

THINGS LONG FORGOTTEN: A COLLECTION

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“Willing Sacrifice”

They give her a lukewarm cheeseburger and watery fountain soda. She nudges them with disgust. It’s her last night on Earth the least they could’ve done was splurge on some fries.

“Cutbacks,” they had mumbled, sliding the food through a slot at the base of the door.

She picks up the cheeseburger, balancing the cool fast-food concoction in her palm before throwing it against the wood. It splatters into nothing but red, white and gray matter. The grease drips in gouges made by the room’s frantic former occupants. “I want to call my mom!” she screams.

A static click as the intercom system blazes to life. “Your mother has already been alerted to the honor that has befallen you, Ms. Schafer,” the crackling voice echoes from the corners of the room.

“This is a mistake,” she cries.

“Amelia, there’s no…”

“Emily.”

The intercom clicks, but the persistent static proves that it’s still on. “Excuse me?”

“My name’s Emily. You’d think you’d at least have gotten my name right...since this obviously isn’t a mistake.”

“Ah, here it is...forgive me, I misread the file.”

Emily sighs, glaring into the camera that adorns the wall. “Right.”

“Listen here, young lady,” the voice drones on, “we’ve had about enough of your lip. I don’t think you understand just how special you are. Now, enjoy your soda and relax. Rilius will appear shortly.”

She grabs the soda, wondering for a moment if this should join its compatriot as a door adornment. A beer would’ve been better, or maybe something a little stronger. Her mom’s preference was towards vodka, but Emily was more fascinated with the warm amber glow of bourbon. Hell, if she’s old enough to play the part of a sacrifice, she should be old enough to drink.

“My dress it too small,” she snaps. Her invisible companion is gone; obviously he found something better to occupy his time.

Rilius, the Dark God, the all-powerful protector, had been making an annual appearance every year for as long as anyone could remember. And every year, he would demand a sacrifice as compensation for the protection he offered against the Dark Army.

“Isn’t the Dark Army His army?” she had once asked a teacher. “So we need

protection from Him? Doesn't that seem like some sort of gangster mentality?"

That statement had earned her a weeklong suspension.

Each year around spring, His priests would gather together to discuss which girl would best suit their Lord's cravings. It had been a practice dating back centuries. The girl and her family would be removed to the lavish estate of Rilius's order, where the girl would live in luxury for six months. Then there would be a feast, for which the preparation would take up most Reality-TV slots for a month.

As Emily began to near her sixteenth birthday, she didn't give the annual raffles any thought. Not being blonde, skinny or perky, she thought she was in the clear; shame about that tiny virginal loophole.

Emily finds a section of the wall that still has a bit of its original yellow tinge, an area that has yet to be contaminated by the dark burn marks, or the rust colored smears that decorate what at one time must have been a wine cellar. She sips her beverage. Of course it would be diet, because at this point she's so concerned about losing weight.

Her name being called over the intercom should've been the first clue that something was wrong, after all she didn't play a sport, so why would she need a check-up? But out of class was out of class, so she had practically skipped down the hallway, at least as much as her knee-high boots would allow.

Normally, Emily would take her time, trolling the halls, stopping by the bathroom, but the nurse's office was only twenty feet from her class, so her attempts at

procrastination had been cut short. The noticeable spring in her step deteriorated at the sight of two men wearing identical charcoal colored suits standing on either side of the nurse's station. She wondered if it had something to do with drugs, but it had been at least a year since she'd smoked a joint.

"Ms. Schafer," one of them acknowledged, opening the door for her.

After that it happened too fast. Two other men appeared from inside, pulling onto either arm. Her cries were choked off as a towel was forced into her mouth, the cotton fibers simultaneously scratching at the soft tissue of her throat, while soaking up all traces of liquid.

She had always believed that she would fight in any abduction situation, but she had remained almost stoical as they strapped her into the chair. It wasn't until one of them started using scissors to cut away the fabric of her black jeans that she even attempted to struggle.

Her captors are chanting now. They have been for the last fifteen minutes. Emily can see them out there, bowling shirts sticking out from under ceremonial robes. It's Wednesday night, and she knows that most of them participate in Bowl-O-Rama's half-price beer night. She figures they're speaking Latin -- she hopes they're speaking Latin. Latin has that antique quality to it...that air of respect...and she could really use some of that right now.

The chanting grows in its intensity. The air grows heavy with the wafting aroma

of spoiled eggs.

“How much longer is this going to take?” a nasally voice on the other side of the door asks. “Charlene’s at her book club, and I told her I would be home to watch the kids by ten.”

The chanting stops, followed by heavy silence. “Jesus, Raymond, now we’re going to have to start all over again.” There’s a communal moan.

Another voice calls for a bathroom break, while someone else requests a round of drinks.

“Fine,” a gruffer voice shouts, and Emily knows it’s the same one that spoke over the intercom. “We’ll take a ten minute break.”

Robes rustle from the other side of the door, leaving blessed silence in their wake. Emily strains against the wood, but it refuses to give. The room seems a little bit cooler, but that horrendous stench seems to stick around. It’s everywhere. She places a single sleeve against her nose, attempting to breathe through the fabric, only to discover that the sulfuric scent has already settled into the garments.

“Hey, where did everybody go?” Rilius, the leader of the Demon Scourge, inquires behind her.

It’s amazing how loud the heart can sound when someone’s stopped breathing, and right now Emily would give anything to muffle the pulsating thump coming from her chest. Somehow she manages to move across the door, away from Rilius, who is now knocking against the partially finished oak. Watching him is like watching water flow;

colors, skin, and materials slide over his frame, preventing her from actually noticing his real form.

“Hello, minions, I’m not hearing any chanting.” A pregnant pause. “Oh, someone is getting fired for this.” Sighing, he backs away from the door and turns towards Emily.

Dark-red muscle is exposed to the world, glistening, moist, and whole, despite the missing protection of the epidermal layer. The head resembles a dog with its muzzle-like snout and dual rows of razor-sharp teeth. “Hiya, cutie,” he whispers, moving towards the center of the room. Tendons pull the side of the mouth as it attempts to smile. “I’m not gonna hurt ya. I just wanna get a look at ya.”

Emily shakes her head. “Fuck you,” she whimpers.

The demon howls with laughter, a deep non-threatening chuckle. Skin melts over the muscle, and she can see that the head is taking on a more human form. “Oh, I’m gonna like you. Is this better?” He blinks at her with eyelids that she didn’t notice vertically covering his crimson irises.

She nods, but doesn’t move away from the wall.

“Come on, girl, I ain’t got all night. Let’s get these introductions over with, so we can go home. If you’re real good about it, I promise I won’t eat you for at least a month.”

“I don’t think so.”

A low growl, almost annoyed. “Move into the light, or I’m going to bring you out a piece at a time.”

Resigning herself to the obvious fact that she’s lost the battle, Emily slowly



moves forward, eyes down in defeat, feet shuffling along the floor. The dress has become a second layer of skin, clinging to areas where it should delicately drape. Tossing the stringy, wet, brown tendrils of hair out of her eyes, she glares at her future murderer.

They stand there, inches apart, in a silent span of moments.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Rilius shouts.

A lone drop of sweat fell onto her cheek from the hunched over bald man, and she struggled against her restraints to wipe it away. She doesn’t remember blacking out, but at some point she must have. Her clothes were gone, replaced by an almost transparent hospital gown.

“Are you sure she’s acceptable?” the bald man asked, moving away slightly.

Another man peered over her, eyes squinting as he took in her appearance. “We could dye her hair,” he offered. “Give her a decent make-up job.”

“Yeah, but what are we going to do about her...” Baldy gestured over her body, letting the statement hang in the air.

“I guess we hope the dress fits.”

“What are you supposed to be?” Rilius demands, his looks sliding out of focus.

“Hey, if you’re not happy please don’t hesitate to call someone so I can get the fuck out of here,” Emily snaps, while attempting to tug down the hem of the dress.

Rilius glares, while slowly moving around her in a circle. “I don’t understand. All

of the other's have been..."

"Vapid little princesses?"

Sharp teeth break out through the smile as Rilius begins to slowly back away

"You're feisty, that's a plus at least." He reaches out a hand, picking up the edge of her dress between two fingers. "I don't understand. Have things changed so much in the last five years?"

Emily snorts. "Five years? Buddy, it's been a year since you last graced us with your presence."

"You think I have the time to visit this place every year?" he roars with laughter. It goes on and on, echoing off of the small confines of the room. For a moment, Emily wonders if this is the sound that will finally drive her insane, before it is blissfully cut off. "Well, if you're the pinnacle of your kind, then let's get out of here."

It was Emily's turn to laugh, while maniacal tears raced down her cheeks.

"Pinnacle? Oh man, what kinds of drugs have you been smoking? And I hope that you're willing to share."

Rilius frowns, his canine muzzle beginning to protrude through the human lips.

