside to work on something else. I kept trying to force myself to work on it. And the more I tried, the worse the block became. I got to the point that I actually dreaded sitting down to my computer to write. So I finally had to force myself to stop. I told myself that I would eventually get back to it, but the damage was already done. I do hope to one day complete the story, just for myself, but I decided it was best not to include it in this project.

My story based on The Odyssey really suffered from the opposite problem. That is, I was so inspired by this idea that I couldn’t cut it down into a short story. I realized that if I gave this work the attention it deserved and wrote it with all of my original ideas it would be a novella, possibly even longer, which was outside the scope of my project. I had proposed writing short stories, and I wanted it to remain that way. I also felt that I would never be happy with a version of this story if I completed it, so I decided that I would rather drop it from the project than
produce something I wasn’t happy with. I will likely write this one day because I am absolutely in love with the idea, but it will be when I have a lot more time.

One of the things I learned about myself as a writer is that I don’t really think about brevity when I write. I get so wrapped up in the plot, the characters and developing the story that I forget about just how long a short story should really be. I know that there is really no universal agreement on how long a short story should be. After I completed “Fire of Life” and realized just how long it was, I began to think more about story length. I finally chose to use the same system that the Hugo Awards use to determine what category a work should fall into. They define a short story as a work with 7,500 words or less, although they also include a category for novelette, which is somewhere between a short story and novella. I chose this convention mostly because I knew they had a specific convention for length and it was readily available. I also found it appropriate because the three works I finished were works of fantasy and science fiction, which this specific award caters to. Both “Perfection” and “Rex” fit into the short story category easily, while “Fire of Life” would technically be considered a novelette. Brevity, where appropriate, is something I definitely want to work on for myself in the future.

I tried to use a different method for my writing process with this project. As much as I hate this term, the only way I can think of to describe my usual process is organic. I have always found that term to be so self-consciously artsy. But I really do think it describes my usual process. I take an idea-- sometimes it’s just a single scene that I see in my head, sometimes it a song I heard on the radio, or sometimes it’s just something else entirely-- and I build the story up from there. I let the story write itself. I let the characters develop themselves. Everything has always just fallen into place the way I wanted it to. But when I set out to work on this project, I
knew it would take a lot more planning than I usually do. I charted all my stories out, planned everything to the best of my ability. I'm not sure it actually helped me at all. I found that by following these plots, I had more trouble connecting the scenes, bridging events. I also feel that my characters really took a back seat to my making sure the plot was true to the original. I can't help but wonder if I had just let myself write as I normally do, if my stories would be better and I would have been able to produce more of them. I also found out that, interestingly, I write in my sleep. I would sometimes wake up, after being stuck on a story the night before, and find everything I needed to fix it already written out in my head. This helped me out of several tight spots, and I really should start writing like this more often.

Another thing I learned about myself is that I have no time management skills to speak of. I guess I already knew this, but it is not something that has really come up in regards to my writing before. I usually am very productive and get quite a bit written in a short time. But, apparently, the second I give myself a deadline, my production slows to a halt. For this project I continually set myself up with personal deadlines, which I then continued not to meet. It seemed as if the more deadlines I set, the less I got done. I really felt that I put a lot of pressure on myself in this way and that is why I didn't produce as much work as I would have liked. I tried to set up a writing schedule, to devote a certain amount of time on certain days to work on the project, but this plan fell apart rather quickly. There were weeks when I didn't write at all, while there were weekends when I'd do nothing but write for about twenty of the forty-eight hours. In the end I did complete the project, but I put unneeded stress on myself in the process.

Along with not really possessing time management skills, I am also severely lacking in the organization department. While I was more organized for this project than I have been for
anything else outside of laboratory work, I still often found myself scrambling around searching for the plots I’d written out, or the copies I made for someone. I couldn’t remember if I had spoken to Dr. Lindberg about certain subjects, if I was waiting to hear back from her, or if she was waiting to hear from me. I have always known I’m disorganized. I have been this way my entire life. However, I usually have what I consider to be a “controlled chaos,” that is, I know where everything is, even if it’s a mess. But even this fell by the wayside during this project. I know that I should be more organized, I really do. But it’s probably never going to happen. This project just further emphasized this.

Finally, I found out that I have a bit of a predilection for specific genres of fiction. I had really hoped to use this project as a way to explore different genres of fiction, to try things that I hadn’t tried before to see if I was capable of writing them. Instead, I found that I prefer writing science fiction and fantasy works. Writing them came naturally to me, perhaps because these are the genres I read the most. And while I still feel that these genres were the best choices for the stories I wrote, I still wished I had had the chance to try out some other genres. I had ideas for stories in other genres, but they didn’t end up being written. While I’m glad I found a niche that I can fit into as a writer, I still want to explore other aspects of my writing.

Now that I’ve completed all the stories for my project, I’ve had time to think about all the things I would change in the stories themselves if I had the time. I really wish I had developed all of my characters more. I would have liked to spend much more time and energy on the characters and their relationships rather than focusing on the plot. I really would like to expand all of these stories someday and properly develop the characters. I also wish I’d had just a bit more time to edit and make changes to the stories, expand certain sections and just make sure
that the works can stand on their own as stories. I feel that I have done a fair job at presenting the myths in a different form. I worked hard to try and make the connections subtle, but that once the reader saw the connection, the other events in the story made sense in a way they may not have before. I think I was successful in this because no one in my test audience ever asked me which myth a story represented; everyone figured it out based on the story. I do think if a student read one of these stories in class, it would help him understand the original work a little better. But in the end, I'm rather pleased with the way everything turned out and really feel that this project shows what I am capable of, both as a writer and as an honors student.
Fire of Life

Love is the fire of life; it either consumes or purifies

—Anonymous

She was beautiful. He could admit that at least. And yet he knew this wasn’t why he watched her. In all his many, many years, he had seen much beauty. Yet he was drawn to her.

“I see you watch her again, my Son. I still do not see what draws you.” Aiden turned from his reverie to see that his Mother was standing behind him, staring into the viewing pool where he’d been watching the girl.

“Of course you don’t understand, Mother,” Aiden sighed. “I hardly understand it myself. Was there something you wanted from me?” But Aiden didn’t wait for her answer, choosing instead to turn back to the viewing pool. They had had this conversation many more times than he would like to remember.

“Son, I just want to help you, please remember that. Surely I needn’t remind you of the pain that results from becoming involved with mortals. There is a reason we have separated ourselves from them.”

“Of course not, Mother. You have made me well aware of the circumstances surrounding how our own relationship came to be. And as I’ve told you before, I am not involved with the girl, I am simply observing her. Nothing more shall come of it, I assure you.” His Mother said nothing more, simply leaving Aiden to once again gaze upon the beautiful girl shown in the viewing pool.

For all his claims, Aiden had been watching this same girl for several years. And he knew that, despite all his promises, if given the opportunity he would certainly involve himself with her, if only to determine how she drew him so.

Little did he know.

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Beautiful. That was all she ever heard anymore. Beautiful. It had begun when she’d turned fifteen and, apparently, blossomed into a young woman. A beautiful young woman. And still over three years later, all she heard was beautiful. And Helena was quite tired of hearing it.

It was as if she had nothing else to offer the world! But she did, she truly did! Helena knew she possessed a thirst for learning and a love of knowledge. Her father had always doted on her, the youngest of his three daughters, and he’d been providing her with books for years. She had a wonderful collection. She’d tried to share them with her sisters, but they wanted little to do with her at all.
She'd read them all, some several times. And the things she had learned! Everything in the books was so exciting, so new! There was so much knowledge at her fingertips, and yet Helena knew that she had barely scratched the surface.

Lately, however, the books that her father brought her left much to be desired. She recognized that they contained knowledge that was "proper" for a young lady of her age. In short, they were boring. Helena wasn't sure what had changed, so she didn't mention it, choosing instead to be satisfied with the books she already possessed. Besides, the young man who ran the giant library at the university often let her in to browse.

But knowledge wasn't the only thing she possessed. Helena had never told anyone, not her father and certainly not her jealous sisters, about the strange things she had found she could do. She knew it was magic. It was the only answer. Once, when she was much younger, she'd mentioned magic to her family and they had became angered. It had surprised Helena, and scared her a bit as well, so she'd never mentioned the subject again.

But she knew.

Lilith gazed at the mortal girl in the viewing pool. So this was the creature that had her Son so enraptured. Well, she didn't see the appeal. The girl was beautiful, she supposed, by mortal standards. But really, when faced with all the beauty around him, how could Aiden find this girl so...captivating? Really, it was very nearly obscene. He was becoming a laughing stock amongst the others and that simply wouldn't do. She and Aiden had a reputation to maintain, after all. Certainly there was something she could do to prevent the unthinkable from happening.

Lilith narrowed her eyes as she scrutinized the girl further. The girl was pale and svelte—rather on the short side really—with lovely long, dark hair and unnaturally blue eyes. She was, Lilith supposed, a much watered down version of herself. Perhaps that was the draw. But really, the girl paled in comparison. What must her Son be thinking?

This certainly wouldn't do at all.

Beautiful Helena. Talented Helena. Clever Helena. Perfect Helena. Father's favorite, the one all the men wanted. It was enough to make anyone sick! And it certainly made Emma and Clara sick. She had all the marriage proposals while her two poor, older, ugly sisters had to scrape the bottom of the barrel to find husbands. Why was life so unfair? What had they done to deserve this?

Sure, they had had their own small, petty revenges, such as restricting the kinds of books Father bought her and giving her more chores, but really! She got everything she wanted without working for it! It made their blood boil!
And now she was going to wed a young, handsome, rich husband, while her poor sisters were left with their old, wrinkly, middle class merchants. The only good thing was that Father was forcing her to marry and soon she'd be gone and out of their hair.

Perhaps it would finally their time to shine.

Aiden always knew the day would come, but he really hadn’t thought it would come so soon. Of course, it wasn’t soon by mortal standards, he was sure. He knew girls were expected to marry much younger than Helena was. *Helena.* He’d finally heard her name for the first time and it was as lovely as she.

Her father’s decision lay like a pit in his stomach. He thought, perhaps, that he felt this way because once she was married, he’d really have no business watching her this way. After all, what good would it do to watch another man with her? But he knew it was more than that really. He loved her. He was willing to admit that now. He wanted to be the one she married.

He heard his Mother once again approach him as he gazed upon Helena. “Still watching the mortal, my Son?” He could hear the sneer in her voice. She was angry, he could tell. And he was about to make it much worse.

“No Mother, I’m done watching. Her father has said she must choose a husband.” Aiden watched as his Mother smiled, thinking that she had finally won, before saying, “And I intend to be her husband.” It was almost funny, really, to watch her face fall. He loved his Mother, truly, but he was an adult and it was high time he started acting like one.

“Now really, Aiden. Don’t be silly! You know as well as I that you can’t marry a mortal! It simply isn’t done!”

