

**THE FORSAKEN**  
*The Apocalypse Trilogy: Book Two*  
G. Wells Taylor

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Edited by Julia C. Moulton

Email: [books@theapocalypse trilogy.com](mailto:books@theapocalypse trilogy.com)

Website: [www.theapocalypse trilogy.com](http://www.theapocalypse trilogy.com)

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**For my sisters**

Alphabetically: Kelley, Kerry and Wendy

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**1 – Assassin**

An Angel was going to die. The idea caused the man on the road to smile—a rare smile cruelly cut into hard, pitiless features. The Angel would die quickly. It was a pity that it had to be so fast. But surprise was necessary. It was essential. He knew he was lucky to have that much of an edge and speed was the only way to maintain it. Their supernatural abilities allowed no margin for error. But the idea of killing one slowly appealed to him—to kill an Angel and take his time doing it. He smiled again thinking about what it would be like to get a knife and take one apart. See what all the fuss was about.

Miles to the west, his car was parked permanently on the soft shoulder. The Pontiac's twenty-year-old engine had cracked in two. He had taken one look under the hood and grabbed his packs to start the long walk to the City. There was nothing he could do about it. He was not that kind of mechanic.

But an Angel was going to die. That was something. Two hours had passed, and the idea had kept him focused on the march. *Fuck the car*. It was common for people to drive them into the ground only to purchase another rebuilt junker when it was necessary. He'd done it more times than he could remember. Automotive parts designed to last in the old counting could not keep up to people who did not age in a time of endless rain and decay.

Money wasn't a problem. He carried enough in pocket to buy a new vehicle right off the lot. But why bother? They all fell apart eventually. It didn't matter how much money you spent. Time got them in the end, like it got everything.

But he wouldn't buy another vehicle just yet. There were too many variables to justify the expense. He had only trusted his abandoned car because it drew little attention. But this was now and the future was then. He was close enough to the City of Light to

walk, so he'd walk. And once there, who knew? Cars were more common than strangers buying them. Until he completed his contract anonymity was his greatest ally.

*Don't let them see you coming.* That was the first rule of the business he was in. The second was to have a backup plan and backup plans cost money. Beneath his Kevlar vest was a nylon money belt containing forty thousand in cash and about the same in gems for special purchases. Printed money wouldn't always buy you what you wanted in the circles he traveled. And it seemed that people with apparently ageless bodies identified with the permanence of diamonds and gems—he did.

The belt held enough for bribes, transport and emergencies. He had plenty more, but with the chaos that yawned around what was left of humanity, the traveler knew that a place you left might not be there when you returned. The remains of civilization were on the verge of riot and dissolution. Occasionally fear would manifest and burn one of the dying cities or towns that remained. The man on the road didn't care about the social costs; he just understood that his many money stashes could be consumed by the madness; so carrying a small fortune had become a habit. And he was the safest bank he knew.

He snarled up at the rumbling overcast as he marched along the road—then stumbled. The broken pavement beneath his boots had heaved in places torn by cycles of frost, and undercut by incessant rain. Scowling, he dropped back into his steady, rhythmic pace. The black canvas bags were heavy hanging across his muscular shoulders, but they did not impede him. The mild annoyance of the gun barrels and ammunition thudding against his kidneys did more to reassure than irritate.

The City was not far off. He'd get there by sundown. The last hill he crested had given him a bleak view of its monolithic skyline and the Eastern Sea beyond. The distance did not concern him, since he welcomed any sort of physical challenge. In his Spartan philosophy he could never be hard or strong enough. Besides, if he grew bored with the walk, he could flag down a passing motorist and either hitch a ride or buy the vehicle outright with a bullet—there were still travelers despite the rigors of the road. In fact, the latter mode of transportation would allow him to enter the slow tempest of the City without making a ripple. And he wouldn't have to make conversation.

But the walk would do for now. It allowed him to step outside his life for a time and do something simple—it was the closest he ever got to carefree, and he could never be carefree. There was no rush. Again the distant thunder made him look up at the clouds. He shrugged knowing he'd packed an overcoat in the smaller of the two bags.

*Rattle!* His boots scuffed against the pavement, almost muffled the sound. And then: *Click!*

The traveler threw his bags and dropped to a knee. A .9 mm automatic jumped lightly in his sinewy hand; its muzzle scanned the dark brush at the side of the road. Dim light from the overcast showed ugly gray weeds—the brittle shafts quivering, rattling sporadically as the gun ran over their varied surfaces searching a target.

Then the traveler hissed with disgust, turned the pistol up and slipped it away. A woman's hand twitched and convulsed its way out of the dead brush. The skin was torn off it from the severed wrist all the way up the broken thumb—worms or beetles crawled in the swollen red meat on its palm. The knuckles clicked hollowly as it moved.

The man walked to his bags, hefted them, and resumed his trek without another glance at the hideous thing that scuttled farther onto the road behind him. The traveler let

his mind move onto more prosaic concerns. He could reach the City inside two hours—if he didn't buy a car first.

And an Angel would die soon after.

## 2 – Dawn at Night

The forever child had a hard time following orders though the reckless bravado that started her current adventure had long ago departed. Swagger was fine to get things going but tended to dissolve the farther she got from safety. That left behind was a small and trembling child of over a hundred years, but a child at heart with a child's store of emotion and anxiety and imagination. She looked to be five years of age, no more—pixie-like, cute with curly brown hair and big round chestnut eyes that peeked over soft and downy cheeks. Dawn was terrified and she was in deep shit.

Her grownup friend Mr. Jay wanted her to stay in the hideout while he was away on business. But she took his concern as a command, and rebelled against it. The first few minutes of her escape were thrilling—she usually had to go about disguised or hidden—but it was dark, and the neighborhood was shadowy and quiet enough for her to take the chance.

Almost all forever children like her had been rounded up in the first fifty years following the Change. Authority insisted it was for their own protection but rumors spoke a grimmer tale of science experiments and worse. Other kids that escaped the government were caught by evil men who made them do evil and grownup things—still others in the cities lived a life in hiding: always running in a world that was after them. So sprinting through the shadowed puddles in a mist of rain—droplets splattering her bare calves—was exhilarating in its first few innocent moments, before the truth hit home.

She moved quickly through the trash-strewn alley re-tracing her steps, fully aware of the danger. Her child's body held too few defenses to justify wandering the streets of the City of Light at night—especially on its lowest level, Zero. A quick scan of the familiar damp walls told her that she was close to safety but Dawn was too frightened to breathe a sigh of relief just yet.

A scream rang along the alley and the forever girl froze in her tracks. Her loose fitting jumper hung close and damp about her shoulders. The night was wet as they all were. She cast her head left and right. Preternaturally youthful ears scanned along the rain soaked bricks seeking the source of the noise.

“Dawn,” she whispered in a voice that far exceeded her youthful looks. “Now you're fucked!”

Another scream echoed through the night. Her perceptions focused on a dark alley that cut across the one she traveled.

“None of your business, this...” Her voice's tone was deep with experience. “Get back to the hideout—NOW!”

But she ignored the warning and ran in the direction of the sound. Her small form wriggled inside her jumper alternately stooping at the shoulders, hands clasping worriedly over her round belly. Quietly she cautioned repetitively breathing, “No.” Head lowered she dropped into the mouth of the alley as a scream echoed again. “Mr. Jay...” Her voice changed momentarily now—had become dewy, nascent. “You're going to kill

me.” She ran breathlessly—all forty pounds of her flitted through the shadows like a dream.

Dawn made no noise as she skidded to a stop in the puddles. Her approach and abrupt halt made no impact on the three people silhouetted ahead of her. In the dim light of a dying streetlight she saw they struggled with a fourth person.

“Come on, bitch!” A gruff voice crossed the distance. “It’s over quick! Well, first times are...” There was the sound of a slap. “At least with them bastards. Me, I’m hard to satisfy. I’m a real lover!” All three men laughed.

A woman screamed again. The fuzzy hairs on Dawn’s limbs stood on end. The men were Rapers for sure. And Mr. Jay had always told her that the worst in the world were Rapers because they killed without killing. She couldn’t quite understand how they did that, but she trusted Mr. Jay. With her friend firmly in mind, she crouched behind a pile of rubbish, working her fingers into the conglomerate muck and stone. The woman’s shriek was followed by a harsh impact like she’d been hit.

Dawn studied the men. All three looked the way she thought Rapers would but these ones also were sick and worse. The biggest had yellowish skin on his round fat belly that was blotchy with purple marks. His companions were thin and wasted enough to be dead men. Their hollow-featured heads looked like skulls. Quickly she guessed she could outrun all of them. Her youthful eyes looked for the woman now—hidden in shadow and covered by the body of a thin man. There was another scream. Rapers are the worst. She’d seen pictures and books. But her retarded sexuality did not understand the true horror that they represented. Dawn was sure that getting stuck in the body with a knife or a spear or a bullet would be much worse. *Rapers kill without killing.*

She clawed a hard jumble of stone from the refuse, stood and flung the missile at the biggest man, Yellowskin, who stood thirty feet from her.

A muffled thump. “Augh! What the fuck!” Yellowskin’s voice was loud and angry. Dawn crouched low in the shadow of a crumpled garbage can.

“What happen, Jimmy?” A different man’s voice—hollow and wheezing.

“Something fucking hit me!” Dawn heard feet scuff the wet ground. “Over there.” More scuffling. “No you hold the bitch. Maybe she got a friend over there.”

Dawn’s heart was pounding. She clasped a hand over it to quell the sound; with the other she lifted a stone.

“Forget it! Fucking city’s crumbling. Came from up there...” The other skinny man growled from the darkness. “Hurry or I poke the bitch first.”

“Yeah, hold on,” snarled Yellowskin. “I do her first.” More scuffling feet and the woman screamed again.

Dawn rose quickly, arm cocked to let the missile fly but one of the thin men had crept close during the talk, stood a yard away, leering.

“There you are!” he hissed then ducked, and yelped as the rock bounced off his shoulder blade. Dawn leapt over a tumble of refuse, but slipped on something soft. Hard, rough hands were on her. One clamped around her arm, the other pinched high up her leg.

