

# *Kiss of the Black Angel*

by

*Della Van Hise*



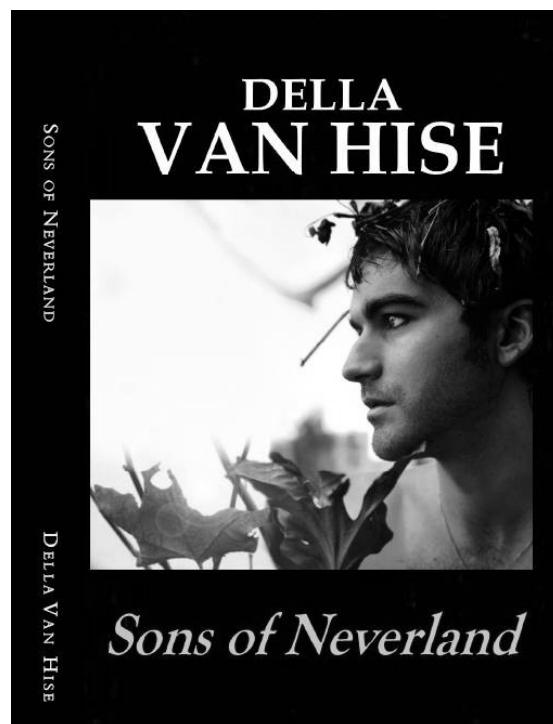
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***Kiss of the Black Angel* was originally published in the prestigious TOMORROW MAGAZINE. It was released as a limited print first edition in 1997, as *Ragged Angels*.**

**There is now a novel-length version of this book entitled**

***Sons of Neverland***



**Available in eBook or Print**

## About the Author...



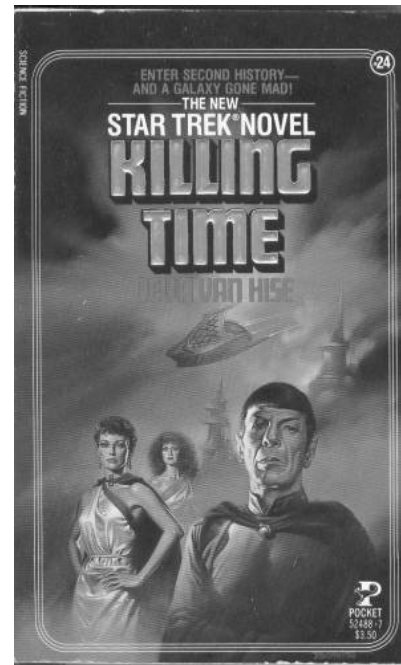
Della Van Hise is a native of Florida, transplanted to California at the age of 21, who has subsequently sunk her roots into the high desert near Joshua Tree National Park. She has not personally seen any aliens since around 1992, but there is rumored to be a secret UFO base underneath her house.

Her first professional sale was best-selling KILLING TIME - the controversial Star Trek novel which was recalled and re-edited in 1984. More recently, Della has written extensively in the non-fiction genre, with titles such as QUANTUM SHAMAN: DIARY OF A NAGUAL WOMAN and SCRAWLS ON THE WALLS OF THE SOUL. "Quantum Shaman" focuses heavily on the author's metaphysical explorations and experiences, while "Scrawls" is a continuation of those journeys many years later. If you enjoyed the works of Carlos Castaneda or Don Miguel

Ruiz, you'll enjoy the non-fiction works of Della Van Hise.

In addition, Della has written professionally for Tomorrow Magazine and other prominent science fiction publications. Her most recent fiction works include Sons of Neverland (an award-winning vampire novel); Year of the Ram (a space-faring gay romance); and Coyote (a romantic science fiction novel combining the mystical aspects of martial arts, coming of age, and personal sacrifice.)

Della lives in the desert, sharing her life with her significant other, Wendy Rathbone, and a host of cats, dogs and various desert wildlife.



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Set against a background of contemporary culture, *Kiss of the Black Angel* explores one man's grief as it plunges him into the realms of the vampire. There, Stefan encounters Dimitri and Miquel, one of whom is destined to become his maker, the other his brother. But the price of immortality is high, and as the vampire warns, "Through my blood you will learn a secret which will compel you to live forever, yet a secret so profane it will haunt you for that same eternity."

*The secret will haunt you, too.*

*This book is dedicated to the quest for immortality and human  
evolution, to the muses who make the quest possible  
...and most of all, to Wendy.*

***Kiss of the Black Angel***

## **PROLOGUE**

"Have you come to a decision in this matter, Stefan?" he inquired in a voice so flawless and clear it could have been the song of some mythical siren.

Dimitri was asking me to choose between life and death, yet all I could do was sit there listening to the clink of glasses and the din of meaningless conversation all around us. At a nearby table, Batman and Robin shared an order of french fries, thick red catsup bleeding toward the center of the plate in an erotic slow dance. In the buffet line, Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock chatted about the "prejudicially Terran cuisine here at Starbase One" as the Vulcan popped a fat black grape in his mouth. Hotel employees strained to maintain polite expressions in the face of a 200 pound Catwoman and an overly talkative Jean-Luc Picard whose skullcap was peeling away to reveal scraggly locks of auburn.

My head hurt from the wine. I was drunk on illusion. I was sick on grief.

And the creature sitting across the table just looked at me and smiled, revealing straight white teeth whose only peculiarity was the two small fangs where incisors should have been. It was no Hollywood make-up job, nor had this blond waif undergone dental alterations in order to personify some macabre fantasy.

No, *this* illusion was real.

Looking at the vampyre now, it was as if I'd known him always, though we'd met less than 24 hours before...



## CHAPTER ONE

The 15th Annual MystiCon was well underway, but I didn't belong here among the starship troopers and the knights and ladies in their Arthurian finery. The huckster's room writhed, undulating with milling misfits and freelance vendors hawking everything from pointed ears to solid gold chess sets cast in the likenesses of Tolkein's hobbits.

Money traded hands, coins jangling. A bearded man broke into a raunchy folk song, strumming a battered mandolin. At the booth next to mine, a lady with long gray hair and one blind eye gave Tarot readings as a Celtic harp played *Greensleeves* on a distorted cassette. Two aisles over, a young knave in a jester's hat extolled the virtues of the swords he was selling, proudly proclaiming in an affected English accent, "Guaranteed to sever the head of the nastiest dragon or your money back!"

There were two things any science fiction convention could guarantee: the atmosphere was chaos, the majority of attendees not plugged in to the reality most people would consider normal. So when I looked up to see a vampyre standing in front of my table as if he'd appeared out of dusk's early vapor, it never struck me as particularly unusual.

Dimitri was a face in a crowd of odd faces, though paler and more gaunt, with straight blond hair that would have fanned over his narrow shoulders had it not been gathered into a loose bundle tied with black satin bows. And while his costume was striking—a black velvet tuxedo and sable cape—his persona seemed nonetheless tame when compared to some of the others wandering the drafty exhibition hall at the L.A. Airport Hilton.

He arrived just after sunset, not long before the room was scheduled to close, and stood there looking at the *Star Trek* mementos, movie posters and new age books which were all that remained of my daughter. Stephanie had been buried almost two years now, and while I would have preferred to leave her belongings enshrined in her room, the house had been sold to satisfy the terms of the divorce, and I couldn't bring myself to toss her favorite possessions in a plastic sack to be picked through by strangers at a thrift store.

No, it had to be *here* that the ashes of her memory were scattered, here that her spirit was returned to the other pilgrims who'd shared her visions of faeries and far-flung civilizations, worlds more real to her than life in the suburbs of San Diego had ever been. It had to be here, where she and I had come so often—I as a bewildered guest to sign copies of my books, Stephanie as my guide and my inspiration.

Ironically, had she been at the convention, she would've recognized Dimitri for what he was. She would have skirted behind me, whispering, "He's a vampyre, Daddy. Don't talk to him and don't look in his eyes!"

Wanting to indulge her as any father indulges a daughter, I wouldn't have replied when Dimitri first spoke, and I never would have known that he wore those mirrored shades to conceal more than just his identity.

But because Stephanie wasn't there, I was vulnerable when the vampyre began to make small talk. Charming and expressive in a manner not commensurate with his age—maybe 19 and tender at that—he tipped his head in greeting, then said in a voice so clear it could shatter entire realities, "I wish to thank you, sir, for making me believe in spirits and sprites."

I stared blankly before I realized he was referring to my first book, *Travelogue of the Underworld*, rumored to be a factual account of the author's adventures into a shadow reality existing at right angles to our own. At gatherings such as these, it wasn't uncommon for people to

believe my books *were* the truth.

But those were stories I'd written to entertain Stephanie when she was a little girl, and now the room shimmered, more mist than substance, more past than present. Merlin walked by in a tall purple hat, Xena and Gabrielle not far behind.

*'The world's not science, Daddy. The world's magic if you just look!'*

But the words were spoken by a ghost, and any magic I'd ever known was buried in her grave.

"I wish I could tell you it's true, but fairyland's closed. There's no such thing as elves or trolls, no sorcerers, no magic. *Nothing*," I concluded, sharper than I intended.

The vampyre gave a small smile, delicate and birdlike. "Oh, but there *are*," he insisted with an expressive gesture of ashen hands. "They exist because you made me *believe* they can, and belief is the first principle of magic, just as the ability to create belief is the mark of a true storyteller."

Oddly, his words didn't strike me as hollow flattery. Though I was now just another face in the swarm, the fact that Dimitri knew who I was after my two-year absence from the convention circuit gave me an unexpected sense of comfort, leaving me embarrassed for the way I'd spoken to him.

"Sorry, it's been a long day," I muttered, a polite social lie to conceal the grief still consuming me whenever I saw a girl in the crowd who looked like my Stephanie, whenever I looked at the empty chair behind the table and remembered when she'd sat at my side.

I turned away from the memories.

"So you're a vampyre," I commented numbly, hoping to lose myself for a moment in someone else's world. I motioned toward the clothes he wore, the dark glasses hiding his eyes. "Am I to assume you never drink—" here I paused for dramatic effect "—*wine*?"

"Ah, Dracula," he sighed, catching my eclectic reference which would have been lost on any normal human being. "A truly unfortunate stereotype that will haunt our kind for centuries to come."

Maybe it shouldn't have surprised me that he spoke as if from experience.

An uneasy silence dropped between us as he studied the articles on the table, the way one politely looks at something when he's really looking for a reason to linger. Picking up a dusty copy of *The Lost Boys*, he slowly turned it over in his hand until the harsh overhead lights glinted off the cellophane wrapper and time did a backbend—

*—in my den, a prisoner to the clackety-rackety-click of a plastic keyboard as I pounded out another chapter of Lucas the Lizard. But I was startled from my thoughts when Stephanie burst through the door, excitement sparking in waves that were all but visible. "Daddy, look!" she exclaimed, holding up the spoils of her weekly allowance, a shiny new copy of The Lost Boys. Sun streaming through the window flashed off the shrink-wrap and bounced around the room, time taking a snapshot. "Watch it with me tonight? Okay, Daddy? Please?"*

But I'd been too busy that night and every other night, and now my throat tightened as Dimitri held that same old tape in his hand, a ruthless reminder of what I'd lost. Ghosts were strange companions, manifesting in the form of an old movie, an empty room, a song on the radio.

Oblivious to my grief, Dimitri set the box down, fingertips barely brushing the soft peach tablecloth as he looked up from his silence.

"The portrayal of vampyres has become quite an obsession in Hollywood," he murmured, clasping his hands together at his waist with an air of formality that seemed somehow natural.

"Still, it's unfortunate that no film has ever captured the true essence of what it means to walk the Earth as a citizen of the night."

Strangely nervous, I laughed, not for what he said but for the manner in which he said it. After all, *I* was the word merchant—or had been before Stephanie died—and Dimitri had stepped on the untended grave of my muse with his eloquent manner of speaking and his aggrandized gestures that would have suited a character in a very old book. He belonged in another world and time, right down to the cloistering scent of his cologne, the brush of powder on his cheeks, the old world propriety of his conduct.

"So what *does* it mean?" I asked, not sure if I expected an answer or was only making fun of him.

He didn't respond, just twitched his lips in a smile that might have been real had I been able to see his eyes. Instead, I saw only myself in duplicate, his glasses throwing my reflection back at me as twins.

For an instant, I thought the images were tiny paintings on the lenses, for no mirror ever captured a man as he saw himself. Momentarily disoriented, I gaped at the distorted stranger, this man who always seemed too tall and too thin, this man who had peered back at me in mirrors for 34 years, an eerie doppelganger wearing my face. Stefan London was his name—*my* name—yet I knew nothing of the man behind it. It was only a symbol for the face who wore it, four syllables meaning absolutely nothing.

Only when the scream of a plastic phaser split the air did I jerk myself back to reality, embarrassed to be searching for my lost identity in another man's glasses.

"I—uh—sorry. I'm Stefan London—please, call me Stefan," I stammered, as if speaking the name out loud might cause it to have meaning again. I thrust my hand toward him, a marionette going through jerky social formalities.

He bowed slightly from the waist, far more graceful than my clumsy handshake. "I am deeply honored to make your acquaintance, Stefan. As for myself, I am called Dimitri, though it's only a word, as you already realize, a label incapable of telling you anything about me. Sad, really, that our entire lives are spent in such isolation from one another. Don't you agree?"

How could I answer that? While verbalizing the mental aloneness every human being experiences every moment of their lives, he seemed to be reaching inside my mind, speaking my thoughts aloud in a way that destroyed the isolation itself.

And even if it were nothing more than some inexplicable synchronicity, the confident aura with which Dimitri spoke sent a chill down my spine. This kid hadn't just crawled into the tuxedo and the black silk cape on a whim. He *fit* inside them, for unlike most human beings, Dimitri was more than just his name.

He truly saw himself as a vampyre, and the fact that *he* believed it intrigued me utterly. Instead of automatically writing him off as just one more deluded soul, a part of me I'd thought extinct broke free of its grief with a vengeance that was exhilarating and at the same time absolutely terrifying. A voice inside my mind burst alive, whispering, *'What if he is? What if he could be? How did it happen and what does it mean to be a vampyre? What if...? Oh, what if it could be real?*

It was a voice I knew well, yet one that had been silent so long I'd believed it mute. In short, Dimitri's very existence made me want to write again—a reaction I could not have predicted under any circumstances. I took a step away from him and would have bolted altogether had the wall not halted my retreat.

My words were no longer for sale. I had to keep them locked up inside lest they, like

Stephanie, leave me forever, for although I might occasionally run across a ragged novel bearing my name in a used book store, the man on the dust jacket was dead.

Suddenly, I wanted to chase Dimitri away before he disturbed my living death. I'd grown comfortable in my mourning and was loathe to give it up. Yet it also occurred to me that perhaps Stephanie had known him. Maybe she'd spoken to him or flirted with him at some other convention years ago. Maybe he would remember her sad smile, her rare laughter. With an effort, I controlled my panic, forcing an unnatural calm.

"These things belonged to my daughter—Stephanie," I said, gesturing toward the table as I spoke her name.

Dimitri looked at me from behind his dark glasses for a long time. "She was a beautiful girl," he said at last.

My heart beat faster. "You knew her?"

Another long silence followed, as if he really did have eternity. Then he shook his head. "No, but because she lives so strongly in your memories, it's as if she still stands by your side, the stygian sprite of your early novels."

His insight left me numb, its implications chilling me through to the very bone. And yet, suddenly, it didn't matter *how* Dimitri knew these things. It only mattered that he *did* know them. It only mattered that, for one single moment, I no longer felt so completely alone.

Finally, blurry-eyed, I managed in a whisper: "Thank you."

I wasn't sure what I meant, but perhaps I was simply grateful to him for acknowledging my grief in a way most people never could. It made friends ill at ease, made them find reason to be someplace else.

But Dimitri didn't withdraw. Instead, he studied me as if coming to some profound decision while the two of us stood encapsulated together at a mystical crossroads existing apart from the rest of the world. Finally, in a gesture that was curiously intimate, he smiled ever so slightly and slowly removed his glasses, our eyes meeting for the first time.

My initial reaction was that he must have some medical condition which could account for the fact that his right eye was cobalt blue and flecked with gold while the left was a shade of green like summer grass. Animal eyes, predator sharp.

I should have known then that he wasn't human, or perhaps I refused to acknowledge it because those terrible eyes were penetrating the very core of my mind. But when he reached out and grasped my hand, pressing it between both of his own with a strength I could never hope to match, lightning flashed inside my head, obliterating whatever sovereign thoughts made a man unique unto himself.

The din of the convention was chopped off, and before I could react, some supernatural force jerked me away to a place where the stars were black and the sky white, where the silence was as shrill a dying man's scream. I was falling then, plunging through infinite space and timeless void, a disembodied consciousness hurtling toward oblivion through the very nothingness which was both destination and annihilation.

My only thought was that the city had been struck by a nuclear blast and this was what it was like to die. But then, through sheer intuition, I understood that I had been miraculously transported into the alien environs of another man's mind, where I stood looking out through his monstrous eyes, seeing myself through his strangely intensified perceptions:

*A man in the peak of his life with shaggy hair the shade of pine bark after a cool rain and eyes blue as tropical waters. Though willow thin from too much grief, he was also willow strong. And though he struggled to stress only the mediocrity in himself, the strength of the long*

*distance runner he had been in his youth always crept past the nondescript clothes and downcast eyes. Stefan London was beautiful, his soul a veil of black lace torn in spots by sorrow, yet it was through those gashes that his crippled aura bled to draw people to him as flame was attracted to wick—*

"Yo! Death Star to dealer! You okay, buddy?"

Darth Vader was shaking my shoulder, waving one of Stephanie's books under my nose until the scent of printer's ink and dust acted like smelling salts to shake me back to my senses. "How much you want for this?" he rasped from inside a black plastic helmet.

The jolt of being catapulted back into my own body was like a rubber band snapping, the pain of it causing me to gasp. I had no idea where I was, nor even *who*, and the world had become a merry-go-round churning out of control.

Then I saw. Still standing in front of me as if nothing were out of the ordinary, Dimitri just looked at me with those omniscient eyes which seemed to be saying, *You wanted to know what it's like to walk the night? Well, I can show you, my friend, things you can't even begin to dream. Oh, the things I can show you with these eyes...*

Bathed in an icy sweat, suddenly sick to my stomach, I yanked my hand away from him, yet before I could discover any answers in his face, he slid those mirrored shades back on and reality righted itself, not unlike an old film fluttering through the projector until the picture and the soundtrack were once again in sync.

In front of my table, a small crowd had gathered to gawk at Stephanie's collection, yet their expressions were vacant, their attention captured by plastic toys and paper worlds hidden inside out-of-print books.

"How much?" Lord Vader asked again.

He might as well have spoken High Martian. I could only stare into the distorted world the mask reflected back at me.

"I—did you see—?" I stammered, fighting the vertigo.