“I don’t care, Mother. I can have no one else. How could I let her be married to some mortal monster when I love her? My decision is made.”

Lilith knew she needed to back track if she were to save the situation. “I hadn’t realized you were so serious about this, Son. I just want you to think about your actions. The child doesn’t know of you. She couldn’t possibly understand what you are. Mortals simply can’t handle it.”

“Then I’ll make her one of us.” Lilith knew that would be even worse.

“But, Son, how do you know if she could handle it? The Change is hard. You barely survived yourself. What if she isn’t worthy of the Change?”

She saw anger flare up in his eyes. “Of course she’s worthy! I have no doubt of it! You wouldn’t know, Mother; you haven’t watched her as I have. All you see is her beauty, but she is so much more than that.”
Then Lilith saw her chance. “I just ask that you test her before you make the decision, Son. Surely if she is as worthy as you say she is, she will pass easily and no harm will be done.”

She could see that he would agree; he wanted this mortal so desperately. “How would she be tested?”

“The test is simple, Son.”

Helena had been surprised when her father had called her into his study several days before to inform her that the time had come for her to choose a husband. After all, she was eighteen already and most young women were already happily married by that age. Despite her protests that she would rather not, her father insisted that she should pick her husband in the next month, or he would pick for her.

When he called her back to his study less than a week later, she had been even more surprised. Her surprise had quickly given way to horror and a deep, abiding sadness. Her father had informed her that he had taken the decision from her hands: that an offer too good to pass up had come along and he could not deny the suitor. She was to be married at sunset that night.

So she sat, waiting for the sun to set. She was left alone atop the cliffs overlooking the sea at the western edge of her home. She shivered as the cold, salty air reached her and she wished, desperately, that whatever was going to happen would just happen for she feared the waiting would end her.

Helena wrapped her arms about herself, trying to warm herself despite the chilly air. The dress she’d been abandoned in was less than helpful. And as suddenly as she had begun shivering, she felt the wind shift. Blowing toward the sea and bringing an amazing warmth against her back. It was, she imagined, the heat of the sun behind her, even as she watched it set before her.

“Close your eyes, love,” she heard a deep voice behind her whisper. She spun around quickly to see who had spoken, yet she saw no one. She could not rightly determine where the voice had come from. It had seemed to surround her from all directions at once, and lay heavy against her skin, making her feel warm through and through, reminding her of smoke.

“Please, you must trust me and do as I ask,” the voice said.

“And why should I trust you when I cannot see you? How do I even know you are the one I am to be meeting?” she asked cautiously. While she wanted to believe this voice, to trust in its warmth and let it surround her, she knew better. She was far smarter than that.

“Helena, if you can trust me now, all will be explained in time. Now please, love, just close your eyes and I shall take you home.” Perhaps it was the way he—for a voice that deep must belong to a man—said her name, or perhaps she was simply tired, but for whatever reason, Helena closed her eyes.
“Good. Now, no matter what happens, I ask that you not open your eyes until I tell you. I promise you, the reward is worth the risk. Can you do this for me?” Keeping her eyes closed, Helena nodded.

“Good,” the voice whispered. “Now, I need you to step off the edge of the cliff. I promise, my love, that I will allow no harm to come to you. But this is the only way to our new home.”

Helena hesitated for a moment, knowing that she should refuse such an insane request. Yet there was something in the voice, something she trusted. Before she could rethink her decision, she took a deep breath and allowed herself to step forward into the oblivion before her.

She braced herself for an impact that never came.

It seemed, to Helena, that she had hardly taken her leap of faith, when suddenly her feet were back on solid ground.

“Helena, you can open your eyes now. We’re home.” Home. She liked the sound of it. She opened her eyes slowly, not knowing what to expect. She certainly didn’t expect the all encompassing darkness that surrounded her. She was inside, she could tell, but where she couldn’t say.

“Please, might we turn on a light? I would like to see you,” she asked the voice. She’d no idea what to address him by. Technically, while there had been no ceremony, she knew he was her husband.

“I’m afraid not. You see, the lights within the castle are connected with the sun and as the sun has set, the lights have gone out. There is nothing to be done. And my name, love, is Alden.”

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She was here, in his home. Finally. It seemed as if he had been waiting for this moment his entire life. While she could not see him in the dark, he could see her just fine, as if it were high noon and not midnight. She was even more beautiful in front of him than she had been in the viewing pools, if that were even possible.

He could hardly speak. He was, he found, nervous. He was actually nervous! He hadn’t felt this way for—well, centuries! It was an odd feeling, to suddenly find himself feeling young and inexperienced when he was anything but. But surely he must be making his bride uncomfortable by his silence.

He took a deep breath, gathering himself as much as he could before speaking. “I know that you cannot see anything, but we are in what is to be our bedroom. Tomorrow you may explore, nothing is restricted to you, for this is to be your home, after all. The only true rule is you must be back to the room before dark, else you could be lost. It is for your own safety. Can you promise me this, Helena?”

He heard her take a breath before replying, “I can, Aiden.” Her voice washed over him, slow and sweet. If he were to make a comparison, he’d liken it to honey. It made his heart beat faster.
Without another word, he led her slowly to the bed behind her, knowing what must occur that night. There were no words left to be spoken between them. Again, he felt the nerves rise within his chest and it seemed his heart was full to bursting.

Who was he? Where had the man he’d once been gone? And who—what—was this creature that replaced him? What was it that made him stumble over his words? What made his palms sweat and his tongue feel heavy in his mouth? Was this love? Was this what love did to a man?

He thought, perhaps, that he liked it. Quite a lot.

Helena listened to Aiden’s—her husband’s—heavy breathing beside her in the dark. He was asleep, she knew. She wanted to fall into the peace that deep sleep seemed to have brought him, and yet she couldn’t. His arm, warm and heavy, lay across her middle and she felt his hot breath on her neck where he’d burrowed his face as he slept.

Everything about him radiated warmth. His touch was like fire, and yet she knew there were no burns upon her body. She wished desperately to see him, this man who seemed to her to be made of pure fire. She knew that sunrise would be coming soon, and with it her first chance to see her husband.

Helena tried, in vain, to keep her eyes from closing. Yet, the closer the sunrise drew, the heavier her eyes became, until finally she fell into a fitful sleep.

She was awakened by the bright sunlight streaming down onto her face. The first thing she noticed was the chill that seemed to have crept into her bones. She was alone in the bed, Aiden and his warmth gone. She was disappointed at his absence, but thought nothing of it. Surely he had something important to do. She looked over to where he had lain the night before and found in his place, a note.

Helena,

I meant what I said last night. The house is yours to explore as you see fit. I highly suggest the library two floors down. I believe you shall enjoy it. Please remember to be back in this room by nightfall. I shall return to you then.

Aiden

While she wished he had remained behind to help her in her exploration, she was admittedly excited at the prospect of a library—her own library. With that thought in mind, she quickly dressed and left the room.
Helena was entranced. It was the only word to describe how she felt—entranced. Walking into the library had been like walking into her own version of Paradise. It contained more books than even she had ever imagined. All that knowledge at her fingertips; the very thought sent shivers down her spine.

Even though her thoughts had been preoccupied by the library, she had paid attention to the house as she’d moved through it to reach this—sanctuary. If house was even the correct word for the vast building. It was more of a castle really. It certainly reminded her of the castles she’d read about in some of her favorite story books. The whole thing was very ornate, yet it seemed to be, very over bearing and dark. She had felt that someone had been watching her the entire time, and yet she could see no one. It was very disturbing.

The feeling of being watched had only intensified as she had entered the library. Now as she looked around, she saw no one. At least no one human. She was surprised to see a strange looking bird perched atop the back of a very comfortable looking arm chair. The bird was a vivid, dark shade of red with patches of brighter red, orange and yellow. It turned its gaze upon her and Helena was startled to see its' eyes were a deep shade of gold. Its stare was nearly hypnotic, and she’d had to work very hard to tear her gaze away.

“Are you a phoenix?” she asked before she could stop herself. She felt rather silly, speaking to a bird like that. The bird, however, bobbed its head. She was surprised and it must have shown on her face for she could swear the bird began to laugh. It was impossible! How could a creature from her fantasy books really exist? Yet here it sat before her.

Deciding that perhaps it was better not to think of such things, she instead began searching the many shelves for books that caught her interest. To her surprise and excitement, she found an entire section on magic. Perhaps she could finally learn more about the strangeness she possessed. She took several of the books back with her to the chair where the phoenix sat and curled up, set to read for the rest of the day.

She was nearly half-way through the second book when she heard his voice. “What are you reading about love?”

She looked up, searching for Aiden, but not finding him anywhere around her. “Aiden? Where are you?”

She heard him laugh. “I’m not in the room, so you can stop looking about. You didn’t answer my question.”

“If you aren’t in the room, how do you know I’m looking around? And if you aren’t in the room, how are you speaking to me?” she asked suspiciously. She heard him laugh once again.

“You are a clever one, aren’t you?” She didn’t really like how amused he sounded and yet she found that his laughter, his voice, gave her a pleasant shiver down her spine. “I’ve ways of speaking to
you, no matter where I am. I will explain it to you one day, I promise. Now, what are you reading about?"

“You are persistent, aren’t you?” she mocked him, before finally answering. “Magic. I’m reading about magic.”

His laughter stopped at her answer. He was silent for a long moment, and she feared that she’d offended him as she had her family so many years ago. Before she could apologize, however, he spoke again. “Do you believe in magic, Helena? Not many today do.”

She swallowed and answered. “I do believe.” Before she could stop herself, she’d spilled the whole story to him. There was something about him that made her lose all sense. It was as if she couldn’t possibly not tell him. She fell silent at the end, worried that she’d truly scared him off. Surely he wouldn’t want a freak like her.

She was surprised by his answer. “Well, you won’t learn anything from those books. If you truly want to learn, I will teach you. We can start tomorrow if you’d like. You should relax today, enjoy your new home.”

She was thrilled by his offer and instantly agreed. It was, much like this library, a dream come true. How could her life have changed so greatly in the last day? She’d been so upset by her father’s decision, yet it was turning out to be the best thing that had ever happened to her. Smiling at her good fortune, she returned to the shelves to choose a new book. Something romantic perhaps, certainly something happy. She returned with her book and curled up in the chair, knowing she still had a few hours until night fall.

She had kept her word and returned to their room before nightfall. Aiden was not there when she entered, but once the room was shrouded in darkness, he returned. The night proceeded much like the one before it and when Helena awoke in the morning light, Aiden was, once again, gone.

Their first weeks as a married couple passed in much the same way. Every morning, she’d awaken to find her husband gone, with a note for her remaining behind in his place. Helena would then make her way to the library where the phoenix waited for her. Aiden, true to his promise, began to teach her of magic, which she had taken to almost instantly. Just before nightfall, she’d return to their bed and as soon as the sun had set Aiden would join her. She had yet to see her husband.