"Something funny?" Emily laughs even harder. "Well, how did you end up here if you're not the perfect representation of your species?"

She stops, wiping away the tears from her cheeks, realizing **that** at some point during her breakdown she had started crying. "Because I'm not a slut."

As they had loaded her into the car, they had explained what an honor it was to be chosen.

“I don’t understand...I thought that the girl was the sacrifice...The one from the T.V.”

Baldy stiffened. “Yes, well, there were some unexpected complications with Lydia.”

“Someone couldn’t keep her legs closed?” she asked sarcastically.

The slap caught her completely off guard.

“I will ask you to refrain from speaking that way about my daughter.”

“So, that’s the rub,” Emily says, while finishing her story. “Ms. Homecoming gets her cherry popped during the celebration, and you get me.”

Rilius’s appearance has settled and he isn’t that bad to look at. If only he didn’t need to blink.

“Five years... For five years I keep my soldiers from setting foot in your pristine world, and the best they give me are scraps?”

Ignoring the obvious insult, Emily nods in agreement. “Why do you need virgins anyway?”

Rilius rolls his eyes. “I guess it doesn’t have to be a virgin, but it is a nice gesture. Don’t get me wrong, a pretty thing is easy on the eyes, but we usually just use them for manual labor in the end. At least until they expire.”

The chanting has resumed again, and Rilus moves away from the wall. He holds out a clawed hand in Emily's direction. "My time's almost up. I guess you'll have to do."

Emily looks up at him, a slow smile spreading across her face. "I think I have a better idea."

Five minutes later the door that she struggled to open flies off the hinges, and Rilus, in all his demonic glory, charges out. White spittle froths around his gnashing muzzle, while scarlet eyes pin his followers where they stand.

"My Lord," Baldy begins, kneeling on the floor.

With one clawed hand Rilius easily lifts him into the air. "Decent build, a little chunky, but I think you'll last the full five years...twice the time of those weak little girls."

Baldy is blubbing now, his feet kicking uselessly in the air. "My Lord...please. We provided you..."

"With sacrilege," Rilius roars, tossing the man over his shoulder. "I will return in one year's time, a period that you have apparently allotted, for a sacrifice worthy of my attentions. Oh, and I also expect my chamber to be cleaned...add some throw pillows or something. In the meantime, she's in charge." He gestures over his shoulder at Emily before racing back into the room. "I'll see you later, sweet cheeks," he shouts behind him as he disappears into the chamber. There's one last puff of sulfur, and then he's gone.

Emily stands in shock before the still shaken worshippers. This wasn't part of

the deal. He was just supposed to take Baldy and let her go. She can't run a cult, and she sure as hell isn't going to decide who will be the next sacrifice. And now she only has a year. One year to figure out just what the hell she's gotten herself into.

She's gazing at her disciples with calculating eyes. Maybe she could use a couple of them. The twitchy one that's trying to make his way to the door seems a little lean, but she can bulk him up in a year. Or maybe she should try the prisons. If that fails she knows there are plenty of easy pickings at the local high schools.

Either way, she only has a year to decide.

“Okay, minions, you heard the man.” Here it goes, her first official proclamation.

“Someone find me an interior decorator.”

“Another Goddamn Deal With the Devil”

Today was definitely not a very good day for the High Priestess of Rilius’s order. She hadn’t slept well, someone had used the last of the coffee without adding it to the list, her little sister had somehow managed to download a virus onto her computer...Oh... and she was about to willingly use herself as the sacrifice to Rilius for the year.

“Mistress, you don’t have to do this,” Minion Seventeen begs, while once again attempting to polish her boots.

Emily tries to gently scoot away the persistent, black speckled rag, but it has been getting to the point where she is starting not to care about hurting the poor man’s feelings. “Listen...uh, Seventeen, my boots are shiny enough...”

“Of course, Mistress,” Seventeen says, while backing away, bowing.

“And please stop calling me ‘Mistress.’ I won’t be after today,” Emily explains, which causes Seventeen to burst into tears once again

“Surely, Rilius will be merciful, my lady,” he blubbers. “You’ve done so many wonderful things with His order. You’ve restored it to its former glory.”

Right, Emily scoffs internally, while stepping through the worn door that had haunted her dreams for the past five years.

The Order of Rilius hadn't really changed in the last five years. Emily had stopped some of the internal corruption, seizing a number of offshore accounts that were using donations for their personal luxuries. And she had managed to turn around Rilius's press image; the one with kittens had been her favorite. It's a good thing society didn't know that was actually the third kitten; apparently, they a delicacy in Rilius's dimension. But none of those things really mattered-- in the end it was all about the sacrifice.

Once, not so long ago, the people believed that Rilius demanded a young virgin as his annual sacrifice, and each year one girl was chosen "at random" to satiate his needs. Things had been working quite well on that front, until it was Emily's turn. Well, not really.

Turns out Emily's predecessor, who to this day she still refers to as Baldy, had the misfortune of his daughter's name being drawn of the lot. Baldy's daughter had no problem enjoying the benefits of being the Chosen One for six months, but when it came time to pay the piper, she faltered. So on the night of the big celebration, she went home with the most attractive, heterosexual member of the men in attendance, some poor chap from the catering company.

It was the cover-up that Emily truly found to be the most impressive. Baldy charged his daughter with finding a "suitable" replacement: Somebody uninspiring, somebody poor, somebody who wouldn't be missed. Ironically, Rilius was not impressed by Emily being offered as a stand-in, and frankly, neither was Emily.

The room of Emily's nightmares had somehow been transformed into a psychedelic, bohemian shrine. Her mother had personally been responsible for the redecorating, possibly some kind of attempt at recapturing her youth. The blood-

splattered dirt floor has been replaced with a navy blue shag carpet and earth tone beanbag chairs. Someone repainted the walls, probably after the last visit, and covered up all the fingernail marks with black-light posters and tie-dye overhangs. But, despite the cheery decorations and the chokingly sweet incense, there is still the overwhelming scent of fear.

At least the meal had been better this time around, Emily muses, while waiting for Rilius to appear.

It had been five years since the demon-god had come into her life. Five years since she had made a pact that would spare her existence, but at the price of so many others. She had thought that it would be easy to pick out the people whose lives would be cut short in order to appease their “protector,” and at first it had.

The moment Rilius disappeared with the former head priest, leaving a very confused sixteen-year-old girl in charge, Emily had rounded up the rest of his cult. She herself had tried them, ignoring their excuses and their pleas; focusing only on the left-over documentation. In the end, she had decided that three of them would be future sacrifices, buying herself three years. But things change.

Sacrifice #2 had decided that a few extra helpings of Valium and chardonnay were a much more viable alternative than what awaited him as one of Rilius’s slaves, and somehow #3 had managed to make off to parts unknown. It would be a few months later that her guard would catch up to him, but by then the damage had already been done.

“Ummmm...Seventeen, I know it must be getting close to midnight, are the candles lit?” she asks the only member of the previous regime that she had allowed to remain on her staff.



“Of course, mistress,” he bawls, bowing his head as he speaks. “I don’t understand why you’re doing this.” Emily likes him, in his own sniveling way, he had helped her ease into the role of Priestess, and he had been greatly rewarded for his work. Emily understands his worry. When she is gone, his place in the pecking order will be unclear.

“Make sure you lock the door behind me. He’s probably going to be pissed, and it won’t stop him, but it will buy you guys some time,” she continues, not even bothering to answer his question. It had been hard enough trying to make her mother understand, and in the end, Emily had decided that the best course there would be to force her to sleep through the whole thing. “Oh, and...Marcus, start the chanting in fifteen minutes.”

The door squeaks shut behind her, and Emily makes a mental note to have it looked at before she realizes that she won’t be able to enforce it.

A year after her miraculous escape, Emily had returned home to the mansion that the order had given to her family with, only to discover that her mother was in the process of making chili for an unexpected guest. As the three of them sat down to eat, Rilius informed Emily of his specification for all future offerings.

“You didn’t seem to have a problem before,” Emily had spat, while her mother went into the living room to change the music. “And those girls didn’t last very long.”

“Oh, my dear, things change,” Rilius purred. “It turns out those girls provided a service that my people are simply not getting anymore, so I’ve had to restructure our priorities, so to speak. I’m going to need more workers, more soldiers...Lovely chili, Ms. Schafer.” Rilius had turned up the wattage of his charisma in Emily’s mother’s

presence, making the older woman beam and blush with pride. “I really must get the recipe before I return. Shame we’re also short of competent cooks in my dimension.”

The threat had been clear. Rilius would no longer tolerate soft business men. He wanted something stronger, younger.

“Marcus, I’m not hearing any chanting,” Emily shouts through the door.

She marches into the middle of the room, her feet sinking into the carpeting. Laid out on one of the low bamboo tables is a robe for the intended victim. One of her first orders as Priestess had been to do away with the traditional sacrificial dress. She had also soundproofed the room.

