Part Two:

The Garden of Love

"So I turn'd to the Garden of Love
That so many sweet flowers bore;
And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be;
And Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars my joys and desires."

--William Blake
"The Garden of Love"
Interlude

My wife died on a day much like this.

The sky above me appears as a only a narrow strip of blue between the steel and glass walls of the buildings on High Street, but even so I can appreciate its crystalline quality. It seems so fragile that, if I were to throw up a stone with all my strength, I might be able to shatter this sky's delicate shell and cause fragments of gleaming blue to rain down upon the city.

A cold winter's wind is blowing in from the Lake, somewhere to my right; I can taste the water in the air. I am dressed in my overcoat, and I can almost enjoy the slight bite of the wind as it sidles joyously out of alleys and crossways to meet me, like a dog greeting its master after a long absence.

High Street is full of bustle today, as always. It is the central avenue of Bayport, the artery and vein by which all life is carried into and away from the fabulous, throbbing heart of the city.

North High, where I walk, is the home of the financial district; here mirrored towers vie for dominance across the wide, choked lanes of the street. At their feet smartly-dressed businessmen--all dopplegangers of one another--race in and out of their high-tech fortresses, clutching at briefcases and umbrellas and carrying on
loud, argumentative conversations with their fellows. The Exchange can be found here, at the intersection of High and Tamerlane, squatting proudly; a short, rounded dwarf amongst tall, squared giants. I walk by and I remember how Sarah and I used to pass the Exchange on weekend jaunts; then we marveled at the constant traffic in and out of its revolving doors, and at the harried, desperate looks of the men and women who converged there. We used to laugh at them, at their helpless groping for invisible monies.

Just south of the financial zone, High swings west and travels alongside the vast Lake. I follow its path, and soon I am striding briskly through Middle Shore Park, catching the chill breeze full on, letting it whip through my hair and numb my cheekbones. At the center of the park, a triad of flags—country, state, and city standards—snap in the wind, their colors bright pinpoints against the sky, now revealed as huge and overwhelmingly blue. Behind the flags the dry grass of the park slopes to meet the Lake at a boardwalk of sorts—for almost a mile, vendors and merchants have transformed the innocent shore into a type of constant, half-hearted carnival. Only the food booths are open now; inside them, burly men, mostly Hispanic and Polish, sell hot dogs and tacos and sausage and flavored ice.

And beyond them is the Lake itself, as big as an ocean, it seems, though much colder and dirtier, and, correspondingly, of apparently evil temperament. Near the boardwalk the Lake pushes away at the land with small grey waves, which struggle to surge beneath a scum of leaked sewage, Styrofoam cups, beer cans, and condoms.

Further away, out on the Lake, cargo boats position themselves for a charge
up the Canal to the St. Lawrence Seaway, and from there to the world. The wind further out pushes the water to a cold boil; its edge seems serrated for as far as I can discern.

I turn my head and move away, to the south, my hands shoved into my pockets.

I rejoin High Street as it angles back eastward, into the city proper. The atmosphere is different here, as far from the financial zone in spirit as it is in geography. Here High Street is home to the dozens of off-Broadway theaters for which Bayport is renowned; it is said our district is second in the world only to New York City's. I am inclined to believe it, though I do not often attend. But I enjoy South High very much; it is home not only to the stage but to the artists which the stage attracts. The strange, unique fauna here is the type one sees only in movies. These characters amuse me, for here I see evidence of difference. On North High every human strives to appear as conservative—as respectable—as his or her fellows. Here, the same drive for image has resulted in a great colorful chaos of clothing and hair and makeup and language. Here the city folk surge in and out of bistros, second hand clothing shops, music rooms, and a horde of fast food restaurants.

The great bookstore called Theo's Vault is located just off High, a block east on Grant. Sarah and I would inevitably find our way there. She was an avid reader, and she took great delight in her books. I used to watch her make her selections through gaps in the wrought-iron shelves at Theo's. I loved watching her smooth face contort in frustration; for Sarah, the purchase of a book was almost a physical
agony. I truly believe she would have taken them all, had she the means.

I used to pretend I did not know her; I imagined she was an anonymous, beautiful stranger, a face from the masses that had caught my fancy. I used to stalk her slowly through the bookstore, until at last I rounded a final corner and she was revealed to me, smiling, trying to guess at my smile and my intent.

Standing across from Theo’s, on the corner of High and Grant, I smile at the memories.

Often I would sneak up on her instead, to frighten her with an embrace from behind. She often shrieked, and then laughingly berated me. And I would kiss her, and know again and again I had not erred in this act of marriage.

We often walked along South High, hand in hand, taking a Saturday or Sunday morning to exist simply within this city, savoring life and its attendant joys.

And sometimes, when I had papers to grade or tests to compose, she travelled alone.

I stand outside the Britannia Music Hall, beneath the great neon lion rampant that marks the building’s place upon the street. I look up at the small old buildings that comprise the block. I try not to let tears clog my throat.

I can imagine what happened. I can imagine the steady gathering of spirits above Sarah’s head as she strolled down South High. I can imagine the way their insubstantial, translucent forms whispered out of windows and holes in the ground. Some, I suppose, might even have arrived with the breeze—it was autumn then, as well—to swirl above the intersection of High and Wallace Avenue, outside

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the Village Market, where Sarah often went to find real coffee beans.

If it had been someone else, I might be callous enough to laugh at the absurdity.

But I can see the spirits. Around me and in my head.

On that day they must have gazed down at her without blinking, their eyes mere shadows in their forms. The sight is easy to imagine. I can see them, stilled above the intersection, awaiting the death that would soon occur on the street below, inside the ring they had created.

And my wife must have strolled blithely into their midst, unawares—for she was blind to them, like everyone else. She would have stepped out into the intersection where I now stand, wrapped in the throng of weekend shoppers and tourists. In my head, I imagine her smiling to herself, but that is no doubt the product of my biased remembrances. For all I know, my wife was frowning, or even weeping, as she strode forward, her legs hidden beneath a billowing, gypsy-like skirt. She could have felt anything; I'll never know. Yet my mind reaches out to the mystery of her mood even now; it strikes me as strangely important. I want to know the portion of her soul denied to me by physical separation.

I stand before the Village Market.

I look down High Street to the south.

A blue sedan, they told me. A light blue Impala, early model. The driver had a heart attack. Probably he began to feel the pain, the tightening numbness in his chest, around the Baker Street intersection a block south. He tried to ignore it,
perhaps—the elderly are full of pain, and who, after all, would want to imagine that this new discomfort is the end of it all? That this last burst of agony accompanies the stopping of the heart?

By the time he reached mid-block he was unconscious, the policeman who spoke with me after the accident said. He dropped forward onto the wheel, and his leg spasmed, driving the gas pedal down to the floorboards. His heart attack, they said, was massive and complete; the policeman told me the man must have been dead by the time his car left the street.

The Impala slewed across the icy streets and into another lane, cutting off a city bus. The bus, I suppose, must have blared its horn. Sarah might have looked. I hope she didn’t. I hope she was looking anywhere but High Street, away from the onrushing chaos.

The car then jumped the curb, still accelerating.

I stand now at the curb, twenty feet from where my wife met her end.

The wayward car knocked over a city bench—it has since been replaced—and kept on moving. A smaller car might have stopped, but not this one; the Impalas of the early seventies were huge constructions, built to cruise at seventy and swallow gas like a drunk swallows cheap wine.

It kept moving, barely dented, barely slowed. It knocked over an Asian merchant and crushed both his legs. It toppled a wooden pole supporting the banner that reads to this day: BAYPORT VILLAGE MARKET—COME ON IN! This last collision edged the car to the right; it sailed into the intersection doing thirty,
and there it intercepted Sarah.

I cover my hand with my mouth. Tears are threatening to spill, and I cannot allow them to overtake me here.

I walk briskly away from High Street, toward the Lake. From there I will turn north on DeLong and walk again across the city, towards home. I keep swallowing back grief, but it is harder and harder to do so, and so I bite at my cheek and pinch at the stinging in my nose with thumb and forefinger and pretend I have a bad cold.

But it is too much.

The spirits watched her die, as impassive as gargoyles carved from stone. They watched her until she became one of them.

I have to cry. I bow my head and turn sideways into an alley. I slide into the shadows' midst and curl within the comforting dark, and finally I allow my tears to leak from my eyes and cool upon my cheeks.

Around me, the city moves about its business. It basks in the winter sunshine, and the wind whisks away the smog and exhaust, and I crouch in its center and cry in a sheath of darkness.

It is not fair. But the city, in its immensity, does not care about me. I am small, and it is far too huge to give me much notice.

Perhaps, if I live here long enough, I will not care either.

But these wonderings are irrelevant. After a time I finish with my tears. I am crouching in the darkness. I take a breath and sniffle and make my unsteady way out to the sidewalk. The masses of the city walk alongside me, and I feel a sudden
urge to reach for one, to take one of them--anyone--by the arm and speak a greeting.