It was nearly a month after their marriage that she asked him the question he’d been dreading. He had thought about the situation hundreds of times, yet when it finally became a reality, he’d no idea how to reply.
“Aiden? Why is it that I’ve been here so long and yet I’ve never seen you? Is there something wrong, something you’re not telling me?” He could hear the sadness, the doubt in her voice. She likely thought that the problem was with her when nothing could be farther from the truth.

“There is much I haven’t told you, love,” he admitted. “And much I still cannot tell you. I will answer your question the best that I can at this time.” He knew she wouldn’t be pleased with that answer. He had learned much about his wife in the short time they’d been married and he knew she was curious to a fault. But for her to pass his Mother’s test, she couldn’t be completely aware of the test itself.

“Do you not want me to see you? Is that the problem, or is it something else entirely? Why are there things you can’t tell me?” When he did not answer, she laughed, trying to lighten the mood as she asked, “You only seem to come out in the dark. Are you a vampire?”

He laughed, yet there was no real humor in it. “No, Helena, vampires aren’t real. Besides, what I am is much worse than a vampire. Vampires at least would not be living, and couldn’t live forever. I am a monster that will never—can never—die. One of the many reasons you have yet to see me, is that I do not want you to see me for the monster I truly am and realize that you would be better off without me.”

“You cannot die? Does that make you a god?” she asked. She was so innocent, knowing nothing about what he was.

“No, not a god. Far from it, in fact. Please, I promise that soon you shall see me, though I do fear you’ll regret it. I promise that soon you’ll understand everything, if you can just be patient.”

“This is some kind of test, isn’t it?” She was so intelligent. When he did not answer she knew she was right. “Alright, I’ll be as patient as I can be. I won’t ask again. But know this, Aiden: I will not leave you. Ever. And nothing—noting—can change my mind. Do you understand?”

She was desperate for him to understand, to know that even though she’d yet to say the words, she loved him. She waited in silence until he finally replied, “I understand, love. And please know, I will not willingly leave you. Please remember it. Now, we should stop speaking of such serious things.”

She understood his need to change the subject. She’d learned much about her husband since the first night, though he rarely spoke of himself. She’d found that he seemed to want nothing more than to please her, to keep her happy and comfortable. Quietly, she asked, “Aiden? Would you read to me please?”

It was a request she’d made many times, and one he’d never refused. He knew that she loved his voice because she’d told him many times. He watched her drift off to sleep as he read from one of her favorite books. Just a little longer, he promised her silently. Just a little longer and nothing would tear them apart and their life together could truly begin.

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Lilith watched the scene in the pool before her with disgust. Her Son, in his True Form, was reading to his little wife as she slept in the chair beneath him. She’d watched similar scenes for the last two months. She couldn’t believe that little mortal girl had already made it so long without seeing her Son. She had thought her plan would be foolproof.

Clearly she had underestimated the mortal. She would have to work harder, interfere a little more than she had originally thought necessary. Lilith knew there was still a month left in the test. Surely she could break her in that time. The question was how.

Perhaps a little visit into the dreams of Helena’s sisters was in order. Her Son knew nothing of this power she possessed. She knew the mortal was missing her family and she also knew the other sisters were envious and...susceptible to suggestions. Yes, that plan would work just fine. She’d have the little mortal girl thrown out of her Son’s life in less than a week. And then life could go back to the way it was meant to be.

Helena was lonely. It had been nearly three months since she had last seen her family and she missed them dearly. Oh she loved Aiden and his company, if it could be called that, but she was used to having more people around her than just her husband and the phoenix.

She hadn’t wanted to mention it, not wanting him to think she was tired of him, but Aiden recognized that something was wrong. When she finally broke down one evening in their room and told him the source of her troubles, he simply laughed and told her that arranging a visit for during the day was simple.

So she planned to return to her home to spend an entire day with her sisters and father. The night before her departure, Aiden had given her a pendant that he said would bring her home when she was ready. She need only clasp it in her hand, close her eyes, think of him, and take that step off the cliff, just the same as she had the night she had first arrived in their home.

She was pleased to see that the sun was shining when she arrived at her old home. As much as she loved the castle that was their home, it was rather dark and there were very few windows and she had found she missed the outdoors. Helena ran to her old house, throwing open the doors and calling out for her father, looking forward to telling him just how happy she was with his decision.

They had thought they’d seen the last of her when she left to meet her mysterious husband. But of course they couldn’t be that lucky. And now their perfect little sister had returned to brag about her perfect new life with her perfect new husband. And now she spoke of magic!

Emma and Clara couldn’t believe it. Their father had told her not to speak of magic when she was younger. Surely Helena had learned how magic had figured in their mother’s death and yet she was
still arrogant enough to fool around with it! And to hear her speak of her new home! It was unfair! What had she done in her life to garner such a wonderful marriage and home while they were left with next to nothing?

Helena worried about telling her sisters of Aiden and the mystery around him. But when they'd asked after his looks, she'd finally admitted that she'd never seen him before. This shocked her sisters and secretly delighted them.

“Oh Helena, what if he’s some great monster? Surely it can’t be safe for you!” Emma declared.

“No, Emma, he’s a man. I’m sure I would know if a monster were lying beside me at night! And I’m quite certain a monster would have eaten me by now! Really, you’re just being dramatic! It’s not that big of a problem. Aiden has promised that everything will be explained to me in good time, and I trust him.”

Clara rolled her eyes at perfect Helena’s faith in her husband. “Oh, but Helena, what if he’s a hideous old man? Surely that would be just as bad as a monster!”

Helena was offended at her sister’s implication. “I couldn’t care less if he were hideous! I love him and that is all that matters. And he’s not an old man! He’s very young and handsome, I can tell. As he’s slept I felt his face, and it is smooth and young. And his voice is young and his body strong. And he’s so warm; I often think he’s made of fire. No, I needn’t see him to know that he’s no monster or old man.”

But her sisters kept insisting that surely someone as curious as she was must be tempted to look. And surely someone as clever as she could come up with a way to do so. Just to make sure she was correct.

It was these thoughts that were swimming through her head when her sisters accompanied her back to the cliffs to return home. Stepping away from them to the edge, Helena clasped her pendant and closed her eyes. Her thoughts drifted easily to Aiden: his voice, his warmth, his lovely sense of humor, and especially their wonderful days spent in the library.

Her sisters watched as, with a smile on her face, Helena stepped off the cliff into nothingness. When they ran to the edge to see what had happened, they found that she had disappeared.

While Aiden was glad that she had enjoyed her visit with her family, he was even happier that Helena had returned home. He was surprised how much he had missed her in the short time she’d been gone. He knew that he would be lost without her in his life. He could only hope that, when the test was over in two weeks, she would not reject him.
Helena lasted another three days before her curiosity became too much for her. She knew that she trusted Aiden, but she simply couldn’t wait any longer to see him. Surely she could take just one little peek while he slept. It couldn’t possibly hurt anything, and he’d never know.

She finally worked her nerve up a couple hours after midnight. Quietly, she sat up in bed and turned to where Aiden lay. She held her hand out in front of her and whispered “Lux lucis,” and a small sphere of light welled up in her hand. She smiled when the spell worked for her, always pleased when she was successful. With much anticipation, she turned the light to see her husband.

He was beautiful. He was lithe, much as she had expected, with corded muscles beneath his golden skin. And his skin, she’d swear it was glowing! How had it not illuminated their dark bedroom? She moved her eyes to his face. He had dark red hair that seemed to be streaked with shades of lighter red, orange and a yellow-gold. His face was so relaxed in his sleep; he looked so peaceful and so young. Not at all like the monster he seemed to insist that he was. She suddenly felt guilty for betraying his trust and looking, yet she couldn’t stop herself from drinking in the sight of him once more.

She moved the light closer to take her last look. She decided that his eyes were his most interesting feature, for they were a peculiar shade of gold. It was then that she realized his eyes were open!

“I suppose you just couldn’t help yourself, could you, love?” Aiden asked quietly, sadly.

“Well, no I couldn’t but I don’t understand, Aiden. Why am I not allowed to see you? Why is it a problem that I’ve looked?” Helena was confused. He looked heartbroken at her actions.

“It’s a long story, and I’ve not much time to tell it. No one can enter or leave this castle until dawn, but at sunrise I shall have to return to my Mother and you shall have to leave.”

“You—you’re leaving me? But why? I don’t understand!” She was very near tears at the prospect of being separated from him.

“Hush, love, please. I cannot stand it if you cry, please, I’ll find a way around this, I promise! You see, my Mother was dead set against me marrying a mortal, so she proposed a test, to see if you were worthy of being my wife and accepting the Change. She said that if you could obey my order and not look upon for the first three months of our marriage, then you were truly trustworthy enough to endure the Change.”

“The Change? What is that? You’ve said you aren’t mortal, aren’t human, and yet you’ve never told me what you are.” But as she looked at him closely, she realized that his coloring and his eyes resembled... “You’re the phoenix! The one in the library! But how?”

He smiled then, and it was a lovely smile. “I am the phoenix. That is how I was able to see you and speak to you in the library. The bird is my True Form. We all have one, but they are all different. As to what I am it is hard to explain. We are Shape-Shifters, but most of us were not born, but made that
way by undergoing the Change. Each Change is different. And when the time comes, if you are willing, I will Change you and allow you to become like me, so that we can remain together.”

Helena began to cry again at his words. “But how can we be together? I’ve failed the test. Your mother’s right and I’m not worthy of you or the Change!”

Aiden held her close, trying to calm her. “We don’t have long. Please don’t cry. I shall find a way for us to remain together. Just remember what I told you: I shall never willingly be parted from you. Just remember that, Helena.”

And as she saw the sun begin to rise through the small window, Helena cried out as Aiden began to change to his True Form, and yet even as she tried to remain awake, she felt herself falling asleep once again.

Lilith was quite pleased with the way her planning had turned out. When the dawn had come, her Son had returned to her. She knew the little mortal girl would fail. She’d expected her Son to speak to her, to tell her that she’d been right all along and the girl wasn’t worthy of him. Yet he said nothing. He simply moved into the viewing room, much as he had before his little foray into married life, and gazed into a viewing pool, watching the mortal as she lay upon the cliffs near her home.

She was a bit surprised at how despondent her son was, and yet she knew that, given time, he would move on, the girl would die and he would continue living. It had happened to others before him, and it would happen to others after him. What he thought was terrible now would fade in his mind until eventually it would be forgotten.

She was sure that would happen. After all, her interference was for the best.

Helena awoke in the sunlight, lying alone on the cliffs on the western edge of her old home. She blinked momentarily in confusion, before the events of the previous night came back to her and she began to sob. How could she have been so stupid? Why had she let her sisters’ words affect her? She’d behaved foolishly and now she’d lost Aiden forever.