“I got it, Jimmy!” Dawn was lifted kicking and snarling. “Look!” Every muscle in her body flashed and struck. “Fucking monkey!”

“Oh, shit! Harry, hold that bitch. Knock her down for Christ sake,” Yellowskin barked at the man who held the woman. Dawn bit at the hand that gripped her arm, but it

twisted away from her teeth. She felt the fingers slip from her leg and wrap around her other arm. Her captor pulled her wrists back until she screamed.

“What this?” Yellowskin squatted in front of Dawn. His penis was out and its mottled purple head almost touched the ground. “She look like a midget, but she no midget!”

“Know what I think?” her captor speculated. “Don’t laugh or nothing, but I think she one of them forever kids. They say there’s no more, but look at the skin!”

“Well she’s no fucking elf.” Yellowskin wiped a grimy hand across his forehead. It came away bloody. “Look what you done now, you bad itsy bitchy. Hit old Jimmy with rock. And he only out to grill up a fun piece of pussy over there.” He laughed as Dawn struggled. “Now, you been bad, itsy bitch. We got to teach you lesson...”

“Maybe she worth money. Think Authority want her? Maybe Prime?” The thin man squeezed her arms. “If she one of them kiddies then she rare as gold. Feel the skin!”

“I figure she be worth money if we careful how we *teach* her.” Yellowskin laughed sickly then slid a big calloused hand over Dawn’s ribs. “And she well fed too... plump and firm.” He looked back down the alley to where the other thin man struggled with the woman. “Hold that bitch, Harry!” Dawn heard a muffled affirmative. Then Yellowskin turned back to her, both of his hands came together between his legs with fingers wriggling. “Maybe we double the fun...”

“That’s enough!” The order rolled up the alleyway. Yellowskin turned quickly rising.

“Shit!” he bellowed. “This fucking alley is busy!” He took a step or two forward. Dawn tried to see past him. “What you want?”

“Let her go!”

Dawn recognized the voice.

“Mr. Jay!” she screamed. A dirty hand slapped over her mouth. Dawn bit down on the thumb. Heavy fluid sprayed into her mouth. The thin man shrieked, released his grip. Her feet hit the ground flashing. Yellowskin threw two big arms out to catch her, but youthful nerves and muscle easily dodged them. In seconds she was wrapped around Mr. Jay’s denim-covered leg. She looked up at him, tears in her eyes; but his gaze stayed steady on Yellowskin. Then her friend turned to the shadow where the third man struggled with the woman on the ground.

“You too.” Mr. Jay’s voice was even and calm. “Let her go.”

“Fuck off!” the prostrate form grunted.

Mr. Jay slipped a finger under Dawn’s chin. His green eyes stared intensely into her face. The brim of his top hat framed his head like a halo. “Go now!” Seeing her inner hesitation, Mr. Jay shook his head. His eyes burned toward Dawn’s attackers before he repeated. “The way you came, Dawn. *Now!*”

Dawn started backing away. She could see Yellowskin approaching from the darkness of the alley. His large hands were folded into heavy fists; his round blotchy belly was thrust out like a battering ram. “So that your little piece of pie? Take her and fuck off. We understand. We all need some from time to time fur or no.” Dawn turned. After ten steps she heard Mr. Jay speak—his tone was even and calm.

“I’m sick of people like you...”

The forever child ran back toward the hideout. As darkness closed around her something like lightning banged against the bricks.

### 3 – The City of Light

Perpetual cloud obscuring the City of Light's upper reaches discharged constant oily gray drizzle from its leaden interior. The rain frothed darkly as it struck the oblique asphalt Skyway ramps before rushing down them in a dirty black torrent. A roar echoed up from the shadowed streets far, far below. Since the Change the rain had been almost constant. The City's face was scrubbed raw.

So tireless was its onslaught that the City's inhabitants had come to predict their daily lives based solely on the type of rain that would fall. During a three-week period in October, Ocean rains boiled in from old Atlantic, the Eastern Sea. Orange and yellow dust suspended in sheets of ugly, red-veined cloud that flashed lightning identified these. Where they originated and of what they were comprised none knew. But for their duration, bullets of highly acidic, slightly radioactive rain sheered through the days, the drops as hard as granite.

Unpredictable Winter rains howled in from the north rarely, but when they wanted entered unopposed. Harsh, cold winds splashed a black slush onto the myriad streets and thundered against the high-rise glass. Accompanying rapid freezing and thawing crumbled the City's bricks and streets to ruin. Because of this it was said that the Winter rain was harder on the City than on those who lived within its walls.

The same could not be said for what the spring brought. On occasion Killing rains would come. Terrifying storms screamed up from the south driving tidal waves before them. Hurricane force winds turned the Eastern Sea to froth and mist as the sky roared like apocalypse. People died during the Killing rains—the lowest sections of the City from Zero to Two flooded in areas despite the seawalls, and the ocean snatched people from the sidewalks.

Of the varieties of rain that fell upon the City, two were most common. The first came in on a wind from the west. Desert rain from the wilderness collected over the City in thin gray clouds. They would shed some drizzle, and sporadic sprinkles constantly. The Desert rain accounted for those rare days when no rain came at all. The second was the most common of the City's precipitation. Nine times out of ten Standing rain was what fell from the sky. It needed no season and bore no special vehemence. Clouds collected heavily over the metropolis, all wind would cease, and a steady, endless rain descended on the cityscape like a dark curtain.

This was the first day of a Standing rain that fell on the heels of three blissful days of Desert. The cloud cover was low, wrapping the tallest buildings in darkness where they protruded from the Carapace—a mammoth patchwork of waterproof materials inlaid with intricate channels and reservoirs. It was added decades before to funnel the tons of water that fell each day and to protect construction workers who coaxed the city skyward. It was dark and gleamed dully with moisture. Humped in places, massive sections of convex graphite and plastic were interconnected by cables and constantly winched upward to keep pace with the City's growth. It offered poor protection, being tattered in places by savage winds, and was under constant repair. It looked like the broken shell of an ancient monster.

Life in the City was hidden. At first glance, the City of Light's name appeared to be a misnomer since the glass skins of its many skyscrapers reflected weak gray in the daytime and flickering streetlight at night. At second, having gauged the spirits of its

inhabitants, the name would be exposed as a marketing ploy and little more. Perhaps there had been a time when light of a physical or metaphysical nature existed there; but no more.

Beneath the Carapace, the City contained within its soaring gothic arches the very best and last of what humanity had to offer the world after the Change. True there were other cities, other living strongholds in what remained of Europe, Asia, Africa and others; but none could challenge the grandeur that the City boasted. The last of the best resided there, as safe as any could be in the madness that life had become. Most believed that the end had arrived—that human history had halted, others thought some new and terrible age free of human domination was upon them all. Only the insane, faithful and foolish still believed that the Change heralded a new beginning. But the Change had come, and in time so had the City.

The City of Light was the offspring of the dead island-city that now protruded from the Eastern Sea some few miles from shore. This had been flooded out by the storms that followed the Change, and never recovered. Global Warming accelerated not long after the Millennium turned, when the clouds had rolled in, the rain began to fall, and the waters of the earth rose up to permanently drown the world's coastal cities.

The City of Light had its humble beginning as a mainland borough of the metropolis now submerged. The jagged corpse of its parent could still be seen rising above the water. Though it was impossible to lay the blame on the ocean alone. The early days had seen a valiant stand made by its citizens—massive dikes were built that held. But then came the terror of the rising dead, the horror of the true believers and the violence of the everlasting Jihad. And the fear set fires, and what remained burned before it flooded. The ruins were still inhabited some said, but none who went there returned to say by whom.

The City of Light's enormous perimeter was guarded by fifty-foot cyclopean walls on the north, west and south, and claimed the sea as its guardian to the east. In its early years, the City had grown outward for many miles, spreading up and down the coast, and marching inland unchecked until its edges scraped terrifyingly against the vast wilderness that was growing there. Something primal happened then, as though the denial that any growth represented could not overpower the truth of what the mainland had become. So much had changed in the world, that the City's designers were possessed of no valiant response, only the gut reaction of throwing up the walls.

With a perimeter defined by fear, the City of Light had nowhere to go but up. Its early leaders easily covered their cowardice with triumphant words and phrases. "Now marks the ascent of humanity." Decades after the Change the City's fathers had laid claim to all the land that once had been North America, and since its population was now disorganized or dead, there were none to argue against the outright exploitation of its vast resources. So the inland cities and states were used as raw material and the City climbed into the sky.

The City of Light grew rapidly. After the disenfranchised millions had salvaged what they could, they abandoned their sinking island city and flocked to the shores to set about constructing new homes for themselves—building on and expanding what they found there. Following the raising of the walls, some twenty years after the Change, ground level had grown dangerously overpopulated and construction began on another level that arched over it on massive legs of steel and concrete. New structures were built upon this,

casting ground level into darkness—but electrical power was plentiful then, and city people were acclimated to artificial light.

Survivors kept coming from all points of the compass, and soon this first level was filling to claustrophobic proportions. A second level was constructed, and more buildings launched into the sky on top of this. Another twenty years and then fifty more passed. Level after level was added as the inland population traveled to the coast for sanctuary—their smaller towns and cities dying under the onslaught of the Change.

Years later, long after high prices and scarcity had dimmed reliable electric light for any but the wealthy, the City's original landscape on its lowest levels was lost. Where its first streets and neighborhoods had been now lurked trackless shadowy paths—ground level had been renamed "Zero." The oldest buildings had become massive foundations for the terrifying towers built upon them. The City of Light continued its charge upward at the endless gray. Construction was unabated, no sooner would a tower be finished and incorporated into the Carapace, than its designers would begin the blueprints for its expansion.

Such constant, rampant physical delineation and disparity encouraged a social twin. The poor were relegated to the City's lowest levels: Zero, One and Two. Three and Four were for the middle class. The highest from five to seven were reserved for the rich and powerful. Over the dark shrouded streets alternately hugging the upper levels and swooping down to the streets below were built the arching Skyways, flying ribbons of concrete and asphalt that kept the City's sky-dwelling citizens from having to lower themselves to the levels and populace that dwelled below. And so skyscraper was built on skyscraper, and tower upon tower. Ever upward the City flung itself, as though its populace feared the very earth that had birthed it.