Dimitri placed a hand on my shoulder, warning me to silence with a oddly erotic gesture of one long finger laid discreetly over pale lips.

"Each of us sees only those things we allow ourselves to see, Stefan," he said in response to my thoughts. Then, leaning nearer, he added, "What I see is a man whose grief is an unrelenting master but also a powerful muse—one that could serve us both well."

I pulled away, realizing in an awful flash that his lips never moved when he spoke.

"Who *are* you?" I demanded, struggling to shake myself free of a dream that had turned dangerously real. "What do you want from me?"

And suddenly we were alone again. Darth Vader stormed off carrying his head under his arm and the others just drifted away, extras milling about at the whim of some unseen director.

"It's not a question of what I want, per se, but a matter of how we may be able to help one another," Dimitri explained in that crystalline voice. "True vampirism isn't based on the surreptitious control of your mind or the theft of your blood, but is instead a matter of give and take." Here he paused to give me an alluring smile, then concluded rather boldly, "I've shown you a glimpse of yourself through my very own eyes, so now I ask you: are you interested in seeing more? Are you interested in discovering who you are, who you *can* be? Are you interested in evolving beyond this mortal life and into eternity itself?"

His questions unnerved me deeply.

It was hot in the room.

My mouth went dry.

In a matter of minutes, with a minimum of words, this willful fiend had seduced my senses and burned my sensibilities. He had lured me to the very brink of madness and now I would be compelled to follow him over the edge—not only because he was clearly a magical being, but because he made me feel *alive* again, so much that the sensation was not unlike physical arousal, and *that* was the worst of all.

As if understanding my dilemma, he reached inside his jacket, pulling out a card which he handed to me with a flourish of pallid hand and lace cuff.

**DIMITRI ALEXANDER KARROS**  
**FREELANCE COMPUTER ANALYST**  
**213-555-8267**  
**Graveyard shift only**

Dazed, I read it twice before he said, "If you should choose to pursue these feelings, Miquel and I would welcome you into our home this evening."

His speech was so formal and succinct it was altogether spellbinding. I had to blink to rid my mind of images I couldn't have described had my life depended on it. Wine thoughts. Gravestone musings. Mermaid etchings that flowed through my soul like black water and left me hallucinating.

*Stephanie dancing with Mephistopheles high atop the Acropolis, spinning and seeming to fly as her long black dress flew out from her on the wind. Then I was cutting in—not to waltz with my beloved daughter, but to dance in the arms of the devil himself because the idea was as erotic as it was absurd.*

These were the visions that came when Dimitri touched my wrist in a gesture of intimate familiarity. His fingers glistened with emeralds, rubies, a star sapphire that reminded me all too much of his one blue eye. He was casket satin, moonlight on baptismal waters.

And then he was just a man-boy in a vampyre get-up as my mind abruptly translated what he'd said. Mortified by the very feelings he referred to—taboo curiosities I might have found intriguing years before—I held out his card to return it.

"I'm driving back to San Diego tonight," I muttered, tripping on my words. "Maybe some other time."

The room was shrinking, the air thin. In the alley outside the building, dusk was luring night into the city.

But Dimitri leaned over the table and, in a brazen gesture, folded his card into my palm and closed my fingers around it until the stiffly laminated paper cut into me and drew blood. Our faces only inches apart, he smiled again as a drop of red squeezed through my fist and rolled down my wrist.

"A lie is a terrible way to begin eternity, Stefan," he sang to me, his breath a cemetery breeze, cool and eerie on my cheek. "Miquel will send a car for you at ten. It is best that you come willingly."

He brought my hand to his lips, and though I thought his intention was to kiss it in the fashion of a European gentleman bidding farewell to a paramour, he flicked out his tongue and darted it between my fingers to catch the flow of my blood. It happened so quickly I couldn't twist free, and my heart cramped as I saw the lips of this dreadful cherub stained red.

Before I could say another word, before I could parade my wounded pride around the room or hurl accusations at the boy, he was gone. A flash of burgundy, a sparkle of bejeweled hands, and he had vanished into the crowd, disappearing altogether.

My hand smarted. Somebody giggled. I couldn't breathe.

\*

Within an hour I was telling myself it was all just a clever illusion by some trickster at a convention. I was afraid to believe, and I wouldn't have known *what* to believe even if I hadn't been afraid. From the sanctuary of my hotel room, I called my best friend, but when Charlie answered, I had no idea what to say. How does one describe being jerked out of body, propelled

at indescribable speeds through a photo-negative-world, then looking at oneself through the eyes of another man?

But because Charlie had known me since we were children, she did exactly what I wanted her to do: she listened, she didn't say she was too busy to talk even when I heard her 4-year-old fussing in the background, and when I was done babbling like some bewildered mental patient, she laughed out loud.

"Damn, Stefan, nothing like that ever happens to me. I'm jealous as hell," she said, robust and filled with life. "So, are you going?"

That was Charlie's approach to the world: meet it head on and beat it with a stick. I envied her tenacity.

Lying on the bed, I stared at the ceiling, my emotions warring between amusement and the melancholy which had been my constant companion since Stephanie's death.

"Why would I?" I grunted.

"You know, Stefan, it might do you some good to make some new friends now that you and Laurie are split up," she suggested without polite preamble. "What've you got to lose?"

"Charlie, this kid cut my hand and licked away the blood!" I protested, indignant. "He really believes he's a vampyre!"

"So what do *you* believe?"

I scoffed. "I believe he's a screwed-up kid who should get some help before he gets arrested. Or worse."

On the other end of the line, I heard Charlie rolling her big brown eyes the way she always did whenever I said something inane.

"Men," she commented, long-suffering. "Look, if you really thought so, you wouldn't have called me in such a dither. Face it, something incredible happened to you tonight and if you don't try to figure it out, you'll be crazy within a week. Regret's an ugly bedfellow."

A feeble smile crept up on me. "Chase the muse again?"

"*Catch* the fucker," she corrected with a chuckle. "Isn't that what writers are supposed to do?"

"Those who catch the muse die," I reminded her. And though I intended the comment as lighthearted prattle, it brought a sudden dread to the center of my chest. I wasn't ready to quest after fantasies. I wasn't ready to write. I wasn't ready to live again.

Without remembering how I fell in the quicksand, I was over my head, wanting nothing more than to be alone with my misery. Stephanie's face whispered across the blank screen of the television, a different muse of a distant life I'd once lived.

"God help me, Charlie, I miss her." *Why did I go up to the room while she was off with her friends? Why did she have to die? Why couldn't it have been me instead?*

I didn't realize I'd spoken out loud.

Charlie didn't answer for awhile, though I could hear the comforting shush of her breathing. "I know, Stefan... I know. But you have to stop blaming yourself. You have to go on with your life." She paused, gave a soft sigh. "God, that's a stupid thing to say. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It helps." It didn't. We both knew it.

We were silent for a few seconds. "Maybe life doesn't make sense because we're missing the corner pieces," she offered just before we hung up.

Maybe she was right.

For a long time, I lay there staring at a spot where the wallpaper didn't quite match up, listening to the distant slamming of doors as other patrons on the 9th floor came and went.



Where were they going? I wondered. For what purpose did they move about inside this skyscraper hotel, and what would happen if we all just stopped going through motions that had long since lost any meaning?

We scurried about like ants in a hive, but what was the purpose of the hive itself? Worse: *was* there a purpose, or was it only random happenso that society had come together as it had, and that Man served *it* far more than *it* served *him*? We worked at our varied tasks, gathering riches like ravens collecting bright objects, but what did we hope to accomplish when all was said and done? We raised our families and grew old sitting on wooden porches, but in the end it would always end the same way.

*Why?* I caught myself wondering. What did any of it mean, and if it really did mean nothing, why keep doing it? Why not just run wild into the world and suckle from it what pleasure we could before death finally caught up to us?

Where these thoughts came from, I do not know, but they sent me tumbling into a maelstrom. And though I might have believed reality-altering revelations should happen to pious monks on mountaintops in Tibet, my own came in a nondescript hotel room when I suddenly understood that my entire existence had been nothing but a series of aimless movements, common gestures, worn-out clichés.

I had to get on with life, Charlie said, but what the hell *was* my life?

I'd spent years staring at a cyclopsian monitor as if it were the Eye of Knowledge, transcribing the lies of my imagination to trade for bread and butter, but surely there was more than pushing paper, mowing the lawn and making sure the guy next door didn't get a bigger tv. than the one in my den. We were so busy with the trappings and the rituals that we'd forgotten they *were* just trappings and rituals, yet I couldn't have ventured a guess as to what might lie beyond the world we thought of as reality.

What were we supposed to *Do* with life in all its briefness?

Every bit as troubling as this unwanted apocalypse was the knowledge that my encounter with Dimitri had inadvertently spawned it. Something inside me was torn free at the instant he walked up to me, and now everything in the world somehow related to him, including the blue and green stripes on the bedspread that were like his mismatched eyes and the creamy flesh of the telephone that was the color of his sandstorm skin. And though the tv. from the next room droned through the wall, I could hear only his voice: *'Grief is an unrelenting master but also a powerful muse...'*

Like a lunatic possessed, I rose from the bed, pacing and muttering to myself, rubbing at a spot between my eyes where my head had begun to throb. Finally, finding no escape, I slumped into a chair by the window, yet there was nothing redeeming in the world beyond.

Two strip joints with flashing neon lights, an assortment of sleazy nightclubs, and the glittering runway of LAX luring the newest victims down from heaven. A ribbon of headlights twisted toward the horizon, an angry snake coiling around the city, choking it. The stars had flown away long ago, the sky was yellowed and spoiled with smog. The night which should have been black and seductive was instead grey and terminally ill.

It was a world with a ruined soul.

Suddenly sickened by it all, I rose from my chair and hurried into the bathroom, turning on the shower to drown out the unrelenting noise in my head. While the mirrors fogged with steam, I hastily removed my clothing, mesmerized by my own reflection as, for an instant, I saw myself as I'd looked through Dimitri's inhuman eyes.

Lithe. Strong. Masculinely beautiful.

*'Are you interested in finding out who you are, who you can be?'*

My hand was an ocean, my erection a serpent gliding through it as I collapsed to my knees and uttered a choked cry into the mist.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

When my head cleared, I made the decision *not* to leave my room that night. Vampyres were nonsense! I wouldn't stand at the curb wringing my hands like some bride at the altar while Dimitri hovered in hotel shadows and giggled at the gullibility of a grieving fool.

Perhaps for that reason, it came as a shock when I found myself in the elevator, surrounded by several other con-goers. Their painted faces drifted by me, taffeta and lace costumes glittering in scattered light thrown by flickering fluorescent tubes. Stephanie's ghost danced in the shiny metal doors and spoke to me in a whisper that was only the rustling of Superman's cape.

The world had become my dream, solid yet not, molasses beneath my feet. A kid in Klingon garb pointed a plastic disrupter at my chest, but I had lost my sense of humor in the fall between floors.

When the elevator stopped, I could only watch myself walking through the revolving glass door that led toward the night and the darkness and the black stretch limo waiting in the portico. A somnambulist unblinking, I approached the car as a skeletally thin man with a lyrical Jamaican accent ushered me inside. It never seemed strange that he knew me on sight or that he called me by name.

As the door closed behind me, there was an odd sense of finality, a feeling that one world had just ended and a new one was about to begin.

*Ah, but now you must make the choice, Stefan, for it's human perception that determines the reality of any reality. Will you choose to see this brave new world or stay stubbornly rooted in your own?*

The thought was outlandish in that it wasn't my own, yet the partition separating me from the driver was closed, the other man only a silent silhouette as the car rolled forward. A chill fell helter-skelter down my back, but as I rubbed my eyes to clear my vision, it suddenly struck me that my first impression of a standard limousine was altogether wrong. Reality shimmered and glittered, just so much fog.

Black leather seats had transformed to crushed red velvet, the pile thick and soft beneath my curled fingers. Small interior lights above the doors morphed into white tapered candles, orange flames flickering inside fragile glass globes.

Terror rose up within me, yet it was accompanied by curiosity, too. A voice inside me whispered, *Quit fighting, just let go, let go.*

And it was then that I found myself in another world—a place that had been there all along, yet one I only began to perceive when I allowed myself to see it.

It was a world of opulent luxury, where the seats were littered with petals of a pallid pink rose and where a narrow bed that took up the entire rear of the car had its crimson comforter turned down in silent invitation. At first glance, it *was* a bed, but when I blinked, it was plainly a coffin, custom-made of mahogany and wide enough for two to share.

On one of the plush white pillows sat a plate of fruit—cherries, strawberries, raspberries, grapes—all things red, and wet as if with dew. On the other pillow lay a bottle of fine merlot, and on the seat at my side was a crystal wine glass bearing a folded note, written in perfect calligraphy and completed with a bold signature.

*My dearest Stefan,*

*As the journey will take the better part of an hour, please be comfortable and accept these modest gifts if you find them pleasing. I have long admired your visionary work and look forward to having you in my home this evening.*

*Miquel Kaliq Constantine*

My heart hammered, but these macabre visions didn't vanish to fulfill my wish to be back in the real world. Even if I'd had the presence of mind to flee, the car was already racing through the city, a sleek ebony projectile where all the troubles of the world were only paintings playing on tinted glass.

I was a dazed prisoner in a speeding museum.

Nevertheless, I wanted to weep for the pain captured in those life-size canvases—for the vagrant preaching at a deserted public park and the tragedy in his life that had brought him to such humiliation; for the hookers selling flesh to support their habit while Death and Disease stalked them slowly; for the skinny yellow dog running wild-eyed and headlong through traffic as if he were there to symbolize every misguided, condemned soul on Earth.

I thought of Stephanie, for I knew we must be near the underpass where her body was found, and once again I blamed myself. She was barely 13, yet I'd let her run with her friends at these gatherings since she was 11.

Wanting to be her confidant as much as her father, I created fantasy worlds for her to inhabit, and when she outgrew them, I encouraged her to find her own or make them herself. But because my life was complicated, too, I'd patted her on the head and only half listened when she told me that the ability of the supernatural world to manifest was directly related to man's willingness to perceive supernatural manifestations. Anything was possible and the impossible was altogether likely, she said, and oh how much she'd believed it!

My failure as a parent and as a man was that I still didn't know *what* she'd believed or what she'd been searching for other than belief itself. I didn't know *her*, and never had.

Now I never would.

I stared at that truth in the limo's magical windows, and for an instant I saw her blood on my hands. Impulsively, I pressed them against the glass and gazed out, a lost child with my nose fogging the window.

"Stephanie," I cried, though no sound came from my lips. "Stephanie..."

What took my thoughts away from her right then, I don't know, though the depth of that pain was suddenly replaced with an equally profound separation from myself. A sign along the road announced we were leaving Los Angeles County, though some philosophical vagabond inside my head told me I'd left the city the instant I entered the car.

It all made sense in that none of it made sense at all.

I held the wine glass and saw that I'd drained it, though I had no recollection of opening the bottle nor any memory of how my fingers came to be stained with the sweet red blood of ripe

cherries.

And then I was completely entranced, a participant in a waking dream as the limo thrust deeper into its night lover and left the world behind.

\*

When the car entered a long circular driveway somewhere between San Bernardino and the Mojave Desert, the sound of tires transformed the whine of asphalt to the unique warble of cobblestone. Tremendous evergreens yearned skyward, the scent of freshly mown grass creeping through the vents to color the air green. By the dim light of a waning moon, the wrought iron gates through which we passed created prison bars across the constellation of Taurus, a cage to hold the stars themselves.

Completely surrounding the estate—nearly 25 acres in all—a 12-foot hedge had been painstakingly pruned to resemble a dragon, its countless spikes and ridges actually dappled ivy. On one side of the gate, the terrible head stretched upward, jagged teeth ripping the sky, red eyes really sensors on high-tech security cameras. On the other side, after wrapping around the grounds, the forked tail formed a delicate curl which was incongruously playful.

My face pressed to the window, I gazed out over what appeared to be sepulchers, yet what sent shivers through me were the humanesque statues atop those cold, grey markers. The entire front lawn was strewn with these life-size figures, men and women frozen in pose as the breath caught in my throat and the limo's lights split the darkness in two.

Atop one knoll, a wraith thin woman would waltz forever with an invisible partner. Nearby, a young man was held in an eternal pose of martial arts *kata*, one stone arm and one stone leg extended in perfect balance. In a corner of this eerie garden, twin brothers no more than 17 embraced, expressions of lust forever preserved in identical faces as one boy's hand cupped the other's buttocks in a gesture of incestuous foreplay.

But as the car cruised past this gathering of stone ghosts—dozens in all—I caught a glimpse of the central courtyard and the even more unnerving statue standing watch over all the others. A full 8 feet tall, it stood with outstretched arms and black wings that bent longingly toward the garden of lifeless lovers. Instead of raw grey marble like the others, it was intricately painted—raven hair that matched the sheltering wings; lithe musculature shaded bronze and gold; full red lips parted in a sardonic smile. Its head tilted slightly to one side, a pose reminiscent of the Virgin Mother gazing with rapture at the infant Christ, yet the hunger caught in those savage eyes was far from holy.

So spellbound had I become that I scarcely noticed the car rolling to a stop. When the driver's shadow blocked the window, I must've startled at seeing him there, for he gave a chuckle as the door opened and the night rushed in to deliver me from my trance.

I stepped out onto the cobblestone driveway, dizzy and disoriented from the wine. A scent of jasmine filled the air, heady perfume painting the sky of this surreal world. Completely surrounding the drive and leading up the marble steps to the estate's double doors, tiny lights glittered like thousands of fireflies. Water rushed through a manmade creek, and frogs hidden within the lush gardens sang an off-key melody that was reassuring and yet keenly sad.

I do not recall being led up the cool stone steps to the entrance, my mind overwhelmed instead with candles burning from every multi-paned window, eyes of fire that threw my shadow behind me to create an army of willowy ghouls. Nervous, I turned to make some comment to the driver, but the Jamaican had disappeared and I caught only a glimpse of blood-red taillights

when the limo vanished into what must have been a subterranean garage or the mouth of Hell itself.

With hesitation born of dread, I lifted my hand to the bell, but the doors abruptly opened of their own accord. Startled, I took a step back, confronted by a young man I imagined to be a servant. Little more than a boy, he flourished an elaborate bow that caused the tails of his coat to sweep the polished marble floor. His face was smooth and ashen, a porcelain doll incarnate, with a hint of powder on his cheeks and a glimmer of lipstick on his mouth. His gloved hands were inordinately fine, his movements deliberately exaggerated like those of a diminutive mime.

Without a single utterance, he led me into the foyer, closing the carved oak doors behind us.

Unnerved, I started to speak, but he laid a finger across his lips, then waved his hand like a magician conjuring a spell. In response, music began to play—Beethoven's *Fur Elise*. The boy looked at me with his head tipped dramatically to one side, then gave a frown which said the classical selection wasn't to his liking. A wave of his hand transformed Beethoven to Pink Floyd, and now the servant placed his hands together like a child praying homage to God, and smiled a smile of sheer bliss.