The temperature starts to slowly rise as Rilius’s followers callout to their god. On the one hand Emily is proud of their progress, this is the first time they had actually gotten the pronunciation correct. On the other hand it is starting to get really hot in there.

She decides to have a seat and do her best to force herself to look nonchalant before the demon’s arrival. No need for him to see how scared she is, after all this is her decision.

“Well, this is a surprise,” Rilius greets, while emerging from the wall. “Did you miss my presence so much you wanted to have a little chat? How is your mother doing?” His smile is wide and smooth over jagged teeth. Fortunately, he picked his face before he came through the wall this time.

“Not exactly,” Emily says. She picks up the silk, white robe, and drapes it over her clothes.

Rilius stares, his smile slowly slipping. “Emily, what exactly are you doing?”

Emily finishes buttoning up the robe, surprised at how steady her fingers are.

“I’m it,” she announces, grabbing her backpack. “So let’s go and get this over with.”

“Excuse me.”

“Surprise, I’m you’re sacrifice,” adding some additional enthusiasm onto that last word.

Last year, Rilius had left a note on one of the tables before he parted. It was a request-- well more of an order-- that the next sacrifice be female. “Equal opportunity,” the letter had demanded.

Rilius’s features shudder, a sign that he is either trying to scare her or he is upset. “It doesn’t work that way. Did the peons rebel? I’ll have to have a talk with them. Are they holding Amanda hostage?”

“No, this is my decision.” Emily understands why he is fighting it. He had requested the traditional little blonde number, although he had come to realize enough of the modern world to leave out the virgin part, and instead he once again had Emily.

“Look,” she sighs, collapsing into one her mother’s beanbags. “I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t pick a girl.”

A foul-smelling laugh erupts from Rilius’s mouth. “Really, you are way too picky. Just grab a girl, any girl really.”

“No.”

At that word all of the noise, warmth, and comfort are sucked out of the room. The bubbles in the lava lamp freeze in their place, while the table it is on starts shaking. Emily keeps her eyes trained firmly on the floor, terrified about the next visage that Rilius will assume. “Look at me.” This voice is new to Emily; there is no humor in it, no

false warmth. The words are slurred together, guttural, and powerful. Emily's eyes begin to lift towards his.

Somehow the dark god has managed to move so silently that Emily didn't realize he was there. Her eyes take in his skinless muzzle and yellow fangs before meeting the watery red-brown eyes. "I am a god, child, and you are a lowly insect. Now, you will find a victim, or so help me, I will devour your innards and leave you here for your mother to find," he hisses, brown spittle flying with every word. "I will tear each limb off of your body, but I won't touch your face. That way your mother will know exactly whose blood is painting these lovely walls."

"I can't do it," she whimpers. Tears beginning to escape from her eyes, and because of his stare, she can't even blink them away. "I tried, alright!" she shouts, mustering all of her strength to push him away from her, and surprisingly he moves. "I scoured every single jail and mental facility. I had women scream at me, spit in my face, and attempt to claw out my eyes, and in the end they all begged for mercy." Her voice is angry, but calm, as she replayed each and every potential victim.

"You're weak," Rilius snaps.

Emily laughs. "Yes, I'm weak, but you knew that the first time we met, otherwise you wouldn't have put me in charge." His face is doing that melting thing again, the wolf-like snout is slowly receding. "You knew I would be too afraid to question. Well, I'm not going to put anyone else in this place. I'm not going to ask anyone else to do what I can't."

A wet rasping sound starts to come from the corner, building in intensity, and Emily realizes that the demon is chuckling. “Now that you’ve gotten the joke, can we go?”

“Oh, oh, my poor...poor girl. After everything you’ve been through, you still show mercy.” Rilius looks back up, the features of a blond, barely shaved twenty-something firmly in place. “No, I don’t think I want you.”

Emily pauses. What is he going to do if he doesn’t take her? Will he cause destruction throughout the city, will he take her mother, her little sister?

The atmosphere slowly returns to the room. The lights flicker on, and Rilius gracefully sits down next the lava lamp. “I’ve got another idea in mind,” he says, while waving his hand over the light, making it change colors.

“Another sacrifice,” Emily asks, shuddering.

“Sort of. I’m going to require another sacrifice in three months time, but in exchange for me granting you this clemency, you must take care of something for me.”

Of course, Emily thinks. It almost seemed like he had a thought for a minute. “What is it?” she says, trying not to sound too eager. It’s always best to keep a poker-face when dealing with a demonic lord.

“My son is becoming a bit too much of a handful,” Rilius explains. “It’s rather hard to wage war while taking care of one so young, you understand?”

Emily nods, having no idea what he is talking about, and terrified at the same time.

“Well, it’s his mother’s wish that he spend some time here. A study abroad, if you will.”

“Wait, are you asking me...” It can’t be...he wouldn’t. Out of the thousands of possible scenarios that had run through Emily’s mind about tonight’s outcome, this one hadn’t even been a blip on her radar.

“I want you to watch over my son.”

### All Around You

Lucky Patty's is an Irish shit hole, but it's my Irish shit hole. I had my first drink here, as a little tyke of seven. My dad had held his scotch on the rocks up to my inexperienced nose, and I had taken a sniff before disdainfully pushing it away. The entire bar had roared with laughter, and I was so embarrassed that I grabbed at the glass again and drained its contents in one swig. Whoa, baby—that was an experience that my mother never let me, or my father, forget.

I used to scrub down the worn tables, while Patty would remind me, if it wasn't sticky, don't worry about it. I had my first cigarette next to the jukebox, my first pint at the bar, my first *legal* drink would follow at the same bar years later...I think I may have even lost my virginity here to one of the college waitresses, but I don't really remember that night, and she's not talking.

Lucky Patty's was a staple in my education, yet you're probably wondering what a fine upstanding Polish boy like me is doing in an Irish bar. Well, it's not hard, since Lucky Patty is my second, or third, cousin once, maybe twice, removed on my mother's

side, so I guess you could say he's my uncle.

I'm watching him now as he attempts to appease his befuddled dinnertime flock with his reasons for closing the bar early on a Thursday. The numbers are surprisingly few, but then again, all his regulars observe this annual tradition. His ruddy cheeks glow in the dim light, while those eyes sparkle at whatever joke he's just told in his Irish brogue. A stout, balding man surrounded by Irish memorabilia. A shrine to St. Patrick, a harp flag from the sacred shores of Eire, Guinness posters, and an angry leprechaun behind the bar: all swear his allegiance to the Emerald shores. Shame that Uncle Patty's real name is Patrick Grybowski.

When the last customer leaves, tragically walking under his own power, Patty goes through all the motions of closing down the bar. He turns the sign, pulls down the shade, but he skips the last step; he leaves the door unlocked.

"Hey, Uncle Patty," I call from atop my stool. "Give me a shot and I don't mean that cheap-ass shit."

Normally, he'd tell me to shut my mouth before he tells my mother about how I talk, but instead he huffs, while pulling down a bottle of Bushmill from the shelf. The large bottle looks very small in his huge mitt, while his other hand scoops up a handful of shot glasses. I don't have to count to know that there are exactly eight in his grasp.

The bell above the door clangs the moment Patty puts down the last glass in front of the last place setting put down earlier by his daughter, Nora.

"Read the sign, ya yokel, we're closed," Patty snaps, before grabbing the shot



glass.

“Cut the accent, Patty, there’s no one here to impress.”

I turn in my chair to face the man in the doorway as he makes his entrance. There he is, the bane of my existence, my rival, my enemy, the best fucking friend anyone could ask for.

“Jimmy boy, you’re early.”

Jimmy smirks, slow and evil, a rogue grin. “I figured you could use a hand, old man. I understand how things can get in your old age.”

Jimmy’s changed. Well, I guess we’ve all changed, but he’s changed in that 9 to 5 way. Slowly the business world has torn into his wardrobe, shredding his torn-up jeans, dissolving his punk band t-shirts, turning everything into some sort of CEO wet dream. The day he cut off his prized blonde locks for the traditional gelled spikes, I wanted to deck him, but now I understand: it’s the nature of the corporate beast.

“How’re things going, you son of a bitch?” he asks, looking over at my seat.

“Can’t complain,” I smirk. “Still selling overpriced software to unsuspecting grannies?”

Patty’s hand starts shaking as he pours into one of the glasses. “Enough of that, now. Jimmy, if you want to help, go wash those glasses that my darling Nora left behind.” He stops pouring and takes a swig straight from the bottle.

“Darling’s the right word, Dad, and don’t you forget it.” Nora steps out of the backroom, her coat already on, an umbrella clutched in her hand.

Patty freezes, his lips puckering while his cheeks puff out like a blowfish. I think for minute that he's going to blow, spit out that precious liquid all over his green upholstery, but he's spent decades building restraint, and he forcefully swallows it instead. Jimmy and I laugh. Patty may be Polish, but he's smart enough to know that you don't go against an Irish woman's commandments, and Nora is every bit as Irish as her mother, and her favorite commandment is....