#### **4 – The Power of Pain**

The assassin was not a religious man. Stroking out his final hundred pushups he focused on the primal forces that kept him alive. Metaphysical muttering did nothing to augment his formidable survival skills. There was more truth in the pools of sweat that had formed around his straining hands than could be found between the covers of the Bible or other religious work. And so spare was his existence, so dependant upon the unobstructed view was he that anything that did not directly assist him in staying alive was rejected outright.

Instead he honed his mind and body like a knife—whetting its edge on any obstacle life threw at him. He had to be the perfect machine to interact with other tools—the weapons of his trade. And he was the integral part—the engine for the killing systems he had designed. Religion and philosophy encouraged irrational thinking, and he had no use for it. The closest he possessed to a spiritual life was his knowledge of pain.

He was exposed to its power before he could talk, and had since depended upon it as his sole employer and greatest teacher. He didn't consider himself able to possess faith in anything else. The assassin had moved through his life with hard actions in an environment too strenuous for anything metaphysical to survive. He was a contract killer. He killed, and tried to stay alive in the process. Childhood had hardened him to viciousness, and from it he had learned to give and receive violence while gaining a

tangible thrill from both activities. That was the power of pain. It punished and it rewarded. There was something reassuring in the assertion of his dominance. It was a pleasure killing people who would kill him and he received great gratification from the blows he absorbed in return. *Pain was life.*

The assassin *used* the pain he absorbed rather than shun it. Early on, he understood the importance of making himself one with reality. His survival depended on that. *Life was pain.* He never tried to convince himself that as he dealt out violence he dealt out knowledge. The power of pain was different. His was a business that was unforgiving to men who flinched. He had to be prepared to take a hit if he wanted to survive long enough to kill his target. A heavy caliber bullet snapping against a Kevlar vest and breaking the ribs beneath hurt, but if he was not prepared to accept the pain—he might miss his own shot, and his prey in turn would get the advantage and he would die. That was the essential equation of his life. Pain punished cowardice and rewarded conviction.

Distantly he could remember the face of his father—the high priest of pain—howling with fury as he administered this arcane knowledge with fists. But those earliest glimpses of the power were so entwined with ancient anger and emotion that they were dangerous, and so discarded. Regardless, the exquisite purity of the pain inherent in those harsh lessons was an integral part of the man he had become. It had survived his transition from the old life to the new—from the world before the Change, into the world that came after.

Before the Change he had made his money killing wayward husbands and wives, faithless gangsters and faithful policemen and politicians. The money was good in those bygone days, and kills more gratifying. There was satisfaction in a hunt that took skill and risk that finished with a corpse that stayed dead. The power of pain made sense then and he had luxuriated in its might. But the Change had altered that. With the rising of the dead had come a change in business, and a loss of control. Since he could no longer earn money killing as a punishment or for silence he found that he could not exploit his talent to the fullest and he sank slowly into a depression that his darkest violence could not break.

He tried to pull himself from it. His killing became more extravagant, more vicious and bloody with little spiritual impact. A target could be silenced, but the process would better suit a butcher than a professional gun. The Change seemed to be more powerful than pain. And for a time he tried to combat this growing impotence by taking greater chances with his work. Finally, he was forced to peer into the dim recesses of himself—to try to unlock the mystery of this power—this power that had seemingly deserted him.

It was through this contemplative approach that he had found the light—or it was the opposite of light—though even that was a misnomer for it was not darkness either. His brain simply lacked the sensory apparatus to explain or categorize what he found. He responded with ambiguous descriptions that fell far short of the truth. It was a black illumination—a full emptiness. It was everywhere and nowhere. Finally, it was invisible until seen from the darkest place in his soul—a place where there was no language. Then, even as he applied his first inept words to the paradox, he realized with some alarm that *it* had discovered *him*.

A force that transcended the power of pain—and yet harmonized with it—pounced upon him and altered what he was. Something changed inside his mind below the basement of him where nightmares lurked in a dark eternal undercurrent. It was obvious and anonymous, but something changed.

Its very intangible qualities made it difficult to know how or where the alterations took place, but sometimes the very lack of evidence proved they had occurred. Despite this alien influence, his essential character had remained unchanged, though it now had a direction. With the new power had come a knowledge that he could not understand but felt instinctively—a knowledge that the world now worked in paradoxes that resisted explanation. The truth was different from his belief. *Life was pain. Pain was life.* But only to the living—only to his race, the Second-born of the earth. And this realization had taken him to the place in which he now resided.

His old life—much like his old name—became outmoded, small and petty in comparison. He did not take pride in what he now did; he was too old for that. But he knew that his talents took him down a road that gave him greater rewards than mere money. His job description had changed with the seeing of the dark light. The power of pain held its greatest potency in its relationship to divinity. He simply had to seek a better prey—something worthy of the pain he could inflict.

The assassin climbed to his feet; sweat running in rivulets over his swollen muscles. He looked at his reflection in the mirror atop the dresser—took silent approval from his expressionless face and emotionless eyes. He grabbed a towel from the bed, slipped it around his taut waist. The sinews in his chest and shoulders flexed powerfully under a skin crosshatched with silver scars.

The walk into the City had done him good. Felon had arrived just after sundown. Over a century of coming and going had given him complete knowledge of all the City's dark ways and entry points. And he exploited its weaknesses to the fullest avoiding the main gates by traveling through the Maze, a damp and echoing labyrinth of ancient sewers and waterways that ran at odd directions under the walls. They belonged to the mainland cities and towns on whose bones the City now grew and grew. A ready knowledge of them put him onto Zero, the City's most anonymous level without dampening a shoe. Soon after he had hailed a cab that took him along the Third Skyway upward to Level Three before depositing him on the sidewalk in front of the towering Coastview Hotel.

The building's design had its roots in a happier, sunnier world and looked ridiculously optimistic where its upper reaches poked through the Carapace and loomed against the permanent gray cloud cover. The hotel was two blocks west of the ocean, climbing some forty stories. He booked a room on its thirtieth floor—just high enough that his balcony hung over the black shape of the Carapace where it sloped toward the ocean from the City's Level Six. The protective materials undulated below as it careened downward in a terrifying ellipse to the distant beaches. Its eaves and ductwork channeled runoff to massive hydroelectric plants dotting the shore. He could see the lights of cars on the Skyway interchanges flickering through its semi-transparent surfaces.

He had left instructions at the desk that he not be disturbed then rode the elevator skyward. After a hot shower and a shave—he dropped to the carpet to augment the day's exertions with a near endless series of pushups. He was as sharp and lethal as a bayonet. The assassin snatched his cigarettes and lighter then walked out onto the balcony. A mist of rain sent a chill over his flesh.

Lights as red as hellfire glared in the neighboring buildings, and below him sirens howled like the damned. Felon's lips twisted with spite as he lit a cigarette. How he hated these regular experiments in sameness—these boring constructs of humanity. Law made

the streets straight but did not make them safe. Instead, they created dark corners full of the unknown. He hated it. The set of his full lips said as much where they tangled beneath high cheekbones round and hard as beef-joints. His eyes were black with flecks of silver—reflections of the blurred cityscape around him. Jet-black hair fell to his shoulders from a high brow and curled at the corded nape of his neck.

The city skyline stretched endlessly to north and south but was lost to his vision in light pollution and the upper Level Seven still under construction. The actual size of the monstrous metropolis was hidden behind massive sheets of concrete and steel. Through a tangled maze of supports and other load bearing structures he could see to the south, jagged spires covered with constellations of dim, winking lights. To the east, buried in the hoary grayness of the rough sea he knew an old and sunken city foundered, its walls shooting hundreds of feet above the waves. At night it was invisible like the past—the monoliths obscured by dark and cloud. But Felon knew they marched like ancient mysteries into the distance. It was a dead place of the long ago. He had not been there in years.

Some grim humor flickered behind his features, and drew his lips back in an apocalyptic snarl. At least *he* had a purpose. Unlike the teeming maggots in the skyscraper holes around him, he had a reason for being. And this purpose had brought him here. The City of Light was a festering sore, a gray running boil on the backside of human history. But Felon had found cause for mirth.

## **5 – Mr. Jay**

Dawn was in her cubbyhole. Mr. Jay had picked an abandoned apartment building on Zero for their hideout. Most of the ancient structure had been filled with concrete and stone to form a pillar for the City's upper levels but a few of its rooms were still accessible. Her cubbyhole was inside an old chimney. For her protection Mr. Jay had fashioned a door for it that she could lock from the inside. She remembered him gleefully showing her how the peephole worked—he was handy with tools. There was a little mattress, snacks and bottled water in it in case she had to stay there a while. When Mr. Jay was away, she was just supposed to stay inside the building, and never stray from their hideout—if she ever heard someone coming she was to return to her cubbyhole. She had been so terrified by the trouble in the alley that she ran all the way back to the old building and hid herself—lying there covered up in her quilt—all her muscles quivering.

As the footsteps approached, she knew from their sound that it was Mr. Jay. She had listened so many times for him that she recognized his step as easily as his voice. This time though, she did not run out to greet him. Her heart still ached with guilt and fear.

“Dawn?” Mr. Jay's voice was warm in the darkness. The hideout was just a big brick room about twelve feet on a side where they kept a little table, some cards and their possessions. The sound of Mr. Jay's movements drew near, urgent now. Tears started to leak from her eyes.

The secret door jiggled, but did not open. She had locked it. “Dawn.” Relief filled Mr. Jay's voice. “So you're here.” She heard him slide down the wall and settle to the right of the door. “Would you come out please?”

She pushed the quilt aside—her clothes still damp from running through the rain—and unlatched the door. She slid it open a crack, and saw Mr. Jay in the orange flame of a candle he was lighting. His eyes turned. He grinned weakly then blew out the match and set the candle on the floor. “Come out. Please.”