After what seemed to be an eternity, Helena finally pulled herself together. Aiden had said he’d find a way for them to be together; certainly she could try to find a way as well. The first thing she needed to do was return to her father’s house. She couldn’t sleep on the cliffs forever. Then she needed to figure out where Aiden was and how to get to him. She would find a way to handle his mother after they were reunited.

She wouldn’t give up. She couldn’t give up.
The day had finally come and Emma and Clara could not have enjoyed it more! Perfect Helena had returned in tears, saying nothing more than that her husband had left her! And they saw it! It was like a dream come true! And the best part was that she had indicated that the castle she’d been living in was now abandoned. Certainly they deserved to live in it. Surely they finally deserved something good in their lives.

It was nearly a week after Helena’s arrival that they decided to try to reach the castle. They remember how Helena had returned after her visit weeks before. And so, at sunset, the two sisters clasped hands and stepped off the cliff.

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Helena wasn’t sure what had happened. Her only guess was that her greedy sisters had decided to try and find the castle she and Aiden shared. She pitied them, really.

But the tragedy had given her a way to reach Aiden again. She knew, somehow, that if she tried to reach the castle by leaping from the cliffs, Aiden would find a way to make sure she was safe. She looked down at the pendant she wore, examining it closely for the first time since Aiden had given it to her. It was a rather simple gold disc with the words “leap of faith” inscribed upon it.

Two days after her sisters had made the jump, Helena stood, at sunset, by the cliffs. She clasped the pendant tightly in her hand and closed her eyes. She turned her thoughts once again to Aiden. She had thought of little else since the day they’d been parted.

With her mind focused only on Aiden and their love, Helena took a deep breath, and leapt.

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When she opened her eyes, she didn’t see the castle as she’d expected, nor did she see Aiden. Instead she found herself in a darkened field. The moon was full and yet it seemed to cast little light. Helena sat up, searching for Aiden, assuming that he had managed to transport her to this place—wherever it was.

But instead of Aiden, Helena saw standing behind her the most beautiful woman she’d ever seen. She looked much like the descriptions of the goddesses of old that Helena had read about in her books. She was tall and slender with long black curls and impossibly dark eyes.

“That was a foolish trick, little mortal,” the woman said. “You caused my Son quite a bit of distress. Why can’t you just accept that you’ve lost and let go of your hold over him?”

“You’re Aiden’s mother? So it’s your fault that we’re going through all this! All because of your silly little test!”

The woman laughed, rather condescendingly. “My fault? It never would have happened if you hadn’t given into the temptation! I knew you weren’t worthy of my Son and you proved it!”
Angry, Helena replied, “Well, it was hardly a fair test! I didn’t even know about it! How does failing a test I didn’t realize I was taking until it was over prove I’m not worthy of Aiden? And why does it matter if I’m “worthy” at all? I love Aiden and he loves me! That’s all that should matter!”

Lilith glared at the girl. “It wouldn’t matter how prepared you were, you would still fail any test I set before you. And what do you know of love? You’re nothing but a child! Aiden will forget about his silly little infatuation in a few years.”

“Give me another test then!” Helena cried. “I’ll prove to you that I’m worthy!”

Lilith pondered this for a moment, before replying, “Fine. If you want another test, then I shall give you another test, many more tests until I deem you worthy. If you succeed to my satisfaction, I will reunite you with my Son. Should you fail to meet my expectations, however, you will agree to move along and find a more appropriate mortal husband.”

Helena knew that, somehow, there must be a trick involved. This woman had seemed determined to do whatever it took to keep her from Aiden. However, seeing no other option, Helena agreed to the challenge.

Lilith smiled, knowing that the girl was falling into her trap. “Very well then. Your first task shall begin at sunrise. I suggest you get some rest.” And before Helena’s eyes, Lilith changed into her own True Form. While she, like Aiden, was a creature of fire, she was no phoenix.

Helena watched as the giant black dragon took off into the night sky.

Helena awoke just past dawn to find herself surrounded by a sea of small, multi-colored crystal beads. Beside her were several baskets and a note from Aiden’s mother.

Mortal,

Your first task is to separate these beads and place them into the baskets. I will return at sunset to see if you were able to complete your task.

Lilith

She was quite worried. There had to be thousands upon thousands of beads before her! Surely she couldn’t separate them by hand it would take weeks. Before she could work herself into a panic, Helena reached up to clasp the pendant around her neck, and, by force of habit, closed her eyes and thought of Aiden. She remembered his voice, his warm, strong arms, and spending days in the library with his True Form as he taught her magic.
And as she remembered his teachings, she allowed herself to focus on one particular lesson. One day, she’d asked him about how the books in the library were sorted and how they returned to their shelves each night when they were gone. Aiden had taught her a spell that allowed her to sort like items and call misplaced ones back to their group.

Helena dug into the beads closest to her and selected one of each color. With a smile, she began her spells.

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Aiden watched, smiling, as his clever wife foiled his Mother’s test. He knew his Mother had underestimated Helena, and he told her as much.

Lilith was furious. Where had that mortal learned such complex magic? She should be incapable of such things! But of course, her Son must have taught her. She turned away from watching the girl continue with her spell. Her next task would have to be more difficult then. She couldn’t let the mortal girl win.

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It took Helena a few hours to properly finish sorting the beads, but it was still much quicker than sorting them by hand. And almost as soon as she had finished, Lilith appeared in a puff of smoke. With a wave of her hand the baskets of beads disappeared as if they had never been there at all. Helena was disappointed to see the fruits of her hard work banished as if they were nothing, yet she knew that they had served no purpose but to cause her grief.

"Your second task will not be as simple as your first, mortal. I require a specific flower for a potion to calm my Son after his grief at your betrayal." After these words, an image of a very distinct looking flower appeared in Helena’s mind, letting her know exactly what she was looking for. “You’ll find it atop the mountain just west of this field. You must fetch it by sunrise or you shall fail. I suggest you hurry, as it’s a rather long walk.”

Lilith turned to leave but called over her shoulder, “Oh, by the way, dear, no magic. The flower will lose its powers if gathered by magic. It can only be handpicked.”

And then a great black dragon rose into the sky once again.

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It was nearly nightfall when Helena finally reached the mountain top. She was exhausted, mentally, physically, and certainly emotionally. The last few weeks had been draining, and yet, she knew that if she could just hang on, she’d be with Aiden again. And that was worth all the trouble in the world.
As she stopped, sitting on a large rock to catch her breath and decide what she should do next, she heard a strange noise that sent tremors of fear down her spine. She quickly crouched low behind the rock, hoping to protect herself from whatever horrible creature was making the noise. She waited, but a creature never appeared. Deciding that she should start, carefully, looking for her flower, she crept out from behind the rock and headed up the sloping path that led further to the peak. She had not walked far before she stopped, frozen in her place. What she saw made her want to scream with terror.

Hellhounds! There were several of the great, black, dog-like creatures circled around a single blossoming plant that was, of course, the flower she was seeking. Hellhounds were guarding the flower. Her impossible task had just become that much harder.

She had read about hellhounds, before she’d gone to live with Aiden in the castle. She’d read of them in a book she’d found in the university library. Their presence explained the noise she’d heard earlier. They were horrid looking creatures. She could very nearly feel the evil that rolled off of them. She closed her eyes, her hand automatically grasping the pendant about her neck as she had been in the habit of doing.

Music! She could remember it clearly now. Music would send them straight to sleep so that she could walk through them and retrieve the flower. But she had no way to make music, no spell to get her out of the mess. She wished that Aiden was there with her. Surely he knew the spell she needed. After all, he’d taught her every spell she knew. But without the flower, she’d never see Aiden again.

What happened then, she’d never be able to quite explain.

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"Hellhounds, Mother? You sent her to hellhounds? Really, this is extreme, even for you.” Aiden had never been so furious in his life. Helena had no way to protect herself from the beasts. They would certainly cause her death. “Isn’t it bad enough that you want to keep us apart? You have to send her to her death as well? I thought the rule was to harm no mortals! How could you?"

“I won’t let them kill her, Aiden. Besides, I expect she’ll give up in a few moments anyway.”

But Aiden wasn’t listening. He could feel Helena calling him, holding the pendant and thinking of him. He had to help her. He couldn’t leave her to deal with this problem on her own. He closed his eyes and changed to his True Form. And then he began to sing.

He watched in the viewing pool as the hellhounds began to settle down and fall asleep. He watched his wife gaze around in amazement before carefully, slowly moving forward and plucking the flower from where it grew. She then scrambled down the mountain side quickly so that she could be far away from the hellhounds when they awoke.

Transforming back, Aiden smiled at his wife and whispered, “Well done, love.”
“Well done, love.”

She heard the whisper and looked around, thinking that Aiden was beside her. But of course, he wasn’t. But hearing his voice, even briefly, let her know that, somehow, he was watching her and hoping she’d succeed.

It was just before sunrise when she returned to the field to find Lilith waiting for her. With a small amount of pride, she presented the woman with the flower she’d gone to such extremes for, feeling a little pleased when it was snatched spitefully out of her hand.

Helena hoped that the woman would give her time before setting her next test, for it had been quite awhile since she’d rested, but she was not that lucky. “Well, now that you have finally returned, I need you to fetch something else for me. This entire situation has been quite hard on me and I’ve used up quite a bit of my power trying to console my Son. To the north lies a great forest. In the center of the forest, you will find a cottage where an old friend of mine lives. She will give you a box that will contain something to refresh me. Should you bring the box to me, I will consider allowing you to have some contact with Aiden.” And with that she was gone.

With a sigh, Helena turned north, dreading another long journey.

Helena was exhausted when she finally reached the edge of the great forest. She looked up to see that the sun was high in the sky. It was likely midday. She walked into the dense trees and it was as if she had walked into a dark room. She could hardly see the trees before her. She held out her hand and with a wry smile whispered “Lux Iuds,” and once again her upturned palm was filled with light, illuminating the area just before her. It wasn’t much, but it would get her through the trees.

Slowly, trying hard to keep an eye out for animals or other creatures, Helena made her way towards what she assumed to be the center of the forest. It took her some time to realize that the forest was silent. It was eerie. There should be some sort of sound. Birds, the wind, something should be making noise! The silence was over bearing.

She had no sense of time as she moved through the forest. Without the sun, she could not tell what time of day it was. She felt as if she had been wandering the forest for hours. She wasn’t even sure she was traveling towards the center anymore. Just when she was ready to fall down in exhaustion, she heard something. It sounded like a woman. Whoever it was was singing something beautiful in a language that Helena didn’t understand. Helena hoped that this was the woman she was searching for.

Helena was surprised when she stepped out of the trees and into a clearing. There in the center sat a quaint cottage with a large rose garden. And there, in the middle of the roses stood an old woman.
She looked, Helena thought, just like the way witches and hags were described in her books. She was stooped over low, working in her garden, but just when Helena was about to call out to her, she shot up and stared straight at her. The old woman’s eyes were a peculiar shade of violet, like nothing Helena had ever seen before. She seemed to be reading Helena.