"Dad, are you drinking already?" she exclaims.

"Ach, woman," he cries, slipping into his practiced Irish brogue, "you know what today is."

Nora blusters, her dark curls quivering against her pale skin. "I know exactly what today is, and I have an idea how much drinking you're going to do later, so don't even think of starting now."

"Come on, Nora, lay off the old man," Jimmy shouts, up to his elbow in soapsuds. Smart bastard, he knows that Nora won't do anything to him as long as he has water as his defense tool. The rest of us, though . . .

"Yeah, Nora," I echo, "give it a rest for today."

"Oh, don't get me started on you," she snaps before turning on her father, but it's too late, Patty's holding up his hands in mock defeat.

"Fine, girl," he mumbles, "you win. I won't down another shot until the rest show up. Speaking of, are you sure you don't want to stay tonight?"

There's a very uncomfortable silence that makes me squirm slightly in the chair before Nora finally responds with a smile that I've only seen her use on the lonely drunks as she rushes them out to a cab. "There're only eight seats."

"You could always sit in my lap," Jimmy and I say together, breaking the uncomfortable moment. Fucking asshole always did steal my lines.

"I don't know, your lap may be a little a too small," she quickly bites back, the polite look turning into genuine mirth. I'm shocked, I'm aghast; did that statement really come out of my little cousin's mouth? Sure, I saw her every day, but those little changes... Then I realize she's blushing, those sparkling green eyes lingering a little too long on the man behind me.

"You son of a..." I swivel in my chair, trying to judge Jimmy's reaction to this obvious flirtation.

Jimmy looks down, making those dark eyes peak up at her. Ass. I taught him that trick too; course it worked better when he had hair, before the whole Abercrombie & Fitch phase. "Shhhhh...Nora, what would your father say about you having such in-depth knowledge of my lap?"

"Her father would say, 'Pass me the shotgun from behind the bar, Jimmy my boy, and kiss your shamrocks goodbye,'" Patty bellows, while pushing Nora out the door. "I'll see you here tomorrow. Don't worry about me, I'll sleep on the cot upstairs." He forcefully closes the door behind her.

Jimmy's leaning against the bar, trying so hard to laugh that his cheeks are now

the same scarlet shade as Patty's. He pulls in great gasps of air as though he's afraid exhaling is going to break his demeanor. I have no problem letting out my own joy.

"What the hell are you playing at?" Patty demands, moving menacingly toward the bar.

Jimmy's ill-fated attempts to suppress his laughter evaporate at the sight of Patty's serious face. "I'm sorry, Patty, I was only joking."

"Damn straight you were only joking. If I were that poor girl's father, I'd have half a mind to...to..." Jimmy's confused, the blonde hair only adding to the natural confusion. "Oh, stop being so serious, boy."

"Don't worry about it, Patty, your daughter's virginal knickers are safe from me."

Patty snorts, his mouth partly around the bottle. "Virginal? Who're you kidding? You know those knickers ain't been white since I hired that damn extra bartender. Irish my ass, you know as well as me that's an Aussie accent he's slinging."

I eye the setting sun outside the door, wondering if this type of scene's going to set the tone for the entire evening. God, I hope so. I can't take another depressing memorial, and based on the size of the whiskey bottle, neither can Patty. It feels good, though, for now, this easygoing conversation.

"Besides, Patty, I've got my eyes on a bigger fish, a little bit leathery," Jimmy says, still in jest. Leave it to him to kill a joke.

My stomach knots, and suddenly I think I can feel blood rushing into my ears. He can't be talking about...I want to deck him, leap over that bar and shove his face into

the dirty water he was just using...punch out every one of those newly capped teeth.

“Don’t you dare,” Patty hisses from the other side of the bar. His face has taken on the genuine stance of disappointment, a look a thousand times worse than actual anger.

“Not tonight, do you understand?”

When I was younger that look would cause me to shuffle my feet and avert my eyes. I would actually pray for any miracle to spare me the lecture that would come from the jowls. It still unnerves me, but Jimmy...

Jimmy’s just standing there across the bar, meeting Patty’s eyes with his own patented look. He’s changed. His back is straight, his eyes are still good-natured, but serious, and I’m left wondering when he finally started to grow a pair. “Of course not,” Jimmy assures him. “That would be impractical.”

Ohhhh . . . “impractical”; someone’s pulling out the big words. You fucking, ass-kissing son of a bitch.

“Not tonight,” Patty repeats. It’s not a question, but an order, an order that years ago Jimmy wouldn’t hesitate to disregard, until today.

“I won’t even mention it, Patty.” The promise is slow and halfhearted. Jerk.

“Damn straight, you won’t,” I snap from my seat, tired of being only a spectator, but both of them ignore me.

“She’s your best mate’s girl,” Patty argues.

I can see the argument on Jimmy’s lips, the way they tilt to form the start of a “w”, but he thinks better of it and quickly closes his mouth. “You’re right, Patty,” he

sighs, while hoisting an already clean glass back into the sink. “But someday she’s going to be someone else’s girl.”

“Yeah, well, that day ain’t today. Now, get over here and have a shot with me.”

And just like that, the tension’s gone. The moment that a second ago could have ended with a physical show of Patty’s brute strength has evaporated with the mutual understanding that can be achieved only with booze.

Patty fills up three of the shot glasses, including the one perched in front of my seat.

“You know, back in the day we would call that alcohol abuse,” I call from the bar, not even bothering to move toward the warm amber liquid.

Jimmy raises his shot first, Albert follows suit. No words are exchanged between them as they down them simultaneously, so I decide to substitute my own dialogue.

“Yeah, happy fucking death day to me.” They’re not the only ones that could use a drink.

My funeral sucked

I thought I would get some sort of epiphany by attending. Some spiritual guidance—hell, I would’ve been happy if Satan had even stopped by for a little chat, but instead I sat there listening to the same mundane sermon as everyone else. This bald guy that might have baptized me as a baby talked about all my accomplishments. How many accomplishments can a guy really rack up before the age of twenty-five?

Then a couple of my relatives made their way to the podium, talking about how it had been an honor to watch me change. My mother cried. I think my father did, too, but his face was pressed a little too close to my mom's for me to tell. Danni stood proud, like some brave little soldier, as each tear fell silently from her eyes. I didn't even have the strength to reach for her.

I was scared.

I thought this was it. At any moment the Grim Reaper was going to come through those doors, or would I be interred in that same mahogany box as my earthly remains.

It wasn't until the least piece of brown earth was shoveled on top of my coffin that I realized this wasn't it. Somehow I had missed out on the universe's mortal joke. I was confused...I was scared...I sat there by my grave until sunset, but nothing came for me, so I walked.

People passed through me, by me. I still dodged them as though I cared. I even said sorry to one woman before her arm passed harmlessly through mine.

I walked until I got to Patty's, and I heard...rejoicing.

Somehow half of my assembly had ended up at the same place as me, some still in their funeral clothes, and they were all having a great old time.

Watching them celebrate, I realized I was pissed. I walked in there to go all angry-Casper on their asses, but found that all my albums were suddenly on the jukebox. My hidden collection of Star Trek memorabilia had been unearthed and was decorating the top of the bar. Nathan, my old roommate, was telling everyone about the time we had broken

into the Fine Arts building, except it was now some sort of life or death adventure. Lager flowed like water, and whiskey was on the house.

I flitted through all of them, feeling for the first time how much they missed me. God, my ego almost exploded. For a moment I was more than I had ever thought I could be. Leave it to death to forgive your sins and exalt your past deeds. It was also the loneliest I'd ever felt.

The party continued until people began to pass out on the floor, on the tables, atop the bar (Nathan again.)

I sat there among them, watching as Jimmy led a stumbling Danni out to a taxi. She leaned against him, heaving great drunken sobs, and he took it. As the taxi pulled up, she grabbed his hand, escorting him inside.

I don't know what happened to the two of them that night and, honestly, I don't want to know. It was the first time I saw Jimmy act like a gentleman, and the last time the two of them would talk for a while.

Danni's fifteen minutes late, but no one's worried yet; she's always late. It has nothing to do with making a fashionable entrance, and everything to do with putting something off till the last minute. It could be as simple as being unable to find the shirt that would put her outfit together. At this point, anyone who knows her is used to it, but it can still get irksome.

When she finally comes bursting through the doors, everyone's finished their first



pint. I'm still sitting at the bar, watching the interactions. I refuse to sit at "my" chair at the table. There's something morbid and unsettling about the never emptying shot glass in my field of vision.

The door never just opens with her; it bangs. She's got this method of opening it that causes that annoying bell to clang once, just once, before being silenced in her presence. It's started to rain outside, and her black hair is pulled back in a ponytail to keep it from frizzing, or maybe it's because she took the motorcycle. I loved that bike. I thought she was the hottest motherfucker because she was a biker chick.