Dawn pushed the door open a little further, and then opened it wide. Her chin drooped as she stepped out of the darkness and crouched on the sill of her cubbyhole. Mr. Jay regarded her in the half-light. The creases around his eyes and over his forehead were wrinkled with concern. His bearded lips were pursed in a frown. A purple lump distorted his left eyebrow.

“Are you all right?” His voice was even and calm, just as it had been in the alley.

Dawn could not control her lips when she was sad. The lower one curled out and down. Her cheeks were damp from tears. She nodded.

Mr. Jay smiled a weary smile. “Good.”

Her lips were quivering again; Dawn fought the urge to cry but was having difficulty.

Mr. Jay smiled again, and then waved with his long slim hand. “Please come out, Dawn.”

She slid herself out of the darkness an inch or two more, saw Mr. Jay frown, and then inched out until she was bathed in the candlelight. Mr. Jay’s dark green eyes flitted over her body—concern melting to relief.

“They didn’t hurt you?” His voice was relaxing.

Dawn shook her head.

“That’s good.” He nodded and put a hand on her shoulder. “Your shirt’s soaked!” He reached past her and pulled her quilt out and wrapped it over her shoulders. “Dawn...” His voice was tired. He shook his head.

Dawn clenched her jaws, her voice exploding past pursed lips. “I’m sorry!” She looked at the welt over his eye. “Did they hurt *you*?” Her lip trembled again.

“No,” Mr. Jay whispered, his white teeth flashing through his short whiskers.

“I’m sorry I...” she said quickly—too quickly for tears to escape.

“Dawn, we talked about this.” He shook his head. “It’s very dangerous for you...”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Jay!” Tears burst past her eyelashes and poured down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry. I just thought I could go out and get something for us. Like the pocketknife, and the other things I found before. I didn’t think...” She was shaken by sobs.

“Dawn,” he sighed, setting a hand on her shoulder. “It’s too dangerous...”

“Oh please, Mr. Jay. Don’t be angry. Please, don’t be angry. I’ll be good.” Dawn was terrified. She saw the dismay in his features—the thick emotion that made him stern. “Please, I’ll never do it again. I just know I’m more than a little girl! That’s all. I am and sometimes I think I can do things I shouldn’t. But I’m sorry.”

“Dawn.” He rubbed her shoulder.

“Please, Mr. Jay. I’m sorry. I don’t want you to go away. I’m sorry! I just wanted to help!” His hand squeezed her shoulder. Through a blur of tears she watched his eyes grow moist.

“Oh, Dawn.” He pulled her over, wrapped her quilt tight around her—held her to his chest. “Don’t do that to me again.” Mr. Jay’s voice broke with emotion. “I came back here, and you were gone.” He hugged her tighter. “I thought you were gone.”

“I’m sorry,” she cried. “I’ll never do it again.”

“It’s okay, Dawn. You’re here now. And you’re all right.” Dawn felt a hot tear strike her cheek. “You shouldn’t be sorry. It’s not your fault we live in a world like this. Where a little girl isn’t safe. Not even a little girl who’s big inside.” She felt his hand stroke her hair. “I’m glad I found you.”

“I’m glad too, Mr. Jay. I was so scared.” Dawn was caught up in a steady stream of sobs. All the while, Mr. Jay stroked her hair and held her.

“It’s okay, Dawn. You’re here.” He kissed her cheek. “I shouldn’t have brought you to the City. It isn’t safe.” Mr. Jay pushed her away so that she was perched on his thighs blinking at him. “But we won’t be here long, I promise. Then I’ll take you somewhere safe.”

“Would you really, Mr. Jay? Back to the Nurserywood? I really miss it so much, and I don’t like it here. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.” Her little brown cheeks were soaked. Mr. Jay swabbed at them with a corner of her quilt. “I’m more than just a little girl, you know. But I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

“I know.” He hugged her again. “I promise you we won’t stay here long.” She felt his whiskers prickle her scalp as he kissed her. “Will you promise me you’ll be careful while we’re here.”

“I promise. Cross my heart!” Dawn’s voice was sore and coarse. “I won’t ever do that again.”

“We’ll get out when it’s daylight.” He chuckled then, and tickled her under the arm. She couldn’t repress a giggle of relief. “Then everyone can see how pretty you are!”

Dawn pressed two hands against his chest and pushed away. She focused her eyes on his. “Do you think so?” She frowned. “Because I don’t know what pretty means. I’ve read books and books and books about it. And I only guess it means pretty like a flower or cute sort of, like a bunny.”

Mr. Jay laughed, “That’s it! Cute as a bunny.”

“With the chubby cheeks.” She pressed two fingers up against her lips like buck teeth and blew her cheeks out. Mr. Jay exploded with laughter again, a nice rich sound full of relief.

“Come on now. Change out of those wet clothes.” He picked her up and set her on her feet, then climbed wearily to his own. She followed him wrapped in her quilt. He said over his shoulder, “I don’t suppose you found us any supper out there on your little jaunt.” Mr. Jay turned and caught her lips quivering. “Dawn, it’s okay—I’m joking. I brought some things that we can eat. Some bread, and some sort of fishy stuff that spreads on...”

“Fishy stuff...” Dawn took her index finger and pretended to make herself vomit.

Mr. Jay laughed.

## **6 – Archangel Tower**

The City of Light was the safest place in Westprime and its reputation drew survivors from what remained of civilized North America and the safe-towns on the southern continent. For the first decades following the Change as the City took its initial steps skyward, its inhabitants clung to the past out of fear. A world of Change with different ground rules was unfolding, and none knew how long it would last. Even though the first

years revolved around the resurrection of the dead, walking and talking corpses suggested redemption over damnation. There was hope then. More so when these walking dead demanded employment, equal rights and answers. Science had no explanations for them and where science cannot speak, religion will.

But times change and the decades staggered passed. As the City grew skyward this defiance of the dead took on threatening proportions. There were clashes and riots so municipal government restricted the dead to the City's lowest levels. Isolated in darkness, they wandered through memories of what they had been—hopeless; awaiting a doom they had not escaped in death.

For the living, it became apparent that the Change allowed them to enjoy virtual immortality with their natural aging arrested or slowed to count years as months. Since time no longer took them, they ran a higher risk of a violent death. And as fear grew in the living populace, defensive and retributive violence became a way of life. But the dead did not care. The prejudice was irrelevant for a much crueler fate awaited them. Time and dehydration would reduce their bodies to lumps of hardened leather. Cries for equality would be twisted into the howls of the damned.

But the City of Light lived on. The powerful, the wealthy, and the popular all made it their home for the dead were kept out of sight here, and it had become a place of Angels. Those Divine messengers of God were rumored to fly from the highest spans of concrete on the City's tallest structures—where the sun still set on the day.

Archangel Tower was the City's centerpiece. It rose a half again higher than the tallest building, slicing through the metropolis' highest Levels. The Tower was built as a meeting place for the world's religions. The vast monetary holdings of Catholicism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam had underwritten its construction. The Change had initially caused a polarization of the religions but as decades passed the larger and more powerful among them focused on the similarities in their beliefs.

The Tower's many-windowed surface was polished marble, and its design combined the best and loftiest aspirations of the many religions represented within its walls.

Its massive main entrance was found on Level Three. Many argued that the Tower should be accessible to all Levels, while others—influential investors and powerful municipal decision-makers—suggested it be approachable only from the highest. Its architects compromised, placing the main entrance on Three: just high enough to avoid the great unwashed on the lower levels, while retaining a respectable declination in elevation that looked like humility. Later compromises included entrances on Levels Five and Six; but these deferments to class and wealth were masked as additions for the purpose of fire safety.

The main gates on Level Three were formidable, rising forty feet at the apex of their spear-point design. Before them were the Tower Grounds. An enormous disk of concrete and steel constructed and suspended from the Tower's megalithic body encompassing four square miles of property. The Tower Grounds' perimeter included manicured gardens and a lake for baptisms and meditation. All around this ran the Tower Wall built of marble thirty feet high. A single gate, a scaled down version of the Tower's entrance, allowed the pilgrims in and kept the unbelievers out.

The Tower burst through all the City's levels, before puncturing the Carapace, charging into the constant overcast and flying skyward. Its upper reaches were obscured

by cloud and accessible by invite only. The two hundredth floor was honeycombed with luxurious offices. One of these belonged to the Reverend Able Stoneworthy.

He was a man of slight but sturdy frame approaching six feet in height. A loose fitting black suit hung on his angular body like a blanket. Its all-encompassing darkness hid his true dimensions. His head was large and round—ill-fitting partner to the thin neck that propped it up. The eyebrows that squirreled restlessly on his forehead were dense and darker than the thick curly hair on his head. They scurried about over bright blue eyes—pausing only to squeeze the penetrating orbs for some finer discernment. His nose, like his body, was thin and straight. It traced a long practical line to a thick-lipped mouth that hung down at the corners—the frown caused more by gravity than sentiment.

Stoneworthy pulled his fingers from the depressions they had made in the thick synthetic leather covering the arms of his chair. Awkwardly, he uncrossed his long legs, pulled them from under his desk. Leaning back, he drew in a breath, and then wiped a hand across his brow. By degrees his heart stopped racing. The air still stirred from his visitor's departure.

Reverend Stoneworthy spoke with Angels infrequently. He had before the Change, but never then did they occupy his office with such Divine presence. Nor did their wings flex and stretch to the ceiling, their feathery tips brushing the fresco there. Of course, he hadn't had such a beautiful office in the days before the Change. Then, he made do with what he could find: a rented tent, a local gymnasium or in the sun behind the open doors of his van. He had done the Lord's work with fervor and hard work, knowing that the Word was the thing.

But like the rest of humanity, the coming of the Change had devastated him. As its wider ranging effects were felt, his Faith was put to a test that he failed. When Stoneworthy realized that both good and evil had inherited the earth, he began to doubt. He saw himself as a fool and hypocrite. The minister remembered well his fall from grace, hitting bottom, and being reborn. He thought of it daily to act as penance.

One night, he entered the home of a young prostitute, paying for her services with monies collected by his ministry. He engaged in all manner of immoral acts with the woman in an attempt to earn the damnation he had received. Myrah, a tired-looking woman of short stature, had full breasts, swollen belly and thighs. Stoneworthy picked Easter to meet with her that final time. Drunk on whisky, he played out all the acts the Devil whispered to him—then he slept.