I don't want to walk by myself.

But I do not. I might frighten someone. In this city we fear weeping, lonely
men; they are the ones with guns and knives and violent psychoses. So we avoid
them and walk away as quickly as we can.

I swallow. The crowds move by, and I see a variety of couples and groups
moving together, speaking, laughing, gesturing.

No one sees me. I walk up High Street, towards home, alone.
I awoke at noon the following day, hung over and late for my class. I called
the University and spoke with my department's secretary; her tone told me she was
not the only one there who disapproved of my absence. I pictured my department
head stomping up and down the halls of DuPrey looking for me, but the sight
wasn't enough to frighten me.

I snorted and told her it was probably just a touch of flu. Then I had to throw
up for real, and I hung up the phone.

Later, I managed to disengage myself from the toilet and stumble back into
the kitchen. The day was weirdly bright, and I squinted against it until I sat at my
island in the kitchen, my head buried in bare arms. A chill breeze flitted through
the apartment; my arms and thighs erupted in gooseflesh, and I groaned
involuntarily.

After a time I lifted my eyes and faced the city outside my windows. I realized
why it was damnably bright: it was still snowing.

I rubbed my arms and stumbled over to the window. My head ached with
every step and my balance was suspect, but I made it. I leaned my head against the
glass and looked out.

Bayport seemed to be in the grip of an honest-to-God blizzard. They aren't uncommon here; the southern tip of the Lake has always seemed to me as though it is a dumping ground for all the weather the rest of the country doesn't want.

I remembered the shell of ice that had descended the night before, and winced at the thought of driving through the resultant muck. I tried to find the street two stories below and barely made it out. No cars travelled its surface, but a garbage truck was parked across the street, and two men that appeared to have been mummified in scarves and mittens were struggling to attach a dumpster to the truck's loader. Then a gust of wind obliterated my view; the glass rattled in front of my face.

Eventually I found my way to the shower and sat down under the spray, my head held between my knees. I started to feel better--and I remembered the night before. I closed my eyes, recalling not only the Darkling's attack but the half-bottle of Maker's I'd gone through while Paul watched Farleigh Dickinson University play a late-night game on ESPN.

After that I drew a blank. I didn't remember dawn.

A thought occured to me, and sitting there naked under the hot fall of water, I began to understand it, in all of its brutally honest totality: I had nearly died, only hours before.

I began to shiver again, even in the scalding water. I rubbed my arms.

The Darkling was still out there. Verene was, too--and she was more of the
same. I had always underestimated her, because she looked human. Now, I realized, she was only toying with me, playing a game that would end with her near-certain victory.

I'd felt fear before; I had encountered plenty of it in my short-lived career as a Finder of Things Lost. Facing Andre in the Glass Slipper, I had felt fear; I had been concerned for my own life. But that was nothing at all like the anxiety that gripped me in my fetal repose in the shower. They only came out at night--but night was a recurring constant. Verene would be outside, hungry, in a matter of hours. So would her kin, the nameless cousin who'd invaded my life in such a hurry.

Both wanted to see me dead.

I ran a hand through my hair, plastering it back to the top of my skull.

At least, I thought, if I were dead I would be with Sarah.

The thought struck me as tiny and apologetic. I would be where Sarah was, true--but what was that place? Sarah knew I could see the dead if I wished; why, then, hadn't she come to me? To at least let me know it wasn't a place of pain, or of terror?

I began to weep. Small keening noises escaped me and echoed off the bathroom tile. I sounded like the whistling of wind across the lip of a hollow bottle. I felt no better.

A suspicion had lodged itself in my brain, one that Sarah's absence had drawn into sharp relief. Every day I worried at it as a child hovers over a mosquito bite, scratching it, pinching at it: the source of pain, of discomfort, of infection.
My wife still existed, somewhere. But I didn't think she loved me any longer.

I held myself and envisioned that place as cold and lonely. I remembered a story by Joyce Carol Oates, in which a man discovers death to be a place of a billion souls who can never touch, nor communicate; in the story, death is a place of eternal loneliness, an infinite remembrance of the simplest of human contacts.

It had chilled me, when I'd read it in college. Now, though, I wondered if perhaps that one little story had prophesied what so many sages and religions had not.

I imagined Sarah in that place.

I sniffled and turned off the water. I towelled myself off and then rubbed at the fogged bathroom mirror. Drafts tickled my bare flesh. I looked at my reflection.

My eyes were hollow, shocked, hurt. My skin was so pale as to be transluscent, except for the sickly redness of my eyelids. My hip was bruised; an ugly yellow stain the size of a grapefruit leered out from beneath my flesh. I remembered falling on the sidewalk in front of Verene.

I shook my head and wrapped the towel around my waist, and then stumbled back into the other room.

I dressed and watched the snow, wondering what I could do next that would save my life.

I thought of Sarah. I remembered the first time we'd made love, in a London hotel. It had been snowing outside, but the room was hot, the air close. We hadn't minded. I'd undressed her with shaking hands; my fingers slipped from the buttons
of her blouse a dozen times. I sat on the edge of the bed; she stood before me, smiling and stroking my hair as I worked at the buckle of her thin belt. I remembered the sweet feel of her as I lay next to her, that first time, of dry warm skin meeting down the length of our bodies, of the smell of her hair.

It had been my first time; I'd never allowed myself so close to a woman before Sarah. And before our union that day I'd felt nothing but panic; after, I felt infantile, rocked in the arms of something larger, my heartbeat pulsing in time with its own.

I remember kissing Sarah's belly, relaxing, understanding at last that I was loved.

I swallowed. The snow came down. Eventually I walked to the cabinet, poured myself another drink, and let my mind empty of everything but the taste of whiskey in my throat and the sight of snowflakes falling upon the city, upon the streets, upon the souls walking and playing and working and loving. I remembered another story, by another Joyce, where snow fell, and a lonely man watched it falling, upon all the living and the dead.

Life was a weight. I drank and closed my eyes and let it crush me, for a time.
Three hours later I sat at the island, finishing off the Maker's Mark and reading *The Big Sleep* for the eighteenth or nineteenth time. Philip Marlowe was wading through the story in his own inimitable fashion, pounding bad guys and thinking existential thoughts and never allowing himself cowed by it all. My kind of hero.

I sighed and closed the cover, marking my place with a Post-It note. I remembered when I had first begun my little business, years back, after Sarah's death; then I'd been able to pretend I was Marlowe, and Spade, and the Thin Man, or any other of the myriad detectives slouching through the streets of rough fiction.

I imagined Bogart sitting across the island from me, smoking and playing solitaire in grainy black and white. "You're taking it too hard, see," he mumbled, laying out a pattern of Bee cards. "You gotta learn not to care, kid, or it'll cost you."

Bogie looked up at me with a long face.
I held out my hands and let wavering light fill them. The warmth in my belly wanted to expel the booze, violently. "Extenuating circumstances," I mumbled, and smiled apologetically. "You never dealt with . . . with demons."

Bogie nodded sagely. "You got that right, kid," he said, and drank a shot of whiskey.

I heard a knock.

"Henry?" said a voice, from outside the door. "Is that you?"

Deborah.


I closed my eyes and swayed for a moment. Then I looked down at myself. I was dressed and rinsed off, if not clean.

"Hang on," I said. "Coming."

I walked to the door, pausing only once to regain my balance. I stared hard at the lock, remembering how it turned. My first guess was wrong, but the second slid it open.

I opened the door and saw Deborah standing at the top of the steps. Murderously cold wind, laced with snow and ice, immediately roared into the apartment. Deborah smiled at me. I winced at the cold.

"Come on in," I said.

She did so, pausing to kick snow from her boots. She was dressed in a thick grey parka and jeans. She closed the door and then took off her coat; underneath it she wore a creamy cable-knit sweater and, beneath that, some sort of blue undershirt
visible only at her neck, where the sweater dipped. She wore earmuffs of the same
color as her sweater.

"Hi," she said, breathlessly. "I don't suppose you've been out yet?"

I shook my head and leaned against a support pillar.

"I ran into Darla," she said, taking off the earmuffs. "She told me you were
sick. I thought I'd drop by and see if you needed anything."

"Darla believed me?" I asked. "She sounded . . . skeptical." I fumbled
"skeptical." It came out _skeptical_. I grinned.

Deborah shook snowflakes from her hair onto the rug inside my door.

"You're drunk, aren't you?" she asked.

"Uh-huh."

"You okay?"

I shrugged. "Had a rough night."

"Want me to go?"

"No," I said. I was sure of that. Being alone was too damned depressing.

"I'm not . . . not very good company, though."

"That's okay." She stepped forward and held out her arms. "Come here,
Henry."

I felt a momentary alarm, until I realized she only wanted to hug me. I
swallowed and stumbled forward, and then she was holding me. She was tall, only
a couple of inches shorter than I. I pressed my chin into the rough sweater at her
shoulder and sniffled. She smelled like soap and perfume. Her hair was wet and
cold against my cheek. She slid her arms around my neck.