Then, with the grace of a dancer, he indicated I should wait while he turned sharply and retreated into the house, his boot heels clicking sharply behind him.

My heart beat faster, and for the first time since I'd wandered like a spellbound zombie from my hotel room, I came to my senses with a suddenness that caused me to gasp.

All the world was mad.

Suddenly alone in that high-ceilinged foyer with its ice-cream-smooth white walls and its two curved arches leading off left and right, I questioned the sanity of a man who would do the things I'd done that night. I had no idea where I was. I knew nothing of the waifish youth who had invited me here, less of the mysterious Miquel to whom Dimitri had referred.

Their limo was a hearse, their wine a drug, their servant a harlequin.

For all I knew, I had been brought here to die in some ritualistic murder. The house exuded darkness despite its fiery eyes. It smelled of decadence and the grave grim yearnings of the human soul regardless of the fresh white roses on the flower table and the painting of Botticelli angels hanging above them.

As the music abruptly stopped, a cuckoo clock sang its tick tock dirge, causing my body to jerk. I cast a rapid glance over my shoulder, and though I saw nothing, some eerie sixth sense warned me someone was there.

The air seemed to move, little currents drafting through the room, silent breaths of an unseen audience. A hint of cologne, faint yet undeniably masculine. And though I couldn't say I heard anything at all, there was a sense of cloth brushing cloth, the barest rustling that comes when a handkerchief drops to the floor or a cat rubs against one's leg in a dark room.

I felt him there. Waiting. Watching.

And then my mind was out of control, conjuring images of maniacs and madness and my own blood spilling out to stain the polished hardwood floor. With a rough breath that came out as a garbled cry, I spun toward the door. I'd run back to the real world if need be. Or I would crawl.

When my fingers closed around the cold metal knob, I experienced a profound moment of relief—a split second *before* a hand appeared from behind me to press the door closed again. In that instant, I knew the dread of a man strapped in the electric chair waiting for a governor's reprieve, and the ironic sinking in the pit of the gut that came from a wrong number. I knew what it was to die a thousand times in the span of a single moment. And I understood what it meant to

look death in the eye and come away with the knowledge that, in the end, there is never a reprieve for any living thing.

Frozen in time as an unnatural calm fell over me, I stared at that graceful hand for an eternity. The fingers were long and elegant, the nails carefully manicured. On the middle finger was a gold band etched with the Greek symbols for alpha and omega, on the fourth finger an oval cut emerald the size of a large almond.

His skin was olive-hued and dark, and as my head slowly turned, I saw on his wrist a band so smooth it shone like liquid gold. He wore a simple white shirt with the sleeves pushed up to the elbows and the three top buttons unfastened, and a pair of jeans so fashionably old they were more patches-and-holes than anything else. The scent of Eternity clung to his body—for he had a keen sense of humor about himself—and when I raised my eyes and looked into his face, I was inundated with the profound realization that Miquel wasn't human.

That was the first thought which assaulted me, though the assault was gentle and dangerously erotic. I knew his name. I knew what he was. And I knew that he *was* a vampyre.

He studied me with candid curiosity, keen eyes raking from my face to my toes and back again, and then he gave an unexpected smile that caused the color to drain from me completely. The front teeth were normal enough; it was the incisors that formed the exquisitely sharp fangs gleaming in his full, wet mouth.

"Such terrible anguish in such a lovely bottle," he murmured in a voice rich with the faintest accent. His words caused me embarrassment, though that was quickly forgotten when he extended his hand in a gesture that seemed trite under the circumstances. "My name is Miquel Kaliq Constantine," he said, his smile turning bolder. "At least it is the name I've adopted for a lifetime or two."

Perhaps I was too shocked to do anything but respond in the expected manner, or perhaps I was already so deep under his spell there could be no hope left for me. I offered him my hand, and when he grasped it in an embrace shocking for its strength as well as its chill, I could only imagine what other names had followed him throughout history. Eros, perhaps. And Pan. Don Juan. But I also considered Vlad the Impaler. Ivan the Terrible. Belial, Zamiel.

My breathing stopped. My heart tapped a crazy rhythm.

He stood at least six foot five, coal black hair brushing the tops of his shoulders in ragged layers and spiked bangs that would have suited a brooding model or a moody bass player in a rock and roll band. His features were angular, sharp, and so perfectly chiseled that he might really have been a Greek god or maybe a Hollywood special effect escaped from its creator. His lips were full and surprisingly pink, his strong chin sporting a two-day shadow which imbued him with an overall ominous look.

His face and body called him 30. His aura told a darker secret of his antiquity.

But what held me captive were his eyes, substantiating all myths of a vampyre's ability to mesmerize. Green as the emerald on his hand and flecked with lighter shades of brown and gold, a hundred flames reflected in those immortal mirrors—candlelight and history and secrets so profound no human could have known them and lived.

While Dimitri was alluring by virtue of his ashen innocence and ballet dancer grace which could be misinterpreted as fragile, Miquel wore his power in a far more imposing fashion, not the willowy body of a youth but the finely honed sculpture which was the epitome of all things male. If Dimitri were Gainsborough's *Blue Boy*, Miquel was the model for David—yet he was the paradigm whose true physical splendor couldn't be captured even by Michelangelo himself.

He was life and death and pure carnal force, and though I had always considered myself strong-natured, I knew I had encountered a creature to whose will I would inevitably bend. I had never been so drawn to another man, yet I stood before him practically swooning with the knowledge that this was how he wanted me to feel and there was nothing whatsoever I could do to change it. If Dimitri had briefly bewitched me, Miquel had stolen all my reason, and I knew in that instant that my life would never be the same again.

Without question, he was a vampyre—a being who could drain away physical defiance and moral inhibitions as easily as he could drain the blood from my body. With God as my witness, I tried to fight him. My fists clenched, fingernails digging in until my palms bled like the wounds of Christ, but even that tangible pain was inadequate to break his spell.

He made a motion that cautioned me not to resist, then took my hand and gently uncurled my fingers. And though I struggled to look away, I was paralyzed with sick fascination as he ran the pad of one long finger over my self-inflicted wounds. Then, never taking his gaze off of me, he touched fingertip to tongue tip, moist lips slowly closing over a single drop of red.

He drew a slow breath, his eyes closing in approval, and only then did I realize I had been droning incoherently.

"*Ohgod—ohmygod—godhelpme!*"

He gave me a look that might have held amusement or curiosity. Then, with a movement so graceful and quick I sensed more than saw it, he placed one hand behind my head, the other on my ribs, and drew me to him in an embrace as intimate as it was inescapable.

"My dearest Stefan, stop talking to God and yourself, for aren't they really the same?" he asked, his body a cage surrounding me. Fairy-tale eyes darkened, and when he leaned closer I noticed the gold cross he wore in one ear as if in defiance of his nature. "If your Heavenly Father were such a benevolent old man, you and I never would have met—and *that* would have been the real tragedy, don't you agree?"

Because he willed it, the strength had left me until I was nothing but clay, the raw material of life that could offer no resistance against the sheer potency of his magic.

"Please," I heard my voice saying, and hated myself for begging. "Please—let me go!"

He pinned me with those terrible eyes, and for a moment I thought he might—not because I asked it, but because he detested weakness and I was behaving like a child. But before I realized what was happening, he brought me so tight against his chest I could feel the hard, slow beat of his immortal heart.

A soft sigh came through his lips and, shaking his head in a gesture of tender reassurance, he forced my body against the cool white wall, compelling me with a thought not to look away.

The sensation I cannot describe except to say it felt as if the idea were mine rather than his. I wanted to look into his eyes and never glance away. I wanted to feel the heady detachment of his trance like a drug-induced euphoria. And I *wanted* to collapse in his arms, a dead weight caught between the world of the living and the world that belonged to the night.

My head had fallen back, and only now did I realize the ceiling was covered with mirrors through which I was compelled to watch the obscene sight of my own seduction by a vampyre. Miquel's reflection was remarkable, the mirror capturing the essence of him which couldn't be seen by human eyes alone. A noncorporeal radiance engulfed him, a silvery resplendence reminiscent of the ethereal glow attributed to the angels themselves.

But Lucifer was an angel, too, I thought.

And I began to weep.

Yet while I would have been loathe to give him any credit for compassion, I felt he

wanted to make this easy for me. His arms went taut around me, the full length of his preternatural body pressing against me as if to shield me from what was to come. With a tenderness that was cruel somehow, he smoothed the hair away from my face, leaning in until his lips were brushing the curve of my ear.

"Ssshh," he whispered, rocking me back and forth. "It doesn't have to be like this, Stefan. It doesn't have to be so terrible if you just let go of your fear."

I knew it was going to happen then. He really would have me. A long feast of my blood. A little drink of my soul. Yes, he would have me, and there was nothing I could do to prevent it.

As that unshakable understanding came to me, his embrace loosened just enough to let me breathe. And as if he'd heard my tortured thought, he said quite reasonably, "Yes, I'll have you, my friend, but if you give in to me without a fight, you'll find my kiss far more pleasure than pain."

Then, with that suggestion murmured against my throat, I felt the rapid sting of his teeth and the blade sharp rush that set my blood flowing. The pain of his bite was acute, that peculiar brand of anguish which raises the hair on the back of the neck and causes the body to go taut, then limp, then taut again, the pain that makes a man surrender instantly in some misguided hope that his surrender might somehow ease the torment or appease the tormentor.

His fierce fangs easily punctured my flesh to bring a stream of warmth pouring down my neck, a torrent quickly diverted by the vampyre's tongue, a crimson well tapped at the source with a ferocity that coaxed a needful moaning from his chest. Separate from myself, yet mercilessly more aware of my body than I had ever been, I became instantly weak as he began drawing hard on the wound, his suckling so intense I could actually feel the blood being pulled through my veins.

I must have tried to cry out, for a rush of wind came from my lungs that carried no other sound. My arms thrashed at the air. My legs were numb, and I would have fallen had he not held me.

It is impossible to say what went through my mind as he took me there in the foyer while Dimitri looked on from candle-carved shadows. Only then did I see the boy, a lanky blond waif leaning against the wall with a jealous grin as his master drank from me in what was, to vampyres, the most intimate of all experiences.

At the time, I would have denied it. I would have said the torment of Miquel's kiss was not something to be described as sensual. I would have tried to convince you that I found no pleasure in the eager suckling which drew the lifeblood out of me while feeding his wicked thirst. I never would have admitted that the sensation of his arms constricting around me as he fed was the most repulsive and yet the most comforting embrace I had ever known.

And never—absolutely *never*—would I have confessed to being overwhelmed with a yearning so excruciating that I fainted in his arms and became a believer in vampyres.

My squandered soul liquefied, flowing out of me in twin rivers: one was red, the other pale.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

"You see, Stefan, the problem is that we've been glorified, vilified and crucified throughout history, yet other than brief glimpses of the truth by enlightened individuals, not a



single work has ever come close to defining what it means to *be* an immortal."

Those were the words Miquel spoke as I regained consciousness in his bed, though their deeper meaning was lost on me when my eyes snapped open and I began frantically struggling to reassemble the pieces of my shattered world.

Candles burned on the sills of wood-paned windows, curtains thin and iridescent as butterfly wings rising and falling on the cool October wind—surreal and yet oddly nostalgic in a way I couldn't have named.

The room was awash with color, so brilliant and rich as to be disorienting. Walls the shade of storm slate sky filled me with longing for something I'd left behind in a childhood barely remembered—an imagined fairyland where little boys lay on a bed of pure white mushrooms and stared up at the heavens, blinking with wonder at every magical thing. In the four corners of the room, potted trees stretched leaves of ash and elm toward a cathedral ceiling covered with sunset purple clouds, a mural where painted night had already fallen at the peak of the tall roof.

The bed on which I found myself was far larger than any conventional bed. An antique that could have come from some baroque plantation in the south, the headboard was openwork wrought iron, filigreed with individual motifs representing the seasons—spring ivy climbing crumbling columns; flowers bursting in the primary colors of summer; muted autumn leaves falling from a skeletal tree; snowflake lace against obsidian winter night sky.

Like a Technicolor hallucination, two walls were painted with a moon dappled forest that seemed to extend into infinity; and when the wind came stealing through again, I could have sworn I saw the trees sway and bend.

My head swam. My pulse, rapid and shallow from loss of blood, fluttered in my ears.

I looked at the vampyre and wanted to weep—not from fear or anger or any other tangible emotion, but because I was overwhelmed with the notion that my blood now coursed through his veins and we were inexorably linked.

I had fed him from my heart and now that heart belonged to him.

The thought humbled me utterly. And yet, still in a daze, it didn't seem so terrible, this sense of belonging somewhere when I'd belonged nowhere in so long. At first, as I lay there with Miquel on one side of me and Dimitri on the other, all I could do was record the fact that they sat like mirror images of one another. Miquel was propped on his right hand, Dimitri on his left, both looking down at me as if I were expected to understand anything they were saying.

I groaned, my head thrashing, but as awareness returned with a vengeance, I bolted up in the bed and backed away from them until my shoulders were pressed against the cold iron headboard. Looking at them now, I was appalled, and before the rational man inside me had an opportunity to vote, the animal within my skin reacted.

"You son of a bitch!" I snarled at Dimitri, placing the blame squarely on his shoulders for luring me to this place where vampyres were real and blood was sustenance and sanity was a word without meaning. Clenching my fist, I was—

*—six years old when little Jason Haverhill yanked my pants down in front of the whole first grade. Embarrassed, I cried, but that made it worse, especially when Old Lady Marley scolded me to stop being such a baby. (But even she was laughing behind her frilly flowered handkerchief). When my snuffling stopped, I was filled with uncontrollable rage, a fury that could only be quelled as I lashed out at that toe headed, freckle faced Haverhill brat and beat my fists against his ugly mug until his shirt turned red and his bawling wail filled the halls of Patrick Henry Elementary School—*

Now my face burned again, and I would have struck Dimitri had Miquel not grabbed my wrists and wrestled them above my head, pinning me with his unearthly strength.

Dimitri never even flinched, but he did smile a little, and that only enraged me to thrash against Miquel in a battle I had no chance of winning. His hands were steel belts around my wrists, his legs scissoring my ankles, and yet his demeanor was one of complete nonchalance.

"So much bolder you are after your nap," he commented, amused. "But this foolish tussling won't change your fate, nor will striking poor Dimitri right the wrong you feel you've suffered."

I writhed, my body twisting on the bed until the strength left me. Only when it was gone altogether—a casualty of blood loss and vampyre magic—did I finally subside, falling back onto the white satin comforter. My chest heaved with the exertion. My ears roared.

Humiliated by a vulnerability to which I was unaccustomed, my eyes fixed on the ceiling, where a tiny spider was building her web in the corner, oblivious to the grim nature of these creatures with whom she shared the room.

Then, suddenly, I was calm.

"If you're going to kill me, get it over with," I said, the reality of my situation stabilizing around me. It would be all right. If I died then and there, I'd be with Stephanie again, the struggle would be over, and it would be perfectly all right.

Releasing my wrists, Miquel ran his fingers through my hair, an unexpected gesture which had the effect of making me tremble because it was so completely without inhibitions, and because I truly believed I was about to die.

"If I wanted to kill you, I would have drained your life away when I drank from you," he reminded me, though now his tone was unforgivably tender. "No, I haven't brought you here to harm you, Stefan, but to offer you a life that never ends."

I almost laughed at the absurdity of it all. Vampyres! And yet, my gaze remaining fixed on Miquel, my fingers dug into the comforter as I was again bombarded with the raw understanding of what he was.

This man—for he could have passed for a man if one didn't look too closely—*was* a vampyre, a being said to be only myth, yet a myth which sat at my side making a very real indentation in the bed and soothing me with a hand that was undeniably solid and alive, even if cool to the touch.

The word beautiful had been penned just to describe him, yet it was a word incapable of capturing the antiquity of him and the totality that exceeded the sum of the individual parts. He was *more* than this man, more even than the refulgent reflection I'd seen in his shiny mirror. He was an immortal with power over life and death, a vampyre with my blood still warm in his belly, a creature who could as easily destroy me as not.

He was *real* magic, and *that* meant the end of the world as I'd always known it.

When I groaned in acknowledgement of that awful truth, he attempted to placate me with a smile that was anything but reassuring when I saw his teeth. My neck hurt where those fangs had stung me and, stupefied, I raised a hand to the injury still moist from his lips.

"You—you bit me!" I blurted out, an ineloquent accusation.

Miquel's smile deepened and, running his fingers down my cheek, he said matter-of-factly, "Bite is such an ugly word, Stefan. I prefer to call it a kiss, and it seemed best to prove my authenticity with such a gesture rather than waste time attempting to explain with a thousand words what a single action could accomplish just as well." His eyes glistened as he leaned closer and lowered his voice to a whisper. "I meant you to find it enjoyable, you realize, though I'll

understand completely if you prefer to pretend it wasn't."

At this, Dimitri gave a hearty laugh, then got up and moved to the window, where he stood with his back to us. Candles on the sill silhouetted him against the night, painting a halo of smoky gold above his head.

But he was no angel.

He'd approached me under the guise of a human boy in a vampyre suit at a gathering where identities were put on with a stroke of eyeliner or the donning of a Calvin Klein tux. I'd no more expected him to *be* a vampyre than I'd expected Superman to fly or Captain Kirk to whip out a communicator and beam up to the *Enterprise*.

Miquel sighed dramatically and gave me a probing look that sent flocks of demons skittering through my soul when I realized he really was reading my mind, when I understood he really *could*.

"Ah, poor Stefan, you need someone to *blame*," he surmised, psychically drinking in my chaos. Then, altogether congenial, he added, "I suppose you could blame *me*, though you realize I can't force you to do anything you don't want to do. I can make suggestions in your mind and soften your fears with my trance, but any decisions you make are ultimately your own. The only salvation which exists is within *you*, my friend." His voice trailed off, his smile turning suggestive as he spelled out a blasphemous truth. "Ah, but the only way *out* of your life that isn't a dead-end is through *me*."

Saying this, he once again soothed my brow, undoubtedly to soften the frightening implications of his words. And though I struggled to push his hand away, he slipped one arm behind my head and gathered me to his chest, where, like an infant, I was cradled. I tensed, distraught by his physical closeness, but he put one long finger over my mouth to silence me.

"Hush now, Stefan. Look at what I'm going to show you and try not to put up such a fuss," he said sternly, rocking me as a father might rock a child and lulling me into some altered state with the deep and metered cadence of his voice alone. "Just be still and let me tell you a story that has no words and no end, yet a story that begs to be told."

His body was warm now, heated by *my* blood. Stretching out next to me, he pulled my head down on his shoulder, and though I longed desperately to be free, there is no defense against vampyre magic, no hiding from the trance. His white cotton shirt pressed my cheek, bearing the scent of him that was muted cologne and wildfire out of control, anesthesia and aphrodisiac all at once.