But an Angel appeared. At first Stoneworthy thought he was dreaming, until he thoroughly clawed the sleep from his eyes. The quiet musical breeze from the Angel's wings caressed him into belief where he lay in sweaty sheets. Filled with shame, Stoneworthy burst into tears and fell forward on the floor.

"Forgive me!" he had cried, rubbing his forehead on the tiles. There was silence for several heartbeats.

"You have sinned against the Lord," the Angel said. Its voice was a clean wind that still blew in the minister's mind.

"Forgive..." Stoneworthy wailed. "No. Judge me!"

"And yet..." the Angel said, "I see that though you have forgotten to speak the Word, you have not lost its meaning." Stoneworthy's mind began to clear then. "The Word is but a word. It is a container, as you are. And though the Word may be used in vain, its *meaning* will not be blemished."

“I was afraid!” the minister bleated, peering upward at the flashing eyes.

“You did not fear. You doubted your God.” The Angel’s countenance was sharply contrasted by the radiant light from its halo. The being was like carved marble, great flowing robes dropping to its feet from broad white shoulders. A gleaming golden sword hung from the Angel’s waist on a shining belt. “Such doubt is sin. To doubt your faith is a pain carried inside your temple body, to doubt your God is a pain that shall last all eternity, for it resides in your soul.”

“What shall I do?” Stoneworthy had covered his face with his hands, weeping. “I have offended Him!”

“Offense?” questioned the Angel. “You offend him now, with such vanity. The Lord shall tend his flock, the obedient he will love. Those who will not heed his Word are free to wander the wilderlands with the Wolf. The Lord understands that you serve yourself with the Word; you do not serve him. And yet, you adore him by serving that part of him that lives in you.” The Angel gestured toward the bed. “Is this how you serve your Lord?”

Stoneworthy looked at the bed, and there was Myrah, still asleep. Her eyes were like a skull’s cast into dark shadows by the Angel’s light.

“No! No! I am so sorry! Slay me, Angel. Strike me blind! Punish me!” Stoneworthy struck his own breast, sputtering through his sadness.

“How shall I punish what should be punished by the Lord God inside you, and by he who is in Heaven above.” The Angel had surprised Stoneworthy then by cupping the minister’s chin with a long warm finger and drawing him to his feet. “*See that you do not do that.* I am a fellow servant who worships God with you.” Stoneworthy rose, naked before the Angel.

“Do not despair. You have served the Lord in Heaven when the rest of mankind reveled in sin. And only when the end of the world came, did you doubt. For that the Lord is thankful. A man’s faith must not need proof and you had none before the Dark Days began. Greatness comes from a man’s ability to believe without proof. Pharaoh asked Moses for proof of the Lord’s existence. Was he great? The empire of Egypt is no more, and Pharaoh no more. For even with proof, they did not believe. Your greatest sin, Stoneworthy is your misapprehension of the signs. This *Change* as you call the Dark Days, is the first step to Salvation for you all. You must recapture your Faith, and learn to serve God as you have.”

The Angel rose to its full height—its great pinions spread, and from it burned a fire that scorched the minister’s soul. Stoneworthy howled, his body convulsing with pain. “Go. Now! As you are. As Adam and Eve were once cast out! And for a time, eat not of the world. For seven days go into the wilderness that you have courted. Then return to this City, and gather the holy men of earth. The truth of your mission will be made known to you if you find the truth of yourself in the wilderness—for there lies Faith. Go! Now!”

And as the Angel faded from his sight Stoneworthy ran naked from Myrah’s apartment. He ran through the streets joyfully bearing the humiliation, rejoicing in the terror of salvation. He left the City on bleeding feet and ran until his heart was ready to burst. Only when he could climb to the top of a tree-covered hill did he end his labor. He stayed in the wilderness for seven days, eating nothing, tasting nothing but the familiar sweetness of deprivation, terror and the Divine knowledge of his essential self. His fear

taught him much, for few wandered the wilderness without it. After the Change, animals lost their fear of man, and no longer recognized his dominion.

The rain of the Changed world washed him—scoured away his sin, threatened the life of his body with cold and death. But he wrapped himself in a protective cloak of faith and rejoiced. When he returned, Stoneworthy set to work gathering together the priests, ministers and officials of the major religions that had already gravitated to the City. Through conferences and discussions, he began the process of joining together those that loved God, and devoted their lives to his work. They would form a beacon for the world to see, and this city of survivors would become the City of Light. With his fellow faithful he would create an altar worthy of God. For decades he labored, and it was done.

Stoneworthy felt the pang of his ancient guilt rearing up to check his pride. *Faith* had done the work. He reached out to stroke the office wall. The Tower had been built. Through great sacrifice and determination, it slowly rose above the midnight world of the Change. But that, like his transgression, was all so long ago. Even this lofty accomplishment could not overshadow his guilt. His conscience would not let him forget that. Yet he had been given a new mission and though he did not feel worthy, being chosen he would make himself so. He was so deeply stained that he relished all opportunities for ablution.

He could still smell the cinnamon in the air. The windowed doors that led to his balcony were open. Wind toyed with the filmy drapes that hung over them. A dim orange glow from sunset sky illuminated the carpet. The adrenaline began to leave his system.

He rejoiced. That God had sent a being of such power to visit him and for a sinner like himself to be entrusted with such a task. This new mission promised things far more important than the gathering of the Holy or the building of the Tower. *To redeem a fallen Angel.*

## **7 - St. Valentine's Day Massacre**

Felon sneered at the idea that romance had survived the Change. At the conclusion of the last Millennium, Valentine's Day had degenerated into another commercial undertaking at a time when the true fabric of human relationships had frayed to a thin veil of separation, confusion and suspicion. He growled at the thought of it.

The assassin pulled up to the curb in his stolen car. The Davedi Club was located in a narrow three-story building. It had been spared the indignity of being used as a support column for Level Four that formed a heavy darkness overhead. The Club's front entrance was of antique design. Its large rectangular window was painted black, with a clear circle framing a neon sign that spoke the club's name. Beside it was a heavy steel door.

The assassin paused to light a cigarette, rolled the smoke around his tongue, and then spat it out. Felon had a fully automatic M-16 to do the job. He would carry it into the building slung across his back concealed under his black overcoat. The weapon had a heavy smell of oil and old gunpowder. It was an antique by military standards, but Felon found the new M-99's to be slower to load, and prone to jamming. When you throw ninety bullets in a volley, the chances for a misfire were many and like most things created after the Change, the M-99 was flawed. Felon disdained such overkill anyway. It encouraged sloppiness and waste.

His M-16 was built somewhere overseas, a knockoff produced by the Kalashnikov people using the original pre-Change designs. He'd bought it on the black market twenty years before and maintained it with rebuilt and salvaged parts. It could be set for semi or full automatic. The choice allowed the assassin an option that might save his life—and it gave him adaptability. He thrust four full magazines into the pockets of his ammo vest and hauled himself from the car. Polka music filtered out of the building as he pulled his coat over his weapons. He snarled convulsively, glaring at the building. The Davedi Club was holding their annual Valentine's Day Dance.

Felon could sense the people inside. Their crowded presence was like a pressure in the air. He snatched the cigarette from his lips, flicked it to the ground and pulverized it with a twist of his foot. The assassin climbed the single stair and pulled the door open. The close atmosphere of the room enveloped him immediately—stillness filled the space. A crowd of people faced away from him; their focus on a stage and an ancient-looking man with an accordion who stood there. He stood smiling between a black guitarist and an older Asian woman with a clarinet. Applause flew up into the dusty air. The ceiling was two stories above their heads. Most of the second floor had been cut away to form a walkway and balcony over the dance floor. Cheers rang out, laughter followed, and the crowd closed to form many tight circles of revelers. The principle color of the décor was red, and the clothing was a dazzling array of scarlet silk. Faces in the crowd were twisted into mad humor and inebriated joy. The air stank of perfume and alcohol.

"Thank you," chortled the old man with the accordion. "I thank you, and the Beer Barrel Trio thanks you." Again, applause. Felon made his way along the right side of the room past a man of middle-aged appearance snoring uncomfortably in a wooden chair.

"We have always enjoyed playing at the Davedi Club. And we would never miss the Valentine's Dance. The air is full of love. The people are full of love. I am full of love!" The crowd responded with a profusion of kissing and laughter. "We make this annual dance the cornerstone of our performing year. I am not getting any younger, as my wife can tell you." Chuckles echoed through the audience. "But I am made young by this wondrous occasion. The love is what makes us young forever. And we know at least that Love will not change! As always we would like to perform the music that moves us all along the current of life, the dance that inspires romance in us all. We give you now the melody that commands the passion in our hearts and the sky above us." He turned, nodded to his companions, the lights faded to twilight blue and the small band moved into a cramped rendition of "Moon River." The old man croaked the words out.

Felon studied a huge cloud of purple helium balloons that crowded over the stage and dance floor. If the Cherubs were feeding, the assassin knew that would be the perfect blind for them. Raw human emotion would be radiating upward like heat. It was natural that their kind would be attracted to a Valentine's Day dance. They flocked to them like fat flies to shit, feeding off the veiled lust of the dancers; but even Cherubs had rules and followed the covenant of Angels and so could not directly intervene in human affairs, or be in close visual proximity. Among Angels, they went most often in their true physical forms, primarily because of their connection with sensuality, lust and love. Cherubs were historically and mythically thought to be responsible for love, love at first sight, and rekindled love. Felon thought of them as parasites, feeding off an emotion they could not produce themselves.

Felon hated Cherubs the most. He found their rotund little forms and their predilection for romantic love and mischief a perversion. They were the naughty children of some two thousand years. He hated the way they looked, their disproportionate wings flickering obscenely over raw dough buttocks. Felon knew their sweet cinnamon smell, and their idle, eternal child voices—caricatures, really. They were the least impressive Angels, gaining their powers from idle sentimentality and romanticism. He was disgusted by the ugly ambiguity they formed, feeding on the irrational human desire to justify lust. And these sexually barren, golden locked, flying Cupie dolls were nothing more than a pedophile's dream—they had little to do with love, or the sexuality it thinly disguised.