The conversation around the table stops, and she doesn't say a word to break up the silence. She walks across the bar and sits in the empty seat, thudding one booted foot on the table while pulling a small whiskey bottle out of her coat. She chugs it like a pro. I would like to claim that I taught her that, but she claims to have discovered that talent long before dating me, either that or she has no taste buds. She bangs that bottle back down on the table, spilling a little from each glass, and wipes her mouth with the back of her sleeve.

Patty stands, banging his fists on the table. "You can walk in here, disrespect my bar, hell, disrespect me, but there ain't no way I'm gonna let you drink that piss water," he shouts. He takes the extra shot glass and slides it across the table.

Danni's smile is brilliant and innocent. I love watching the way it slowly lights up her entire face, from the pointed chin to her brilliant blue eyes. I used to tease her about that one lone dimple on her cheek, but it seems to come out less and less nowadays. "I

love you too, Patty,” she says, while draining it against her lips.

I’m not the only one watching her, though, and the instant the shot glass is drained, the greetings start all over again.

Maddie and Evan go back to comparing notes on childrearing, while Dakota politely listens to Nathan explain the intricacies of his management position in the record store. Danni gets up to help Patty serve the food. Jimmy’s silent, ignoring Nathan’s vain attempts to include him in the conversation about marketing. Those hazel eyes never waver from Danni’s form, and I know he’s planning something.

Everyone leaves two hours later—well, sort of; Nathan will once again be spending the night on the cot in the office. Dakota catches a ride with Maddie’s husband. The two pile into the SUV, forgetting for an instant that one of them is a mother of two, while the other one has to be at work at seven the next day. I’ve lost track of where Evan went to...maybe the bathroom, but Patty’s not worried, so neither am I.

Jimmy tries to stay behind, but Patty’s ready for every excuse he could throw out.

“You’re not going to let me drive home, are you, Patty?” he slurs.

“You’re not that drunk, lush,” I call from the bar, finally standing for the first time in hours. One of the perks of being dead is that I don’t have to worry about my limbs falling asleep.

Tsk-tsking, Patty pushes Jimmy’s towering frame out the door. “What, you

don't think I noticed that nice little company car dropping your lazy ass off? Now I suggest you pull out that lil' phone of yours and tell them to pick you up before you get soaked." With that it begins to rain. Uncle Patty was always good at predicting the weather. He closes the door in Jimmy's bewildered face, this time turning the lock with an authoritative click.

Danni's still sitting at the table, one finger idly circling the edge of my glass. "I miss him, Patty," she whispers, as my heart breaks.

"I miss you, too," I say back, kneeling beside her. I place my hand on the back of her chair, not touching, just hovering. A tiny bit of warmth comes through, a tiny bit of feeling, the first I've felt in a while.

She lifts my drink in the air. "Here's to you, you son of a bitch," she says before she throws it against the wall.

It shatters delicately, a sparkling mess of crystal shards. Jeez, Patty, the least you could've done was shell out some money for decent glasses.

"Sorry." Her apology is halfhearted, her voice hard and brisk. "I'll clean it up."

Patty shakes his head. There's a dust brush behind the bar for various mishaps, and I know that he's used to these outbursts. "Let me get it and then I'll give you a ride home."

"No need. I'm sober." She holds up the empty whiskey bottle she came in with. "Iced tea."

I laugh; that's her secret. I should've known. I dated her for two years and for

some reason never took a drink from her secret stash...the same stash she was drinking from before our drunken first kiss...

She puts on her jacket, eyeing the roads warily. "Are you sure you're good closing up, Patty?"

"I'll keep an eye on him," I tell her, knowing I won't be able to do the least bit of good.

"What is up with you kids thinking I'm some sort of invalid?" Patty shouts. "Besides, Evan's still in the bathroom if I need any help."

The zipper of her jacket catches in its movement before continuing up. "I'll see you then," she promises, pausing in the doorway.

I follow her to the edge. "I'll see you at home," I promise, not wanting to get there before she does. She turns back for one more parting shot with Patty, but I'm so close that my lips brush her forehead and I use this unexpected closeness to bestow a gentle kiss. In that moment I can pretend that everything is normal.

The words never leave her mouth as she steps back, one hand going to her forehead to swipe at what she believes is a stray drop of water.

Her bike is parked right across the street, the seat soaked, metal slippery, but it's her baby, so she knows how to handle her. She turns the key, while pushing her foot down. The bike grunts, and then is silent. She tries again with the same gurgling response. I know what the problem is as soon as she stands up, but my hands are tied.

A silver Lexus pulls up beside her, and Jimmy gets out of the passenger seat with

an umbrella. I can't hear what they're saying, but I can see their lips moving as Jimmy puts the umbrella over her head. I taught that kid everything he knows, including how to temporarily stall machinery.

Danni smiles up at him, not the same joyous look as earlier, but a knowing smirk. She bends down to pick up the disconnected hose.

Poor Jimmy, I taught Danni everything I knew, too.

### Fanning the Flames”

I’ve been watching him for close to eternity, the man who’s barely a child, this murderer who so casually walks among normal society. He’s apparently decided to have that cigarette. He now has a fifty percent chance of dying from lung cancer, a higher risk than getting hit by a car. Funny.

The ember on the top glows a steady orange color, not changing with every puff.

My son loved the color orange. Every outfit he owned contained at least a shred of that bright, almost neon hue, including his hoodie. He looked like a large Clementine whenever he put it on. He was so bright and cheery in it that I was never worried about losing him in a crowd. I almost had to pry the thing from his grasp on laundry day, and then he would rebel by wearing some sort of Hawaiian shirt that clashed with every other color. But the cops wouldn’t even let me have his hoodie back. It was evidence...and then it was gone. I wonder if it would still smell like him, Irish Spring and Axe, it was all the rage to an adolescent boy. I wonder how dirty it looked. Would I have been able to wash it? Is it now a twin to that Hawaiian shirt, a dazzling orange with splotches of red?

Given Kevin’s penchant for orange, it wasn’t much of a surprise that I willingly, though painfully, parted with two hundred dollars to guarantee an orange Diamondback

Cruiser under the tree two Christmases ago. Perfect for a young boy, the salesman assured me. It was already decked out with every single precautionary measure. Red reflectors clashed with the orange paint, vigorously bright flashers added just in case Kevin was out during sunset. Large enough that it would last him through one more growth spurt. A growth spurt that was on the horizon before that man...that boy...

He's there right now, smoking his cigarette, staring at the storefront and periodically checking the clock on his cell phone. I saw him earlier, getting out of the passenger seat of a blue SUV, something a soccer mom would transport her entire brood of sports-minded children. I never had a brood, just Kevin. Kevin, who always came home before curfew, and would always call as soon as he reached a friend's house. Kevin, whose rebellious stage was becoming something of a joke. Kevin, who is nothing like the man-child who was originally leaning against the car with a silver Zippo, flicking the flame on and off, the great smoker's debate. At first he had decided against it and casually leaned back against the car, playing it cool.

Kevin tried to play it cool when he saw the bike, but that mindset lasted for five seconds. He was thirteen, it was "uncool" to get excited, but that gentle kiss on my cheek, the tiny "mom" that left his lips betrayed his normal, unswaggering independence. Did he call out to me that night, was I "Mom" then or was I "mommy"? Did his mind revert to a more primitive mentality where the first thing that gave him comfort would come save him? Did he think it was a nightmare as he lay upon the cold concrete? Was he even awake?

I hadn't known, not even the slightest inkling. Where was my fucking mother's intuition? Why didn't sirens go off in my head when he asked me if he could ride over to

Josh's house? It wasn't even four o'clock; sunset wasn't at least for another two hours. I didn't have a problem letting him go that Saturday. It was a path he knew by heart, and Josh's mother was home to watch the two boys.

The kid's companion is still in the store, and now he's flipping a coin, heads or tails, oblivious to his surroundings, to me. It's completely by chance that I'm here right now; I ran out of milk. Funny, when Kevin was around we never really ran out of milk. Cereal was pretty much the fifth food group. There hadn't been a need to pick up a new carton for the last six months, but today... Today I found an unopened box of Smacks that had been buried in the back of the pantry. I never bought sugary cereals, dentist bills were costly enough, but Kevin had procured one during one of his outings and was saving it, most likely for dinner on a night that I was working late. I decided to have a bowl, but the milk in the fridge was past the point of rancid.

It's funny, my sister told me that it was time to let go, but here we are. Small world. Smaller fucking state.

He's on his cell phone right now. His lips are moving, but I can't make out the words. Wonder if he has a girlfriend, something that Kevin never had the chance to have, at least not that I know of.