Terrified that he would kill me, perhaps even more afraid that he wouldn't, I began to pray—for strength and detachment as he ran his hands over my back to calm me; for some glimmer of hope when there was no hope left; for salvation from knowing I was falling under his spell because I *did* find him altogether alluring. It was what he wanted, of course, the way I *had* to feel because it was his will.

But as an inexplicable telepathic union opened between us and he whispered against my ear, "Ssshh," I suddenly knew no one was listening to my prayers except the very devil in whose arms I was held.

"Hush now," he said again, seductive and terribly calm. "Just close your eyes, Stefan, so you may finally begin to see."

And my eyes closed as if I'd been drugged.

Perhaps Miquel's most terrible power was that of Truth—the ability to strip away the lies humans tell themselves and force them to look at reality for what it is. This seeing came as a tickle of thought, a trickle of an idea, a drop of awareness that quickly swelled to a rushing river.

It came when he opened his immortal mind to me, pulling me inside that somber sanctuary which was both Tartarus and Elysium.

And though I struggled fiercely not to look, I beheld in his thoughts those higher truths humans could only imagine: the dreadful condition of mortal man, the futility of old age, the emptiness of an afterlife consisting only of casket satin and bone dust. I heard the wail of the void as the prayers of lost angels and fallen souls were screamed out into the night, unheard and unanswered, and I tasted the emptiness between galaxies which no words could ever describe.

It is one thing to acknowledge intellectually that Man is alone in the universe. It is another matter altogether to stand in the middle of that wilderness and *see* it for the wasteland it is. It encompasses no color, no sound. It permeates everything, yet cannot be touched.

It is a meaningless abyss in the center of the chest where human awareness got caught in a permanent spin and drain cycle. All of us have touched it at one time or another, yet for the first time I *knew* what it was.

That black hole at the heart of human consciousness was the blind eye of our manmade God.

Assaulted with the sensation of knowing rather than merely believing, I still *believed* life had meaning. Yet I *knew* it had none. Man had created God to create Man, and now the entire lot of them were stuck in an endless loop.

It was so simple it was blinding. This brief life was all there was and it was a life that always came to the same fatal end. The flaw in the program was that the program was irrevocably flawed, contaminated with a self-destruct virus that was intrinsic to the program itself. Death was death, certain and final, for although I had a human soul, there was nowhere for it to go except back to the oblivion that spawned it.

God wasn't sitting behind the grave with a catcher's mitt.

Oh, we were immortal, yet it was an immortality existing on a cellular level alone, the recycling of our atoms across a universe so vast it was inconceivable that two molecules from the same human body would ever find one another again. If we lived after death, it was as fertilizer for the flowers on our grave or dinner for the worms.

Valhalla was a fallacy, reincarnation a lie.

When I looked up into Miquel's eyes and saw my reflection captured there, I understood these things with a terrible and dark sobriety. Heaven and hell were only ghost towns with crumbling altars and unpaved streets. God and the devil were off playing cards for quarters and could no longer be bothered with the snivellings of Man.

Worse than merely lost, we were a lost cause, blasé.

A cry of despair tore from my throat, for though I had never been particularly religious, I had cultivated a firm belief in God. I *needed* my God, as most men did: someone to cry to with my suffering, some fanciful benefactor to pray to for things I neither needed nor wanted. But most of all, as Miquel had already noted, I needed someone to blame for the state of our wretched world and the death of my beautiful daughter.

But there was nothing out there—at least that is how Miquel perceived it—and the reality of that profound abyss devastated me utterly and sent me whiplashing back into my own body. I began to shake uncontrollably, convulsing.

"I'm sorry," the vampyre whispered against my ear, rocking me until my body stopped its shuddering. "I *am* sorry to end your world so abruptly, but isn't that how worlds always end, Stefan?"

What surprised me was his genuine sorrow, for I knew then that he was as alone in the

universe as I was myself. His eyes were wet—wet with red tears that left a trail on his unshaven cheek, tears he cried for me because I was too afraid and too proud to weep for myself.

"Sometimes, knowing you *are* alone is worse than *being* alone," he barely whispered.

"Then why did you show me?" I demanded, my heart an unlivable desert, broken in two by the things I'd seen. "Why did you want me to know?"

He bent over me, and for a moment I thought his fangs would deliver me into death, but instead he placed his mouth close to my ear and spoke so softly I barely heard him. "Because truth is all we have, dearest Stefan, and the greatest truth of all is that I *could* be wrong, though I've no reason to think so." He paused, then added with a certainty that told me he'd already made up his mind: "I will show *you* some of these truths, and *you* will show them to the world."

When I stiffened, afraid of what he was asking me, his hand tightened on my shoulder. He tilted his head, the masculine stubble of his chin a shocking contrast to the softness of his lips moving over my neck as he spoke. "Humanity has lived in spiritual darkness and religious fear too long. It's time their eyes were opened, and who better to do it than you and I? My knowledge, your words, yes?"

He was seducing me with an opportunity to say something which had perhaps never been said before, and surely he knew it was a lure no writer could have refused. The ramifications caused me to bolt up off the bed, for while I was adamantly telling myself I couldn't be enticed into such a Machiavellian task, I had already begun falling into the mire of that dark seduction.

For that I hated him.

In a single evening, he'd torn down the walls I'd spent a lifetime building, making me see what I didn't want to know, and now there could be no going back to the sanctuary of writing children's books and drinking cappuccino with Charlie and driving off to church on Sunday to look for promises of salvation that were as hollow as my own heart.

*'The only salvation which exists is within you...'*

Crying out as I tore away from him, I staggered to the middle of the floor, disoriented and physically ill. What little blood remained within me drained to my feet and dragged me to my knees, and suddenly I was holding my entire life in my hands, looking at it for the tiny microcosm it was.

It was finite. It *would* end.

All I had held sacred was lost, reduced to ash as I stood apart and watched, yet Dimitri turned from his station at the window to regard me with a look which told me I was behaving inappropriately. With long, delicate arms crossed over his boyish chest, he sighed heavily.

"Really, Stefan," he chastised, his songbird voice a desolate melody to my ears now. "Nothing has changed except your perceptions. Life and death go on, but don't you think it best to finally *tell* these secrets so that men and women may live their lives honestly rather than on their knees? For after all, do you really believe nuns would marry ghosts or priests wed the solitude of their own sinful hand if they knew this book they've held sacred is only a myth written by ancient politicians to control an unruly population? Indeed, if people knew the truth about life and death, you'd see them finally come alive!

"It's time for Man to take responsibility for his own immortality, Stefan! It's time he starts to use that dormant portion of his brain to create his own heaven and destroy his cumulative hells so that—*perhaps*—he might find a way to transcend death on his own. As it stands, Man goes through his life thinking he'll live *again*, so he consoles himself with believing death is only a transition when, in reality, it is the end of his entire world."

How does one answer that? I couldn't.

And the world spun out of focus all over again, though for reasons altogether unclear to me at the time.

Miquel shot a disapproving glance which Dimitri met with a sultry stare and a subtle curling of his lip. Disapproval and disagreement synapsed between them, as if the kid had said too much too soon. Never speaking out loud, they argued, quarreled, tension crackling between them like a violent storm.

Something in their wordless exchange contained more history than in all the world's encyclopedias, yet attempting to translate it to language would be no easy task. It was, quite simply, an exchange of passions dating back centuries—an exchange that caught me in the crossfire, where the tempest in Dimitri's eyes revealed—

*—a young boy alone on an foggy night shore, shrouded in heartfelt silence and sick with the disease of unrequited love. Greece, when tattered sailing vessels brought visitors from faraway lands and the music of shepherds' flutes carried down from rugged hills.*

*The boy wept into the ocean's basin, depending on it to carry his tears away in secret just as it had carried his love away to Italy. He never saw the shadows unfold nor felt the unnatural wind against his neck until it was too late. And he certainly never understood that it was his own melancholy which beckoned the vampyre from the belly of some dismal ship where he had hidden seeking passage out of the country.*

*When unrelenting arms closed around him and the cruel fangs found his throat, all Dimitri felt was the puncture wound through which his soul was greedily drained. As he lay dying, he thought of love and was glad to be released from it. And as he drew his fatal breath while cradled in the vampyre's possessive embrace, he smiled up into those rueful eyes and said in a diamond clear voice, "Thank you, sir, for taking my life so gently."*

*And then the boy was dead.*

My head pounded as I was inundated with telepathic images so vivid it was as if I had become Dimitri, looking at the past through his perceptions just as I'd looked at myself through his eyes earlier that evening at the convention. I felt for him. I felt *with* him. I died with him in Miquel's arms there on the warm, soft shores of Piraeus.

But as I stared into Miquel's quicksilver eyes, he just sat there on his bed with his lips drawn back to a vicious snarl and shot me a look which catapulted me back through time itself, a vehement thought that proclaimed:

*The boy mustn't die!*

*The blood singing through Miquel's veins fed more than his thirst and the outpouring of gratitude he felt while expecting the hatred reserved for one's executioner was so acute he wept. 'Thank you, sir, for taking my life so gently'.*

*What manner of creature was this?*

*He gazed at the ragamuffin in his arms and longed to join him in death, yet that was a voyage reserved for humans alone. Miquel could no longer remember when he had been mortal. He could no longer recall when he'd walked in sunlight or taken a lover to his bed.*

*He could no longer remember when he had felt love, and though the One who Created him had said he would never feel it again, he experienced that old stirring return with a vengeance now. Love, he thought. And the word became an obsession wearing Dimitri's face.*

*But it was too late, that unique force of life gone from the universe when the boy's mismatched eyes closed in death.*

*The unfairness of it overwhelmed Miquel, the very existence of death incensing him to the point of outrage, and it was that divine injustice which caused him to tilt his head back and wail*

*a wordless cry of bone-splitting despair into the night. A keening shriek. A soul deep weeping to rival an angry siren's screech or a banshee's scream.*

*And then, looking down into the face of this mortal angel, he fell calm and coldly determined as a sensation such as he'd never known gripped him, shaking his very soul inside his body.*

*Though he had no real idea of what he intended to do, he tore away his shirt, and with a broken shell found in the sand, drew a wet line across his nipple until a trickle of red bled from him. His body shuddered against the pain and rapture of such a deep cut, and moving solely on instinct, he cupped the pale head and lifted the still warm lips to the wound.*

*Intuitively cradling child to breast, he watched those lips turn dark with his blood as the river flowed into the dead boy's open mouth. Frantically, desperately, he rocked the limp body in his arms, his only solace a far removed memory which told him he had once been suckled at his Creator's breast in similar fashion.*

*"Live again and live forever," he whispered, exerting the sheer force of his vampyre will to create the reality. A litany now, over and over: "Breathe because I bleed for you! Breathe because I need for you! Breathe because I am the only god I know and because I call on this immortal blood to make it so!"*

*Though he'd never spoken such words before, they fell naturally from him now. The blasphemy tasted sweet on his lips, an honest hatred for death, for the pious lies of a God who'd long ago forsaken him.*

*"Breathe... live... breathe..."*

*And because the blood was part of him, alive and vital as the paradox of those very words, Miquel accompanied it on its magical voyage. No longer a single entity, he was elaborately woven through the boy's empty veins. A caress of human heart, unbeating but still warm. A burn of needful lips now beginning to suckle on their own.*

*Though he had never experienced this holy thing before, the instinct to create another like himself was suddenly there as if it had been waiting for the sound of Dimitri's voice to awaken it. And for the first time, he knew he was more than just a vampyre. He was a Creator—one who could give life as well as take it. Of all the preternatural powers, this was the most sacred. Maybe one vampyre in a thousand possessed the gift of Creation. Maybe only one in a million.*

*The implications flooded him, spilling from him in a cry of sheer wonder. He was a Creator!*

*Waves broke hard against the shore as dawn slaughtered another night. The first sliver of silver tore the horizon at the same instant the boy's chest heaved with an unearthly cry. Like a newborn babe—and that he was—the child knew only its pain and its insatiable need. So with little regard for its father/mother/sibling/progenitor, it attached its newly formed fangs to the nurturing laceration and made known its demand for Life.*

*For years to come, all Miquel would remember was scooping the little progeny beneath his cloak as dawn came looking for them with accusation burning in her fiery eye. Running at full force, in awe of this fragile son of his blood, he barely made it to the darkness of the old ship, and even then Helios singed the ragged edges of his vampyre soul—.*

*"Enough!" Miquel decided roughly, breaking eye contact and shattering the spell. "Enough!"*

*I must have cried out when I fell back to Earth, back into my body, on my knees in the middle of the floor.*

Had I seen the visions only in Miquel's eyes? Had I tasted a vampyre's hatred of death only on his tongue? The stench of dead fish cloistered in my nostrils from a sailing vessel that hadn't existed in hundreds of years said otherwise. The pale white sand dusting my hands confirmed it.

Suddenly, it no longer seemed important that Miquel and Dimitri were vampyres. All that mattered was this transcendental experience which defied explanation and would have shaken mere science to its foundations. I had been there—on the shores of Greece in what I roughly imagined to be the 17th century.

Suddenly, I wanted to crawl to Miquel—for I was unable to walk—and beg him to show me more. How I craved this knowledge, this feeling of wonder that had been dead and buried since Stephanie left me. For the first time since I delivered her body and my soul to the care of worms, I was alive again—ironic, considering that it was vampyres who brought me back from the dead.

"Please!" I said to Miquel, feeling as a junkie must feel surrounded by an ocean of morphine just out of reach. I looked back and forth between the two of them, realizing I'd been trapped in their private mental war. A taste of vampyre magic. Bait I couldn't ignore. "*Please!*"

Whatever became of *me* was irrelevant. For the first time, I truly *knew* there was a reality beyond the five senses, and for an opportunity to photograph it with my words, I would do anything in all the worlds.

Miquel looked at me as if coming to some private decision, then turned his eyes on Dimitri and quirked a smile beset with those menacing teeth which now struck me as oddly attractive. An unspoken communication passed between them, then Dimitri shrugged with seeming indifference.

"If he plays with his food the way he plays with his words, he might prove an interesting distraction for a century or two," the boy said to his Creator, substantiating my suspicion that they'd been reading my thoughts all evening. He turned his head to study me with a fair amount of disdain, a twinge of jealousy. "But there are thousands of scribes in the world, Miquel, and while this one is somewhat intriguing, is he really worthy of the dark evolution? Is he worthy of being an immortal?"

What surprised me was my immediate and profoundly emotional outburst. "I'm worthy, goddamn you!"

But I had to ask: worthy of what? Of being a monster? A thief of human blood? But as I looked at Miquel now and recalled his vulnerability when he'd shown me how alone each of us is in the world, I could not attach the label 'monster' to him whatsoever.

He was, quite simply, another species. Not human. Not at all a "vampire" as mythology paints them. He was something else entirely, and he had shown me more about myself in a single evening than I'd learned in a lifetime.

More than any monk or priest or doctor or wizard, this creature despised death and had gone to war against it.

Now he was offering me a chance to live forever, yet I couldn't help feeling a bit like Adam pondering the outstretched apple. He wanted my words, which meant he was asking for all I had. He wanted me to tell the world vampyres were alive and God was dead, and it was a job I didn't want in the least.

And yet, it was a job I had to take because I needed—so desperately—to prove him wrong, and the only way I could do it was to live long enough to make a thorough search of all the nooks and crannies of the universe where the Almighty might have gone to hide.



Maybe that's why Miquel wanted me. He needed a fool who could argue both sides of any coin with equal conviction, a bumbling pilgrim obsessed as much with the journey as with the destination.

Oh, I wanted to find God, all right—but for all the wrong reasons. I didn't want to worship the son of a bitch. I wanted to slaughter Him for destroying my faith in Him.

In answer to that thought, Miquel gave a melancholy smile. "Mortals feed themselves on faith because they have little else to sustain them, Stefan," he said as if he really did feel sorry for them. "Indeed, when I was still a man, it was easier to believe in forbidden apples and a serpent in the garden as a means to explain Man's mortality than to believe our entire existence was random chance. It was even easier to believe the soul might exist forever in Hell's torment than to think it would not exist in any capacity whatsoever."

Truth again. That's how he gave it to me—in little doses of irony and pain.

Immortality, then, existed not in resurrection nor belief in any deity, but only in the tender mercy of a vampyre's kiss—the kiss of the Creator, the kiss of the black angel. Eternal life was to be found only in eternal death.

"You begin to understand, Stefan," Miquel told me as he got up off his bed and walked to where I still knelt. "But is it a life you would want? Most men would prefer to die simply because it's far, far easier than living forever, and this is not a choice to be made lightly." He placed a hand on top of my head and looked at me with an expression reminiscent of angels gazing on their mortal charges.

I knew then what the statue in the courtyard symbolized, and why it watched over all the stone ghosts in a moonlit garden. They were Miquel's human lovers, dead and buried and destined to be mourned forever by their immortal beloved who had gone on without them. I envied them such devotion. But I also envied him the eternity stretched out in front of him, his patient mistress.

"I don't want to die," I told him, realizing for the first time the truth behind those words. "I *don't* want to die!"

I wanted to weep for all the souls already lost throughout the scope of time, my Stephanie most of all. We were throwaways: replaceable, recyclable. And I suddenly despised Nature for making us in such a shoddy fashion. Perhaps, I thought deliriously, vampyres were more thorough than God—better creators than the Creator. They made their children to last, at least.

And so, in that moment of tumultuous revelations, I added blasphemy to my list of unpardonable sins, though it never occurred to me that such a sin or such a pardon would have required the cooperative agreement of something which did not exist. How much we depended on God. How much we depended on *nothing*.

I trembled, in awe of this knowledge and yet filled with dread at the thought of my *own* death. Even Dimitri had died. Surely Miquel had, too. But why must it happen to *me*?

My ethereal ponderings stopped cold, my knees aching from kneeling so long on the floor. Outside, even the frogs had given up their singing, and in his motionless silence, Dimitri had become a still life portrait framed by the open window.

I blanched, holding my breath. And I lifted my head to look the creature squarely in the eye, mentally asking the question I didn't have the nerve to ask out loud. *Are you going to kill me?*

"No one gets out alive, Stefan, not even us," Miquel warned aloud, oddly compassionate despite his threat. "If you choose to live forever, it is true you must first die in my arms."

I stiffened with anxiety, but he soothed me by tangling his fingers in my hair and slipping

a thought inside me that transformed my worry to molten slag.

"It's just a small part of the price," he said softly. "And look at it this way, my friend. You will go to your death with *knowledge* of it! You will die with the certainty that you will live again—a certainty not dependent on hollow hope or fragile faith." He paused for a moment, offering a wistful smile. "I cannot promise you heaven, Stefan, but I *can* give you eternity if you're willing to accept it."

The cadence of his words was so hypnotic I wanted to be lulled into that new life by the sound of his voice alone, and it is my belief that had he simply told me to die I would have done it then and there.

"But—*why*?" I heard myself ask in a strangled, desperate whisper. "Why would you offer this to me?"