He slid the M-16 on its strap until it hung under his arm and then gave it a reassuring pat through his coat. Felon squinted into the darkness watching the balloons. There was a steady column of heat rising from the dancers that caused the mass of rubber to undulate, so Felon waited for any telling motion. A man reeking of scotch brushed into him. Felon's arm did not yield and his stance did not sway. The man, a pre-Change fifty, scowled beneath iron gray eyebrows.

"Damn it..." He rubbed his chest where Felon's elbow had scraped a furrow in it. "Watch your..."

Felon tore his gaze momentarily from the balloons. He glared into the stranger's bleary eyes. Something in the look penetrated the man's drunken haze. His lips trembled and held still. He turned to stagger away.

Then Felon caught a motion out of his right eye. It was a wing, a small, down-covered wing with round-tipped feathers. He whipped open his coat and pulled the M-16 up with both hands, firing into the cloud of balloons. They started breaking with the burping roar of his gun. He fired until the gun was empty, then pulled the magazine out, and jammed another home. The assassin opened up again—the blue tongue of death licked upward.

The crowd moved in a screaming wave away from the sound and flame of violence. He raked the cloud of balloons. They vanished in violent banging echoes, revealing a pair of fat but amazingly fast forms. Two Cherubs flew free of the flying debris. The leader wore a white silk robe and the other flew naked. The Angel in the rear showed streaks of blood on his dimpled skin, and his wings beat more slowly than the other's.

Felon let up on the trigger, and concentrated his fire at the first Angel that was fast approaching a second story window. Five bullets punched holes in the soft chest, and it hurtled downward with a flutter of wings and robe. He watched it fall as he swung the barrel of the gun on the second Cherub. Its wings flapped hysterically—its golden head clicked from side to side looking for escape, but Felon severed its left wing with a burst of lead. Screaming musically, it landed hard in the center of the dance floor.

The assassin spun to where the other Cherub had dropped. The white robed creature had staggered to its feet, and was limping quickly toward the rear of the hall. Felon miscued his fire and line of sight—bullets removed the back of its head, and the front of the sleeping man's. He spun again. A pair of men had frozen at the door like terrified rabbits. Everyone else was gone. A motion of his gun barrel broke them from their paralysis and sent them running.

Felon pulled out the second magazine, and jammed a third into the body of the M-16 as he approached the Cherub on the dance floor. A pool of blood had formed around it—dark red like human blood but with the peculiar property of evaporating slowly at room

temperature. Keeping his weapon trained on the dying Angel, Felon drew a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it. He looked down on the Cherub, thrilled by the risk he was taking.

Its chubby buttocks jiggled against its attempt to rise; its fat belly was slick with blood. The stump of its wing pumped a hot red jet.

“You’re dying today,” Felon said, watching the Angel as adrenaline thrilled along his nerves. These creatures had Powers. Still, he had the trigger pulled three-quarters back, and he could quickly terminate any spell the Angel tried to utter. Besides, this was part of the contract—earned him a big bonus. At the sound of his voice, the Cherub ceased struggling. With enormous effort, it flipped itself over, and then lay still—its fat chest smeared with crimson rising tortuously. The short arms and legs were splayed at all angles.

“Why?” it asked in a voice of bells and chimes.

“Cleerfindel?” Felon hissed a cloud of gray smoke. He remembered the image his client had shown him.

“I am.” Its dazzling blue eyes met Felon’s dark orbs. Fear crossed its features. “I cannot see you...”

“A Demon hired me to kill you. You caused the woman he loved to love another—a human. He killed them both and has hated you ever since.” Felon took another drag from his cigarette and threw it away. He lowered the mouth of the gun to Cleerfindel’s head.

“I do not remember...who? I do not control love... that is the heart.” Cleerfindel tried to raise himself on an elbow. Felon pushed him back with the gun. “The Demon lies!”

“*You* lie. Azokal is his name. He wanted you to know that as you died.”

“Azokal...” Cleerfindel’s voice was fading. “Ah, Azokal.”

Felon felt the killing power rising up in him again.

“How human... I cannot see you?” Blood trickled from the corner of its mouth.

“Azokal spits on you.” Felon raised the gun, the sentence fulfilling his contract.

“Human, no.” A ragged gasp shook the Cherub—its eyes went wide with terror. “*Yahweh!*”

Felon fired at the Cherub’s body until the gun smoked and burned in his hands. He left Cleerfindel in a dissolving pile of gore and checked the greasy smear that was all that remained of the other Angel. Felon walked out of the building and traveled three blocks before taking a public stairway down to Level Two where he caught a cab on the Skyway.

## **8 – The Entertainers**

Mr. Jay lit a candle so they could prepare. It was early. Dawn watched him from her snug tangle of blankets. He hummed cheerfully to himself before turning to her.

“Get up sleepy!” he said, his teeth sparkling in the candlelight. “If you’re waiting for the sun to rise I might as well go without you.” He laughed. “It doesn’t come up in the City of Light.” His face became quizzical as he hovered close. “Which has to make you wonder why they call it that.” Mr. Jay kissed her forehead where she lay by the cubbyhole.

He walked to the table humming and started making breakfast. Dawn rubbed sleep from her eyes and crawled to her feet. Her belly grumbled.

“Maybe they mean the food!” she said, suddenly ravenous. “I’ve never felt so thin and airy and *light*.”

“That’s because,” Mr. Jay said over his shoulder, “you didn’t eat your supper, or much of it.”

“I’m sick of fish.” She pulled her socks on, and looked in a pack for her shoes. Since the Change, animal flesh did not stay dead, so people ate various exotic mixtures and pastes of plankton and fish.

“Imagine how the fish feel!” Mr. Jay laughed and scooped some sort of mucky substance into a bowl. “Oatmeal this morning.” He pointed to the pack beside her. “Sugar, please.”

Dawn dug into the pack and grabbed a plastic container. She carried it over to Mr. Jay while she kicked and wedged and shoved her foot into her right shoe.

“They go on easier if you untie them.” Mr. Jay took the sugar and sprinkled some on her oatmeal before handing it to her. “It’s cold but I soaked it overnight. You’ll have to use your imagination to enjoy it.”

But Dawn was too hungry to care about a thing like that, and soon dug into the porridge, enjoying the sugary sweetness on top. As she ate, Mr. Jay crossed the room, found his top hat and put it on.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” She asked looking at his hat. It was worn and patched, and had a frayed edge along the back that Mr. Jay hid by wetting his fingers and twirling the fringe around the wire frame.

“What?” Mr. Jay glanced over, pulling his coat on. It was a ragged shambles of a thing, but matched the hat just fine. “Oh, food.” He shook his head and pulled the coat tails out behind him. “I’m not much of a breakfast eater, dear. You know that! *Wakey wakey!*”

Dawn giggled as Mr. Jay waggled his head, and mimicked what he had told her were fine and gentlemanly ways, with his shoulders and legs stiff, and his elbows bent. He walked across the room and twirled, then twisted the end of his moustache.

“You look the fine figure of a man, Mr. Jay!” Dawn said with a giggle.

“It’s only fitting...” he said. “That I wear this to conjure up notions of the things that *were*. It’s all in the subconscious.” He slipped his gloves on and bowed with great flourish. “They may not even know it, but it’s there. Teaching them to see it is the hard part. And, as entertainers my dear, we’re obligated to employ all the trappings of our profession to accomplish that. A few loose threads will never overpower the imagination.”

“Conjurer” was what he sometimes called himself, but Dawn had seen people in books dressed like him who were called “Magicians.”

“I answer to either,” he once said with a laugh, “but I don’t pull rabbits out of hats.”

For now, they were “Entertainers.” Dawn had heard it referred to as busking, but what they did was go to street corners where Mr. Jay would do magic and entertain. People would gather around to watch and give them money. Mr. Jay often said it was a hard way to make a buck but that it beat working for a living.

Mr. Jay turned to her from where he was putting some food in a smaller pack. “I could do with some coffee though. When you are through, little princess. So *chop chop!* You still have to get into your costume!” He held up the fake beard.

As a forever child and being a rare and wonderful thing, as Mr. Jay called her, Dawn was forever in peril of capture. It wasn't that people hated forever children, but the government still caught any they found and kept them in orphanages for their own protection. Dawn heard rumors of it from other forever children at the Nurserywood. Some said they had escaped from the government, and if they spoke about it at all, it was in hushed tones, with fear on their faces.

So to go out in public, Dawn had to go disguised as a midget. She held the collection basket for Mr. Jay and took great pride in her part of the ruse, because she had learned to disguise her voice and otherwise carry off the charade without discovery.

"Avoid real midgets." Mr. Jay had warned her. "Most people are afraid to look at a little person for more than a glance, but a midget or a dwarf, he'll see you eye to eye and know."

Her costume was a multicolored patchwork of bright materials that covered her body completely. Mr. Jay called it "motley." It came with its own broad padded shoulders and potbelly sewn into place. The boots she wore rose to her knees and curled up at the toe. Each toe was graced with a small bell—just as her cap bore on each of its five points. To complete the illusion, Mr. Jay would painstakingly affix the dark brown beard to her cheeks and chin. She hated the glue he used to stick it on with, mostly because it stank and partly because he called it "spirit gum." Dawn could never bring herself to ask what that meant.

She finished her porridge and then turned in her chair for Mr. Jay to apply the beard and make up her face. He continued to hum as he did so, smiling occasionally at the faces she made.

Though they were meager earnings she gathered in her collection basket, they were able to afford the essentials. And Dawn really loved being an entertainer, costume or not. It allowed her to go out in the streets with people and dance and carry on like she was normal. Otherwise, she spent her days in the shadows. Years ago, she had started coming up with her own tricks. Her body though a child's was as nimble as a cat's and decades of living in it had made her dexterous beyond compare.