“You’re little Aiden’s wife, aren’t you? Lilith told me she’d be sending you to me. Come into my home and I shall retrieve Lilith’s package.” Without waiting for an answer, the old woman turned and walked into the cottage. Helena quickly followed her. Once inside, the woman indicated for her to take a seat at her kitchen table. On the table lay a veritable feast. It was then that Helena realized just how hungry she was. She wanted nothing more than to eat and have a long nap.

The old woman saw her longing stare and said, “Dear, do feel free to help yourself to some food. You’re looking rather peckish.” With permission given, Helena reached out her hand for an apple, when she heard a whisper in her ear.

“Don’t eat anything, love. The consequences would be dire. You mustn’t eat anything.”

Realizing that the woman was watching her closely, Helena said, “No thank you, madam. I am not hungry. I simply wish to return home as soon as possible.”

“Well, you’re rather clever aren’t you, dear? Most nearly everyone takes a bite. Had you eaten, you’d have never been allowed to leave here. Now,” the woman handed Helena a medium sized dark wooden chest. “Here is what Lilith requested. I certainly hope that you are able to meet her challenges, my dear. I believe you are good for Aiden. Now, come into my garden, I have a gift for you.”

The two of them walked out into the beautiful rose garden. Once there, the woman stooped to pick a rose. She whispered a charm that Helena didn’t understand, and then handed the flower to her. “This will help you find your way out of the forest once again. Now, you’d best be on your way.”

With the help of the charmed rose, Helena managed to make her way back to the edge of the forest. She was surprised to find that it was once again midday. Surely it hadn’t taken her a full day to reach the cottage! Perhaps the magic of the forest had made it so that no time had passed.

Once again, Helena realized just how tired she was. She’d need more energy to make it back to the field once more. She looked at the wooden chest she held in her arms. Lilith had said that it contained a bit of power, to help revive her. Surely it wouldn’t hurt for Helena to borrow some. Just enough to help her complete the rest of her journey. Her decision made, Helena sat down and opened the box.

Blackness rolled over her and she fell into a deep sleep.
She awoke once again in the bed she had shared with Aiden. For the first time, their room was well lit, even though a glance out the window showed it was night.

“You really have trouble with temptation, don’t you, love?” She turned her head to see Aiden sitting beside her, smiling.

She wanted to fling her arms about him, but said, “I can’t help it if I’m naturally curious.” He laughed and it shot straight to her heart. “Are you real? I don’t think I could survive if this is just another dream.”

Aiden smiled, and then gathered her into his arms, pressing a kiss to her lips. “Does it feel real?”

She smiled for the first time in what felt like ages. “Very real. But how? I never returned that box to your mother! I didn’t pass her test!”

“Let’s just say that someone with more power than Mother decided you were worthy enough and put a stop to her meddling. She’ll leave us be for quite a while. She hates to be proven wrong.” Aiden smiled at her once again, pulling her closer. “But she doesn’t matter anymore. We’re together again, and this time nothing shall separate us.”

Helena smiled and nestled her head into his chest. “We’ll have eternity, but even that doesn’t seem long enough to me.”

Aiden pulled away to look at her closely. “Are you sure? We can wait if you’re not ready for the Change.”

Helena shook her head. “I’m ready. Eternity with you cannot start soon enough.”

He pulled her close once more and said, “Don’t worry, love. It’s scary at first, but I’m here. I promise that it is worth it in the end.”

Holding her close, Aiden began to change, burning like fire into his True Form. He watched as the flame from him began to surround his love. She began to glow as the fire settled beneath her skin, becoming a part of her, just as it was a part of him. He watched as it filled her, her skin, her eyes, her heart.

He held her close, knowing that it was worth it. Eternity awaited them.

And together, they burned.
Perfection

Dr. David Scott sat monitoring the controls of the Myrrh 6100 in front of him. It had taken well over a decade and many failures, but finally in the span of a few short days, Dr. Scott would see a successful end to Project Cypress. He was the only original member of the team to remain behind, the others having left as the toll of their continued failures, as well as the ever suffocating weight of what the Project entails.

There were five of them, he could recall, himself included. Alex Harrington had been the first to leave. After the twenty-seventh failure in a row he could not take another try. He had been replaced, several times over as the subsequent doctors had also succumbed to the pressure and left. Alice Taylor had been the next to leave. They’d all tried to ignore the reasons for her departure, and yet, David could still remember that mad look in her eyes as she had tried, and partly succeeded, to smash the machine that contained the experiment. They had been stalled for half a year while the replacement had been installed. Back then, of course, they’d only been running a Myrrh 2500. David had become used to the ever changing rotation of the doctors on his team after the first three years. Not everyone was cut out for their line of work.

His eyes were drawn once again to the tank before him, filled well to the brim with Human Growth Serum, a still fairly new invention that had revitalized Project Cypress. He could not stop himself from rechecking the vitals displayed on the monitor every few minutes. Things were going so well. But things had gone just as well in the past only to lead to failure. But they had learned from all the mistakes. All of the other trials had been too young. Those subjects that had survived the incubation had not survived the “birthing process.” Extreme trauma had caused the young bodies to break down. And until the discovery of the Human Growth Serum, it had been impossible to run a longer incubation with an older specimen. But this trial was sure to be a success. The stars were finally aligning for the success of Project Cypress.

Not far from the lab where Dr. David Scott sat monitoring the final steps of his project, two women sat upon an outcropping of rocks, staring out into the sea before them. The sponsors of Project Cypress, as well as other similar projects, had built the facilities on a private island where the “products” of the experiments could be free to roam, while still being surveyed by the many fellows involved in the projects.

The two women in question were both “products” of separate projects, Project Venus and Project Kore. Evelyn had been badly scarred in an accident that had taken both her husband and her young daughter away from her. She had been approached by someone involved with the project, offering her a new life, freeing her from her scars, if she were willing to remain on the island indefinitely. That had been nearly five years ago and all the physical evidence from her accident was gone, as promised. Of course, had she realized all those years ago what would be involved in removing the scars, she would have refused.
Kerri, one of many “products” of Project Kore, had thought she was signing up for a clinical trial, like so many others. They had been able to completely eliminate all of her Parkinson’s symptoms, as promised, but she had not been able to return to the normal life she’d thought she’d be living. She’d been on the island since nearly the beginning. Project Kore was the first project to have “specimens” that needed observation.

The two women, like nearly everyone on the island, were thinking of the impending completion of Project Cypress. Project Venus had been focused on physical appearances, Project Kore on genetic diseases, and there were still many other projects that dealt with intelligence, physical ability, anything that could be controlled or changed genetically, all of which were being utilized for Project Cypress, the capstone project on the island. Project Cypress was the reason the island, and therefore they, existed.

It was Kerri who dared to speak first. “What do you think they shall do with us once Project Cypress is complete?”

Evelyn sighed. “I imagine we shall remain on this island forever. Perhaps they will cease the lab work, even abandon the facilities, but they will never allow us to leave.” She didn’t dare voice the other likely option, that should the project finally be abandoned, they would all be put to death, “sacrificed for the good of research,” like the lab rats they’d become.

She heard Kerri shifting her position on the rocks, turning to look at her, she was sure, but Evelyn never removed her gaze from the ocean. “Do you ever regret signing onto the project?” It was a question the “specimens” asked of each other often.

Evelyn had never really answered before, choosing to keep her thoughts private. But on this day she was feeling particularly alone and introspective, and instead of her normal refusal, replied, “I am of two minds over my situation. There is a part of me that knows that if I had remained out there in the real world, I would not have remained alive much longer. I had lost everything that had ever had meaning in my life in the span of a few seconds. I had nothing left to lose, nothing to live for when they approached me about the project. And they were promising me a new life and the removal of the physical reminders of my loss. I had to accept. And that part of me can never regret my decision. But there remains a part of me that vehemently regrets joining, knowing that death in the real world would have been better than the farce of a life I am living here.”

Kerri had no reply. She instead turned her piercing gaze back to the waves before them, leaving Evelyn mercifully alone with her own thoughts. She certainly didn’t need any more of Kerri’s questions, whose answer only led to more confusion.

**********************************

It’s not too late to end it. Nothing that perfect should exist, David, you know that. Destroy it now.
He was used to the voices by now. They had appeared sometime over the last two years of the project. Always there, always whispering, telling him to end it, to smash it, to destroy it before it was too late and his soul was forever tainted by this deed.

*I cannot end it.* He argued silently. *It is too late. And I wish to see my project through to completion.*

He pushed aside the voices’ reply, whatever it was, to punch in the final code to lead to the “birthing process.” Once the process had begun there was no way to reverse it or interfere in any way. He could only watch, and pray that this time, this time the specimen would survive.

Before his eyes, he watched as the Human Growth Serum began to drain from the tank. The next step would be the adjustment of the temperature, followed by pressure and the introduction of proper atmospheric components. If the specimen survived these processes, it could be removed from the tank and taken to Medical for evaluation. His eyes stayed focus on the monitor in front of him, keeping a watch on the vitals.

As the process continued, the voices began to hiss at him again. *It’s never too late, David, surely you know that. You could spike the temperature, or over lower the pressure and no one would think anything of it. They’d assume that the machine malfunctioned, or simply that another one didn’t survive. It’s never too late to destroy a monster.*

But even if he had listened, it was too late. The process was over, and the tank was opening with a hiss. He watched as the figure stumbled forward to land upon the tiled floor on its knees and drew in big gulping breaths.

He was perfect. *Too perfect. Perfection like this cannot be,* the voices’ hissed, but David drowned them out, his mind screaming his victory. Here was a physically perfect human male, no more than twenty-five, and more beautiful than any man had the right to be. Full lips, high cheek bones, an aristocratic profile, with dark hair, and, although he could not see them, strikingly blue eyes. An unusual combination, to be sure, but when you could control what traits an individual possesses, anything is possible. He snapped himself out of his reverie. He needed to test the specimen, to see if the information they’d implanted had taken. If it had, he should be a functioning adult, with no need for instruction.

“Cyril?” It was the name they’d agreed upon for this trial run. They’d named each specimen, from the very beginning, so that should this day finally come, they’d have a starting place. This was the first time one of those names had been spoken aloud to a specimen.

The young man turned to look at him. Beautiful. “Cyril? Is that my name?” The voice was raspy, as if from disuse, but he’d spoken. He’d spoken! A success! Speechless himself, David simply nodded.

A success.
Perfect.

Too perfect.

It was nearly two weeks after their strange conversation on the shore, and Evelyn and Kerri were walking together, enjoying the warm, sunny weather that had graced the island that day. There had been no word about Project Cypress yet among the “specimens,” since none of the others had mentioned seeing a new “specimen” either in the living area, or among the common areas of the island. Another failure then, they were sure.