Miquel only looked at me, his unexpected empathy a tangible presence in the room. "I offer it to you, my grieving friend, because you burn with a thirst for life that will be reborn in your vampyre skin, surviving even the barrier of death. The pain within you can make the nature of life and death ugly enough and beautiful enough to peek through the words you'll write. People will come to you—frightened and impassioned and looking for answers—and *you* will bring them to *me*."

I started to protest, but he shushed me to silence. His voice softened to an awestruck whisper, and once again he caressed my face to mute the blow of what he was telling me.

"Together, Stefan, we will build a new garden with mortals who'll live forever because that's the way nature intended it before Man lost his way and became a plaything of Death."

Now Dimitri turned from the window, locking his gaze on his master. "But is he *worthy*?" the boy repeated, sultry.

Miquel's wicked smile was his only answer as he knelt at my side and gathered me against his chest, an embrace so intimate I could have refused him nothing. Had he asked for my life, I would have given it. Had he taken it, I would not have resisted.

But he merely held me in those illusory black wings and rocked me back and forth as we knelt there in the center of his deep green world. It was another reality—a place where trees grew out of the floor and time was a forest painted on the walls and the sun was always setting on the ceiling. *Forever sunset*, my mind whispered, delirious. *Forever dusk and dawn's a million years away*.

Then, as if it really were a kiss, Miquel bent his mouth to my throat and sank the sharp points of his teeth into the wounds he'd left me with before. It hurt brilliantly, though I made no attempt to pull away from the euphoria that instantly overcame me. This time, I did not lose consciousness, and I can only describe the soft red suckling as a libertine union of pain and pleasure.

It lasted only a few seconds before Miquel drew back, and the additional loss of blood drained my strength entirely. My head collapsed on his shoulder as the breath flew out of me, and then the black angel brought his moist crimson lips to my pale dry ones and left a kiss on my mouth that tasted of my own blood.

It was a flavor both erotic and sweet, a taste of copper pennies and a little boy whose face I'd once worn running by the railroad tracks with autumn leaves and magic spells crumbled in his pockets. It was a brief taste of knowing my life *could* go on forever, and a deeper drink of the realization that I had a right to eternity. The dark evolution, Dimitri called it. Perhaps that's what it really was, a willful parthenogenesis whereby a man passed through death in order to evolve forever beyond its reach.

My head swimming as Miquel's mouth brushed over mine and lingered there, I wondered if this were the forbidden kiss that would forever transform me.

"Just a taste to whet your thirst," he whispered in response to my thought, and I felt him nurture my disappointment like preparing a complex cocktail. He was a vampyre all right, whether he drank blood or sorrow, laughter or tears. "Tomorrow is soon enough for eternity. For now, you must return to the dayshine world and make your peace with your mirror."

His proclamation stunned me utterly.

I tried to protest, to tell him my peace was made on my daughter's grave, yet he hushed me with a finger laid across my lips.

"It isn't only a matter of manners that I send you away to contemplate this grave choice," he said, so close I could count the fires dancing in his eyes from the candles' myriad reflections, "but this is how it is done, you see. You must offer me your life and your death willingly and of sound mind, and this you cannot do while weak from loss of blood and still half fainting from my spell."

I was afraid of thinking about it at all, afraid I *would* change my mind or come to my senses or simply give in to other responsibilities as I'd always done before.

The thought caused him to smile—compassion and darkness all rolled into a single paradoxical expression that embodied the sheer essence of him.

"If you survive the transformation," he told me in a tone which said these were the most important words I would ever hear, "you will learn a secret which will give you the strength to live ten thousand years and beyond. But I am constrained to warn you, the price each of us pays for immortality is high and filled with irony. You would be wise to turn me down right now."

I'd already paid the highest price of all. My daughter was dead. Eternity would never be long enough to mourn her. "I won't change my mind," I insisted, and a terrible resolve caused me to add coarsely, "just do it!"

But he shook his head and fastened those preternatural eyes on my soul. "You know I cannot, Stefan, for all of this is nothing more than a dream within a dream."

And with a hypnotic gesture of one bejeweled hand, he made it so.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

I came to in my hotel room, my cheek resting on the cold white tile of the bathroom floor. The water in the shower was still running, steam so thick the wallpaper had peeled away at its seams and started to curl.

My head ached horribly, and at first I recalled nothing of Miquel. Groaning as I struggled to consciousness, the only thing I remembered was Dimitri—the crazy kid from the dealer's room who'd gotten under my skin.

Clearly, I'd been masturbating and struck my head on the sink when my climax dragged me to my knees with images of the vampire boy sneaking through my sick mind.

I did not recall turning off the shower nor crawling to bed, where I fell into a fitful sleep. Dreams of red fruit and painful kisses haunted my dreams.

\*

It wasn't until I went down to the dealer's room that the memories of the night before caught up to me. I was taking the covering off the display when a fat guy with a green dragon perched on one shoulder ogled me with a knowing grin.

"Looks like I'm not the only one who scored last night," he said, though he obviously hadn't scored his entire life. I recognized him as the vendor from the stall next to mine. The eyes of the latex dragon blinked, tiny red LEDs that gave me a start for the irretrievable image they stirred – a different kind of dragon and dappled ivy and images I both feared and longed for simultaneously.

Strangely light-headed, I gaped at him.

He just shrugged and pointed at my throat. "Looke like your girlfriend took a nice bite out of you." Snickering, he elbowed his partner. "Hey, Carl, get a load of this guy's hickey!"

Another hollow-eyed ignoramus with a Big Mac in his hand and a *Jurassic Park* t-shirt stretched too tight over his belly stared at me and started to chuckle. Hercules and Indiana Jones sidled up next to them, gawking now, too. The tarot reader with the silver hair stood on her tiptoes and whispered in my ear, "Don't think of the man in your dreams as the King of Swords but call him the Magician. The path of least resistance always leads to the grave, so take the higher road if you dare."

Under normal circumstances, with reasonably normal human beings, I wouldn't have scrambled away so abruptly; but it was at that moment the memories came flooding back as if injected deep inside my brain with a dull needle and a hard, fast push.

In a flash, all of the night before was there—the limousine, the dragon hedge with its red eyes, Miquel and Dimitri and the things they'd done—laid out before me like a feast of rich desserts that left me nauseous until I fled the crowded room and burst through the emergency exit onto the loading dock with a breathless gasp. It stank there—rotting garbage and diesel and rat piss—but at least there was no hint of Eternity when I sucked in the foul air in an effort to clear my head.

I had to be alone and I had to be in the real world, in a place where daylight had chased away the shadows, where traffic and airplanes and sirens created a comforting uproar of human existence. And yet, the thing that had happened the night before caused me to suddenly wonder just how real any of it really was.

*So is your entire reality only an illusion held together by the glue of society's consensual thoughts?*

Strange ponderings again, uninvited cousins from another universe.

As I looked at the 'real world' now, it seemed an illusion, a thin shade pulled down to conceal an inconceivable reality beneath, a transparent overlay of stages and actors in one of Mr. Shakespeare's plays.

And though I'd never noticed it before, the edges of the set were a bit rickety, the colors faded and dull; and when a security guard walked by without asking what I was doing there, I realized some of the extras had forgotten their lines. Indeed, it was as if I started to see the world for the thing it was—a two-dimensional backdrop, a cheap painting on black velvet hiding a masterpiece beneath, a Hollywood set that could fold in on itself at any moment like—

*"—a carnival!" Stephanie exclaimed, her nose pressed to the window as we sped down the freeway late at night. "Can't we stop, Daddy? Oh, please—just for a little while?"*

*At the edge of Del Mar's fluorescent sea, a double ferris wheel plummeted end-over-end through whirligig darkness. A tumbledown roller coaster labored up unseen tracks to plunge over the nothing into nothing more. The Tilt-a-Whirl spun, a magically illumined eggbeater stirring up a potion in the night.*

*"Maybe tomorrow, honey," I told my little girl, exhausted from the long convention weekend. Laurie would be waiting up at home, probably drinking again, and perpetually annoyed because we were late.*

*Stephanie just kept looking out the window, her head turning to stay with the lights as we left the carnival behind. "It won't be there tomorrow," she said with ethereal certainty. "It's only there for now because we see it, because we're creating it. As soon as we look away, it'll be gone forever."*

*She'd either be a quantum physicist or a writer. "We'll go tomorrow, punkin. I promise."*

*But as I looked in the rearview mirror, the carnival had already gone dark. When we returned the next night, there was nothing to indicate it had ever been there—not a drink cup blowing along the shore, not a half eaten corn dog crawling with ants, not even a faded funhouse ticket torn in half.*

*It was a thing of the night and to the night it had returned. That's what Stephanie said. I believed her just enough to begin fitfully scrawling notes for my fourth book, Tilt-A-Whirl Worlds—the diary of a mental patient who believed the key to other dimensions was a wobbly thrill ride at a phantom carnival...*

Now I wondered what Stephanie had seen that I never could.

I would have given anything for one chance to do it over again, but there was no going back, and now I'd never know if those distant lights had been real or just a special effect, courtesy of Industrial Light & Magic. I sat down on the hotel's loading dock with my legs dangling over the edge, staring at the metropolis which had sprung up out of the earth just as that carnival had sprung up out of the ether.

Was L.A. any more real, or if I turned my back would it disappear, too?

Engrossed in my troubling reverie, I barely noticed the vagrant passing through the alley until his scuffling footsteps caused me to look up. Wrinkled green army fatigues folded in on his frail body as he caught my eye and shot me a mock salute accompanied by a toothless grin.

"You'll drive yerself crazy tryin' to figger it out," he slurred in my direction, clutching a paper sack with the neck of a whiskey bottle peeking out. He took a swig of amber amnesia and wiped at his scroungy beard with a dirty hand, tottering from side to side as he stood there in a

stupor and began urinating in his pants.

The wind stopped whipping the dandelions that had fought their way up through a crack in the asphalt. The world went still. And though it had once been my nature to look the other way in circumstances such as these, I stared into the derelict's jaundiced eyes as if they held all the secrets of the universe.

And because I was already crazy, I said to this vagabond who could as easily have been a wizard, "Was the carnival ever there that night?"

He looked at me and chuckled. "The carnival's always there—'cept when it ain't."

His words sent an icy rush shooting through my veins, for I knew then he was as real as I was myself—not just some organic prop going through the motions of a random life. But he was already staggering away, as if he, too, had entire worlds to build before the sun went down.

"Wait!" I called after him, jumping to my feet. I hurried down the loading ramp, but a gust of wind burst around the corner and tossed a handful of grit in my eyes. Above the rushing howl, I could have sworn I heard the giggling of mischievous munchkins and the cackling of the wicked witch.

By the time my vision cleared, the dust devil had swept the stage bare and the drunk was nowhere in sight.

Trembling, lost, I clutched my arms to my chest, leaning heavily against the dirty block wall for a long time. *'For now, you must return to the dayshine world and make your peace with your mirror'.*

Miquel's warning came back to me, though I knew now he hadn't been referring to the looking glass above the sink. The world was my mirror, reflecting back at me whatever I put into it, whether carnivals from the phantasm or a hobo who was only a visiting zephyr.

The people and the dogs and the props *looked* real enough, but I was starting to suspect they weren't as solid as I'd once believed, and, indeed, they were probably hustled off at dusk to an abandoned factory where they slept a dreamless sleep until some other isolated traveler thought them back into existence. For when darkness came calling again, this whole vast stage would fold in on itself to be reborn as a carnival that existed only at night, complete with its own sun in the form of neon lights and kaleidoscope vampyre eyes.

During the course of that day, I convinced myself that the entire affair was nothing more than an hallucination brought on by bad hotel food, or some bizarre experiment with virtual reality for which I'd been the unwitting guinea pig. But in the end, when I felt that cold wall at my back and saw the sun crawling toward its ocean bed, a strangely euphoric calm came over me.

The understanding came easily when I stopped chasing after it—the realization that humans have little purpose on the Earth other than learning, and what greater thing was there to learn than the way out?

Like all men, I was afraid of death and I was most certainly afraid of change, so it stood to reason I was terrified of this thing Miquel had offered me, for it meant I would no longer have the luxury of looking at the world the same way. It meant acknowledging a fourth dimension of sorts, an underworld where vampyres walked the night and death was the blink of an eye instead of an endless black sleep.

It meant turning my back on everything I'd ever known, and *that* meant dancing a dangerous tango with a designer label known as insanity. Still, I couldn't help thinking that madness, like death, was a threat thrown in by the scriptwriter to keep the stakes elevated.

If we stripped away the social taboos and could ever confess what we truly believe, I

doubt there would be more than a handful of souls who really believe in heaven, and those would be captured within the pale green walls of asylums or cloistered inside dank monasteries.

We all *pretended* to believe in some nebulous afterlife, but no one really did.

We hired gurus to search for our truths and doctors to find cures for our ailments instead of eradicating the source of the ailments themselves: the belief that we *would* die. We trusted priests to show us the way to eternal life because we were far too busy creating corporations and slinging hamburgers and raising our families to look for ourselves.

Death, therefore, had become an institution, nursed at the breasts of undertakers and all complacent fools. But faith could no more save my life than wine and wafers could raise me from the dead. There was no miraculous snake oil on the 6 o'clock news which would cure me of my mortality. There was no proof of reincarnation, no hint that even Harry Houdini had survived that final disappearing trick.

There was only Miquel and his red kiss. Take it or leave it. Live or die. Now or never.

*Eat my body, drink my blood and you will never die.*

A chill passed through my heart and caused my eyes to water. It was a sensation I'd known only rarely in the past, some eerie confirmation of a deeply hidden truth clawing its way to the surface. A niggling at first, an phantom itch, nagging.

When the epiphany did come, it snowballed into an assault, each realization more dangerous and soul shattering than the last.

"Oh, God," I whispered, and slid down the wall until I was sitting on the ground hugging my knees to my chest. "Oh, God!"

*Eat my body, drink my blood and you will never die.*

Had similar words once been intended literally but became warped over the centuries into mere symbolic ritual that had lost its meaning? Was this man Christ crucified in the noonday sun not because of his claims of godliness, but for deeds that could only be explained as witchcraft or vampyre magic? Was the wine really wine that night or were the disciples already Princes of the Blood—emissaries of eternal life set loose on the world to do battle with the brute with the scythe?

Had Jesus *really* been the submissive child come to do his Father's will, or was he the rebel son in disguise, determined to steal the secret of immortality from Daddy's blood and give that secret back to Man?

*Eat my body, drink my blood and you will never die...*

Was our entire Western society based on vampirism?

*Jesus Christ!* my mind protested, appalled and imploding as it tore loose the bonds of decent moral restraint. *Jesus Holy Vampyre Christ!*

Clever boy.

A voice in my head screamed *Blasphemer!* to scare my thoughts into obedient silence, but when I closed my eyes and took a peek beyond the veil, the only thing shouting in my ear was me. That was the truth which came to me while workers unloaded shredded lettuce as if it really mattered and two kids from the kitchen stood smoking a joint as if knowing none of it mattered.

But I had to ask myself, *Is it worth it, Stefan? Is it worth giving up your humanity to defeat death?*

We're expected to keep a stiff upper and pray for an afterlife for some part of us that scientists can't find and mystics can't define and surgeons can't transplant into a corpse to give it life again. The ironic thing was this: the only way I could avoid dying was to die trying and trust

the bloodthirsty devil to raise me up from the dead.

Faith.

There was that word again, that monosyllabic abstraction which stated that humans were in control of nothing, including our fate or even our faith.

But at least Miquel had held me in his arms and offered me immortality in a body I already knew and a location right here on Earth. God and his unmapped heaven had some catching up to do.

The city shimmered in the distance, a mirage in the corner of my mirror.

*If this isn't your will, strike me dead now, God,* I prayed in earnest, not because I expected an answer, but because I desperately needed one.

But the lightning didn't come. The building didn't fall on me. No embolism ruptured to stop my lungs.

I was almost disappointed.

*Blasphemer!* the little voice cried again, louder and more shrill as it took up the chant of well-worn clichés. *You'll burn in hell! All things die! God moves in mysterious ways!*

*Blasphemer! Blasphemer! Blasphemer!*

"Shut up."

Imbued with total calm, I returned to the dealer's room, packed up my dead daughter's belongings and left them in a box for the cleaning crew to find. Inside the lid, I scrawled a note for Charlie, asking her to take care of my cat and telling her I wouldn't be coming home again.

Then, not really sure where I was going, I ambled into the lobby where the convention's din was at its loudest and the bustle of chaos swam around me. It was there I saw Dimitri coming through the revolving door just as the last dim watercolor bled from the sky. His coat fluttered in brisk wind. His hair shone, a halo of pure light. He had come for me.

It was night and would be forevermore.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

"Stefan? Have you reached a decision in this matter, Stefan?" Dimitri repeated, tapping a fingernail on the wine goblet from which he never drank in an effort to regain my attention.

I snapped back to reality and tried to think of at least one reason why I should refuse him. Eternity courted me in his eyes as the world shrunk to hold us. Batman and Robin had gone away, leaving only an empty plate at an empty table. Kirk and Spock were tucked safely in bed.

My heart screamed in my chest. "If you had it to do over again, would you?" I asked at last. "Would you give up your human life to embrace what you've become?"

"Oh, yes! *Yes—I would!*" he whispered with a fervor that showed me a glimpse of the things he'd seen in his lifetime. He'd stood on the battlefield at Gettysburg. He'd sailed on the *Titanic* and gone down with her in dark waters. He'd danced with royalty and drunk from the veins of slumbering queens. "Any fool can die, Stefan, but it takes a brave heart to beat forever."

His passion made me want it all—that perfection, that dark evolution, that immortal life coursing through his body. I leaned closer, unintentionally conspiratorial as my stomach knotted with thoughts of Miquel, with details of what had to be done.

"What about you?" I asked, nervously running my fingertip through a drop of wine spilt on the table. "Why can't it be you who... why can't you be my... Creator?"

He grinned at my uncharacteristic lack of words. "You flatter me, Stefan, but I do not



have the power to give life back once it is taken." His little fangs glittered as he smiled philosophically. "And besides, why would you drink from a peasant's stone cup when the golden chalice of the prince is pressed to your lips?"

Dimitri was good, a cunning and patient hunter who knew a net of pretty words would capture me faster and hold me tighter than any cage. If he really had been jealous the night before, it didn't show now, for he was open and casual in a way that put me at ease.

There was only one thing left for me to know, and that because I was still afraid of the dark. "Will it be terrible?"

His blue eye winked. His green one sparkled, reflecting the chandelier and all its little lights. "It will make you whole and enable your spirit to fly."

We left the restaurant together and, like two little boys, raced across the lobby to the limo waiting beyond glass doors.

\*

My next awareness was of being in the great room of their home, where candles burned on the sills and the scent of smoke from the fireplace filled the air like pleasant anesthesia. Dimitri led me to an overstuffed sofa of soft burgundy leather and had me wait while he went to tell Miquel of my decision. He even told me not to be afraid, though he confessed he was glad he'd never had to make the choice himself.