While Dawn handled the acrobatic part of their act—mainly to keep the crowd's interest and guard the collection basket—Mr. Jay would prepare for his next bit of magic. He always did that with great flourish, his whole body taking on a rigid, sticklike stance, and his face going flat, eyes looking inward. Dawn was never sure how Mr. Jay actually did his tricks but he had told her that it was a fine art that relied on misdirection as much as it did magic. Regardless, he would come out of his "Gypsy trance" as he called it, and go about the crowd mystifying them with tricks like guessing a person's name, and their parents' or friend's, or he would do other more exotic things. It depended on the crowd; some were easier to please than others.

The pair had traveled a long way with their entertaining, and had performed now so many times that Dawn found herself improvising effortlessly—Mr. Jay had said that this was simply her subconscious having fun with it.

"You don't want to get bored with entertaining, Dawn. What would be left?"

And she rarely ever felt butterflies in her stomach anymore. As long as Mr. Jay was nearby, she felt that she could do anything.

Today was a little different. This was their first full day in the City of Light. He wouldn't tell her why they had come to the City, but he assured her that the money would

be good if they could get the prime locations. Mr. Jay had already scouted out locations to work.

“And I might even find some old friends,” he said cheerfully.

Dawn didn't care about any old friends as she struggled into her costume. She had already seen enough of the City. True, the size of it was awesome as you approached it, but when you were *in* it, the levels above weighed heavily and the only breezes blew off cars and buses or came up from sewers. There was a constant feeling of crowding.

She could not shake the nagging sense that her run in with Yellow-skin and the thin men was just a shadow of worse things to come. And the streets in the City were so big and numerous, and there were so many people, there were just too many places a forever child could get lost. She knew she'd be worried about losing Mr. Jay the whole time.

“Come along, Dawn. You wrinkle that forehead of yours any more and you'll look like a road map.” Mr. Jay chuckled and twisted her nose. He looked her over. “And how are you today Mojo?” That was the name of the midget she played.

She patted her forehead with the back of her hand nonplussed.

The action made Mr. Jay laugh out loud. “Forever child or not, Dawn. There's a woman in there somewhere.”

“Stop it!” she scolded, hoping to end the teasing right away.

“Yes, of course.” He smiled and regarded her with such a loving gaze that she immediately cheered up. “Now, will you be warm enough? These February winds can chill you through and through. A Winter rain's expected...”

“Of course I'll be warm enough.” She almost stamped a foot but remembered that Mr. Jay only said those things out of habit. “But thank you anyway.”

Mr. Jay picked up his walking stick, and shouldered his bag of props. He always carried extra things with him—packs of cards, bottles and string and cups—anything he might use in one of his tricks. And he always had some packets of mixed nuts and a stick of bread that never seemed to run out. “We'll have to hurry. I found an excellent corner last night but it's quite a distance uptown.”

They made their way out of the hideout and then along a rickety stair that took them to the exit of the abandoned building. A dirty mist hung in the air over the street. “I hope you don't mind, but we may have to ride a bus to get there while the pickings are still good.” She looked up at his face as he talked, but its expression was hidden by the gloom. “We want to catch the workers at their first coffee break—and there's a good collection of hotels and office buildings nearby that we can work until they're back on the streets at lunch.” The fog blew into Dawn's face and left droplets in her beard. She shrugged at her friend's face.

A mixture of excitement and apprehension ran through her as they made their way to the bus stop. Other shadowy shapes joined them on the dark sidewalks: heads down, collars pulled up, with shock on their faces when Dawn stepped out of the gloom. The idea of performing in front of a whole new bunch of people was as exciting as it was frightening. She gripped the first two fingers of Mr. Jay's right hand. As long as she kept her hold on him, she would be all right.

Able Stoneworthy's footsteps receded. Sister Karen Cawood waited on her knees, sliding each rosary bead over the plump flesh of her lower lip—her mouth unconsciously forming words that were not uttered. *Jesus, whom thou didst joyfully conceive.* Her shoulder still bore the warm impress of Able's hand where he had gripped her reassuringly as she dropped to her knees in prayer. His voice had grown thick before he hurried from the room. The minister, her friend of many decades, respected her privacy more than she did. *Jesus, whom thou didst joyfully carry to Elizabeth.* At the sound of the outer office door latching, she climbed slowly to her feet, knees aching.

She muttered, "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen." She pinched her thumb where the crucifix in her grip had bitten into it. Moving to her desk she dropped into her seat with a fragile sigh then pushed her coif back to rub her temples. Sometimes she wished they still wore the elaborate, heavily starched head covering that was once synonymous with nuns. It would have been better for hiding her bleary bloodshot eyes and pale skin than the modern headband and small veil that was now in use.

It was too early in the morning for Able's earnest nature, too early for a woman who had consumed as many shooters as she had the night before. She couldn't even remember leaving the bar she'd staggered out of, Casey's or Carson's on Level Four or Five, her wounded memory let the information go. Dragging herself in to work had required Olympian effort, and when she had looked up over her hot black coffee to see Able Stoneworthy standing there, fear disintegrated the last veils of her morning-after numbness.

*Mortal. Venial.* The difference in sins was a few thousand years in purgatory give or take. That was nothing. True purgatory was having a job that wouldn't let her recognize her own G-spot. A guilty grin appeared on her face but was wiped away by a painful throb in her temples.

Then Able started in about an Angel visiting him. Smiling idiotically about it had come easily to her. That was the worst part of loving him; the lies were coming so easily to her. The irony was his trust hurt her more than his discovering the truth ever would. She set her rosary and crucifix aside, then leaned back in her chair pressing the backs of her hands to her aching eyes. "Oh, Able." *O kind and good Mother, whose own soul was pierced by the sword of sorrow, look upon us while, in our sickness...*

The deceit had not been so easy when Able first brought her into his mission. Then, she had been deep in the cups of her own penance, and his religious fervor had been an easy crutch to grab onto.

She had traveled from South Africa to the New York on her 23rd birthday for a United Nations New Millennium conference on feeding the poor in developing countries. All so long ago now, but she had special interest in the topic since her country had been in dire need of such assistance. The new regimes that followed Apartheid were behaving no better than the worst of Africa's despots. That on top of years of inequity had left her country grossly out of balance. Most of her black countrymen remained poor and were now being joined by thousands of whites. Competition for oil company revenues fueled the pirate governments and the distance between rich and poor had grown to almost insurmountable proportions.

How young she had been then, how idealistic. Then she said aloud: "How naïve." Everyone involved was naïve. When the news hit about the pedophiles in the church and

Rome's complicity in their crimes there had been a mass exodus among parishioners. And Cawood's faith had started to die.

An unnerving thunderstorm en route to New York City had filled her with dread. The pilot announced over the intercom that their landing might be delayed. Rainwater flew from the wings in spraying torrents as they landed at JFK International. She waited an hour for the ride she had been promised, and finally hired a taxi to take her into the city.

She could still remember the vehemence with which the rain fell, how it tore at the pavement around the car. Its froth formed a violent film on the windows reducing the entire world to a flat gray wall. Pedestrians moved past like shadows, flitting from blurred doorway to blurred doorway.

The Change came while she was wrestling her bags through the door of the Venture Inn. The television in the lobby asked people to standby for a report from the U.S. Department of Defense. A crowd of guests and New Yorkers sheltering from the rain gathered on the snowy blue rug in front of it. Cawood joined them, watching. The screen flickered from gray, to snow, to black and then projected the image of a news anchorman. He fixed his steady gaze on the viewers.

"A weather system is forming at a speed and magnitude unprecedented in recorded history." The newscaster seemed anxious. "The Department of Defense and the National Weather Service have issued this joint release: 'All citizens of the continental United States are advised to remain indoors pending further notification.'" Electric tension jumped through the people around Cawood. The statement was punctuated with satellite pictures of the earth's surface covered with whirling tempests of black and white and gray. It had all begun three hours before, the report said. Military and civilian satellites recorded the phenomena. What at first appeared to be several hurricane formations had taken on a more destructive tone.

Global weather stations confirmed the growth of a contiguous worldwide atmospheric disturbance. The picture of the growing cloud cover intensified during the broadcast, with a time-lapse effect, until the once blue globe darkened to a uniform shadow. Soon after, the satellite picture broke up and was lost. The news anchor's image returned, flickered and was gone forever.

Cawood paused in her reverie.

Beads of sweat stood out on her pallid forehead as the moment returned to her in full. The lights in the lobby died. A man bellowed repeatedly into his cell phone until he charged out of the building screaming his children's names. A woman shrieked, then apologized in embarrassment. The crowd hurried across the lobby to the desk, to a line of dead pay phones on one wall. There was a loud harsh clap of thunder, and the Change had arrived.

"Damn!" she cursed. All this was behind her, but Able had a way of stirring things up. Coming into her office so early in the day babbling about Angels and salvation and a new mission. "There's no fucking mission," she said to the empty room.

The first days of the Change were crisp in her memory. The group at the Venture Inn had dispersed quickly: huddled, cautious shapes going into a hissing gray nothing that smelled like autumn. Cawood was taken to a room by a busboy with a flashlight: taste of salt from the back of her hand as tears came upon her in the dark. She slept uncomfortably listening to sirens and awoke next day to the rain: smell of cleansers, the

dry reconditioned air on her tongue. Cloud cover kept New York in perpetual twilight: searching for her underwear on the floor, the dusty curtain made her sneeze.

Rain thundered down for weeks without end. The riots started in week two, close on the heels of the looting. There was a slow realization setting in that things had changed permanently. As communications returned at the end of the first week—radio and television signals were inconsistent and distorted—digital signals were lost, replaced by analog. American meteorologists blamed the ozone and greenhouse gases, European scientists suggested an undetected meteorite impact. Few ocean-going vessels returned from the wild maelstroms the seas had become. The melting ice caps threatened to drown coastal cities. Estimates had 85% of all aircraft aloft at the time of the Change were crashed or missing.

Electrical systems went wild, city lights and telephones flickered and died, computers crashed and subways ground to a terrifying halt deep in their dark black burrows. Factories fell silent and millions died. No one was unaffected. Presidents and Prime Ministers made reassuring statements that could not hide their ignorance. Leaders religious and political wanted calm.

Calm. The absurdity still provoked a sarcastic smile in her. Their world was dying and they asked for calm.