"Need anything?" she said.

I pulled away, shaking my head. I tried to focus on her eyes. I saw in them what I used to see in Sarah's eyes: an almost palpable warmth.

I was, at that moment, filled with almost overpowering desire to make love to Deborah. Need anything, indeed.

I'd never felt it for her before, beyond the abstract longing for orgasm that most human males feel at most times. It took me aback; I stepped backwards, taking in a breath. Deborah cocked her head at me. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said, pushing the desire down with supreme difficulty. "I'm okay."

"Sure?"

"Yeah," I said. I was dizzy again. But I couldn't allow myself to sleep with Deborah, even if I thought that was permissible. More guilt was the last thing I needed.

I made my way to a chair and sat down.

"Want to talk?" she asked, sitting next to me.

"I don't think so," I said. "I just . . . I don't want to say anything, I don't want to do anything." I licked my lips. "I think I'm going to get even drunker. If you want to stay around for that, you . . . you can, but I don't know if it'll be pretty."

I leaned forward and massaged the back of my neck with my hands. The carpet I could see between my knees whirled, carousel-like.
"I'm fucked up," I said.

"I can see that," she said, quietly. "I'd like to help."

"I know," I said. I lifted my head and gazed at her. "You've always helped me. I don't . . . forget that."

"I don't want you to be alone," she said.

"I don't want to be alone, either." I frowned. "But I have to."

"But why--?"

I held up my hands. "Deb," I said. "I have to." I thought of holding out a hand and showing her why. I thought about revealing myself, or telling her about the Darkling. At the thought of it my stomach closed down into itself like an acidic fist. I wanted to vomit.

She gazed at me, her eyes wide and hurt.

"I'm sorry," she said, and looked at her hands.

"Please," I said. "Don't hate me. I have to fix myself. Nobody else knows how."

"Did Sarah?" she asked, softly.

I looked up at her.

"I'm sorry," she said, and covered her eyes with one hand. "God, Henry, I didn't mean--"

I shook my head. She'd nailed it. Sarah had known. Sarah had fixed me half a dozen times.

Deborah stood, her mouth pulled into a helpless frown.

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"I'm sorry," she said again.

"It's okay--"

"No, I'm just going to cry if I stay. I'll call . . . " she stopped and took a breath.

"I'll call you later, okay?"

I watched her put on her coat. "Okay," I said. I thought about standing and returning the earlier embrace. My limbs didn't move. I decided to place the blame on the alcohol, where it was convenient.

She put on her earmuffs. She turned and gave me a wan smile.

I smiled back.

"I want to help you," she said. "So very much."

Say something, I told myself.

My mouth remained closed, stuck in a tight smile.

Her smile faded. She opened the door. "I'll call," she said. The wind invaded, lifting my shirt at the waist. She turned. The door shut.

"Tough luck," Bogie said behind me. "Take a drink, kid."

"Good advice," I mumbled, and did just that.
The snow had stopped by the time evening descended. I woke up, twisted in my covers, near dusk, just in time to see the snow swirl away to nothing and the sun set over the Lake—it was just visible, at the far right of my windows. Its light—reddish and fiery—illuminated the snowbound city to the south, and for a moment I felt as though I'd been whisked from Bayport in Dorothy's balloon, and into some glittering city of ice and fantasy. The buildings looked unreal, and too glittery; they seemed to be made of burning crystal. I half-expected Smaug the dragon to rise above the State Trust building, belching flame and pursued by arrows.

Nothing happened. The city, still in the evening light, remained silent as darkness engulfed it like tidewater. Or the subtle flowings of a Darkling.

I waited in the soft darkness, shivering. I was exposed, but Paul would come soon, after he'd fed. Considering his preternatural speed, that wasn't a long time at all. I hugged myself, watching the lights of the city switch on building by building.

I imagined the soft living wave of the Darkling rising in front of my view, blotting it out, encasing me in shadow before it burst in to execute me.
My heart thundered. The alcohol I'd steadily consumed all day slowed my reflexes, left me as though in a dream, moving with imprecise jerks and too-late reactions to every shift in the light. It was out there, waiting for the time to end my life. If it came, it would do so now, while Paul was away.

I felt magic rising under my skin almost unconsciously, charging my veins, burning away my muddiness. I held my hands at the ready, knowing even as I filled with power that it would be useless. I would only stave off my eventual destruction by a matter of seconds, or minutes at the outside.

A moment later I heard a soft knock at my door. I jumped and nearly screamed.

I rose, turning my back to the windows with a shudder, and felt my way across the apartment to the door. A voice said, "It's Paul," as I set my hand on the knob.

I grunted and unlocked the door. Paul nodded to me and walked in, pausing, as Deborah had, to kick snow from his boots.

"Good evening," he said. He looked up at me. "You're very drunk."

"You read me like a book."

"I smell you, rather," he said, shrugging. "Anyone could."

I shut the door behind him, frowning. He surveyed the apartment. "There's a nosferatu outside, on the street," he said. "Watching."

I closed my eyes.
"I took extra time to move around him," Paul continued. "I don't think he saw me, but I know he heard my entrance."

I walked over to the window and looked out.

"Where?" I asked.

"He's standing to your left, down by the corner," Paul said, easing himself into a chair. "In a grey overcoat."

I shaded my eyes and leaned closer to the glass. I strained my eyes, searching for a figure in the newly-erupted night. I saw nothing, no one. My eyes picked out a faint flurry of movement near a streetlight, but when I focused my vision there I saw nothing but windborne snow swirling in the halo of sodium light.

"Hot damn," I muttered.

"He's harmless," Paul said. "He won't act alone. If he wishes to act."

I'm sure he meant to be reassuring, but his cool, even tone sounded like a death sentence in my ears.

"Why?" I asked. "Am I a threat? Why--?" I broke off. I felt hurt, like a child beaten on a playground for no other reason than that the neighboring bully felt like hitting someone. "Why now?" I said, in a high voice. My nose stung with impending tears, but I was damned if I was going to cry in front of Paul. "I almost got killed last night, and now this--"

I stopped, catching the note of hysteria in my voice. "I never wanted to hurt anyone."

"You haven't," Paul said.
"But why--?"

"Who knows?" he said, lifting his hands palm up. "You know better than anyone that things oftentimes . . . just happen." He placed his hands down on the arm of the chair.

"But--"

"I can guarantee," Paul said, "That trying to understand the workings of a Darkling's mind . . . or Ulrich's, for that matter . . . will get you nowhere."

I looked out the window again. I saw him this time, a thin rail of a figure in a flapping coat, standing at the edge of the circle of light cast by the streetlamp. He remained in view for perhaps a second, and then vanished. Snow swirled up in small clouds near the curb, disturbed by the speed of his departure.

"Shit," I said.

"There is no use in getting angry," Paul said, but I barely heard him. Anger swelled up in me like dark water from a blocked drain. I clenched my fists. Bogie was in me somewhere, nodding and smiling.

They were coming for me anyway, I thought. I might as well do something about it.

I turned and walked for the door, the light within me flashing in my veins and eyes.

I felt movement in the air around me, and then Paul was leaning on the door, his arms folded across his chest.

"Listen," he said. "Let him watch. For now. If you go out there, I'll be forced
"My fight," I said. "I'm not asking for help."

"If you kill him," Paul said, "Then two things will happen. First, you will enrage Ulrich, guaranteeing a tail each and every night. Second, you will assure yourself of destruction. No one slays a Brother and is permitted to live for long. Ulrich will have your heart within days--and if he comes at you with all of the bodies he controls you won't have a chance."

I stared at Paul, and he watched my face with maddening patience as I sorted out the logic. Finally I nodded and took a step back.

"Would I have a chance?" I asked. "Against all the Brotherhood?"

"Not much of one," he said.

"Paul," I said, "I think I'm going to get killed. Soon."

"It's possible."

"You're not very reassuring."

He shrugged.

I turned and made my way to the kitchen. I had a glass of wine there; the Maker's Mark had run out in the middle of Wheel of Fortune.

"It's just that it happened so quickly," I said.

"How long has it been since you've slept?" Paul asked.

My turn to shrug. I'd been unconscious for a while that evening, but I didn't feel like telling Paul that. I drank a sip of wine. My hands shook. Two images now floated in my head, intermingling, vying for dominance: the Darkling spilling into
the dark kitchen of Amelia's house, and the pale upturned face of the nosferatu
watching my form in the window. I knew then what it was like to be prey. I
wonder if that was how Amelia had felt, hiding in the small cold house, alone
except for a gun.

She had hidden herself, at least, from those who loved her. She had been
cared for, however perverse the affection.

Could I say that about my hunters?

"You need to rest," Paul said. "Sleep. I'll watch over you."

"I want to be awake," I said, softly. "In case they come."

"If they come, it really won't matter."

I turned and looked at Paul's face. His eyes and expression were inscrutable.

He would do his best, I knew. Maybe that was all I ever had to know about him.

There was a small measure of reassurance in that.