As I sat there listening to the irregular pounding of my heart, it occurred to me to jump up and run. I was beginning to think Dimitri and Miquel had forgotten about me entirely when I heard the hushed padding of tennis shoes on the hardwood floor. I looked up, expecting to find some monster looming over me, but instead it was the young servant from the night before.

He stopped in the shadows of the stairwell, peering at me from a distance. Tight bluejeans hugged his athletic legs, and a green spandex top made it look as if he'd just come from the gym. His hair, which had been tied back before, now hung almost to his waist in glassy waves the shade of imported dark chocolate.

He was a vision, unreal, an album cover.

When I saw how exotic he truly was, I thought I'd been mistaken and this wasn't the same boy at all. But when he emerged into the light near the foot of the stairs, his porcelain doll skin and graceful movements were trademarks that couldn't be forged or inadvertently twinned in nature.

Seeing him better—firelight flickering over pronounced cheekbones, narrow nose and defined chin—I realized he was older than I'd first believed. Twenty, perhaps. No more than 22.

"Hello," I said, sensing that any quick movement would cause him to bolt. He was a shy animal, wild, and I could only wonder what had happened to make him this way. I held one hand toward him. "I'm Stefan—Stefan London."

He nodded a wary acknowledgement, looking at me with wide brown eyes reminiscent of a deer.

"You came back," he said, coming no closer.

I'd almost decided he was mute, but his voice was even more clear and sharp than Dimitri's—not a human voice at all, but the plaintive sound one might expect from a merman or some fabled he-wolf crying to the moon. He cast a nervous glance toward the darker part of the house, then inquired in a fervent tone that sent chills through me, "*Do you know what will happen if you stay?*"

I was too scared to be scared anymore, so I sat there numbed to the bone by his voice, his extraordinary male beauty. "Yes, I think I do." I didn't, of course. How could I?

He crept a step closer, and as our gazes locked across the wide room, I felt sorry for him without understanding why. Uncomfortable with the silence, I started to say something, but a sound from the top of the stairs stopped me—a little bump, a soft thump, hushed male voices that sent a rush of dread through my gut. My head jerked toward the source, but the darkness sweeping down that curved stairwell revealed nothing.

There was a sensation of abrupt movement nearby, yet when I cast my eyes toward the young man, he was nowhere to be seen, the only thing that gave any hint to his whereabouts a curtain moving on the far side of the room. The window was open, and as I leapt from the sofa and hurried over to it, a shadow streaked through darker shadows at the farthest edge of the lawn.

I opened my mouth to call out, but the garden of statues and their watchful black angel stole my voice away completely.

Perhaps I should have gone after him or run away myself, but a writer's curse is to record events, often missing their significance at the time, so that he might mull them over at some later date. Returning to the sofa, I sat tentatively on the edge, struggling to quiet my ragged nerves.

The fire in the hearth was warm, a pleasant crackling filling the room, comforting somehow. The smooth white walls which stretched two stories high here in the great room were adorned with ornate tapestries and the hardwood floor covered with Persian rugs perhaps as old as Miquel himself. Overhead, a stained glass skylight depicted two enormous seraphim in frantic flight, carrying between them a third comrade whose head hung limp and whose broken wings trailed from his muscular back, lifeless.

Enthralled, I stared at it as the moon rose to illumine its fragile beauty. Then, when I could no longer bear the grief captured in the eyes of those stained glass angels, I drew my attention back to Earth.

What brought a smile to my lips was the large screen tv. and the elaborate stereo system with its 8-speaker surround sound tied in to the home theater. Two DVDs in rental cases sat next to the array, tagged with a common yellow sticky note which read: *Dimitri, return these on Monday. ...M....*

For reasons I might never understand it was *that* silly detail which made Miquel human to me—sticky notes and memberships at the local video shop and a note written with plain black ink instead of blood.

For all his eloquent speech and his Ming vases gathering dust on a corner shelf and his undoubtedly authentic Van Gogh leaning against the wall as if he hadn't yet decided where to hang it, Miquel Kaliq Constantine was no Count Dracula imprisoned in a dreary castle. He could be just as comfortable at a rock concert as at the Bolshoi, and that was the thrill of him.

My stomach leapt unexpectedly – a rare premonition – and when I spun toward the stairs, it was to see the vampyre descending in all his glory. Whereas the night before had seen him in jeans and a plain white shirt, now he wore a tuxedo that made him appear even taller and darker than I remembered. He hadn't shaved—his scruffy countenance part of his vain self-portrait—and his glossy black mane crept inside his collar to nuzzle his neck, a curious pet. His eyes sparkled with mischief as he glided toward me and extended his hand in greeting.

I laughed nervously as we shook hands, halfway expecting him to say, *'Smile, you gullible fucking idiot, you're on Candid Camera!'*

Instead, completely at ease, he took my hand and pressed it firmly between both of his own, meeting my eyes in a steady emerald gaze that wasn't meant to mesmerize but nonetheless

left me light-headed.

"You must forgive my protégé for not offering you something to drink," he said with consummate poise, "but I'm afraid he's run away into the night again. The act of creating a vampyre still scares poor Donny, you see, for he was made against his will—a struggle that almost destroyed us both." He smiled a little, sharp fangs glistening in his mouth. "Tell me: did he try to talk you out of it?"

I went cold to the bone when I saw his teeth, when I thought of what he was going to do to me. "Uh—no. But why—why did you—why against his will?" I stammered, taken off guard by the realization that the boy *was* a vampyre and the strong insinuation that Miquel wasn't above using force to get what he wanted.

He put an arm around my shoulder and led me to the window, and though I'd never been accustomed to such familiarity with another man, the strength of his embrace was reassuring. I tried to relax, knowing the time was past for changing my mind.

For a few moments, he looked at me as if trying to decide whether to answer my question. The creek gurgled, rushing through the flower gardens. Glass windpipes hanging beneath the eaves began a melodic chiming.

"Donny was my blood lover, you see," he explained in a voice that was barely audible despite our physical closeness. "When he fell ill, I had to bring him into this life or lose him forever." Taking his gaze from the window and fastening it on me, he added darkly, "I do *not* like to lose, Stefan."

These words he uttered with an arrogance that was palpable in its intensity. I could think of no appropriate response as he looked at me with a vulnerability which told me he really did want me to understand why he did the things he did.

"I have been acquainted with death for over a thousand years," he explained, and I knew then that the madness in his eyes was history. "I've seen him steal friends, obliterate families at a whim, annihilate entire civilizations. Normally I've looked the other way, ignoring him as he's ignored me. But when he came for Donny and singled him out of all the world, I took his audacity as a personal affront, and on that day death and I went to war."

His ardor chilled me. His passion moved me. And because I *wanted* to understand, I foolishly muttered, "I understand."

Miquel turned his head to me, his scrutiny causing me to writhe inside. "Really?"

Knowing he'd seen right through my bravado, I gave him the truth instead. "I want to."

This made him smile, though somewhat sadly. "I believe you really do, Stefan."

Then, before I knew what was happening, he reached out to run his fingertips over my hand, a gesture that wasn't intrusive when I consciously lowered my walls in response to the telepathic presence of his will. And without the bulky burden of words, I suddenly knew—

*—the April storm was unexpected, making the house damp and full of shadows even at mid-afternoon. By the open window, Miquel danced, naked and frenzied, grateful for the clouds yet resentful that the sun was hiding behind them, waiting to sneak out again. The windows fogged, frosty ghosts peering in at the corners. Music screamed—the same song playing over and over on speakers omnipotent enough to render even a vampyre deaf to the world's din.*

*The thirst aroused him, thoughts of drinking from his chosen blood lover causing his lips to part and his eyes to roll slightly upward. How long had he known Donny? A year? Or was it two? The kid shouldn't be dying. The kid shouldn't have AIDS.*

*"I shouldn't have to kill you just to make sure you will live." Though he said the words aloud, Miquel never heard them above the music and the pounding of his own crazed heart.*

*Death was mocking him, challenging him to a duel for the soul of a dying man.*

*Donald Anthony Carrera—lead vocalist in a rock band that played weekend gigs at the local pub. The first time Miquel laid eyes on the kid he had to have him: a taste of his blood, a drink of his poetry. The first time he heard him sing, he was lost.*

*To make it perfect, Donny loved the blood bite, his entire essence surging every time Miquel drank from him. With this one, there was no need to hide the truth, no need to resort to sorcery to make him forget. With Donny, Miquel could openly enjoy being a vampyre again, partaking in the shared symbiosis as it was meant to be.*

*His body quickened. Neither God nor Satan could have the kid and that was that!*

*He visualized making it real: Donny climbing into his arms as he'd always done, accepting without fear or fight the sharp kiss that would end his life in order to chase away his death forever.*

*The magic wouldn't be quite that easy, of course. It never was.*

*From the cold gray fabric of the storm, Miquel gathered strength, knowing he would need every molecule of power he could conjure, and even then it might not be enough. The sting of mortal death was sometimes fatal, defying even his blood. Fear could destroy it all and plunge the kid into the sun, a failed Icarus.*

*He trembled, feeling terribly small. He had to be more than a man, more than even a vampyre. Could he be the Creator now, when it mattered more than anything?*

*He never knew, and that was the hell of it.*

*"You must fly – beyond the ability of Death to undo!" Miquel said to the empty room, the breath rushing out of him as he collapsed on the floor, his chest heaving from hours of exertion. He touched his body for magic, for luck, and to bring forth the power of Creation itself.*

*He closed his eyes, hugged his arms to his chest, and he wept. Soon it would be night—time to take the life of a love.*

I was staring fixedly into Miquel's eyes when the trance dissipated. A small sound escaped my throat, and though I swayed dizzily in response to the clash of conflicting realities—what I'd always believed possible and what I'd always thought of as myth—the myth steadied me with a firm grip on my arm.

"I will not lose you either, my friend," he assured me.

The sheer force behind those words caused me to look away. Panic pressed close.

If this thing had to be done at all, it should be clinical, detached and quickly over, an awful thing to be gotten through like a trip to the dentist. I didn't want to hear him talking about mortal lovers and challenging death and making a man a vampyre against his will—an act that sounded obscenely erotic despite its more sinister overtones. I didn't want to watch the plays written in his memory, nor see him dancing like some savage warlock, naked and crazed by a storm.

To my surprise, Miquel laughed, then reached out a hand to tousle my hair. "But don't you see, Stefan?" he murmured with a little grin that caused my heart to miss a beat. "I've danced the day away for *you* this time—to prove to Death that my will is stronger even than his."

I tried to speak, but no words came as I took a step away from him. He had danced for *me*. He had danced a barbaric dance because it truly was his intention to kill me.

Suddenly it was all very real and sharply focused, and I was no longer ready to give up my life even for the prospect of living forever. Before, it had been an idle thought, a fantasy. Now, with him standing in front of me as we finalized some unholy pact, it became 3-dimensional and far too detailed.

Without volition, I stumbled another step backward, glancing toward the tall double doors, knowing I would never reach them.

"Oh, God," I whispered. "Oh, God!"

Instead of chastising me for my cowardice, Miquel followed after me and slipped an arm around my waist in an attempt to calm my fright. If I'd ever wondered how a prisoner felt on his way to the gas chamber, I knew. My body was numb, my mind detached, and my life was far too finite—measured in minutes and seconds rather than years. The air in my lungs had turned to fire because I'd forgotten to breathe, and I was on the verge of nausea when Miquel pulled me to his chest and forced my head down on his shoulder.

Without words, he held me there, swaying easily back and forth with his fingers tangled in my hair and my cheek pressed to the ruffled shirt of his tux. His chin rested against my forehead, his shadowy stubble coarse and entirely too physical, his clean scent filling my nostrils. Unable to bear the sight of our reflections in the mirror above the mantle, I clenched my eyes tightly shut, dancing with the instrument of my impending death.

An hour passed, maybe more.

Finally, when I could breathe again, he placed his hands on my shoulders and held me at arms' length as the room came back into focus. I do not know what our minds said to one another, but after a minute or two, he led me to the sofa and sat down at my side.

"I know you're afraid, Stefan," he told me with compassion, resting a steady hand on my shoulder. "But I've done this thing before and I know you'll make it through. So we'll speak with reverence of your death for a moment and then we'll simply do it. I think it would be best that way—without so much angst and contemplation, yes?"

It was so easy for him, so natural to seduce a mortal soul right out of the vessel that held it. All I could do was stare at him, at those feral eyes framed by the most exquisite features I'd ever seen.

He was both executioner and messiah. He was my fate and undeniably he was my faith.

I tried to reply, but my stomach cramped and my vision blurred. My heart went into an unearthly rhythm until I cried out in pain, ashamed of myself for an anxiety so acute it reduced me to this.

In the face of eternal life, I was about to die of a stroke.

Miquel squeezed my shoulder to calm me. When he gave an unexpected smile at my predicament, I saw his teeth and once again knew that special fear reserved for those who had looked their death squarely in the face. Meeting my gaze with an expression of real empathy, the amusement left him.

We were alone in the world then, and I believe he planned it that way—for time to stop, for the lights in the distance to dim, for the wind to stop stirring the chimes in the garden. All that remained were the songs of the frogs and the gurgling of the little creek, a miniature Styx winding its way past the window.

"All you need do is come to me willingly, Stefan, and I will do the rest," he assured me, holding his hands open as he spoke. Here he paused, fingertips brushing my cheek. "Can you do it, my friend? Can you surrender your life to me and trust me to make you whole again?"

I hated him for the images his words awakened—a savior offering me body and blood and telling me I would live forever if I were first willing to die.

I began to weep, for there was only one answer to his question, and with a gruesome effort that drained me, I whispered it before I could change my mind: "Yes."

His entire self surged in response, a burst of energy on my mind. "*Excellent*," he breathed

darkly. "Perfect."

Then, meeting my eyes and compelling me not to look away as his trance engulfed me, he began to speak in a voice that was hypnotic and soothing unto itself.

"When you feel my lips on you, draw a deep breath and rejoice in knowing it will be your last as a mortal. You'll think you're drowning, but remember I'm with you in the waters, driftwood at your side. You'll want to fight me, but if you do, know you'll die the death from which not even my blood can awaken you again."

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't move. "I'm afraid."

He wet his lips with the tip of his tongue, as enraptured by this insufferable act as I was horrified. "Then come to me, Stefan, and let us take that fear away from you forever. Let me show you the way out."

Our eyes locked, passing candlelight back and forth in an endless hall of mirrors.

It *was* the only way out, terrifying and terribly seductive because of that very singularity. When I finally saw that, when I acknowledged that death was the only chance I had for life, I fell into his outstretched arms because there was nowhere else for me to go.

I believe I was speaking—whimpering and crying and begging him to let me live, I suspect—though I could not tell you for sure. It was a terror I would will on no other living soul, and had I known I would experience such an all consuming dread when his arms closed around me, I could not have gone through with it.

My world was ending and I was going to my death as if it were a lover.

My body surged in protest, survival instinct making me resist even his pleasing trance. But when he seized my wrists and forced me down with a strength I could never match, I could only look up into his eyes and accept as fact that I was already dead. Releasing one wrist, he touched my face as his weight pressed me deeper into the dream. Then, as if he wanted to shield me from the hunger I read in his gaze, he brushed his fingertips over my eyes, forcing them to close.

"Driftwood, Stefan," he whispered as my head began to spin and I knew he really was going to do it. "I am driftwood."

I caught a shaky breath when he gathered me to him and his lips fell quickly upon my throat. My heart pounded, wild drums. My tears fell, a fatal storm. In a final act of resignation that begged for mercy, I threw my arms around his back and pulled him roughly to me, burying my face in the curve of his neck as I began to weep.

"Beautiful," the angel of death whispered, his thirst a palpable force in the room. "Your surrender is genuinely beautiful." His fingers caressed my throat, luring the blood to the surface, and then I began falling into a warm, sheltering faint. "Now let the world be gone, Stefan. Let the world go away so the night can come in."

And with that, he seized me with his teeth in a grip so fierce I felt the cramp of torment all the way through to my feet. My eyes flashed open for an instant, but I clamped them tightly shut, afraid I would see death in the room. Warmth poured down my neck, a rushing river caught by the devil's lips.

I panicked, surrendered, panicked again.

At first, I fought to shove him away from me, but when I remembered his final warning as my blood ran freely and I began to suffocate, I grabbed the driftwood to me and rode that hellish tidal wave straight on into the night.

The world went still then, and I stood apart from myself, a voyeur watching my own metamorphosis as I lay in the arms of a vampyre who drank my dying soul. It was all I'd dared to

think it might be—my body conquered beneath him, my soul rising up to dance on the ceiling in a bid to escape the terrible pain.

The music of the spheres wasn't Lawrence Welk or Andrew Lloyd Webber or even Enya. It was rock and roll, with my own high-pitched scream wailing like an electric guitar.

The suffering was indescribable. The pleasure left me spent. I stopped breathing. And then, as Miquel suckled the blood from my world, I knew the gruesome serenity of death itself.

Though one might think it would be the most enigmatic experience of man, the actuality of it was altogether dull. For a moment, it seemed that whatever essence had made Stefan London a creature unique unto himself would merely be absorbed into the spongy black cloth of the cosmos, soaked up, finished.

The horror came with the realization that even this disintegration of the Self would have been acceptable, because the will to live was the first thing death stole away. In that way, it was an altogether flawless mechanism. Annihilation wasn't a process of defeat or surrender. It was, in the end, nothing more than nonexistence—a state of non-being which would triumph by default because one could not do battle with a vacuum while inside that very vacuum.

In one moment, I had been alive and vital and terrified that my life was going to end. Yet when that ending came, the heavy *blankness* obliterated even the realization that there had been a *me* to be destroyed in the first place.

For the first time in all of time, I did not exist and never had and never would, and that was the nature of death as I perceived it. There was, if Nothing can be said to exist, Absolute Nothing which could not even be perceived because the ability *to* perceive was lost in the Nowhere, swallowed whole. There was no blinding white light, no line of dead relatives welcoming me to heaven, no angelic choirs, and not a single deity or demon in sight. And yet, if there *was* a Hell, this was it: this profoundly empty and hollow void where Stefan London had once existed, this hole death created in the very fabric of space and time, this hole which was the annihilation of consciousness itself.

Adrift in that nihilistic state, I didn't see Miquel loosen his crisp black tie nor unfasten his ruffled shirt to reveal his neck to me. And though I have no recollection of him making a small incision below his ear, I was drawn to the scent of that scarlet milk as a baby instinctively seeks its mother's breast—the only real thing in the midst of the cold black mire.

Because I could not do it for myself, he lifted my head to the wound and held it there as I was overcome by a hunger so fierce it threatened to consume me. Abruptly, I was dragged back into my lifeless body—*too heavy, so small, so cold*—when I tasted the precious salts of his blood on my tongue.