Fourteen is a tough time for kids and their parents. Kevin was starting to clam up more and more; "nothing" was becoming an everyday word in his vocabulary. The first time he responded with that word, I cried. This was it. This was the end; my boy was growing up. I didn't want him to-- part of me clung to the hope that he would stay with me, stay at same age where he would still need his mother. I tried to be the "cool" mom



and not push it. If he didn't want to talk that was fine, but the apartment was starting to feel empty, even though Kevin would be in the same room.

But what did I know about silence? Our apartment wasn't empty; it was a home. It might have been the sound of Kevin's video games; his harsh shouts into a headpiece to friends that I would never get to meet, or the muffled shuffle of his feet on the carpet, right before he would throw his book bag onto the floor. The static hush of his T.V., on the lowest volume he could set it at, would keep me up at night. I still turn it on some nights, just so I can sleep...although I haven't really had a decent night's sleep since Kevin died.

He's hung up the phone, and he's smiling. Smiling at some wonderful joke that some disembodied voice related to him.

Bernice, Josh's mom, told me what happened. She had arrived at my house with a police escort. The accident had occurred two houses down from hers. Apparently she had ridden in the ambulance with Kevin...held his hand.

I don't remember screaming. I remember the sound, but it hadn't come from me. It carried on and on, like a dying animal caught in a trap. It raced through our apartment building. Arms tried to hold me, tried to pry my hands away from my own ears, but I couldn't stand the sound of that broken wail.

Bernice held me up. She grasped my hand, and at that time she seemed so stable, so strong, but she was able to. Her house would still be full of sounds.

I'm still staring at the boy. His cigarette is almost out. I wonder if his mother knows that he smokes. Judging by the way he keeps gazing at the door, I assume not.

My pulse is racing, I can't wait here forever, and I don't have to. As Fate would have it, he looks my way, and stops. We make eye contact, he drops his cigarette. The orange ember falls onto his knee, searing his pants, but he's too shocked to notice. Good. I walk towards him. At this point he's noticed the burn, and frantically tries to brush it off without taking his eyes off of me.

At this point I could talk to him, make a scene. I could scream that he's a murderer. I could demand some form of vigilante justice, and not a single person would be able to find fault with it. Maybe I would show him a picture of Kevin, and the two of us could cry together about the boy that would never grow up. Or he could scoff at me like he did the day the verdict was reached. I could then beat that triumphant smirk off of his face with my purse.

The court was a fiasco. The cops had arrested the boy who hit my son. A stupid teenager and his friends, just barely legal adults, messing with the MP3 player or something, I'm not sure. They all shut up at the request of the delinquent's lawyer-- and what a lawyer. Turns out the driver's father had a nice, tight wad of cash, being a judge.

The case should have made headlines, but after the first day it disappeared from the paper. The public never got to hear about the missing evidence, the "expert" witnesses (some of whom were actually at the scene of the crash), nor did they hear about Kevin's neglectful parents.

The father that abandoned his family, the mother who let her son stay out at all hours of the night, and had no idea of her child's whereabouts. And let's not forget about Kevin, the child with a fondness for wearing dark clothing and playing violent action video games, who, because of his recent bout of depression, could have conceivably

swerved into the defendant's car. Why should another young man's future be compromised because of a hellion child, a bumbling police force, and his wastrel of a mother?

The prosecution had objected to the defense's statements numerous times, but it was enough. Reasonable doubt had been established. Negligent driving, but that was it.

More than half of the courtroom had celebrated, cheering for their released hero. I was too numb to cry. I let the prosecution lead me to the judge's chambers, let my sister escort me out the back. I guess in the end it wouldn't have mattered, Kevin wouldn't be coming home anytime soon.

I'm walking now; my groceries are heavy in my arms. He's watching me. At some point he had pulled out his cell phone again. His body shrinks up against the car, though I'm a good five feet from him. I keep my eyes forward, and I remember to breathe.

I can hear him now, his voice is deep, not a boy's voice at all. The words don't make any sense, though; he's telling someone he's sorry. He's telling them he didn't mean to, but the kid came out of nowhere. He's saying that it wasn't his fault.

I slam my door.

My car is hot and silent, and he's stopped talking. There's a look of abject shock on his features, I'm glad. He backs away slowly as I put the car in reverse. Those lying lips are moving again, speaking at a rapid pace into a machine that has people on it Kevin will never meet. A girl that Kevin will never get to see.

Continuing to back up, I straighten out my car. An older woman comes out of the convenience store and walks over to him, and I know I've seen her before. I place my

hands on the steering wheel. He turns to her, and practically collapses into her arms, she's so small the scene is almost comical. I put my car in Drive. He can go back to his life, go to college. She's watching me now, her face switches between a plea and understanding.

I accelerate.

“Marble Suitors”

I can't do a thing with my hair. It's a chaotic, writhing mess that defies gravity. I'd love to push it down, wear it flat, or maybe give my curls a little more spring, but every time I go to touch the snakes bite my fingers.

It might be because they're still bitter about that time I tried to cut them all off. I managed to take out one writhing tendril, but then they attacked, hissing and biting at my face, constricting around my wrists. I think I almost lost my hand, and the worst part...the worst part is that two more of those hideous things managed to grow out of the stump I had left behind. Good thing they're not poisonous.

Oh god, what if they attack him if he tries to kiss me?

I can't get my hopes up, this is just the first date, a blind date...Maybe it'll actually work this time. I mean if he can't see me, he can't turn to stone, right? That means he won't be able to see the snakes either. This could work. I could have normal for once. No more wielding of swords, dodging arrows.

But he'll wonder. He'll wonder why I won't let him run his fingers through my hair, or even let him touch my head. He'll wonder why I have the appetite of two, or three, or...how many of you are there now? He'll wonder where that low hissing sound is

coming from, why it always sounds like static whenever I walk in the room. Eventually it'll become harder and harder for him to concentrate whenever I'm around because all he'll be able to hear is "that noise." He'll wonder about the noise that is coming from my hair because this mop on the top of my head does not SHUT THE FUCK UP!

Well, I guess that worked. They're a little quieter now. Loud noises make them cautious. Maybe I could tie a ribbon around each of their mouths. That would solve the hissing and biting. All I have to do is get them to stay still for a minute, but how am I supposed to grab them when I've put lotion on my hands.

Hmmm....did I use Dream Angel or Cherry Blossoms? Shit, I missed a spot. I can't believe I missed a spot. Is body hair still out or has it made a comeback? I can't remember.

I haven't done this in years. Decades. Centuries? Am I even doing it right? I'll have to cover my face if he wants to go out, but that's okay, I'll deal. It's kinda hard to order appetizers when your waiter keeps turning to stone. The only thing that'll be obvious is my hair, which I might be able to hide with a really nice scarf. I wonder if I could cut down on the hissing if I tied it tight enough. Maybe some of them would suffocate.

Ouch...ouch...I was kidding...I swear it was a joke, sort of.

I bet he's really into touch, which is why I'm "borrowing" my sister's velvet top. I know I have a couple of silk skirts around here somewhere. Maybe something in burgundy, the tops purple, so this should...

Not the phone, please not the phone. He's canceling. Maybe he's just running late. "Hello?"

“Dusa, darling, is he there yet?”

Shit. “No, Mom. If he was here, I wouldn’t be answering the phone.” Aw, man, her voice...it grates. She must be the only creature that can simultaneously growl, bellow and whine. Why did I pick up? Why didn’t I take up that offer for CallerID.

“That’s a bad sign, dear.”

Here we go. As if I wasn’t nervous enough. “It’s only five. I’d be even more upset if he showed up an hour early.”

“You haven’t spoken to him have you? And don’t forget to cover up that scar on your neck. You know the one that that boy gave you when you were younger. You were such a tomboy back then.” She’s gone into reminiscing mode. I’ve got to get her off the phone.

“Mom, he can’t see the scar. He’s blind, remember?”

She let out a slow, patronizing sigh. “Well, it never hurts to be prepared. You know you’re not getting any younger, and I would like to see my grandchildren.”

“I’m not getting any older.”

“That’s just a technicality. You could try to work with me here.”

I let out a gasp. “Mom, I think he’s here. I’ll have to call you back.” I should’ve been an actress.

“Alright, go, go. And, Dusa, body hair is out.”

I smile as I hang up the phone, happy that my hunch about shaving was correct. She has a point about the scar, though. I had almost forgotten about it. It’s not that obvious, but it completely encircles my neck. I could try a scarf. Get real; it’s like summer

outside. Oh, I could totally use a lace chocker...or maybe that one with Celtic knots.

Was dating always this hard?

You know, before my head was infested with vermin, people thought I was beautiful. I mean I was dating a god. Okay, he was a married god, but he was still a god.

I wonder if he'll think I'm beautiful. I miss the looks I used to get when I would pass by a line of soldiers or a field of filled with workers. I never really thought about it until... it stopped. It sucks having people avoid you like the plague, but look at me. I'd avoid me too.