Kerri was gazing at the lab facility near them when she got Evelyn’s attention. “Evelyn, look at him. Do you think he’s a new doctor? I’ve never seen him here before.” Evelyn turned her eyes to see the man in question. She was surprised to see one of the—no, the most beautiful man she’d ever seen. And it was not beauty in an effeminate way, like some men had, eternally beautiful young boys. No, he was quite obviously a man, well built and strong, and yet his face was so beautiful, it nearly moved her to tears. She was unable to say anything to Kerri in return. She could only watch in silence as he approached them. Perfection she thought.

He was graceful, she noticed. She had not realized that she was staring until the young man had reached the spot where she and Kerri were still standing. And still she could not stop staring. His eyes were mesmerizing, so blue, so open. It was as if she could read every thought that passed through his mind. And his face! His features were so delicate, so precious, so heartbreakingly beautiful. And then he spoke and she was again awestruck, this time by his voice. It was few seconds before her mind could stop processing the mere sound of his voice and begin processing the words he had spoken.

Cyril was drawn to the two women he was watching walk across the lawn. He had finally been released from the medical wing two weeks after his “birth,” the doctors and researchers finally satisfied that his working knowledge of basic human life was complete. This was his first venture outside at all, his first chance to meet anyone other than the researcher, other “specimens” like himself.

The two women were as different in appearance as night and day. The shorter of the two was dark—dark skin, hair as dark as his own, and dark eyes. She was rather pretty in an exotic way with her small, curvy build, and yet Cyril’s eyes were drawn to her companion. She was tall and lithe and if her friend was night, she was the morning. Skin as pale and smooth as marble, and yet in no way cold, long pale hair that was nearly blinding. And blue eyes—his own blue eyes were staring back at him. She was, in that moment, to him, beauty in its living form, the most stunning human being to ever walk the earth, that is if her feet even touched the ground. He wasn’t quite sure she was even human, and not some sort of goddess sent to the world to tempt mere mortals like him.

He knew that perhaps he should be intimidated by this woman, and yet he could not stop himself from approaching her and her companion and speaking. According to the information in his
head, the easiest way to start a conversation was to ask for their names. And so he did just that, if a bit awkwardly.

"My name is Kerri," the dark one—Kerri, he added mentally—replied. "And this is my friend..."

"Evelyn." That was all she said, and yet he was already hanging on every word, wishing to hear more.

"I am Cyril, or so I have been told." Cyril. It was an odd name, and yet as she turned it over again in her mind, Evelyn found she liked it quite a bit. She liked him quite a bit.

Kerri watched, ignored as the two began to converse. They were obviously drawn to one another. This Cyril was likely the product of Project Cypress. He was obviously too perfect to be natural. She couldn’t help but be jealous of her friend Evelyn. She wished that she could have all of that man’s attention on her.

But rather than say a word, she slipped away, unnoticed. She’d leave them be. Evelyn knew where to find her when she was ready. Looking back at them she could only be struck by how beautiful—how perfect they looked together.

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You’ve let it live too long, David. The voices had been a near constant drone in his mind ever since the culmination of Project Cypress. At every moment since, they had been whispering, wearing down his mental barriers until he could almost believe what they were saying. During Cyril’s medical examination...

Too perfect, David. They’ll find no faults, he’s too perfect.

During each and every mental task placed before their specimen...

Of course he passes them, David, you designed him that way. You designed him, David.

And now, every day as he’s watched him interact with the specimens from the other projects...

He is a stain on your soul, David. He cannot survive; perfection cannot exist in such a form.

The voices were driving him more than mad. In the past, he’d been very adept at ignoring their presence. But they’d begun growing louder and more insistent. He’d actually begun to believe the things they were telling him. That was why he was still spying on Cyril nearly two months after his “birth.” And somehow, along the way, it had become less of an observation and more of an obsession.

Cleanse yourself, David. If you destroy it now, your soul will still survive. End it now, David.

Yes. The voices were right. The time had come to end it. Cyril was becoming attached to one of the other specimens, and she to him. The other researchers had turned a blind eye to the romance, but
David could not. He’d seen how close they’d become and he knew he could not let it continue. If he let it go too long, it could lead to the production of offspring.

_We cannot allow that, David. You must strike to prevent this abomination from occurring._

He could not allow that to happen. He would end it, and soon.

Evelyn could hardly believe that she had met Cyril only a few months ago. She hadn’t thought, when she lost her husband and daughter in the accident, that she would ever fall in love again. And yet that is exactly what she was doing. And it was the most wonderful feeling in the world. She had forgotten just how much fun it was to be in love.

They spent the majority of each day together, wanting to learn everything about the other. Sometimes Kerri would accompany them, but most days, it was just the two of them, alone. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world. Cyril allowed her, for a moment at least, to forget everything that had happened to her, both before and after her enrollment in Project Venus. She was, for the first time in a very long time, just a normal woman.

They’d occasionally discussed their future, together, if they even had one. It gave Evelyn a newfound since of hope, an ability to finally see beyond the island, beyond her place in the project. Even if they had to live out their remaining days on the island, the future was much brighter with Cyril than it ever had been when she was alone.

All of the knowledge he had been endowed with had not prepared him for Evelyn. His creators had not thought about emotions or relationships when they had “programmed” him. He’d been ill equipped to deal with his growing feelings for the beautiful, if older, woman. He understood that she’d already experienced love and life before him, she’d been quite candid about her past, and he knew nothing of love beyond her. But they worked together, he knew this.

He had spent the past few months with Evelyn, learning about love, learning how to live, learning all the things that his creators had not felt necessary to provide him with. They had only wanted to make him a functioning young adult male, and yet he wondered how they could consider him functioning without providing for him emotional stability. But he did not let himself think these things often, not when he could turn his thoughts to Evelyn.

Though they had not spoken about their future much, he often turned his thoughts there. He could easily imagine a life with Evelyn. A life filled with love, with joy, with children and a family that he’d never before known. He couldn’t help but allow himself to want, to dream. The last few months had been idyllic, and he could only hope life would remain that way forever.

_It’s time, David. You know what to do. You are ready for this. Today is the day it ends._
Yes, he thought. Today is the day it all ends. It had gone on too long. Decades too long. He should have done this back when Alice had lost her mind, or further still, when Alex had left, or further still before the project had even begun.

They were far too arrogant in their younger days, he and the other doctors. Who were they to believe they could create life—define life? What right had they to define perfection, to create its human form? They had manipulated the genomes of innocents, all in the name of science. Oh but they were helping them! But they weren’t. They were building and storing knowledge. The island hinged only on Project Cypress.

And at what cost? Their sanity, their souls, their very lives! No one had survived this project unscathed. Not even him. Perhaps his situation was even worse. It had been building for so long, too long. But no more. It ends now.

It ends now, David. He’s too perfect. Nothing so perfect can exist. End it now, David. Destroy it and cleanse yourself. Do it now!

Yes, now. He shouldered the gun, lining up the shot through the scope. His target was out in the open, in the presence of the woman David often saw him with. He must be careful, he reminded himself. The woman was an innocent. He could not hit her. And there! The perfect shot!

With a deep breath, Dr. David Scott felt his finger squeeze the trigger and end Project Cypress once and for all.

He couldn’t hear the shot over the voices in his head.

Well done, David. Good old David.

Well done, Judas. Good old Judas.  

Evelyn still remembered the day Cyril died. It had been so sudden, no one had expected it. They had been sitting upon the shore, simply enjoying the good weather and the company of the other. It was an idyllic day. They were happy.

Evelyn glanced at Cyril out of the corner of her eye. She was still struck breathless by his beauty, even after all the time she had spent with him. She imagined she always would be. He was everything she had ever imagined she could want. He was perfect. She wanted nothing more than to remain with him forever, on this island, or off of it, it didn’t matter, as long as she could stay with him.

Cyril smiled as he caught Evelyn glancing at him. She did it often. He enjoyed pretending not to notice, loved that she still looked. Her looks were different than those he got from the others on the

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1 Jesus Christ Superstar, “Damned for All Time/Blood Money” Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice
island. The others, even her friend Kerri, were always staring, always seemed to be watching. To them, he was nothing more than a beautiful young man. But to Evelyn, he knew he was so much more.

This is why he loved her. He had not yet said as much to her, though he'd tried to show her in his own way. He wanted to say it, often, and yet he was worried that, perhaps she was not ready for such declarations. While they had talked about an abstract future, he wasn't sure if she was ready for something so concrete. And yet, in the moment, he knew he had to say something, had to voice his feelings at last, lest he finally implode.

He turned to Evelyn. “Evelyn...” and his voice caught in his throat and he became silent. He looked down at his chest, disturbed, as a patch of red bloomed and began to grow. And then all he knew was pain.

Evenly watched as the spot of blood began to grown on Cyril’s chest. She lurched forwards to grab him as he slumped forward. She could faintly hear someone crying and screaming his name, and was surprised to realize it was her own voice she was hearing. She knelt down on the sand, pulling him close, holding him, begging him not to leave her.

She could practically feel the life leaving from him. She began to wonder why no one was answering her frantic screams. She looked down at his face, begging him to just hold on, not to leave her. If he could just hold on, someone could save him. But he just smiled—so beautiful—and whispered in a hoarse voice so unlike his own, normal voice “I love you, Evelyn.”

The light faded from his eyes. His blood was spilling onto the sand, a vivid, macabre patch of color on the never ending brown beneath them. She was numb. She couldn’t move, couldn’t speak. He was gone.

That was all that stayed with her, even as pandemonium broke out. She never heard the others come running, never heard security wrestling a mad doctor to the ground. Never felt Kerri try to rouse her, try to pull her away from Cyril. Never felt them pry his body away from her. *He was gone. Forever.*

Evelyn turned her eyes, wide and unseeing, to Kerri, and said, more to herself than anyone else, “Nothing so perfect can last for long. And I—I was such a fool for believing it could.”
Rex

Rex Non Potest Peccare\(^1\)

High Palace, Vargus City, Delta Prime 2793

Riordan of the House of Corinan, Emperor of the Known Universe, was content with his lot in life. He was an educated man, well versed in science, literature, and politics. He had studied the history of man, from its first vestige of civilization back on Earth, to the Great Exploration that led to his own home on Delta Prime, from the Industrial Revolution, to the Teletarian Wars. He had a beautiful wife with whom he was raising four wonderful children. He had all the power any man could ever want.

He sat in the great hall within his palace, awaiting the arrival of an important guest, a blind Teletarian, who’d left his home planet to travel across the Universe and was supposed to be a Seer or Prophet of some kind. If the rumors flying around were to be believed, he was the best in the Universe. And he was coming to Vargus to speak with Riordan concerning some troubles his planet had been having as of late. Riordan did not truly believe in Prophecy, after all, he was a shining example of an exception, but he knew a ruler—a good ruler—would seek council from any and all to better protect his people.