Greedy for that flavor which I now recognized as the only cure for death's nonexistence, and gifted with sharp fangs that had replaced my own dull incisors, I bit down hard and sucked in my first immortal breath: a choking, gurgling reverse scream of vampyre evolution.

Miquel cried out when I was born, trembling beneath the suffering I caused him even as his arms tightened around me and a low groan of wicked bliss whispered across his lips. The anguish thrilled him as it thrilled me. We were two of a kind, he and I. We were cloud and rain. Pain and pleasure. We were flesh and bone.

At first, I knew only the security reserved for a newborn first set to its mother's nipple. But then, as his blood began threading its way through the veins and the capillaries of my death-still heart, something happened I hadn't anticipated. It came as a flash at first, a quick burst of images with no rational explanation.

*A male concubine, groomed as a consort to the emperor, but arrogant and defiant in his*

youth, refusing to be subservient even to the highest lord of Byzantium. When he struck the monarch and would not allow himself to be taken, his belly was cut open and he was thrown out for the wild dogs to find.

*But it was the king's odd son who found the beautiful creature first, the pale young prince who fed the dying man blood from his own body and nurtured him back to health in secret.*

*When Miquel was well again, he stole the vampyre's sword and plunged it through his heart—not because he believed it would kill Prince Leo, but because he desperately hoped the prince would be driven to kill him in a fit of rage and revenge. Leo, like his father Basil, had taken liberties with Miquel against his will. A vampyre now himself, he would not be sodomized like some common whore; and though he secretly wept when his maker cast him out into streets, he never saw the prince again.*

But he would not let me linger there, giving me only the briefest glimpse of his past.

Centuries tumbled together in his mind, a haze of lost memories made dim by the will to forget. Before Dimitri, there was only the darkness. After Dimitri was born in his arms and he knew he was a Creator capable of building a new world, he no longer mourned the loss of the sun or cursed the thirst.

He was a vampyre, and now he held his head high as he smiled at the moon and admired his own reflection in pools of still water. Though barely 19 when Leo changed him, Miquel's magical body had settled into the maturity of a man in his early 30s—the prime of mortal life, the peak of strength and prowess, when a man was feared by powerful men and desired by beautiful women.

The images came hard and fast, mixed in his blood. The images *were* the blood, the culmination of all Miquel. I drank of popes and soldiers, kings and fools. I tasted Lord Byron on my tongue, and pressed the elixir of Shelley to my lips. I sampled the soul sick sweetness of Norma Jean and the final breath of Jim Morrison. There were the homeless urchins from the streets of L.A., whose blood ran strong and quick in anonymity. And there were the willing victims who had sought out the vampyres since the dawn of time in the hopes of finding immortality.

I suckled deep as his heart fed me, finally encountering my own familiar flavor running fast through his veins. The taste was narcissistically sweeter than all the rest, and I yearned for it so much that I released my hold and re-sank my teeth to gain a better view.

*Railroad tracks slick with rain and tennis shoes pounding footprints into the mud. Wild pumpkins growing in an empty city lot, still green. A finger sliced open and the flood of blood in a little boy's mouth as he sucked it, secretly hungry with the need to know himself better.*

Again Miquel writhed, fingers twisting in my hair as he held my head to him and encouraged me to feed.

"Yes, my child, take all you need and take it deep," he whispered, though I heard the words in my mind more than in my ears. He stroked my face, my throat. *The instinct is strong with you because you were born to the Blood.*

I floated in the soft, warm core of him and let its red waves gently rock me. But as my feast continued and I indulged this terrible hunger to the point of gluttony, something went skittering past my lips that gave me sudden pause. It was a presence half remembered, a face in an album of faded photographs, an old song playing on a distant radio.

"Drink deeper, Stefan," Miquel encouraged, though his voice had gone sad, resigned. "Drink it to the soul so you may understand it."

Because he was my Creator and I was compelled to obey his will, I drank deeper of this



familiar essence. So perfect was the flavor on my lips that I never wanted to let it go, so dulcet and trusting I wanted to devour it as Miquel had once devoured it.

*They moved together on the dance floor at the costume ball—the vampyre in his tuxedo, and the goth girl with the dyed black hair and skin paler even than his. Enamored of his physical radiance, thrilled when he lifted her in his arms and waltzed with her, she threw her head back and laughed with an abandon only an adolescent girl can know.*

*"Are you really a vampyre?" They'd courted one another all evening, covert glances across a crowded room. Finally, he'd asked her to dance.*

*"I really am," Miquel told her, and captured her in the folds of his cape.*

*She rested her head on his chest, for she barely reached his shoulder. A strange sensation such as she'd never known alighted in the pit of her stomach.*

*"I believe you," she whispered, and she did believe. A soft sigh pressed through lips painted red with her mother's borrowed lipstick. The calm inside her grew. "Can you read my mind?"*

*"Yes."*

*"What am I thinking, then?" Her head was held high, chin beginning to tremble.*

*He drew her close, so close, caressed her hair. Emeralds snarled in ebony. "You want to die," he barely whispered, sucking that ghastly aloneness until her essence filled him. Other couples danced nearby, oblivious to the pact being secretly sworn.*

*Her eyes closed, cheeks suddenly wet. Her small hands clenched his back, shiny black fingernails digging in. "Nobody understands," she told him, her soul awash with the torment of growing up. "Nobody ever has."*

*"I understand, Stephanie."*

God help me, I believe he did. He understood something about her I never had. He understood her pain enough to acknowledge it and, more, enough to make it stop.

And though I tried to tear myself away from him and run screaming into the night, I could never run far enough now. In a horrible flash that came through the blood, I knew how she'd died—*kiss of death, soft and fine and without fight or pain*—and I knew it had been as mystical for her as it had been for me because it had come at Miquel's skilled hands.

The bastard even made love to her before he pressed his teeth to her throat and gave her the release she desperately craved. As he stole her innocence, he liberated her from a life she'd never wanted: a mother addicted to therapy and booze, and a father more obsessed with trying to describe the color of her hair than with questioning why that color came from a bottle when she was only 13.

When I tore my mouth from his nurturing throat, my lips wet with her blood, I could only look into Miquel's predatory eyes and cry out when I saw my own iridescent reflection caught there. I would have killed him if I could, yet there was no denying he was already dead.

In shock, my words came out cold and ineloquent. "You godless, soulless bastard—you murdered her!"

But he shook his head and forced my head down on his shoulder, knowing I was too weak to resist. Worse, he knew I *wouldn't* resist, for he was my Creator whom I would love by nature, even in the face of a hatred equally profound.

It was a paradox for which no reconciliation existed, and by that very definition it was madness itself.

In defiance of nature, my body quickened as he coddled me, and that was worse still. Shame overwhelmed me, and I wept in denial as the river of arousal flowed from me in a rush

that confirmed his intolerable power over me.

"You murdered her!" I shouted, twisting and writhing. My fists flailed at his face, his neck, the air, but the blows had no effect whatsoever. "You murdered her! You murdered my baby girl!"

With little effort, he stilled my protests, placing one hand firmly over my mouth and the other in the center of my chest until I fell back, unable to do anything more than stare up into his face.

"No, my dearest Stefan," he said with a degree of regret that astonished me, "*you* murdered her—you and your busy, busy world that had no time for a little girl with a melancholy soul." And as if I needed to hear it again, he leaned down close to my ear and repeated, "*You* killed her. I only gave her the ability to die."

My mortal tears were drying as they fell, though my chest still heaved. "Then kill me, too!" I begged, so frail I could barely speak. I hadn't the strength to attack him again, yet I couldn't imagine going on with him in the same world—wanting him, needing him as a father, a friend, a teacher and more. Loving him more than I could have loved hatred itself.

I vowed to destroy him. But at the same moment, my immortal soul was swelling and shattering with the excruciating love a man feels for someone who has just saved his life.

That was the price, that was the passion, that was the motivation which would spur me to eternity itself. Damned to love the creature who had murdered my daughter, it was his blood mingling with hers in my veins that caused my vampyre heart to start beating.

"Kill me!" I demanded, appalled at the strengthening flutter in my hollow chest, yet secretly filled with a hunger that horrified me with its intensity. "If you have any compassion in you, kill me, Miquel!"

A jeweled hand stroked my head. "I already have," he whispered, and gave an ironic smile.

Then, rising from the sofa, he lifted me easily into his arms and, like a loving father, carried me up the stairs to his white satin bed. There he lay me down to sleep, curling his body around me, sheltering me in the down of his noble black wings.

Perhaps there was no God, but I knew then there was a devil. Not the Christian devil, to be sure, but colder still and far more brutal. Marble hearted. Not a fallen angel, but one who had deliberately flown away from the light because it offended him.

*Is the coyote evil because he kills? No, he is only a hungry coyote, capable of compassion.*

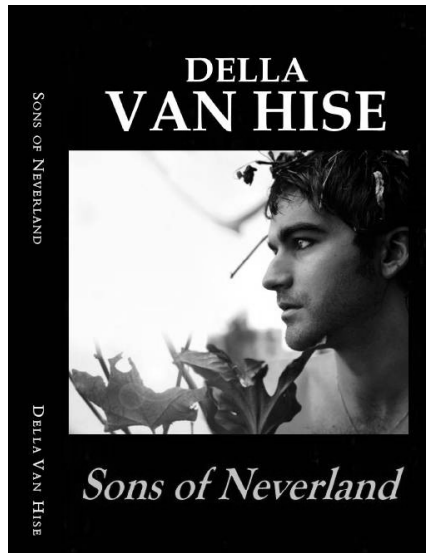
Because he left me no other choice, I fell into a cold and bottomless sleep with the kiss of the black angel on my lips and the blood of my Stephanie dancing The Mephisto Waltz in my veins.

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If you enjoyed ***KISS OF THE BLACK ANGEL***, please consider purchasing the novel-length book which is available under the title ***SONS OF NEVERLAND***. Available through our website at [www.eyescrypublications.com](http://www.eyescrypublications.com)



## *Other fiction titles from Eye Scry Publications...*



### **SONS OF NEVERLAND** **an erotic vampyre novel by** **Della Van Hise**

*"The virtuosity shown here is only the beginning of a pyrotechnic talent unfolding into the hidden dimensions of the human and nonhuman spirit."*

-Jacqueline Lichtenberg

*"Sensual! Sexy! Surreal!"*

-North County Times

*"A literary triumph where the undead have more heart & soul than the living."*

-The Readers

"What Sons of Neverland resembled to me was the creative hagiographies of Nikos Kazantzakis, where a few stylized characters deliver a message that goes way beyond the parameter of the characters themselves. And much like Kazantzakis, this book zones on the question of immortality. However, this is not just the decadent historical immortality of the long-lived vampire, it is immortality as a change in one's perception. This is the story behind the story, delivered by characters that are hyper-real - each one loaded with symbolism. Sons of Neverland will have you filled, even brimming over with the sense of Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans. Go there for a full helping of the numinous." (A Reviewer on Amazon!)

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Set against a backdrop of contemporary culture, SONS OF NEVERLAND explores the universal questions of life & death, sex & love - the most crucial challenges every human being faces - through the eyes of the immortal vampire.

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Readers have compared SONS OF NEVERLAND to the works of Anne Rice, Carlos Castaneda, and Anais Nin. One reader summed it up as follows: "SONS OF NEVERLAND is one of the most erotic books I've ever read. I found it totally uplifting regardless of the gritty story. In the end, it made me realize that light can't exist without darkness. Thank you for a truly exceptional read!" (Charlene J.)

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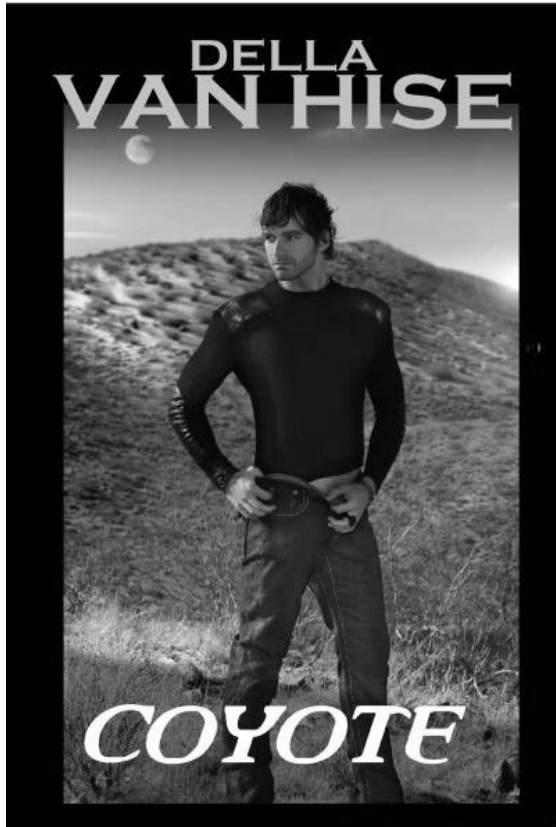
A shorter version of this book was published in TOMORROW MAGAZINE, under the title "Kiss of the Black Angel." The novel in its entirety was published as a limited first edition under the title "Ragged Angels."

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**COYOTE**  
Della Van Hise

*A Novel of Love, Honor  
and Personal Sacrifice...*

When River Willows is accused of a murder she didn't commit, her life takes a turn toward the sanctuary of a world existing at right-angles to our own. Combining the mysticism of martial arts and the romantic conflict of a young woman torn between two powerful men, COYOTE takes the reader on an epic journey of dangerous secrets, military cover-ups, and the infinite heart of the peaceful warrior.



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"So who's Coyote?" I asked, trying to ignore the effect he was having on me. "You?"

Steale laughed easily, though it did little to hide the torment behind that mask of indifference he wore so well.

"Coyote's a scavenger, Jack of all trades. The Native Americans call him the trickster - the one who brought chaos down on the world." He shrugged as if altogether unconcerned. "Original

sin."

"Is that what you are?" I asked, keeping it light despite the growing knot my stomach.

"Original sin?"

He kept his profile to me, eyes straight ahead as he drove.

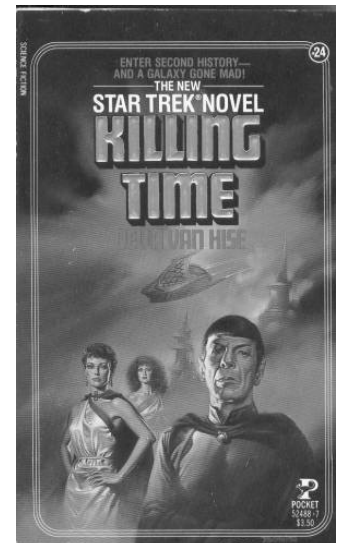
"Sure you want to know?"

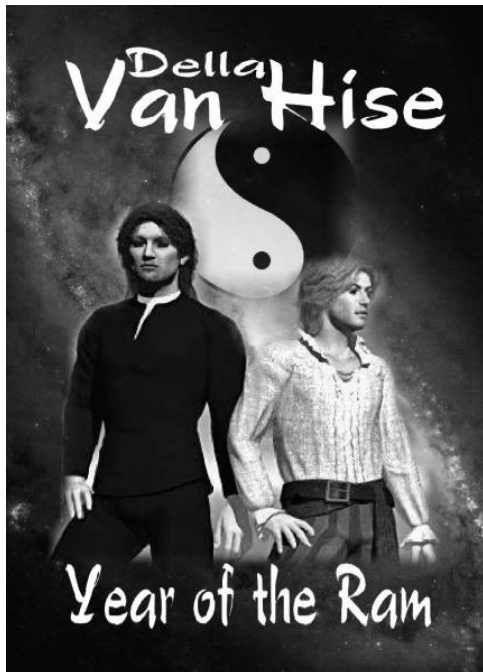
I couldn't help wondering if I had cornered the coyote, or if the clever trickster had cornered me.

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By the author of **KILLING TIME** – without a doubt the most controversial **STAR TREK** novel ever published!

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## **YEAR OF THE RAM** **Della Van Hise**

*Year of the Ram* was described by one reviewer as... "A spacefaring gay romance full of love, angst, and longing."

Only after Star Commander Morgan Diego becomes an exile as a result of a Galaxy Corps political blunder does he begin to realize how much he valued the companionship of his second in command - the mysterious Lucien, an Alfarian who is more elven than human, with peculiar powers & abilities which begin to unfold as he, too, realizes what he has lost.

Separated by circumstance from his former life, Morgan is thrust into a world where he must survive by his wits. When he meets a peculiar little old man calling himself Kim Le, Morgan finds himself in a situation where he is required to master The Art - not only a form of human & extraterrestrial martial arts, but a way of living and being that will alter his life forever.

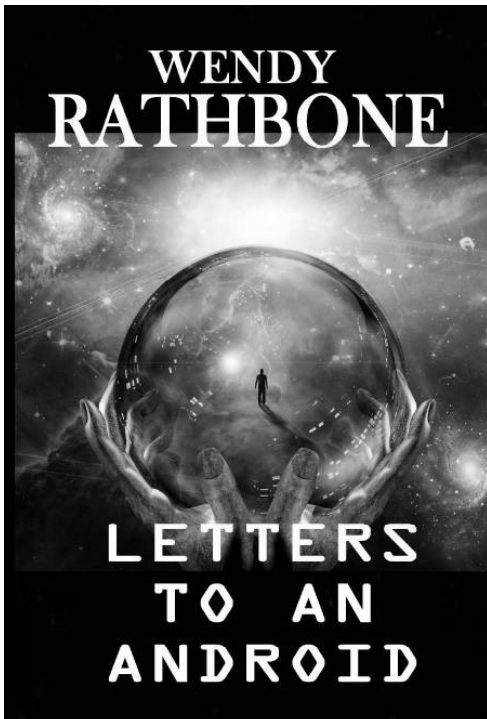
At the temple, he is introduced to his new teacher, another Alfarian who begins to steal his heart - a heart which is already promised to Lucien. Torn and conflicted, Morgan struggles with the world he left behind and the world he now inhabits.

Beginning to believe he may never again return to his ship and to the friends and loved ones he left behind, he is all the more frustrated and heartbroken when a new Master arrives at the temple: a man to whom Morgan is immediately drawn both mentally and physically, a man who is strikingly familiar... yet utterly alien.

*Year of the Ram* is a fully-fleshed novel, approximately 97000 words, with a focus on the love story and romance angle. Set against a science fiction milieu, it explores the infinite possibilities of the human and alien heart. Sexual content is explicit, though is not the primary focus of the novel.

For those who like a romance that forces its characters to contemplate the ecstasies AND the agonies of love... you will enjoy *Year of the Ram* immensely.