I guess once you get past the snakes I'm not so bad, but if you get past the snakes you wouldn't be able to say anything anyway. Fate really is a bitch. I still get to see what I look like, I still get to see the monstrosity I've become, and everyone who even has the most remote idea of what I look like underneath freezes up. On one hand it's a good thing; at least I can't hear them scream.

Thanks, guys, but that tickles. I guess you're just as stuck with me as I am with you.

Maybe tranquilizers? I could put a little something in the water I give you tonight, but that'll make me loopy. Alcohol? Don't want him to get the wrong idea. Um, could you guys do me a teensy, weensy favor and crawl under a hat? Didn't think so.

I can barely think with your hissing. What is it going to take to get you to stop? I'll feed you. I'll give you anything you want. I'll give you crickets. Please, please, please. I'll catch them myself, I'll dip them in chocolate, I'll...

You've stopped. You're just sitting there because of chocolate covered crickets. That's it, that's all it would take. You mean I could have had peace years ago if I gave you chocolate?



Well, what do you know? Crickets and chocolate. Not only did they settle down, but they let me polish their scales. Can you believe it? They're like totally glowing now. Emerald and jade, and those little brown flecks look like copper in the light. This is awesome! They also put themselves put into this cool looking braid. I didn't even know they could do that.

Chocolate covered crickets for a month. I'll catch them and cook them myself if I have to.

The bell...the bell...Alright, guys here we go. I can't believe I didn't hear him walk up. He must be really good with that cane, he didn't knock over a single statue. Calm down, calm down, you don't want him to think that you're too excited. Open the door, say hello, what's\_the worst that can happen?

Oh, oh, he brought flowers, violets and marigolds; they're practically glowing in his hand.

"Hi." My god, he's got gorgeous hair.

I'm..." And those eyes, they're such a light grey they're almost silver. It's like they're looking right at me. Wait, they are looking right at me...

Fuck.

“Frozen Lives”

He has a funny chin. It’s longer than it should be, and it kind of sticks out a little too far from his face, making all his other features seem smaller. The size of it dwarfs the flawlessness of everything else, making him seem less perfect. I think it’s my favorite part.

“So, what are you going to do with him?” Mom asks from the couch.

Technically, it’s a couch and a recliner that she is now lounging across, her tail needing more support in her more mature years.

SeeSi, my dauntingly all-knowing sister, steps out of the kitchen with one of my favorite earthen mugs, full of her latest herbal concoction. “You could always sell him,” her low voice chirps, the perfect sound for flowing across silk sheets. Despite having more lovers than Cleopatra and Catherine the Great combined, my *darling* sibling has somehow managed to avoid being cursed all these years..

I study him again, so still, so perfect. His mouth is the silent little “Oh” of surprised wonder. There’s no fear, no disgust. I like that. One of my more curious tendrils weaves itself away from the rest of the mass, flicking a tongue across his cold cheek. “I wouldn’t be able to find a buyer,” I say, turning to take the mug from my sister before she accidentally spills the foul-smelling muck onto my floor.

She does that annoying little clicking-hiss sound with her mouth and my hair twitches. “You’ve got a point. That chin of his just kills the entire piece.” Of course she would think that. SeeSi’s tastes only run toward perfection. Perfect body, perfect date, perfect car. For the longest time she’s always been the epitome of class; shame that her little soul-sucking affliction tends to guarantee that there won’t be a second date.

“I swear, Dusa,” Seesi continues, oblivious to the growing presence. “You’ve got to be more careful. The days when you could just freeze anyone are long gone. For all we know this guy could’ve been the head of a Fortune 500 Company.” She doesn’t have to tell me that. Despite my cloistered state, I have a better idea of exactly what is at stake. Torches and pitchforks are things of the past; now computers are making it almost impossible to spend more than a couple of decades on Earth. We leave too much of a paper trail.

She gets closer, focusing on his face. “I think we’ve lucked out this time. I don’t recognize him.” Mother nods in confirmation on the sofa. “So, it’ll be the usual clean-up. Charge a plane ticket to his credit card, leave some casino vouchers out in the open, maybe a message from an angry girlfriend. Next time, though, pick someone salvageable. I’d like to think something is to be earned from all my hard work.”

Why did I call them? Oh, wait, I didn’t. If being a mother means having a sixth sense about your children, to the point where you will instantly know when one of them has managed to do one of the top ten most embarrassing things in her life, count me out. That still doesn’t explain Seesi’s presence. Most likely I interrupted one of her weekly interventions with Mom, and now I’ve got two for the price of one. Lucky me.

“Seesi, darling, your sister means that the current art market is a little too obsessed with the abstract for that piece to find a home.” Mother’s interruption is flawless, as always. “Now how about you get me another glass.” One perfectly manicured talon carefully balances the cup on its tip. I’m afraid that it’s going to spill, or that Mother will lose her concentration and cut one of my glasses in half, but SeeSi moves in to intercept the catastrophe.

“I wish you wouldn’t drink so much, Mother,” she says, while walking away to do my mother’s bidding, but not without one more parting shot. “Whatever happened to the Nature’s Choice teas I bought you for weight loss? I swear, if you keep this up, immortality won’t be able to stave off some of these new diseases. Hell, do you want to turn into a mountain?”

“Wine comes from grapes, darling, which also come from nature,” Mother interjects. Seesi knows better than to continue arguing, and walks toward the kitchen. “Oh, and if you would be a dear, see if Dusa has any of those Mallow Cups.” Sethno’s shoulders wince, but she keeps blessedly silent.

“That was mean,” I say, while pouring my own cup of Nature’s Choice onto the lawn, hoping that this blend won’t kill the grass. My poor sister’s heart is, for most intents and purposes, in the right place, metaphorically. A few years ago, she realized that health nuts would last more than one night, so she started hanging out at the choice hunting grounds: health clubs, yogurt bars, co-op stores. Somewhere along the way she was sucked into the health vortex, and now she’s made it her mission to save her entire family from themselves.

Mother smiles and pats the recliner with one beefy arm, and I walk over, wedging myself between her tail and the end of the couch. “Your sister tends to rant when she’s had more than one of those,” she gestures at the empty cup. “And I wanted to spend some time with my estranged daughter.” The snakes hiss from atop my head. “As well as all her little friends.” She reaches out another one of her hands as though she’s going to pat my head, but the snakes beat her to it. I can feel them pulling away from my scalp as they twist and turn around her arm. “Oh, Dusa, you’re not feeding them enough. The one with the yellow scales looks listless and weak.”

“Mom, they eat what I eat.”

“Ach, then you’re not eating enough. Look at you, you’re practically bones...Is that a rib I see there...Dusa, I swear, how’re you going to keep a man if you’re just a skeleton?”

“First, let’s solve the problem of getting them through the front door.”

She freezes, her well-rehearsed mother rant cut off in its prime. I manage to squelch the five-minute spiel about the magical wonder of grandchildren...Thank God.

“Dusa, Dusa, you just have to be more careful. When I was your age...”

When she was my age, she was the exact same way she is now, except... Well, let’s just say that my mom must’ve been a looker, and all 42 of her children are a testament to that fact, but times have changed.

As technology moved in, monsters moved out, and my mother found herself without a line of men willing to lay claim to one of her offspring, so she found a “tasty” substitute. Today she’s all about the food. Everything from the lowliest Oreo to the purest shepherdess have all passed through her pallet, and, over time, they’ve massed

around her thighs, arms, tail, until that mythical grace of hers has vanished. I don't think she'll die from it, but I'm worried that I'll have to widen my door soon if she keeps this up.

"You do realize that Mallow Cups went off the market in the seventies?" I ask.

She smiles, clearly amused by her own intellect. "Of course I do, darling. This'll give us a little time for catching up. How's the job front going?"

The irony is that she thinks this is safe territory, a neutral zone that will open up to deeper topics, but being in my currently unemployed state...

"Dusa, stop playing with your veil."

Must've drifted off. "Well, the last one didn't work out, so..."

The entire love seat rolls with a shuddering heave as she adjusts her bulk.

"Another one." Ah, there's the cacophony of sound I've come to know so well. "This is all your father's fault. He had a chance to get you a place in Olympia, but no..."

"Mom," I whisper, trying to draw her attention back to the subject at hand.

"Now, don't you worry, honey. Your Uncle Malcolm knows a couple of people, good, honest people, who'll help you..."

"Mom!" It comes out as a chorus of hisses, and my mother stops winding her fingers through my hair. "My dad works for Hades, remember?"

And we enter the moment of uncomfortable silence as my mom realizes her delicate error. "Oh, of course, that's right. I never did understand this whole job thing." Now, I know where this conversation is going, and sure enough... "You could always move back home."

Ironically, it's SeeSi who saves the day. "There aren't any Mallow Cups, Mother, and I think you've polished off the last of the wine. What did I miss?"

"Nothing," I snap, rising from the couch. One lone claw grabs my wrist, almost entreating me to take my seat again, but I know by doing that I may not get up.