I realized then how little we knew about each other. Odd, that in the space of
just a few hours a nosferatu--a lapsed Brother--had become the stabilizing force in
my life. Even Deborah couldn't claim that, though it would have hurt her to know
so.

I nodded and set down my glass. Then I walked to my bed and lay down. My
head spun, and I closed my eyes, and the darkness came soon after.
Paul woke me later; I felt his hand on my shoulder and jumped from sleep.

My head still hurt.

"What--"

"The phone. I believe it's Rupert Fisk."

I blinked at him, and then half-lifted myself, swinging my legs off the bed.

"What's he want?"

"To speak with you."

"Yeah, I know that. Right." I stood. My tongue tasted awful and swollen in my mouth.

The apartment was dark, except for the ever-changing flicker of the television screen across the room from my bed. I glanced over at the digital alarm near my bed: one in the morning.

Fisk wanted to talk to me. I grimaced. I'd forgotten to read yesterday's paper; I had no idea whether the media had caught hold of the story of Amelia's murder. Was she important enough to warrant that sort of attention? Enough people are
killed in Bayport daily to make the reporting of violent death a happenstance occurrence. Her father was important, but the location of her death might relegate the whole thing to a paragraph-long blurb in the City-State section of the *Herald*.

And how had Fisk taken it? I hadn't even thought about it, and immediately felt guilty for that omission.

I walked across the apartment to the island and picked up the phone.

"Fisk?"

"Moquin."

His voice was low, even. If I hadn't known better, I would have guessed he sounded happy.

"Yeah."

"I need to talk to you."

"Shoot."

"I know what you are, Moquin."

"What?"

"I know what you are. I know you use magic. I know."

"Fisk, we've been through this--"

"And I know how Amelia died," he said.

I shut up.

"I know it was the Darkling that killed her."

Across the room, Paul frowned.

"You can't," I said.
"I do."

"How--?"

"Not now." He chuckled, and my heart sank. His voice wasn't just pleasant; it now bordered on good-natured madness. I'd heard the tone before, oftentimes in the bereaved, but that didn't make the hearing any more enjoyable.

And how did he know? How could he have found out?

He went on:

"You fucked it up, Moquin. You drew it there."

"Fisk--"

"Shut up. The way I see it, you owe me."

I was silent.

"I paid you a lot of money to find my little girl, and you led a fucking . . . monster . . . to her. You owe me, goddamnit."

"I told you," I said. "I'll give the money back."

"It's not worth what was done to her."

He laughed again. I thought of Amelia screaming.

I shut my eyes.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"I want you to meet me at Esteban's Bar, on the west side, tomorrow at nine. 3401 Berwin. We'll discuss it there."

"But--"

"Just tell me you'll fucking be there!"
"Yeah, sure. Esteban's. Berwin street." He hung up.

I looked at the phone, then at Paul.

"How does he know?" Paul asked.

"I don't know. He can't. It's not possible."

I sat at the island and swallowed something foul. Paul walked into the kitchen, his arms folded at his chest.

"Are you going?" he asked.

"I think I have to."

"But you don't--"

I looked up at him. "But he's right. I let his daughter get killed. I owe him this much. Maybe everything. I don't know."

"There was nothing you could do."

"Paul, I led it to her." I shook my head. "I watched her die. She couldn't even run, because I blinded her. And I watched it... destroy her. I didn't do a goddamn thing about it."

He nodded, his brows furrowed.

"I don't trust Fisk," he said.

"What can he do? Try to kill me?"

"Perhaps."

"I'll be careful."

"I'll go with you," Paul said.

"You don't have to."
"The Darkling is still out there."

We were both silent at the thought of that. I stood up and opened the refrigerator. I poured some Coke into a mug, followed by the last of the Maker's Mark.

"I think," I said, "That I have never been in more trouble."

Paul said, "I think you're right."

We sat at the island, not speaking.
Another day came and went. I woke up somewhere in the middle of it, alone.

I spent it at home; I couldn't bring myself to go into campus and present my sorry self to the future of America. I even spent a good fifteen minutes trying to recall which author my Early American Lit class was supposed to be studying, now that we'd finished with Emily Dickinson. I couldn't. I gave up and drank half a six pack of Bud Dry while watching soap operas.

That part of my mind which was on occasion analytical tried to make sense of Fisk's request. It went nowhere. Fisk had managed to obtain information that, as far as I knew, only Paul, the Darkling, and myself possessed. I knew Paul wasn't talking, and I doubt Fisk could have gotten within speaking distance of the Darkling before being devoured.

But he knew.

Had he followed us?
Possible, but unlikely . . . I'd called him as soon as Paul and I returned from Amelia's house. He'd been home. Paul had driven like a demon over snow and ice to return us safely. Could Fisk have managed it in the same time? And, even if he had been watching Amelia's house, more questions suggested themselves: how did he know what the Darkling was? How did he know where to find Amelia's house, after he'd hired me to do just that? And, most importantly, why? Why hire me? Why follow me at all?

I opened another can of beer. If I was going nowhere, I might as well try to obviate any rational thought between here and there.

And yet my mind muddily browsed through the events of the last few days, wincing at nearly everything it found: the encounter with Verene, talking to Andre, fighting with Amelia, the spirit ring in Amelia's kitchen and her subsequent death, the Darkling's attack and pursuit, the Brother watching the apartment, Deborah damn near telling me she loved me and my childish skittishness in response.

Henry Moquin: a prince of a man.

I wondered to myself if I could have screwed things up any worse if I'd tried. The answer, inevitably, was no.

My liquor cabinets were growing steadily empty. I swayed in front of the thinning shelves and looked through my stores: a bottle of vodka left, and some scotch I'd gotten for Christmas from my department head. I hated scotch.

That left the vodka.

I poured myself a screwdriver and sat at the island. A book lay open before
me. *The Big Sleep* had somehow been replaced by *The Maltese Falcon* over the last couple of days, though I couldn't remember how.

I picked up the book and drank and read until the vodka was almost gone, and Hammett's words blurred together into a greyish haze. I thought about Dash and Lillian Heilman doing it. I thought about me and Sarah doing it. I grew a lazy hard-on. The snow outside my windows glared at me. I blinked and slid off my stool and onto the floor. The wood was smooth and cool under my cheek.

I passed out, almost gratefully.

When I woke up it was almost dark. The TV was still on; I heard Alex Trebek saying something in pretentious French, followed by polite laughter from his audience. My head hurt. The polished surface of the floor was lit with reddish highlights from the gleam of the setting sun.

I winced and lifted myself weakly from the floor.

The sun was going down. Seven o'clock, more or less. That left me a couple of hours or so to prepare for the meeting with Fisk.

The rest of the vodka sat atop the formica island. I licked my lips and then shrugged; Paul could drive, when he arrived.

I carried the bottle with me into the restroom. I showered and shaved and took a long, acidic piss. I looked at my face; my eyes were surrounded by ashen hollows, and my cheekbones were dotted with little stippled patches of acne. I needed a haircut. And I found some grey strands intermixed with the rest, growing in at my temples.
God, I thought.

I held up my hands. My nails were ragged.

I cupped my hands in front of me. I closed my eyes. Concentration took some time, but at last I was able to push out and summon light. It filled my hands with a gentle radiance; it spilled out from between my fingers and cast odd shadows across the room.

It had been a few days. I hadn't used my magic at all since I'd cast handfuls of this ineffective stuff at the Darkling. A reasonable assumption, I'd thought: throw light at the darkness. Maybe I hadn't used enough to hurt it. It didn't matter. I was in no hurry to meet it again.

Something moved in the mirror, behind my head. I whirled, knocking the vodka bottle from the sink and onto the floor. It shattered, sending shards of glass and fluid flying around my ankles. I held up my hands, and instinct filled them with reddish-blue flame; I heard it crackle around my head. I was a fool. The sun had gone down while I stared at myself. I braced myself, expecting to see the black swelling of the Darkling's form behind me.

Instead, a spirit floated between me and the far wall, vague and barely visible in the light of my fires. So close I could have touched it.

I expelled my breath in a great burst and stared at it. My fire guttered away to nothing, and I slumped back against the sink, my heart galloping.

"Shoo," I said, waving my hands at it.

It remained.
I squinted at it, trying to guess its sex or identity. Nothing familiar. It seemed to be male; beyond that I could make no guesses as to its name or purpose.

"What are you looking at?" I asked. "Go away."

Nothing.

"So tell me," I said. "Have you seen my lost Lenore?"

It faded. My magic was no longer in use; thus, its interest was negligible.

"Sure," I said. "Stay and talk."

I rubbed at my chin and sighed. I wondered--as I had over and over again, late at night--why. Why. Why I could call forth light. Why the spirits came to look at it. When I was with Sarah, it hadn't mattered. But now . . . I called myself an atheist, but sometimes I wondered if the Christian God had looked down and decided that I should have some greater purpose, some greater pain to shoulder and carry. Or if It simply decided It hated my looks.