<http://www.eyescry.com/html/publications.htm>



**LETTERS TO AN ANDROID**  
**Wendy Rathbone**

**Cobalt is a created human, vat grown and born adult, with no human rights and indentured to serve others for the duration of his life. Liyan is a young man with wanderlust in his eyes, embarking on a career that takes him to the furthest regions of space. The two become unlikely friends and create a memorable long-distance correspondence. Through Liyan, Cobalt gets to explore the universe, living vicariously through his friend's wave transmissions. A strong bond develops between them that not even the stars can put asunder.**

---

*Now you know an android who writes poetry.*

*This is all your fault. Did you not read my last*

*wave telling you extracurricular activities for my kind are discouraged? Of course this is harmless and strangely enjoyable and does not necessarily require me to leave the hotel. Pel would not care if I wrote lines of equations or nonsensical juxtaposed words. As long as the act does not bring my mental state into question.*

*However, in history, poetry is often written by the rebels.*

*So we can keep this to ourselves.*

*Let me know about your lieutenant's test.*

*And to give you peace of mind, I never believed you observed me as anything other than human.*

*Some people are and always will be hateful bigots. Most people are simply uncomfortable in speaking to "property." And anyway, friendship, like poetry, is also discouraged.*

*Your friend,  
Cobalt*

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**PALE ZENITH**  
**Wendy Rathbone**  
*A Science Fiction Novel*

On a far-flung "Earth" in a parallel universe, two factions are fighting a decades-long psychic war. Young talented psychics are being temporarily kidnapped from present day Earth, seemingly at random, to serve as part of one side's psychic army. They are put under the control of psychiatrists, mysterious machines with many limbs that have a programmed ability to travel time and space and universes to kidnap and control carefully selected humans. The humans never know they are being used; when their missions are completed they are brought back to their universe through time and placed back in their beds, their memories wiped.

---

*The shadows wound the tall corridor in muted gold, varnished brown. It seemed as though they were in the bowels of a giant serpent coiled outside time, outside space.*

*When they left the palace, a familiar sun flourished in a clear, blue sky. But this wasn't their sun. Not Zack's sun. It was an alien star burning within a different galaxy in an all too distant universe. Zack looked up squinting, trying to see if he could peer beyond the sky, beyond the pale of midday and into his own timespace, but there was nothing. Only sunlight. Only the thin atmosphere of an Earth not his own.*

*His back knotted again. Leo's presence was a gelid space inside his chest, empty. Always before he'd felt a warmth there, a sort of pressure like someone's hand pressed gently to his heart. He'd taken Leo for granted knowing, the way a shadow falls when you block the sun, that he was there around him, inside him: blood, air, salt, brain, soul. They were genetic duplicates, twins, spiritual halves. Without him, Zack knew the first icy tugs of panic.*

<http://www.eyescry.com/html/publications.htm>



**The Foundling**  
by Wendy Rathbone



Diego is a powerful man with a tragic past. Out on the expansive ocean in his private yacht, he discovers a beautiful and mysterious man adrift on a raft, near death. The bond that forms between them in the aftermath of Alec's rescue is one of fierce passion, though lacking in trust. Can they make it work, or will Alec's amnesia bring forth secrets so disturbing as to tear them apart? A passionately erotic love story of desire and darkness, exquisite and explicit.

---

*I can see his struggle between gratitude and uneasiness. He is buffeted by all things new and strange. He does not know where he is from, who he is or what happened to him. He does not know me. There has not been enough time to transition between strangers and friendship.*

*This isolation of his is something I can identify with, but it is also a feeling no one can help him with until or unless he gets his own life back. And his memory.*

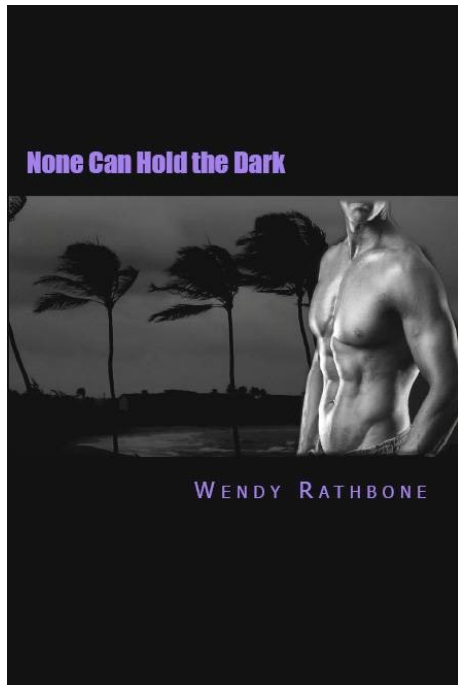
*If that doesn't happen, then it will take time for him to build a new life. He is polite to me, even friendly, but even a night together during a storm with his arms wrapped tight around my waist doesn't calm the surge I see inside him, the emptiness, the loss, possibly even panic. That night may have reinforced some trust in me, but so far not enough for him to completely relax.*

*He seeks me out, though. That's something. He sits by me at dinner when he can have any seat of his choosing. I watch him closely when he does not realize it. At dinner the following night after we had only 'slept' together, and before we go to bed again in separate rooms, I notice everything about him, how he moves, the way the air warms when he is closer to me, the dry sheen of his lips as they part for more air when he is reacting to something, or speaking, or eating.*

*His hands still shake. Anyone else might not notice because he keeps them clasped into fists at his sides or, while sitting, pressed tight to his lap.*

*I spend another fretful night alone. I dream restlessly, wild, loud and colorful visions I cannot recall at all as soon as my eyes open. All I know is the dreams leave me unfulfilled, impatient.*

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## **None Can Hold the Dark** **Wendy Rathbone**

### ***The long-awaited sequel to THE FOUNDLING!***

In the eagerly-awaited sequel to Wendy Rathbone's homoerotic romance "The Foundling," Diego and Alec meet new challenges in private and from the outside world. Diego is being investigated by the local police for murder. Meanwhile, Alec's amnesia and the trauma of his kidnapping by white slavers continue to plague him. And the danger to Alec is not yet over.

Distracted by their new love, both men fail to see certain threats until it is almost too late.

---

"Why do you keep doing this illegal business?" Now Alec's gaze turned toward him, open as the day and lit with a sad frenzy, a challenge. "You could go anywhere, do anything, be anyone."

Diego had asked himself that question on rare occasions. In truth, he got used to what he was, what he did. Even a dangerous known was perhaps preferable to the unknown. "People depend on me."

Alec shook his head, but smiled a little as he said, "That's so weak." He leaned forward, over the arm of the chair, and put his shaking hand on the back of Diego's head. The kiss was cool, lingering, moist with salt. When Alec pulled back, he said almost matter of factly, "It's like there's sharks and there's goldfish and one can't decide to become the other."

Diego was still stunned by the kiss. But the words hit him hard. In them was the unfair conjecture of a locked fate. He believed in making his own fate...or luck. Did Alec think only one kind of man lived inside him and that was all there was to it? To life? It hurt. Badly.

Diego sat back on his heels, catching himself with his hands on the smooth, plank floor. "So, Alec, which am I?"

Alec frowned.

Diego said, "I made choices in my life. I made them. No one made them for me. If I need to be strong I'm strong. If I need to be vicious I can be that too. So what? I'm stuck there? In a pattern, a role...with no free will?"

Alec watched him inquisitively now.

"Because," Diego went on, "I'm solely responsible for my actions. Me. Could you say the same of the shark?"

They both waited, the silence covering them in muggy discomfort.

"You think you understand me?" Diego finally asked.



## **My House Is Full of Whispers** **Wendy Rathbone**

Ten erotica short stories by Wendy Rathbone - former winner of the prestigious WRITERS OF THE FUTURE contest!

Leda has not one beautiful man, but two. Kale enters a secret world in a wealthy man's basement. Noah is in love with a man who hates sex. Dina lives next door to a famous Hollywood director she secretly loves. Dorian has a sixteen year old female student coming onto him. Tara is haunted by an erotic ghost. Young Dimitri is kidnapped by lecherous men. And more.

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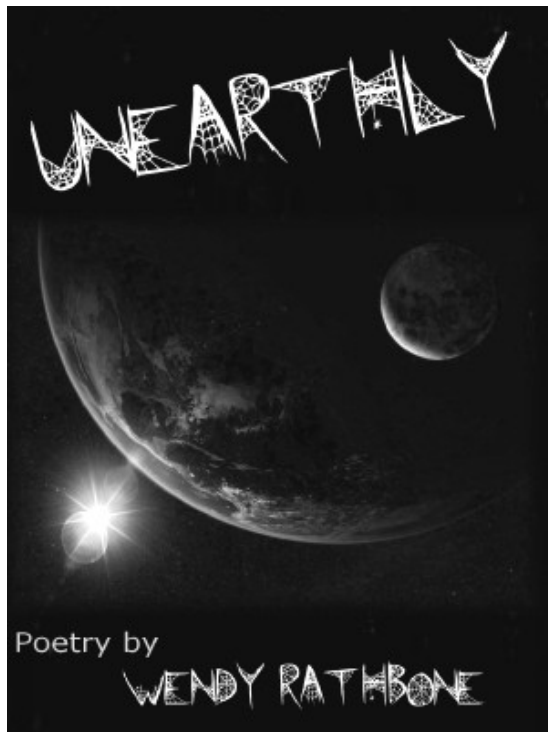
### Author's Preface

When I wrote these stories, I deliberately set out to gently break down certain barriers, and I've certainly broken taboos. Do I care? No. This is fantasy at its purest level. The stories are never meant to be political statements, nor do they make any attempt at political correctness, and there is little consideration for safe sex. While I definitely condone safe sex, my stories come from fictional realities in my head where safe sex is not much of a concern because, well, it's imaginary and it's fiction!

For me, these stories are meant as little poetic erotic ramblings merely to stir the flames of desire, nothing more. They are pure fantasy and therefore to be enjoyed as such. Every story is erotic in nature, meant to titillate, some more explicit than others. Some of the stories are light, some are darker. I invite the reader to a feast of diversity and delight.

One reader commented: *"...some of the most beautifully written erotica since Anais Nin!"*

From the author: [www.eyescry.com/html/publications.htm](http://www.eyescry.com/html/publications.htm)



**UNEARTHLY**  
by Wendy Rathbone

*A Collection of  
Award-Winning Poetry*

Intro by the Author: This book contains all my out of print chapbooks (mini-collections of an author's work usually published by smaller presses.)

The chapbooks published within include:

**Moon Canoes**, published by Dark Regions Press, 1994

**(Im)mortal**, published by Shadowfire Press, 1996

**Scrying The River Styx**, published by Anamnesis Press, 1999

**Autumn Phantoms**, published by Flesh and Blood Press, 2000

**Dreams of Decadence Presents: Wendy Rathbone**, published by DNA Publications 2002

**Dancing in the Haunted Woodlands**, published by Yellow Bat Review, 2003

**Vampyria**, published by Eye Scry Publications, 2005

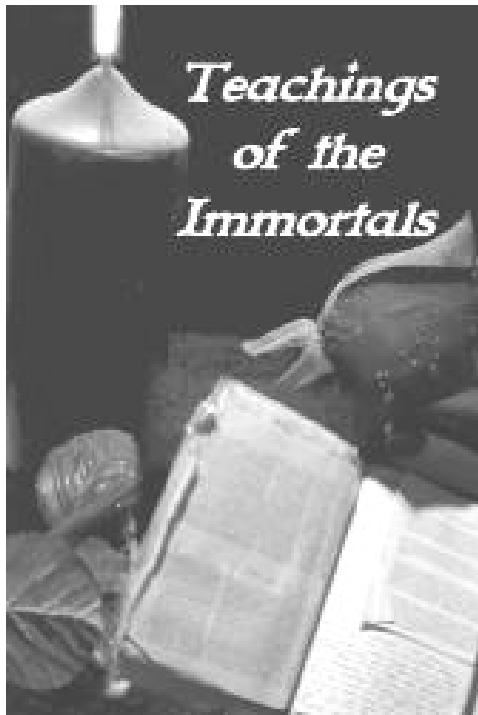
**She Sleeps With Vampires**

She sleeps with vampires  
courting velvet breaths  
poem-dreams  
chill-stopped hearts

Wrapped in her arms  
like teddy bear thoughts  
purple lips trembling  
at her quiet throat  
they love her more than  
somber rain  
more than autumn  
more than ash-soft hearths of night.

[www.eyescry.com/html/publications.htm](http://www.eyescry.com/html/publications.htm)

## *Non-fiction titles from Eye Scry Publications..*



### **TEACHINGS OF THE IMMORTALS** **by Mikal Nyght**

#### ***So... You Want To Live Forever?***

The teachings are presented as brief vignettes in no particular order of importance. This is not a book you read from start to finish in a single night. It is a grimoire of self-creation, intended to be contemplated slowly so as to be assimilated wholly. Pick it up and turn to a page at random. Where your eyes come to rest on the page is your lesson for the day. Go no further until you have assimilated the lesson totally.

The teachings are seduction as much as instruction. This is the way of The Dark Evolution.

#### **Two Brief Excerpts...**

##### **The Ruby Slippers**

The danger of the consensual continuum is that its natural gravity exists at the lowest common denominator of human experience, and because of this it will automatically make you forget those elusive truths you've fought to learn, and before you know it

you're lost in petty dramas again, sinking into the mire of old familiar scripts.

The only way to overcome this is to be continually cavorting with worlds and events beyond human experience, journeying into the unknown so that it can become known, expanding knowledge and awareness to become more than you were, bringing back from the Dreaming those secrets which will teach you how to use the ruby slippers to transport yourself over the rainbow to the vampyre wizard's secret lair.

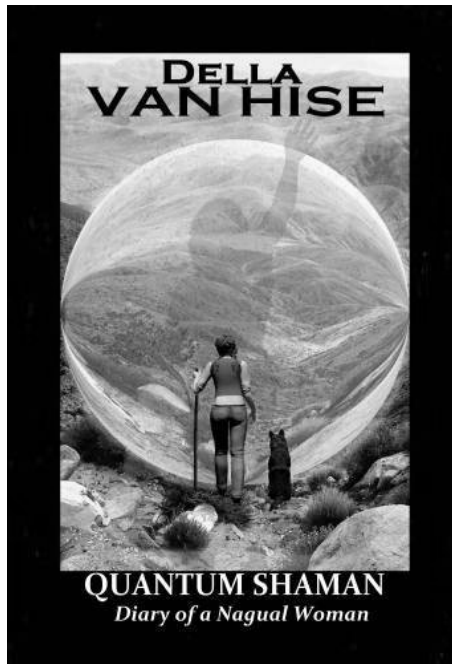
##### **Perception**

This is the nature of reality: to be precisely what perception dictates, as solid and whole as your interpretation of it, or as changeable and eternal as you permit it to be.

It wasn't knowledge god tried to keep from Man, you see. It was perception, for perception alone has the power to destroy god and obliterate comfortable consensual realities to create unending immortality.

Take the apple, my embryonic children. Nibble its red red flesh. Open your vampyre eyes so you may finally begin to See.

[www.immortalis-animus.com](http://www.immortalis-animus.com)



**Quantum Shaman:**  
**Diary of a Nagual Woman**  
**Della Van Hise**

*"Diary of a Nagual Woman brings a quantum understanding to what has traditionally been believed to be a mystical path alone. This book picks up where Carlos Castaneda left off to take us on a roller coaster ride of our own forgotten power..."*

- Michael Grove, Independent Reviewer

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When I asked how Orlando had known I would come to this remote location, and how he himself had gotten there – since there were no other cars in the tiny parking lot – he only smiled a little, stretched out his long legs, and slouched down on that cold metal bench to stare up at the stars.

"You're predictable," he said as if I should have already known. "I'm here because this is where you always come when you're mad at the world."

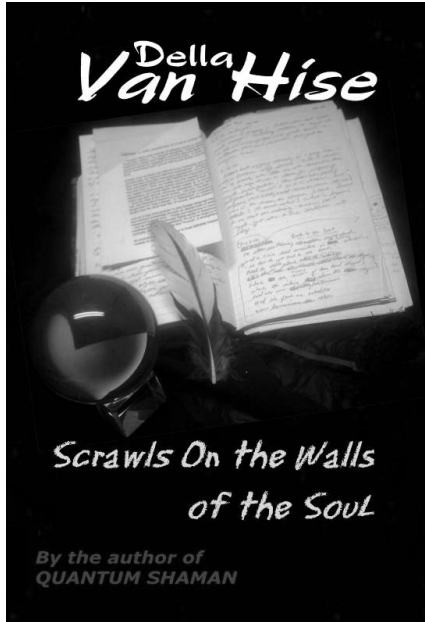
I attempted to engage him in a conversation of just exactly how he knew I was mad at the world, since I'd had no direct contact with him in quite some time, nothing to give him any hint of what was going on in my everyday life. But even as I began spelling all of that out to him, he brushed my words aside with an easy gesture.

"Do you want to talk or do you want to waste time looking for logical explanations for every magical thing that ever happens?" he asked. "That's what's wrong with the world, you know. Instead of embracing the mysteries and trying to determine how they might open a crack in an otherwise humdrum, pre-programmed existence, people waste their entire lives explaining it all away, attaching labels to it, filing and categorizing it until it loses any meaning."

He had a point. And I'd already been inundated with enough mysteries in my time to know that some things simply had no explanation humans could understand. *'Magic is only science not yet understood'*. Words Orlando had written more than a year before rattled through my mind up there in the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere, looking down on a distant world that seemed far more unreal to me at that moment than the world he had been trying to teach me to see.

He was there – whether physically or in some spirit-form manifestation is ultimately of no importance, for in the sorcerer's world there is no difference between body and spirit, and in any world, perception is reality.

[www.quantumshaman.com](http://www.quantumshaman.com)



## **Scrawls on the Walls of the Soul** **Della Van Hise**

**The long-awaited follow-up to Quantum Shaman: Diary of a Nagual Woman. Stands alone, or order together!**

*"If you've ever felt like a stranger in a strange land, this book is your road map to survival in the spiritual wilderness!"*  
(Michael Grove)

~

It was May of 2000 when my mentor threw me out of the quantum cosmic classroom and said, "I've taught you everything I can. Now it's time to take that knowledge and slam it up against the walls of the real world. If it remains intact and survives the brutality to which it will be subjected, you will get a gold star next to your name

and be allowed to proceed to the next level." No mention was made of what this next level might be, or if, indeed, it truly existed.

Go ahead – try to explain this all-consuming path to your friends and relatives. They will smile politely, squirm uncomfortably, and eventually they will stop returning your phone calls and look the other way when they see you coming. And who can blame them? They live in the real world with their office jobs and nuclear families and a host of mindless sitcoms waiting on the propaganda box at the end of their busy day. In direct contrast, it could be observed that anyone who has dedicated themselves to the pursuit of forbidden knowledge really doesn't live in that world at all. Not for lack of wanting, perhaps, but because the real world is quickly seen to be little more than a series of programs and illusions – not unlike The Matrix. And not surprisingly, the people who populate that world may begin to take on a peculiar zombie-like quality.

You find yourself alone in a world of jesters, jokers and jackasses. Now what?

[www.quantumshaman.com](http://www.quantumshaman.com)



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