It takes about another hour for the two of them to leave. By the time they're heading out the side door, my hair has come completely out of its braid. The entire nest is in somewhat of a tizzy, snapping at anything that moves, including Mother, so I use their irritable temper to drive my family out the door.

"You should come out with me, Dusa," Seesi had suggested as I tried to usher them around the statue. Next time I freeze someone it won't be in a doorway. It's pretty hard to close a door around a six-foot doorstep.

"Sure," I said politely, trying not to be too obvious that I was more than willing to sacrifice a couple of her toes in the process of ejecting her from my premises.

"No, I'm serious. It can't be good for you to be cooped up in this house all the time." I'd paused at her sincerity. "Besides, I saw that you are seriously lacking in dietary supplies. I know this great shop in New York."

And now they're gone, and the house is mine again. Mine, my hair's, and my quiet guest's.

"So, what should we do with him, guys?" The snakes respond with a hiss, and slide toward the back of my head. "Yeah, I think the garden's a good idea, too."

It's not easy picking him up, and it has nothing to do with the height. By Olympian standards, I'm pretty strong; by mortal standards I'm a god. But the way he

froze; one leg is still sticking out behind him, his arm, now empty of flowers, is still handing me the bouquet, but I manage.

I find him a place next to a willow tree, facing one of my last victims. The girl is quite young, Victorian era, and she'd paused mid-curtsy. It looks painful, and because of that I put her in the shade.

You would think after six thousand years I would've figured out what happens to them when they turn into stone. I'm really certain of only one thing: they're not dead. Persephone has assured me on numerous occasions that none of my victims pass through her underworld, so now I worry that they can still feel. Is my date—God, I wish I had a name for him—wondering why he can't put his arm down? Or are they sleeping inside their marble bodies?

I turn back to study my "masterpiece." The two really do make quite a pair, both of them beautiful, and in this light it appears that the two of them are gazing at each other. I quickly turn away as my two "friends" lick gently at the salt on my face with their tongues.

I enter the house to discover that I have missed four calls. The first one's from my older brother, Chris; he wants me to call him about a job opportunity in the university Art Department. I wonder how he swung something like that, and then I remember that his wife, Amanda, was an art major in college before she switched to a business degree.

Chris is one of the few of Mother's "special" children not only to survive through the centuries, but also to find a way to integrate himself into modern society. He's got a job, a house, and a family. He's also one of the most popular circus freaks on the West



Coast. Unlike a number of the minor deities who turned to plastic surgery as a way of integration, Chris decided to use the more antisocial type of body modification. He is now one of a handful of men who can refer to themselves as Lizard Men; however, Chris's teeth, scales, and horns are real. He's also able to completely dislocate his jaw in order to swallow his food whole, but they haven't come up with a procedure to explain that yet, so he doesn't do it very often.

For a while he suggested that I join up. We could turn this into the family business, it would be a bit more productive than maiming and terrorizing. But there isn't much of a profit to be made when your entire audience won't be able to leave.

Still, I'm wondering how he expects me to fulfill this job. It's not exactly like I can sit down for an interview, let alone go to work on a daily basis. I am largely stuck with telemarketing gigs, stuff that I can do over the phone. Most of the time I would convince people to upgrade their insurance or try new vinyl siding, hell, I was even a phone sex operator for a year... That job had to go when one of my "clients" insisted on tracking me down. He now works overtime as a bird feeder in my backyard.

The next three messages are from Mother, reminding me to call Chris.

I decide not to call either of them.

The reception will be lousy, and it's going to cost me an arm and a leg, but I really do need a friend now.

So my curse, which I guess is the best way to put it . . . It's actually been so long that I have a hard time remembering what life was like before I ended up with some fifty-odd roommates.

It's a textbook cliché, really: Girl falls for older man, older man is married, wife finds out about affair, garden-variety vengeance ensues. Tragically, the older man wasn't your garden-variety mechanic, and his wife had connections in the supernatural sense.

Basically, I was beautiful, and I knew it. I was one of my mother's few children that could've given the Olympian bunnies a run for their money in the looks department. I was also incredibly naïve. I loved to play games with men, and they loved to play games back, and for some reason I never thought of the repercussions. I honestly believed that all of them loved me, even though I could really care less for them.

"Your hair is as brilliant as a sunrise," he had said the first time we were introduced, and if he had been anyone else, I would have quickly turned him down for that lame-ass attempt at a pick-up line, but come on, the guy was a god. Now, I don't mean just any god, I mean capital G-O-D material. He was one of the central thirteen, the heavy hitters who ruled Mt. Olympus.

"Thanks," I giggled, trying to come off as a vampy vixen instead of the naïve schoolgirl that I was feeling at that moment.

Poseidon beamed, and I felt myself melt a bit. Now, don't get me wrong: yeah, the guy is old enough to be my father and looks that way, but that was a different time. I let him get my drinks for the rest of the night, and I let him drive me home in his chariot.

Yes, I knew he was married, but I was a firm believer in "out of sight, out of mind." I hadn't seen his wife in a few years, so for all I knew they could've been divorced.

Our fun lasted for almost a year, with clandestine meetings, generally at my place, dolphin rides, and exclusive invitations to private parties. All the while his wife, and any mention of her, was decidedly absent, to the point where I forgot she even existed.

It was somewhere around the ninth month that I noticed our relationship was getting old.

Poseidon just wasn't doing it for me anymore. At first I liked the whole older guy thing, I felt mature, but then he started wanting to stay over, to cuddle, to make plans that involved staying in and reading poetry to each other. I wanted all-night wave rides, skiing on Mount Olympus, and gorging myself on stuffed olives, something that gave him indigestion.

I let him down as gently as I could.

"Is it my wife?" he raged, flooding my entire apartment with the Aegean Sea.

"No," I sputtered, clinging to my prized Etruscan coffee table in the deluge. "We're just too different." The wind started rising. "You're a god, and I'm like the daughter of a monster-chick."

Abruptly the waves died down, and all of the water quickly receded. It was then that I realized he was crying. "Why...why don't you want me?" he sobbed.

I attempted to placate him, promising that we would still be friends.

"Is it commitment?" he asked, while wading across what was once my living room.

And with that statement, I saw an out. "Well...you can't exactly commit to two people, now can you?" My voice was like velvet butter. "And I would never in a million years ask you to sacrifice the marriage that you worked so hard to build." I had him now,

his watery eyes watching my every move. “Besides, marriage vows are sacred,” I said, as I led him to the door.

“Go home to Amphitrite,” I insisted.

That should have been the end, but I guess some men just can’t take a hint.

I awoke that morning to the gentle hiss of the oceans outside my windows. I cracked open one eye to greet the morning, but with no desire to start cleaning up the mess Poseidon had left before his departure, I decided to go back to sleep.

As I rolled away from the light, I felt the pillow under my cheek move.

I recoiled with a start, but the pillow itself was untouched, smooth, and undisturbed. I looked underneath, but that was also empty.

Then I felt something brush against my cheek. I reached up a hand to move the stray strand away...and it wrapped around my wrist. Slowly, my hand moved up that one lone tendril before it made contact with the swarm of snakes that were now growing out of my hair.

I screamed and pulled, but all my efforts were met with pain. My scalp burned as I tried to yank them off my head, while the intruders attacked my own fingers in their desire for self-preservation.

I imagine that I was quite the sight as I passed through the doors to my living room; screaming, crying, both hands fisted in my hair.

“Medusa, I love the new look,” Amphitrite said from the only chair to survive her husband’s tantrum.

I froze; I couldn’t speak, so she continued the conversation without me.

“Nothing to say, home wrecker? You aren’t going to beg for my forgiveness? Deny that you were sleeping with my husband?”

“You,” I gasped. “You did this?”

She smiled, slow and sinister, reminding me of the reptiles on top of my head. “I thought it appropriate for the occasion. Don’t you?”

“Take it back,” I cried, collapsing in front of her. “I called off the affair. I never really wanted to...”

“Shut up,” she snapped, kicking a foot out at me. “Do you think I care who he sleeps with? It keeps him out of the house, and out of my kingdom. But the moment I hear that he’s planning on using some little tramp to replace me... I built this kingdom after he destroyed the original to get to my father.” She stops, pulling me off the floor. “No, Medusa, I will not abdicate my throne to anyone, least of all a daughter of Echidna.”

I am weak in her grasp; all fight gone, only my hair is attempting to snap at her. She drops me to the floor, disgustingly wiping her hands on her toga. “No, Medusa, my husband will not set eyes on you again. However, I will continue to allow you to bask in the affection of your admirers. May all those who look upon you be frozen where they stand,” she said.

At first, I thought that was it. The snakes were all that would be left of my sin, but, like I said, I was naïve.

You really would think I would’ve known better, given Hera’s wrathful inclination toward Zeus’s numerous mistresses.