He could still remember his own Prophecy. It had been the catalyst that had led him to his current situation. His parents had sent him to see one of the Oracles on Teletari when he was seventeen, to seek out his Destiny, like any young man of his station was expected to do. He’d met with one of the greatest Prophets to hear his fate. The Prophet had then predicted much doom, gloom, and darkness for his life, which would culminate in his killing his father and marrying his mother. Riordan had found the whole thing absurd and had told the Teletarian as much. The Prophet had cursed him, calling him a fool, but Riordan was convinced of his own power over Destiny.

And he’d been proven right. His mother and father were alive, safe, and still married back on Gamma Six. And he was now safe on Delta Prime with Kamari and their children, Prophecy be damned.

He was drawn out of his thoughts by the announcement that Hywel, the Prophet, had arrived, and was being shown into the hall. Riordan was surprised at the alien that stood before him. He was not exactly a typical Teletarian. While he still possessed the same lurid golden-yellow skin and basic humanoid body structure, with a third eye on the forehead, he was much smaller in build than the generally tall members of his race. Riordan was also surprised to see that his two main eyes were not the usual silver-mirrors, but covered over in a milky white film. Blind then. And his third eye! Every Teletarian Riordan had ever encountered had kept the third eye resolutely shut, unless in the process of Seeing, which they never did among Outsiders. But Howell’s third eye was open wide. It was, visually, much like a cat’s, bright green with an odd, slotted pupil. All in all, he cut a bit of an odd figure.

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\(^1\) “The King cannot sin”
Nevertheless, Riordan greeted the being with all the respect and manners due to one of his station. Hywel, however, did not seem to be in any mood to respect decorum. He shuffled forward, a bit ungainly on his four feet, his third eye constantly flitting back and forth as if searching for obstacles, and yet there were none before him. Riordan wondered if the third eye helped him see at all. After all, the rumors were that the eye was for the purpose of Seeing only. Of course, you'd never hear either way from a Teletarian. They were notoriously stingy with their secrets.

"Well, great Emperor of the Known Universe, I hear you are having some troubles. And now you seek me out, is that correct?" His voice was strange. It was quiet, high and breathy, and it seemed almost as if he were speaking from a very faraway place. But this was how all Teletarians spoke. It is thought that this is because they are too steeped in the future, too busy trying to determine Destiny and Prophecy, that their minds are always far away from the here and now, but no one really knows.

"You have heard correctly, Prophet Hywel. I am afraid that things are not sitting well in every place within the realm."

"Yes, yes, blight, starvation, flooding, rather large meteors, strange creatures suddenly appearing, and you're looking for a solution. You're hoping I will look in the future and See such a solution." Hywel seemed amused. Riordan was surprised that he knew so much, and a bit angry at the tone of voice. However, he bit back a stinging retort, and listened as Hywel continued speaking. "Well, I will do no such thing. The solution does not lie with the future, but with your past, Emperor Riordan. You may think you can run from Destiny, but you cannot. Prophecy always has a way of coming true. You are the source of the Empire's problems. The solution lies in your own hands."

Riordan was furious. Who was this creature? What right did he have to speak to him in such a way? He kept his silence, however, until the shuffling alien was nearly to the door. "You'll find very soon that you are wrong, Prophet Hywel. Destiny and Prophecy have no hold over me, nor have they ever. You would do well to remember this."

The blind Teletarian laughed. "And you would do well to remember, Emperor, that while you may command the speakers of Prophecy, you cannot control Prophecy itself. I fear that it will be a lesson learned in pain and misery. And it is coming sooner than you think. I will take my leave now, Emperor. I will see you at a later date." The Prophet turned and shuffled out the door, leaving a baffled, speechless Emperor in his wake.

When he was in bed later that night, Riordan told his wife, Kamari, about his meeting with the Prophet. She could offer him nothing but words of comfort. She secretly wondered, however, if her husband was behaving rather foolishly. Everyone knew that you could not run from your Destiny, just as everyone knew that the Teletarians were never wrong in their interpretations of the things they Saw. But it was not her place to voice these concerns. As her mind began to drift into the peace of sleep, she could only be thankful that it seemed she had yet to meet her own tragic Prophecy.
Riordan’s dreams that night were a melding of past events in his life. He could see himself, young and brash, ignoring the words of the Teletarian Prophet, swearing he could, and would, create his own Destiny. He’d thought at the time the best way to circumvent the Prophet’s words was to not return home. He’d sent a message to his parents, telling them he would just travel the Universe, seeking out his own future, his own success.

His travels had been interesting. He’d had the chance to see planets that he’d only read about in data-books, and some that had never been written about at all. It had been so exciting. He often found himself missing those days in his older age. He was the Emperor now. He wasn’t allowed the same freedom to travel, to explore, to get into great trouble, and greater fun.

He remembered the events that led to the death of the old Emperor, Kamari’s first husband. They’d both been visitors on Veratini, and had had a minor altercation. While on another planet, they might have been able to work the problem out peacefully. On Veratini, however, all questions of “honor” were settled by combat. The Emperor’s death was an accident, a result of trauma during the combat. Riordan truly hadn’t meant to kill him. And he certainly hadn’t realized who he was. In fact, he hadn’t found out until he reached Delta Prime and became Emperor himself.

Delta Prime was only meant to be a brief stop on his Universal tour. He’d heard that there was some sort of interesting creature that was plaguing the inhabitants of the capital city. No one was really sure what it was or how it had ended up on the planet, but he had heard that a great reward was being offered if anyone could defeat the creature.

It had been a fearsome beast, much larger than Riordan, or any humanoid being. The resulting “battle” had taken all of Riordan’s strength, skill, and ingenuity to simply survive. And somehow he had managed to destroy the creature. His reward, much to his surprise, had been Kamari and the title of Emperor, which her brother Crevan had held pending a re-marriage. And so ended his life as a wanderer and began his life as Emperor.

Riordan shifted in his sleep without waking. It was a peaceful night in Vargus City, the last peaceful night they would see for some time.

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It was at the Great Feast of the Exploration, in honor and memory of the Great Exploration all those centuries ago, that everything fell apart. Most of Vargus City, as well as important guests from across Delta Prime and the Universe, were in attendance of the festivities in the High Palace.

The Emperor, in all his glory, sat atop a raised dais with his family by his side. He enjoyed days such as these, seeing his wife smiling, his children enthralled by the constant stream of visitors, some from planets they had only read about. It was so easy to put the words of Prophet Hywel, and all the troubles that arose within him because of them, out of his mind.
It was too much, he supposed, to hope this kind of peace and happiness could last. The great, heavy doors had flown open, and in shuffled Hywel, drawing the eyes of every creature within the room. Riordan could hear the whispers, the questions of who he was, what he wanted. The stories of the myths and mysteries surrounding the Prophet. But the Teletarian seemed completely focused on Riordan and Riordan on him. He could hear his eldest child, his daughter Addison, questioning him, Kamari, anyone who would listen, and yet no one was answering her. The other children remained silent.

"The time has come, Emperor, to meet your Destiny. I had warned you that you could not run from Prophecy, and now your day of reckoning is upon you." Riordan watched as the sightless eyes turned to his wife next to him. "Both of you. Surely you must know, Kamari that you cannot escape your Destiny, no matter how hard you might try."

Riordan was on his feet, furious, saying "You are not to speak to her! Now, I believe you should be leaving Prophet Hywel. You have upset my family enough for one day!" He motioned for one of the guards to escort the Teletarian from the hall.

Hywel ignored the outburst and continued speaking to Kamari. "Have you not told your husband of your own brush with an unsavory Prophecy, Kamari? I think you would find the results...interesting, Kamari. Perhaps."

Riordan turned to look at his wife, watching as her face paled dramatically. She sank into the chair behind her, whispering over and over again, "No!" He wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake her, yell at her, scream for her to tell him what was going on. But she said nothing else. It was Crevan, who'd come up onto the dais when the trouble had started, who answered.

"I remember those events. It was back under the rule of the last Emperor. A Teletarian Prophet had been called upon. He and Kamari had been married for several years at that point, but there were no children. The Emperor was hoping for an answer from the Prophet, and was not pleased at the outcome. The Prophet told them that should they ever have a son, he would kill the Emperor and marry Kamari."

Riordan felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. Surely, surely it was just a coincidence. Crevan continued on, "The Emperor cursed the Prophet, saying that he would never bow to such a Destiny. That he was the Emperor and Destiny should bow to him."

Riordan heard Hywel scoff, "Looks like it runs in the family, eh, Emperor?"

There was a rushing in his ears. It couldn't be true. It couldn't be true. He turned to his wife—Oh God his wife—and asked, "Please tell me you've never—that Addison was that first."

But as tears streamed down her face, he knew he would not like her answer. "He wanted to kill the baby, nearly as soon as we found out. I couldn't let him. And I had a friend who said he knew a couple off-planet—Oh God, on Gamma Six—who wanted a child. And I just couldn't—I couldn't—" but
she could say no more, incoherent through her sobbing. She jumped to her feet and rushed from the room. No one tried to stop her.

As pandemonium rang out in the great hall, Riordan fell to his knees on the dais. Everything he had known was tainted. His wife—his mother—whom he had loved like he had not thought he could love anyone. His children—his poor children—who would suffer this taint forever. In his haste to escape his Destiny he had inadvertently set the events into motion.

“I told you you cannot hide from your Destiny, Riordan. No man can; we are all just players in a greater game.” He was surprised to hear that Hywel sounded apologetic. Surely he was enjoying the pain he had caused! Surely he couldn’t pity them! Wrenching himself to his feet, Riordan stumbled out of the hall, intent on being anywhere else.

Kamari reached the rooms she had shared with her husband—no, her son. She was sick, this entire situation made her sick. She should have listened to her first husband and ended the pregnancy. It was all her fault. She should have known. Riordan had looked so much like her husband—his father. She was sick, she didn’t deserve to live. Pain, all she had given anyone was pain. She’d ruined so many lives. Her children, her beautiful children—all five of them! No, she didn’t deserve to live, so she would end it. She reached into the bedside drawer on Riordan’s side, where she knew he stored a phasegun for protection. She would end this now.

Riordan entered the room the moment she pulled the trigger. He was unable to stop her, unable to look away. This was his punishment, he thought, eyes burning as the flash of the laser robbed him of his vision and his wife. Yes, his punishment. He had turned away, blind to Prophecy, to Destiny. It was only fitting he should return to life, blind and alone.

Rex mortuus est. Vivat rex²

A Starship, Beta System, Quadrant Three, en route to Ferradin 2795

They were all that remained of her family, her tattered family. Her sister Ilana, the youngest of the four, was too young to travel and was forced to remain on Delta Prime with Crevan, who had been holding her father’s throne in regency since the events that had destroyed their world nearly two standard years ago. Her brothers had stayed behind to argue over which had the right to assume the role of Emperor when he was old enough. Addison had wanted none of it, birthright or no. Her brothers were thinking of their own power, ignoring their family, and condemning their father.