But that was silliness. I reminded myself, as I had always done, that life was never required to be sensible at all.

I licked my lips and looked down at my feet, at the spilled vodka.

If life was supposed to make sense, I would never have existed. I had enough proof.

I heard a knock on the wall, outside the bathroom. I turned my head, the fear spilling over into my throat again.

"Henry," Paul said. "It's me."

I sighed and grunted as he leaned into the bathroom. "You're drunk again,"
he said.

"Yeah."

He looked at the bottle on the floor. "Are you well?" he asked. "I smell fire. You used your magic?"

"Delusions," I said.

Paul cocked his head at me, looking as mutely quizzical as the spirits.

I only shrugged.

"Are you still going to meet Fisk?" Paul asked.

"Yeah," I said.

"Have you figured out how he knows?"

"No." I looked up at Paul. "You?"

Paul shrugged. "I'm not the detective," he said.

I chuckled; it felt good. Better than crying, anyway. I let it build, until I was spilling out laughter like a broken dam spills water.

"Jesus," I said, between fits. "And I am?"
Chapter Fifteen

I'd never heard of Berwin Street, nor of Esteban's, the bar at which Fisk waited for us. Paul had, though; I began to suspect he knew Bayport to its last alley and stop sign. He drove the LeBaron through the streets with nary a pause, nor a misstep on the ice.

The snow was worse than I'd been able to gauge from the window of my apartment; perhaps a foot and half had fallen two days before, and sporadic snowfall since kept it at about that level. The streets had become narrow, slick corridors between waist-high drifts left by the passage of city plows; these mounds were now dirty and grey, and seemed poisonous. The surface of the streets was buried beneath a good inch or two of thick slush; if I had driven, I would have most likely sent the LeBaron spinning sidelong into one of the drifts before long.

We drove in silence toward the West Side. I leaned my skull back against the headrest and tried to ignore the oncoming headache. Paul watched the road, but occasionally his hand darted into the case of cassettes between us, searching for new
music. We currently listened to Traffic: "The Low Spark of High-Heeled Boys." I didn't understand the title--probably a sixties/seventies drug thing--but the tune's mood was appropriate.

"This is Berwin Street," Paul said, finally, turning onto a narrow capillary of a road.

"Have you heard of the bar? Esteban's?"

"No. Look to the right; I'll take the left."

"Yessir."

The street was, aside from the omnipresent snow, unremarkable. Berwin seemed to be one of those holdovers from the late eighteen hundreds, when Bayport had first begun to resemble a city, rather than the trading outpost from which it had sprung. The buildings were only two or three stories high; all were made of brick, with identical fronts. Most of them had become bars or small groceries or video stores--the only three establishments that mean anything anymore.

Paul turned his head to scan his side of the street.

"Why here?" he asked.

"Hm?"

"Why did Fisk want you to meet him here?"

"It's hard to tell. He seemed . . . irrational."

Paul nodded. "This is near the Brotherhood's conclave," he said.

"What?" I asked, and turned to stare at him.
He reached forward and turned off the radio. "We're near," he said. "It's only a few blocks from here."

"Meaning what? Are we in danger?"

"No more so than anywhere else," Paul said. "Do you honestly think Fisk did it on purpose?"

"No."

"Then it's immaterial." He stopped at a red light. "The Brotherhood knows where we are. If they want either of us, they'll come."

I nodded, but my fears had hardly been assuaged. For the first time, I thought about pulling up stakes and leaving the entire goddamned city. It would certainly be the healthy choice.

But the irrational part of me--the part whose hackles rose at any sign of trouble, and which had, of all things, made me a reasonably successful detective for a time--told me I was a chickenshit coward who should face his problems head-on, and not even consider giving an inch of ground, come Brother Nocturne or Darkling.

I wondered vaguely if this was what schizophrenia was like.

But Paul was right for the nonce, my warring factions notwithstanding. I was getting panicky, and that was dangerous. Best to drive, and meet Fisk, and be calm.

We did.

We encountered Esteban's Bar three blocks to the south. It was a dive, of course--we had passed far beyond the realm of clean, chic taverns. This was a bar,

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and it held no false pretensions. The windows were boarded over by huge sheets of plywood and metal bars, and the doorway was equipped with a sliding metal barricade that could be pulled across whenever the place closed up. A sign above the door—lit by ordinary light bulbs—bore the bar's name, and a neon job in the window told us that this was one establishment that served Budweiser, goddammit. Not any of those wussy beers.

Paul pulled into a metered slot across the street and we got out.

I stood on the sidewalk for a few breaths, letting the cold air slash at my cheeks like a knife blade, invigorating me, sobering me. I sniffed at the wind, smelling the city, the Lake, the atmosphere. My eyes lifted to the shadowy tops of buildings and the darkened recessed alleys and doorways. I wondered if any of those pools of shadow would suddenly burst into motion, erupting out into the street with serpentine speed. I saw nothing.

Then again, if the Darkling wanted to hide, even Sam Spade would see nothing.

I resisted the urge to shiver, but only barely.

"Let's go," I said, more to myself than to Paul.

We crossed the street and walked up to the door of the bar. I opened it and held it as Paul walked in. I followed and ran into his back. My shoulder felt as though it had just rammed a concrete pillar.

"Danger," he said.

"Where?" I asked, immediately turning around to face the street, which was
as empty as ever. I found myself fervently wishing I'd stayed home, and had ignored Fisk entirely.

I took a deep breath and summoned my flame. I closed my fists around little bright points of heat, on the ready. My stomach churned.

"At the bar," Paul said. I turned and glanced past him, catching a look at his face as I did so. He didn't seem angry on the surface, but I thought I could sense it underneath, burning out of the small steel vault where he kept his emotions.

"What?" I asked, following his gaze. There wasn't much to the place. A bar ran along the length of the far wall, made of scarred and polished wood. Tables dotted the floor between it and the door. Dim lights in recessed sockets in the ceiling. Another Bud sign in neon above the bar.

The bartender was a pale kid with an L. Dever Community College sweatshirt on. His eyes were red, and he seemed ready to drop. The rest of the place was nearly empty—a couple of sleepy-eyed men sat in the far corner, and an elderly man in a fedora sat next to a jukebox in the corner, nursing a tall glassful of pale brown fluid. And then I saw, even as Paul continued:

"A Brother," he said.

Fisk sat at the bar, next to a man whose back was turned to us. Fisk was explaining something to his companion in a lawerly way, gesturing with one broad hand and leaning on the bar with the other arm.

"With Fisk?" I said.

"Yes."

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Fisk looked up and saw us. He nodded acknowledgement, and then said something to the man next to him.

The man turned.

He was indeed a Brother; even I could see that. Something old and wise in his gaze reached out across the space between us and pulled at me like a hand grabbing at my collar, demanding attention. He was thin and tall, with a full head of curly brown hair and a thick moustache. His skin was dark and tanned tough, as though he'd spent a lifetime in the sun. He looked forty-five or fifty, but I knew, seeing him, that I was facing an old Priest--this one had been on the earth a long, long time. His eyes sparkled, and I knew he had me sized up from top to bottom. I also knew he could probably smell me from where he sat.

"Ulrich," Paul said, tersely.

Ulrich. The leader of all nosferatu, and High Priest of the Brotherhood Nocturne. I felt my bowels loosen.

Fisk waved us over.

"Is it a trap?" I asked.

"I don't think so. I didn't sense him until we were close, though. Who knows?" Paul's voice was clipped. I glanced at him and saw his jaw working almost imperceptibly. He'd told me very little about Ulrich, but I could guess the particulars. Paul hated all of the Brotherhood, and this thing at the bar was its guiding hand and mind.

Ulrich stood. He looked at me and spoke. His voice was quiet and soft, and it
crossed the twenty feet between us like an arrow. Yet it sounded as though he'd just whispered in my ear; I shuddered and resisted the urge to wipe at the gooseflesh underneath my overcoat sleeves.

"You are in no danger, Dr. Moquin. Come join us." He turned his gaze to Paul. "You, too. I shan't hurt you, Paul."

"No," Paul said, standing still and straight. "You shan't."

Ulrich frowned, but then nodded.

"Come on," I said, under my breath. "Let's get this over with."

"I have my reservations."

"I know. You can stay here by the door if you want."

Paul glanced at me. "No. I'll stay by you. He's a good liar." He licked his lips.

I walked across the bar and stopped a few feet away from Fisk and Ulrich. "Good evening," I said, softly, and clasped my fingers behind my back. Maybe that way Ulrich wouldn't see them fidgeting.

Ulrich stood. He was taller than me by perhaps a foot. I kept my eyes on his, but I was forced to crane my head to do so.

"Well met," he said. "I've heard much about you, Dr. Moquin."

"Likewise," I said, my voice thin and slight in my own ears. Ulrich's eyes burned out at me like guttering flames; his gaze was as analytical and penetrating as that of a jungle cat sizing me up for a chase. "Not all of it is good," I added, but the words seemed frail.
He nodded again, and then smiled. His eyes glittered. This close, I could detect an old, spicy odor to him. It wasn't a modern deodorant or cologne; this was the scent of old magic, the type of aroma I'm sure the ancient Egyptian mummy-makers must have smelled on their hands at the end of a long day. The kind of smell that barely masks the sweeter rot of death and fresh blood.

"We have much to discuss," Ulrich said. "We might at least be civil."

He sounded reasonable. I was reminded of Verene; both creatures had the uncanny ability to seem perfectly logical.

I shook my head, dragging my eyes from his. "I know what you are," I said. "I can't be civil to you."

Ulrich's eyes hardened. The good-natured superiority was gone, only to be replaced by a certain wariness I'm sure he wasn't used to feeling. I wondered if perhaps I'd made a mistake. Then again, as a little kid I used to go poke at wasp's nests with sticks just to see what would happen.

Behind Ulrich, at the bar, Fisk watched the two of us, his eyes darting back and forth between us with more than idle curiosity.

"Very well," he said. "Have a seat at the table, Dr. Moquin." He pointed at a booth up against the wall, isolated from everyone.

"We'll stand," Paul said. He stood a few feet behind me, his face impassive.

Ulrich smiled.

"As you wish. I must insist, though, that you two have nothing to fear from me."
"We won't sit," Paul said.

Fisk stood up, and I took a good look at him for the first time. He was paler than I remembered, and his girth seemed flabby, rather than hard and muscular. His eyes were hollow and elementally disturbed. My heart tightened a little.

"Moquin," he said. "Tell your friend to cut the shit."

I continued to watch him. His face, now unhealthy and frightened, bore more than a passing resemblance to Amelia's. "Right," I said, swallowing. "Say what you have to, Fisk."

Fisk swallowed, and directed a nervous glance to his right, at Ulrich. Ulrich frowned and settled himself again at the bar. The bartender cast us a frightened, bewildered look from the opposite end of the bar. The poor kid probably thought a drug deal was going down. If only it were that tame.

"You owe me one," Fisk said, his eyes finally resting on me. "I'm going to suggest to you a way to set things even."

I nodded, dreading his proposal.

"I want to see my daughter again."

I took a deep breath.

"She's dead," I told him. "That's it, Fisk. I saw her. The police probably showed her to you, too." I held up my hands. "She's dead."

"Right," he said. He laughed and rubbed at his left temple with long, broad fingers. He had an ugly class ring on his left hand; it glinted dully in the dim light.

"Right. Dead."

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"As soon as I heard what had happened," he said, watching me, "I began to think about a way to contact her. Once I would have given up. But I know now that these things can be accomplished. I know there's magic in the world now." He smiled up at me. His eyes were wet, mournful. He was crazy—at the very least, as crazy as I was.

"I did some digging," he said. "The best investigative work of my life, Moquin. I came across some people who knew about the Brotherhood. And I thought, if there's anything to find about the line between life and death, then I'll find it with the vampires."

Ulrich held up a hand.

Fisk nodded. "Sorry. Nosferatu, I mean. Anyway, I went to them. Ulrich was the one who found me. I ... I did some talking, and I made him listen to my story."

I could guess what had really happened. Translation: *I pleaded for my useless life before this monster could tear out my throat.*

Ulrich spoke. "His plight caught my attention," he said. "I realized that Rupert and I could help each other. We have mutual interests." He smiled and crossed his arms across his chest. "I'm a scientist of sorts, Moquin. You and Paul and I move in spheres that most men . . . cannot fathom." He grinned. "We have access to great power."

"Right," I said.

He ignored me. "I have always looked into the Land of the Dead," he said. "I
find it fascinating. I was brought up to the brink of it many years ago, when I was made." He glanced at Paul, half-smiling. "As all of us were. The Brothers can look into that Realm whenever we wish. It is there we seek our God." He pursed his lips. "I have dedicated my life to opening a gateway between the Lands of Life and Death. It is... you might say it is my calling."

"I might," I said, with false bravado. His words were chilling me deep inside, in places I didn't know I had.

He leaned forward. "I've found a way across."

We were all silent at that. I swallowed.

"He found a way," Fisk echoed. "And we've made a deal."

Ulrich nodded. His eyes had fastened on to mine. They were almost black in color. I thought about the stolen blood roaring through his veins, and I tried to resist a shudder.

"Rupert wants to see his daughter," Ulrich said, in a low voice. "That is understandable. They parted in anger, and he wants to tell her he loves her. I am not without compassion for such a request." He smiled. "All men have wanted to do the same, when a loved one passes across." He found my eyes again. I was smart enough to know what we were talking about.

"I told Rupert I would help him," he continued. "I have an interest in acquiring land from the city, for the Brotherhood. Rupert will help me iron out... the legality... of such a maneuver, and in return I will help him see poor Amelia."

Fisk bit at his lip.
"But..." Ulrich said, smiling. "We need your help."

I stared at him.

"I cannot enter the Shadowed Realm," Ulrich said. "I have cheated death once; another journey would destroy me. I take the blood every night for that very reason; without it death would overcome me. Paul and I walk a fine line—as he might tell you. We walk the line of shadows, and only supreme effort keeps us from succumbing to the pull of the dark."

Paul said nothing.

"Of course," Ulrich said, "Rupert cannot enter, either. He is a mortal man, and when mortals cross they do not come back." He chuckled and stroked his moustache. "Rupert tells me this is no matter, but I feel it is. I need him alive to finish our bargain. So that leaves us with a dilemma, eh? Who can safely cross into the realm of the Dead? Who can go and survive the pull of death?"

"No one," I said. "It's impossible."

"Wrong," Ulrich said, and smiled. "You can."

I stared at him. Everyone else stared at me.

"Explain yourself," I said.

"Easy enough," Ulrich said. His voice went up a notch, assuming a commanding didacticism. "I've been watching you. You are a source of great concern to me. You are a mortal, and yet you can use as tools both the forces of light and heat. I have pulled out handfuls of hair simply trying to classify you." He frowned. "And one day it simply occurred to me: you are just like us. A
genetic aberration, perhaps, or an experiment by some God or another. Perhaps even mine." He grinned, looking like nothing so much as a hungry wolf.

"You walk the line of shadows, Moquin. Like me. Like Paul. You are somewhere beyond humanity, between Life and Death."

"That's ridiculous," I said.

"Then why can you see spirits?" Ulrich asked, in a near-whisper.

The fear came to me like a lover. It clung to me and kissed the back of my neck with cold lips, making my skin crawl and spasm. Murderous bastard or not, it seemed Ulrich was telling me the truth. And it hurt me inside, wrapping a hand around my innards and squeezing until I wanted to gasp.

Ulrich steepled his fingers and looked at me over them. "I was thunderstruck when I realized this," he said. "Just as you are now, I imagine. But I put it past me, because I knew then of what you are truly capable."

I said nothing. My hands hung limp at my sides.

"I can take you to the border of death, Moquin," Ulrich said. "And you can cross."

"I'll die," I said, in a whisper.

Ulrich grinned. "No," he said. "You shan't."

"How--"

Ulrich advanced a step, still smiling; I took one involuntary step back. More than anything else, I wanted to be away from him, out of the range of his dry grasp.

"Because you can take your own light with you," he said. "You have soul to
spare. You can wrap yourself in it and travel untouched in shadow. You may visit
the dead—provided that you allow me to guide you to their door. Neither of us can
go alone—but together we can accomplish it. You can contact Amelia, and Rupert
can see her from the border."

"No," I said, shakily. "I refuse."

"Moquin," Fisk said. "You owe me."

"I don't owe you a goddamned thing," I whispered. "Paul, let's go."

"Think about it," Ulrich said, as I turned. "Just think about it, Henry. You'll
know. After all these years of wondering—of fearing the other side—now you'll have
a chance to know what it is. To see it for yourself."

"I don't want to do—"

"Don't lie to us," Ulrich told me. "I know you inside and out, Moquin. I
know what you want. You're afraid and you're desperate to know. It's a
wonderment to me that you've never taken your own life, just to see what happens.
But you were too afraid to do even that. Now I have a safe way for you to go."

"No."

"And you have a chance to see your wife again." Ulrich said, softly.

I began to tremble.

"Henry," Paul said, and put a hand on my shoulder. "Henry, let's go."

"We all gain from this," Ulrich continued. "We all win. It's worth it,
Moquin."

"No," I said again.

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"Do it," Ulrich urged. "Do it and I'll see to it you have the Brotherhood's full protection for the rest of your life. The Darkling won't be able to move within a mile of you." He took another step.

I stopped, my jaw slack.

"Henry," Paul repeated, and I heard urgency in his voice. He tugged at me.

We began to retreat. I walked backwards to the exit, my eyes locked upon Ulrich's.

"Think it over," Ulrich said. "I'll call you tomorrow evening. We'll do it then if you agree."

"No chance," Paul said. We were near the door.

"Moquin," Ulrich said. "One more thing."