She could still remember the look in her father’s eyes when he’d stumbled up the steps after her mother. She could still remember the look on his face when she’d found him nearly an hour later. He’d been nearly catatonic in his grief, kneeling near her mother’s body, blinded by the flash of the beam that

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² “The king is dead. Long live the king”
had killed her. Addison had put aside her own grief and pain in favor of helping her father. Both had known that he could remain no longer on Delta Prime. No one would want him to remain, and he deserved far more than remaining in a place that was a constant reminder of his sin. There had been no question in her mind about her own future. She would follow her father to the ends of the Universe and back again. They had always been close, and it never occurred to her to abandon him at this moment, unlike her brothers. She couldn’t blame Ilana. Addison knew that if given the choice, her sister would be aboard the starship with them. Ilana was her only source of information about home.

They’d left the very next morning, even before the crisis had died down. The only ones to see them off were Ilana and Hywel, the one who had brought their lives crashing down around them. And yet Addison could not bring herself to hate him. He was just the speaker for Prophecy. She’d never been like her parents, both of whom had shown strong disbelief in Prophecy and Destiny. Addison firmly believed that one cannot escape what was pre-determined. And her parents had learned a very painful lesson.

Addison had let Ilana have a moment alone with their father, knowing it would likely be the last time the two could meet in person. She had turned aside, to provide them with some privacy, and had found Hywel at her shoulder. “I wish I could tell you, young one, that your future will be much happier from now on, but Destiny has other plans for you. It won’t be easy, and it won’t end well. I can only wish you well as you travel down the path laid before you.” His words had chilled her to the bone, still resonated within her brain in the quiet moments, which were found quite often upon the starship.

She missed home. She missed Ilana quite often, no matter that they spoke frequently through com feeds. She even missed her brothers, as angry as they had made her. But she missed Brennan most of all. They had been unable to say goodbye in person, though they had communicated through com feeds. Brennan had been her closest companion from a very young age. He was the son of one of her father’s advisors, to whom she had been betrothed long ago. Their marriage had been intended to help cement her place as Empress, although that reason had become secondary in her eyes. She loved him, more than she thought was possible, and it hurt to be so far from him. But he understood that, for the time being, her place was with her father, and his was on Delta Prime, trying to help hold the Universe together.

In the time that had passed since their departure from home, she and her father had traveled the Universe, in search of what she did not know. Her father was quite silent about why they traveled. He was silent about nearly everything, save the most banal of conversations. And yet she never doubted that he appreciated her presence, that he needed her.

They were on their way to Ferradin, where her father said he had an old friend from his first Universal travel who would allow them to spend some time off the ship. They’d been sent off every other planet they’d stopped at. News of her father’s fall had traveled fast and now no one would touch him. They’d been sent away nearly as soon as they’d set foot on solid (or not so solid in some cases) ground.
But on Ferradin, they would have sanctuary. And perhaps on Ferradin, her father would finally find what he was looking for.

Riordan heard the automated voice announce their estimated time of arrival to Ferradin, the last stop on his travels. Ferradin would be the end. He could no longer put Addison through the pain. Two years was too long for such a journey. She should be home with her siblings where she belonged. And yet he was too selfish to send her there. He never should have allowed her to accompany him on his quest for forgiveness and peace. After all, she could hardly be faulted for his sins. She could have been comfortable, happy back on Delta Prime. She could have been Empress, there was precedent, and yet she'd chosen to throw it all away to accompany him.

And he had done nothing to inspire such loyalty, such love. He was a monster. How could she not recognize that? And yet he couldn't bring himself to say such things to her, his daughter. She was his first born and they'd always shared a very close relationship. Of all his children, she was the most like him. He'd looked forward to the day he could pass on the ruling of the Universe to her, for he knew she would excel in the role even more than he had. And now he'd allowed her to throw it all away to accompany a blind fool on a final quest before his ultimate death.

But they were nearing Ferradin, and there he would have his final rest. He knew Arawn would not turn them away. He knew his own death was near, could feel it within him. And then Addison will be free to return to her life. And everything would be as it should be.

Arawn's palace, Ferradin 2795

Ferradin was very different from Delta Prime. Addison rather liked it. Her father had always called it a jungle world when he would tell her of his travels from before she was born. She liked the heat and humidity. The weather on Delta Prime was always so mild. It was boring, in her opinion.

She had always loved her father's stories of the exciting life he'd lived before becoming Emperor. She had always thought she'd have plenty of time for her own adventures before she was expected to step into the role of Empress. She supposed that now she had all the time in the Universe for adventures. She'd abdicated the throne to her brothers before leaving the planet. And now her father lay near death. Soon there would be nothing tied to her, no expectations. Perhaps Brennan would be up to traveling the Universe with her. It would be different, she thought, than these travels with her father. She'd never be forced off a planet after less than a day, stuck drifting forever in a starship.

Not that Addison resented her father. She loved him, and wished desperately that his death was not so close, but she had resigned herself to his fate. He had encouraged her to think about her future, what would become of her in a few days time when he was no longer with her. It was a morbid
thing, knowing that his death was so near. She wanted to spend every minute with him, and yet he would not allow it, telling her she should enjoy her time on Ferradin as much as possible. He couldn’t understand that she could not enjoy it, knowing their time was limited.

Arawn had been to see him often in the few days they’d been on Ferradin. Riordan appreciated that. It was nice to know that he still had one friend in the Universe, someone who supported him besides his daughter. He didn’t want to burden her with his death, so he’d tried to keep her away from him, asking her to spend more time exploring Ferradin.

She was back beside his bed, along with Arawn. They all knew it was the end.

Riordan was looking forward to death. That fact surprised him. He realized that the only thing that anchored him to the world of the living any longer was Addison, and the longer he remained, the more he hurt her. Death would be his deliverance, and hopefully, his final forgiveness, though he often doubted this. He was not deserving of forgiveness.

He felt Addison clinging to his hand, holding it to her face, where he could feel her tears. He wanted to tell her not to cry for him, that she should be happy and return to living her life, and yet when he opened his mouth, only a cough was voiced.

Addison watched as her father struggled to breathe. She wanted to turn away from him, finding it too painful to watch, and yet she would not. She had not abandoned him before and she would not abandon him now. For the first time, she was glad her father could not see her. She did not want to cause him any more pain. She didn’t want him to know how much losing him was hurting her.

Arawn watched wordlessly as the two said a silent goodbye. He remained silent as he watched his friend breathe his last breath, his daughter sobbing in anguish. He watched and offered his own support and silence, all without saying a word.

A starship, near Delta Prime, 2796

Addison was nearly home when she received the call from Iiana. She’d been hysterical. She’d not really explained what was going on; she’d only begged Addison to come home as soon as she could. It wasn’t until she spoke to Brennan a few hours later that she learned what had happened in her two year absence.

3 "Tearful that day on which will rise from ashes guilty man for judgment"
She had been surprised when Brennan had contacted her so soon after Ilana. He'd looked so serious. When she and Brennan spoke, the conversation was usually fairly happy. Brennan was one of those men who always seemed to be in a good mood. It was one of the many things she loved about him.

Her brothers were dead. They'd killed each other in their greed over the throne she had left to them. And her Uncle Crevan was refusing them the right to be placed in the family's mausoleum. He would also be holding the imperial throne indefinitely.

Addison was angry. What had her family done to deserve such a fate? First her father, then her brothers, gone. And now her sister, stuck inside their home in the care of a man who obviously didn't have her best interests at heart. Had her uncle truly cared about their family, he would have prevented her brothers' premature deaths.

Brennan had encouraged her to remain off planet. He said that he and his father could find a way to free Ilana and the four of them would return to Ferradin, where Arawn had promised her that she and her family would always have a home. But Addison had refused. She needed to see Ilana first, needed to see her brothers, needed to speak to her uncle.

Addison was angry. She slammed shut the door to the room she was sharing with her sister, cursing her uncle under her breath. Crevan had gone power mad. It was the only possible answer. How could he possibly think that he had any kind of power over the House of Corinan? She was the head of the House, not he! And when had informed him that her brothers were to be placed into the familial mausoleum, he had laughed at her. Laughed at her! Just who did he think he was?

Brennan, having hardly left her side since she returned a few hours before, had followed her. He gathered her into his arms, trying his best to soothe her temper. “It will be alright, Addison. We'll find some way to fix this.”

She shook her head. “It's too late, Brennan. He's buried them both already. There is no way to fix the damage he's caused. And the only way to remove him from power is a war, and I won't plunge our Universe into that kind of turmoil. Look at what he's done to my family! What else will he do to the Universe?”

Brennan was silent. There were no good answers to her questions. Addison continued, saying, “I have to do something for my brothers. And then we'll leave. You, Ilana, your father and I. We'll go to Arawn on Ferradin and the five of us will figure out something. But first, I have to find a way to honor my brothers. Build them a small monument or something. Anything.”

It was crazy. They both knew it. But Brennan didn’t voice it. He would do anything she asked without a second thought. And so all he said was, “I know where they are buried.”
She was caught. They were caught. Brennan had refused to allow her to go alone. They were caught, but not before the monument could be erected, so that the entire planet could come and see their acting Emperor’s madness and disrespect of the dead.

Crevan had sentenced them to death. It shouldn’t have surprised Addison as much as it did. She knew he was mad, after all. She only wished that Ilana hadn’t been in the room. It hurt her deeply to hear her sister’s heart-rending cries. She and Brennan were being held in a small pod hanging low in orbit over Delta Prime, awaiting Crevan’s decision about the means of their demise. There was no way to move the pod because the piloting control were locked. The only thing that they could override was the environmental controls.

Addison knew that she should be frightened, she should be angry, she should feel something. But all she felt was a sense of peace. And gladness that she could be with Brennan in her last few moments. “I don’t want to wait for Uncle Crevan to decide our fate,” Addison whispered, breaking the silence between them. “I would rather take my Destiny into my own hands, even if my life is ending much sooner than I had planned.”

Brennan said nothing at first, simply pulling her close to him, holding her tightly. Finally, he spoke, his voice rough, “I will follow anywhere, my love, even to death. If this is the way you want it to end, then I will join you happily, knowing that at least, in these last moments, we are together.”

And so, locked in a final embrace, Brennan and Addison gave the codes to override the environmental controls of their prison, allowing the mindless cold of space to engulf them in a final death grip.

They wouldn’t be there in a few hours time when Crevan returned to free them, finally won over by Ilana’s impassioned pleas. They wouldn’t be there to see his descent into guilt driven madness. They wouldn’t be there to see Ilana’s pain and growth. They wouldn’t be there to see her, with much help and support from Arawn, become the best Empress the Known Universe had ever seen, or ever would. They wouldn’t be there to see the morning. But they would be together. And that was all they wanted.