I stopped again. I was without will. My strength had vanished into the High Priest's stealthy logic and crystalline stare.

He strode forward and reached a hand into the vest pocket of his suit. It emerged with a thick envelope. I cringed away from his looming form, the smell of him, his deep-set eyes.

He extended the envelope to me.

"Take it." He smiled. "But don't let it come to this, Henry. You're smarter than that."

I reached out a numb hand and took the envelope.

"Goodbye," he said. His smug smile was back in place, and as radiant as ever. Paul pulled me through the doors without another word. I submitted, close
to tears. We stepped over the snowdrifts and then crossed the cold street. Slush trickled into my shoes. Paul unlocked the door of the LeBaron and folded me into the passenger side. He crossed to the driver's side.

Then he started the car, and we drove off with all the power the car could give us.

I looked at the envelope in my lap. I didn't want to open it, but I had to.

*Don't let it come to this,* Ulrich had said.

A threat. But I had to look.

"It's a trap," Paul said. "You can't submit. Ulrich has his own plans."

I opened the envelope. A sheaf of paper was folded up inside. I withdrew it.

An address was written on the first page, in a thin script: 1431 Almaden Lane, Apartment 4, Bayport.

Deborah's address.

"God," I said.

Paul looked over at, and his face grew grim.

I looked below the address, and I began to understand what was at stake. Not just Deborah—as if the threat of harm to her wasn't bad enough. But Ulrich knew I could move her away from him, to safety, given a day.

That's why he'd included a single sentence at the bottom of the page that summed it all up:

*One way or another, Henry, you will cross at my hand.*

And I knew then, with a cold stone of fear in my heart, that Ulrich had won.
He had me by the throat; the Brotherhood would declare war if I declined.
"I want you to know," Paul said, as we pulled up outside of my apartment, "that you have my help in this. Ulrich does not frighten me."

"He frightens me," I said. "He's sharp."

"It's an animal cunning. You have as much capability as he does."

I grunted.

"Paul," I said. "Do me a favor?"

"Yes--"

"Go watch over Deborah. I'm worried about her."

He watched me from the driver's seat, his eyes occasionally swiveling to face mine. "Is that such a good idea?" he asked.

"I don't know and I don't care. Just . . . please, Paul, just do it. Ulrich won't let anything happen to me now, if he wants my help this badly." I rubbed at my jaw; rough stubble grated at my fingers. "I'll let the fucking Brotherhood work for me for
Paul arched his eyebrows.

"Please," I said. "Just drop me off. I . . . I need to be alone, I think."

"Do you?" He glanced at me. "I wonder."

"That's where you're wrong," I said, and looked at him.

He gazed at me, his face composed. As always. I felt sweat dripping down my temples; my fears were carving me a new expression every few minutes, but Paul . . .

Paul was eternally the same; he had made his choice, and this was the price: stasis. Was that what I faced, in dying? An eternity of inflexibility? Of nothing but nothing?

"I might die tomorrow," I said.

"Yes," he said.

I nodded, and then I opened the door and left the car. "Watch her until morning?" I asked. "Please?"

He faced me gravely through the open door. "Yes."

"Thank you, Paul," I said, quietly.

He nodded. I closed the door, and he opened his. He emerged and was gone. I thought I saw a shadow across the street tremble for a moment with his passing, but I could not be sure. The city opened up and swallowed him, and I was left on an empty sidewalk, holding my keys in one hand and trying not to cry.

I unlocked the gate with still-trembling hands. Then I made my way up the stairs and into bed.

[160]
Chapter Seventeen

I woke up later. In the dark.

The sleep had been exquisite; my dreams had kept their distance, allowing the comfort of nothing to slip around me like a shroud. But then I was flung from it, aware of the rough fabric of my pillowcase against my cheek and an agonizing slow throb in my temples.

I grunted and rolled over. As always, I struggled to place myself in time; I could not stop my hand from sliding out across the sheets of my bed, in search of Sarah beside me.

Nothing.

I blinked and slowly opened my eyes, facing the wall. My prone form was silhouetted against it, outlined by some sort of tremulous light, like that of a candle flame. I opened my eyes wider, and realized I was not alone.

I whirled as fast as I could, throwing myself off the bed and onto the floor. My shoulder struck it, but adrenaline had taken over my body; I barely felt the impact. I rolled and summoned power to myself, wrapping myself in flame. My passage set
the floor on fire; small tongues guttered along the floorboards.

I stood, surveying the place, ready to bathe it all in heat if I had to.

Nothing. And yet there had been light—pale blue, and all a-flicker.

I sighed, realizing what it was: a spirit, just like the one which had visited me in the bathroom earlier. It hovered near the kitchen, all but invisible when seen by the brighter light of my flames. I extinguished myself, and with a wave of my hand erased the flames on the floor. Smoke curled around my ankles, lazy and acrid.

Darkness again. I stood in it, panting, feeling my heart slowly calm itself. I swallowed, letting my eyes adjust.

Faint blue light bobbed in the corner, indistinct as always. Two pale eyes gazed at me, still and deep.

"You frightened me," I said aloud. I grunted. "You made me burn my floor."

I wondered if it understood anything I said. If it did, it didn't seem to care; its reaction was no reaction.

I walked back to the bed and sat on the edge, and then let my forehead rest against my palm. My head hurt terribly. I began charting my steps to the kitchen and the liquor cabinet.

The light moved closer.

I raised my head and looked at it.

Its form wavered as it moved, as though its passage through the air disrupted whatever hold it kept on substantiality. It moved like mist moves, struggling against a light breeze. But as it came nearer, I recognized the shape, the gentle
curvature to its outline.

It had been a woman.

I swallowed, and the crazy irrationality of wishes blossomed in my head and heart. I peered through the shadow, at the spirit, trying to discern features in the incandescent sphere that was its head.

Its form blurred and wavered; the light it cast grew brighter, and then dimmed. Its outline began to tighten. I opened my mouth to speak and could not. My mouth was dry. I heard nothing. My vision narrowed on the spirit's face as it pulled together and formed, in a sculpture of gentle light, the features of my dead wife.

Sarah.

She drifted nearer to me, and I watched with incredulous eyes as she extended a misty hand. I saw its shape and recognized it; I'd stroked that arm a thousand times in life, marvelling at its fine shape, at its texture, at its warmth.

I could not move. She stopped two feet from me, hovering only inches above the floor, within my reach, should I wish to touch.

A buzzing sounded in my ear. I rubbed at it, until I saw that the spirit's mouth—a shadowed depression in the brightness of her—was moving.

"Sarah," I whispered. "Oh God . . ."

Her mouth moved again.

"I can't hear you," I said. I had begun to weep. "I can't hear you."

She moved closer. Her face tipped close to my head; I saw the delight in her
glowing expression. I held my breath.

And I heard her voice; faint, and echoing within my ears:

*Henry.*

"Yes," I whispered.

*Henry, I love you.*

My heart exploded.

"I... I love you too," I said, in a cracked voice. Tears cascaded down my face.

I felt as though I had done the impossible; I had fulfilled the childhood wish of waking from a dream only to find it real. My fantasies had been granted to me, and with them, the world.

She loved me.

She could still love. Death granted her that, still.

She floated closer. Her voice, impossibly small, tickled at my ear:

*Henry... make me real.*

I could only stare, open-mouthed.

*Hold me... bring me back...*

The spirit extended her arms.

I could not think. My synapses had filled my head with nothing but the sight of her before me, stretching pale blue arms to me and begging for a touch I could not give.

But I could not deny her. Never. No more than I could turn my thoughts inside myself and shut off the beating of my heart.
I lifted my arms.

She moved between them, smiling.

And we touched, such as it was.

For one perilous, gloriously strange moment, she completely enfolded me; I felt her form around me like droplets of chill rain, as refreshing as the spray of a hose on a hot day, and just as shocking to the skin. I tingled across every square inch; my hairs stood on end.

I was surrounded by glimmering light. I held my hand in front of my face and stared at it. My fingers were pale, the nails dark in this strange illumination. I took a breath; the air prickled against my mouth and throat like carbonation.

And I felt life. All around me, like a swarm of small burning insects.

I heard her laughing.

I wept and laughed with her, shaking and trembling in her substance.

The light grew heavy; I opened my eyes and saw it brightening. Electrical currents charged across my skin, and I gasped. Sparks jumped and dodged between my outstretched fingers. I moved my hand and strands of her caught on them; they stretched with the movement as though I had pulled at taffy.

I felt light flowing from my skin; my light, my magic. I felt it spiralling around my torso, and up, and away--into her, it seemed.

Was that the secret, then? Did she need my magic to live?

I opened my pores and let her have her fill. The air around us burned with all the incandescence I could muster. Her laugh was the sound of a baby's birth--
both pained and alive, moreso than anyone.

And then she pulled away.

The smile on her face was both joyous and triumphant. As I watched, I saw why: before my eyes, Sarah was becoming flesh.

Her body coalesced from the mist it had been, swirling and stretching and then becoming firm. I felt like a God before her, watching a galaxy form out of nothing; for a moment she was merely a whirling pool of light and gaseous matter that heated, condensed, and became real—a galaxy in miniature.

Then she stood before me, her hair swirling about her head with its own life. Her skin faded from blue to pink, and it pulsed with the ebb and flow of bloodlife. Her eyes flashed at me: winking sapphires. Her mouth was smiling, smiling at me.

I covered my mouth to hold in the sobs.

"Thank you," she in a voice soft and real, so real. I barely recognized it; for a long while, I'd heard it nowhere but the echoing chambers of my own suspect memory.

"Oh God," I said. "Oh God. Sarah—how?"

She took a step forward. I heard the gentle sound of her footfall against the floor. Shadows moved across her body. Sweat sheened her skin. She was naked, and I let my eyes fall from her face to the form I had been allowed to touch so many countless times in life; the form I had kissed and praised and entered and tasted. Slender, curved, perfect: my wife.

She reached out a hand. She let it touch my face.

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Hot. Soft. I tilted my cheek into her touch, and wondered in that moment how I had allowed five years to pass in such utter loneliness. How I could have gone so long without a touch like this—how, in fact, I had been able to survive at all.

I remembered a day long before: Deborah stroking my hair; touching me; kissing me . . .

I turned away from the memory and gripped Sarah more tightly.

"I wished . . . I wished for you," I said, hoarsely. "You came true."

"You sound surprised," she said. Her fingers traced my lips, my nose, my eyebrows. "You know magic. Wishes can come true."

I nodded. It had never occurred to me before. And, hearing her say it, the words made perfect sense. Of course. Wishes.

Her fingers in my hair.

"I want to hold you," I said. "May I?"

She smiled, gently.

"Of course."

She sat down upon the cover, next to me. The bed squeaked with her weight. Her naked thigh touched mine. I put my arm around her shoulders, hesitantly. She leaned her head against my shoulder and curled her arms around my waist. She was warm. A warm body next to mine. God. I slid my hand down her smooth back. Her hair smelled clean, and organic, not as though it had just grown in the space of seconds.

"It's been so long," she whispered. Her voice caught. "Henry. Kiss me."

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I tilted my head and met her lips as they rose towards mine. The kiss was soft and wet and wondering, just like the first one we'd ever shared.

My heart thundered in my chest. I felt nothing but the contact between us; the touch between our separate skins.

"Henry," she whispered. "Please. Make love to me."

I nodded, breathing into her neck. I was aroused to the point of violent explosion.

"It's not too soon?" she asked.

"No. Oh no."

"I love you," she said.

Something in her voice made me catch my breath. Something about it had changed, inexplicably. She sounded so strange; her voice was new, an oddity. I kissed her cheek, and she pulled us prone to the bed. Her hands rubbed my back. I wore only underwear, and her hands travelled downward. Her fingers hooked themselves underneath the waistband and pulled. I managed to wriggle out of the garment, lifting my hips away from her.

I kissed her jaw where it met her ear, where I knew I could elicit a sigh.

I heard nothing.

"You're beautiful," she said. Her voice echoed in my head, naggingly. I tried to brush it away. I didn't want to think. Not now. I simply wanted to live, as simply and as perfectly as I could, with her.

"I love you."
She guided me down on top of her with gentle pressure. Her legs moved apart and she circled my waist with them. I moaned. She was open to me; I slid forward and felt the joy of being surrounded by her, by all of that marvelous heat.

"Henry," she whispered.

I moved.

Henry, echoed her voice.

I thought about the first time I'd seen her. Ever. In an Oxford nightclub, while I was there vacationing from London. I saw her cross to the bar and order herself a drink. She wore a white skirt and blouse. I remember thinking: that is the perfect woman. I had never seen anyone so inexplicably beautiful. She glanced at me, and her eyes seemed to catch on my face. I gathered my courage and managed to walk down the length of the bar, to where she stood. I took a breath.

I asked her to dance.

Motion; rocking, back and forth, back and forth.

"So strong," she said, beneath me.

"Yes, thanks," she'd said, out of breath. "I'd love to." Then a pause. "You're American, aren't you?"

Her accent had tickled at me, inside. It had been the element that had pushed my attraction for Sarah Davenport into the realm of fantasy. The accent.

"So strong," she said.

Even five years in America hadn't erased that lilt in her voice. Not this much.

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I smelled perfume rolling up from beneath me, delicate and overpowering. Hypnotic. I remembered a night long ago when a woman had smelled that way. I remembered a time in the distant past when I'd given her a rose, its blossoms fashioned from gentle light.

I felt pressure at the point of our union, growing stronger. And then, faintly, the beginnings of pain.

I did not think. I caught myself on fire and let light, searingly bright, explode from every millimeter of my skin. I opened my mouth and let fire and rage blow out like a dragon's holocaust. Inside her, I jetted fire.

Verene began to scream.

I pushed myself away and doused the bed in flame.

I heard her wail at me: "You bastard!"

A part of my mind folded up into itself and died. I was a hundred years old, a thousand. The tonnage of years multiplied itself and pressed at my shoulders with firm hands.

Verene stood near the bed. I had burned the Sarah shell from her, and now only a blackened, smoking form faced me, staring with blazing red eyes. Its hair still burned.

She smiled. I heard her skin crack with the effort. Smoke rose from her cheeks in rapid waves.

"I almost had you," she said.

"Get out. Or I'll kill you."

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The smile widened.

"You'll never do that, my love. Not ever."

I let myself shine, blindingly bright. She squealed and covered her eyes with the charred stumps of her hands. Part of me nodded with satisfaction: they could be hurt, if I hit them hard enough. At least in human form.

"Stop it!"

"Get out."

Her form began to break apart. I took a step backwards as the part of her that was recognizeably human fell away in smoldering chunks, and then vanished. Inky blackness rose from the core of her disintegrating human shape, pulling together in a terrible ebon cloud that filled half the room. Its substance was vast, and utterly familiar.

It arched above me, a mounstrous tendril of shadow.

*I love you*, it said.

I filled my hands with light.

And I saw, through the window behind the beast, the city slowly darkening, obscured by something rising in front of it and blotting out its lights. A shape, indiscriminate and black as the bottom of a deep well. It arched before the window, and Verene turned to face it, her throat warbling in fear and rage.

The two Darklings faced each other through the wall of glass.

*Leave him alone*, Verene said. *He is mine.*

The beast outside gathered itself, pulling into a tighter, more compact form.
Then, with a siren-like cry, it flung itself at the window, shattering the glass. It rolled into the apartment, an icy black cloud straight from the silt of Styx, bringing with it the night's chill and a discomfort far more palpable than that of cold air on naked flesh.

I felt a hand on my shoulder.

I turned, shrieking, and nearly let loose my flame upon Paul. He stood behind me, his eyes riveted upon the two beasts facing each other only ten feet away.

"Hurry," he said. "Get away. It will be morning soon."

The Darklings reared and then met, circling each other and twining tendrils of darkness together. Their battle cries shrieked out at us with deafening force.

Paul pulled me to the door; I let myself be guided. He paused and picked up the clothing I'd pulled off before bed, and with that we left the apartment, stumbling down the stairs to the street. Behind me I heard an explosive crash.

"The car," he said.

"No keys."

He grunted and shattered the driver's side window with the flat of his hand. He reached inside and unlocked the doors, and then bundled me into the back. I was awake now, and alert, and dove for the floor. The door shut behind me, and then the car was in motion.

I dressed quickly. When we had travelled for perhaps five minutes, I sat up and looked out the rear window. A solitary taxi followed us, but nothing else. I turned to Paul.
He'd stripped the steering column to start the car. Glass littered the seat. He stared out at the road with no expression. The speedometer's needle hovered at sixty-five.

"Thank you," I said.

"You're welcome." His eyes flickered to me. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'll make it."

I looked at myself. I was healthy and alive. Secure in my flesh. I did not bleed.

But my soul had crumpled upon itself. I thought of Sarah's face, and how I had been able to touch it.

A mass rose in my throat. Burning tears squeezed out from my eyes. Paul did not look at me; I was glad.

The car slowed, and then stopped.

"We're away," he said. "Dawn will come in a few seconds. I have to find shelter."

"Okay," I said, and wiped at my streaming eyes.

"Will you be all right?"

"I don't know," I told him. "I can't tell."

He turned and gazed at me. "What happened?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"What happened?"

"Paul, please. Don't ask."
He considered it, and then nodded. He opened the car door.

"Don't go home," he said. "It might be dangerous."

"All right."

"Deborah is fine. She slept the entire night."

I smiled. "Good," I said.

"Can you go to her for help?"

"I don't know."

He nodded again, and then craned his head to look at the sky.

"I must go," he said. He smiled briefly at me, and then vanished. I saw a pale smear scuttling off through an alley, almost too fast for my eyes to follow.

And then, once again, I was alone.

I sat in the back of my car, shocked and shivering, until the dawn came, and after.