Her first steps off the high road came when she sought her sisters and brothers in the rapidly sinking city. They had nothing for her. There were riddles in the text and that's all they had: the text. The Revelation of St. John had been a long contested part of the Testament, but this Change was different. And the Bishop was missing. No one had heard word from the Vatican. It was silent, but most had grown used to its methodical responses to crises in the past. From her search for guidance she came away confused.

And there was the water to worry about. It was rising every day, and New York City was so big. Twice she was drafted into the ranks of millions who built dykes against the flood. She worked beside strangers with the rain pooling about her ankles. A slight increase in wind pushed the waves up and over, collapsing the hastily constructed barriers, flooding neighborhoods. Pull back; build new dykes.

The military was brought in to build dykes but became a police force and fire brigade. The world had Changed. On the radio all reports were the same. Coastal cities the world over were drowning. There was a Federal state of emergency instituted as panic set in. Buildings were burning throughout New York, the sound of gunshots and explosions rolled up every street. And as the rain continued, people left the city.

Cawood heard about the Vatican while riding on an army transport moving refugees to the mainland. Dying witnesses swore they had seen a mushroom cloud. That pushed her into a general trance of terror and disbelief. It wasn't until later that she found out about the nuclear exchanges in the Middle East, India and Pakistan, China and Russia. To her a simple question: if the Vatican could be vaporized, then what value the cities of man and where was God?

Science, the last refuge of the faithful, could not answer many questions. Meteorologists were baffled by the worldwide weather system that set in and stayed. Some theorized that whatever had caused the new weather patterns was so catastrophic that the atmosphere reacted by creating a suspension—an equilibrium of itself—seemingly sucking up the moisture as the North and South Poles melted. Scientists at

MIT announced their initial findings: the majority of species of bacteria had died off in a mass extinction of unprecedented proportions.

Lost for a time, Cawood felt no urge to pray. It was as though heaven itself had been destroyed with St. Peter's. Still, she could hang onto something, the basic lessons of Catholicism. Yet even as she rallied, another blow fell as the second month passed. All pregnant mammals spontaneously aborted their fetuses. And it proved in the years that followed that humanity could not conceive again. The voice of childhood had been silenced. Cawood almost joined the suicides she tended though events soon made death a crueler fate than life. No sooner was science trying to explain the great stillbirth than the dead rose up from their graves.

*Raise them up to live forever with all Your saints in the glory of the Resurrection.*

Each country claimed to have had the first to rise. Clambering out of mortuary drawers, coffins and medical research facilities the dead came awake, but they were not alive. Bodies continued to dehydrate, but with the extinction of most bacteria, they did not rot. And this new revivifying affect, whatever gave them life, was not for whole bodies alone, severed parts were charged with some atrocious nervous activity, mindless, but lifelike. The dead retained the characters of the people they had been in life, so long as some portion of their brain remained.

Karen swiveled her chair around to gaze out the window at the cloud tops. She never felt guilty for having Sunlight offices high up in Archangel Tower. Never regretted a single sunset she got to watch while the populace below muddled through endless days of rain. She'd helped build it after all.

## **10 – Dealing with the Devil**

Felon sat on his bed at the Coastview Hotel. He had set his guns on a rubber sheet: the rebuilt M-16, his Smith & Wesson .9 mm automatic, a .44 Magnum Colt Anaconda, and a Ranger .45 Colt Derringer. He started disassembling, cleaning and oiling the weapons one by one. In his business the machinery had to work perfectly. One misfire and the wrath of Heaven or Hell would be on him. Throughout the operation, he kept a loaded Taurus .38 close at hand.

He had dropped Azokal's check in a Level Two Branch of the First City Bank then caught a cab to the hotel. Felon usually demanded cash or valuables up front, but his reputation was growing and he knew the Demon feared his gifts too much to chance insufficient funds.

Felon knew that the old adage, "never deal with the Devil" was absolutely true. Fallen Angels claimed to be the wealthiest deities of Hell, but were an untrustworthy lot so the assassin took their boasting with a grain of salt. Typically, they were compulsively organized—like psychopathic lawyers inextricably bound to unfathomable laws of self-protection and a celestial legal system that ruled them.

Every deal was suspect the moment bloody quill was set to parchment. It was their nature to want to get the upper hand. They thought it was their right so Felon knew he could take nothing for granted. If something was missing from a contract, they knew it. Rarely, did any of them talk about bartering souls. If they had that power Felon had never

seen evidence of it. Apparently, souls were a commodity that had depreciated over the last thousand years.

As Fallen they strove to emulate the Divine order in Heaven with a system of their own. Their hierarchy awarded advancement to those who won advantage over humans or over others of their own kind. Felon was never given a clear description of how it worked. And he didn't care enough to pursue it.

He preferred dealing with Demons. They were more dangerous, but their contracts more lucrative. Almost indistinguishable from Fallen in human folklore and religion, Felon had learned that they were a completely different species. This had prompted him to make a study of each. Ignorance was lethal in his business.

Fallen had only contempt for Demons and their parallel Infernal system. Comparisons prompted indignation if not outrage. Demons were unimpressed by their own hierarchy—Felon learned it was a chaotic system of feudal anarchy. Instead the majority expended enormous wealth and power in the advancement of their own passions. Demons were ruled by revenge. They were prodigal with their riches, and most seemed willing to part with a fortune to entertain some petty personal vendetta. The money was good and the employment steady—though at times a messy and degenerate affair.

Demons hated goodness far more than their Fallen counterparts. Fallen viewed the human graces as weaknesses to be exploited. Otherwise, they worked with or around goodness, as an intrinsic matter of business. Without it, they would have no more purpose than the madness of the Demon horde.

The Demons who had contracted Felon over the years appeared to resent goodness. He chalked that up to a feeling of inadequacy born of being shut out of Fallen Hierarchy; and the envy that must have caused, combined with the precipitous drop their position took in relation to the Divine Ranks in Heaven. They hated the Angelic host just slightly more than they did Fallen.

But Demons paid handsomely and since they were often employed as minions by Fallen, they maintained a better relationship with their own servants. If the job was done well, they paid and got on about their business. Regardless, Demons were dangerous. They were a put upon species, and quick to see an insult whether intended or not.

Regarding Heaven, Hell and the Pit, Felon had never received a satisfactory answer. They existed, that was obvious. But such intricacies were lost to the assassin. He didn't care if they came from Ohio or Denmark or Limbo, as long as they paid. Felon hated them all. They were a powerful and anarchic waste of power. He claimed no allegiance with any one. Playing the center served him best.

But Felon hated Angels most of all. He had worked for them only once before switching to more lucrative business partnerships. The Celestial Choir had wealth to share, but they were not generous with it. Their holier than thou attitude made it very easy for them to cheat at business, apparently adding an unwritten clause into every contract: "No payment necessary if said services can be considered to contain educational or redemptive value."

Felon had experienced only one such arrangement. It had happened only months after his epiphany of pain, when an Angel approached him to whack an abusive father. The assassin's new knowledge allowed him to believe the creature's claim without proof. He could smell the Angel—cinnamon, sickly. The target was terrorizing his wife and child with sexual abuse and violence. Nathaniel was a Guardian Angel who appeared to Felon

as a kindly old grandfather with twinkling eyes and round red nose. He was four feet tall dressed in wool sweater and slacks. A steady warm glow emanated from his halo. He wanted Felon to intervene on his behalf.

Much later, Felon learned that Angels came in all shapes and sizes. There were guardians, protectors, and messengers—though at the end of the Millennium most were regarded by humanity as little more than good luck charms. Guardians were given clients to look after without directly intervening. Intervention was the purview of God and no one else.

But Angels could bend the rules a little. They could insinuate, make helpful suggestions and minor protections. The Divine Compact kept them from doing anything else. It declared that Angels could not make themselves known to human eyes without the permission of God.

In this case, Nathaniel was at the end of his rope. The father of his client failed to learn from his mistakes, or see the light of truth through introspection. Nathaniel's charge was a girl, 11 pre-Change years of age. She was taking the brunt of the abuse.

Nathaniel offered Felon a lost Reuben's painting captured from a Japanese collector whose mansion had been located on the seashore near Hiroshima. The Angel picked it up moments before the atomic bomb dropped. Apparently in the seconds before a cataclysm of human wrought or natural origin the Cosmic rules were relaxed. Devils, Demons and Angels were drawn to such places by the impending doom and the screams of souls foretasting death. Angels and their fallen brethren arrived for the recovery of the works of man. Demons attended for Chaos and Hellfire.

Nathaniel offered Felon the Reuben's work, worth a respectable fortune on the black market, since it was considered lost. He was suspicious about the transaction from the start since it was a lot of money for capping a nobody. Felon accepted and signed the contract. He shot the abusive father through the eyes two days later, removed his head and burned it.

When it came time to collect, Nathaniel balked. "Think you, that you had a hand on the pulse of God's great plan—surely the wealth of that experience is found in your acceleration of the powers of good. Look inside, Felon," the Angel had said in his grandfather's voice, "and see there a light far brighter than the illusion of gold." Felon remembered looking inside, and finding only a blaze of anger.

He had acted impetuously then. Gun flicking out, he shot the Angel four times in the face. The old man persona had melted away as the body evaporated, the flesh dissolved quickly to expose the alien skeleton beneath. Felon had only a moment to view the smoking bones, thinner and longer than human, with wings rapidly burning up in death. In a little under ten minutes an oily mark was all that remained. Felon had taken a huge chance, and he scolded himself for it later—the open face of hatred was too much like faith—too certain and self-assured. He had acted on an impulse that could have killed him.

His had been a life of simmering hatred where he was content to nurse ancient grudges—boil them like molten metal to form weapons. Only a controlled repugnance of all things gave him superiority. Such unfocused anger left him blind to the world. And he had not known at the time that Angels could be killed. Much later, he learned that Angels and Demons in physical form were vulnerable to all the ills, calamities and mortal injuries that humans were. Human beings didn't know this, because few would offer

them injury. They also had a degree of omniscience that made them impossible to surprise.

This first Angel kill made Felon aware of his gift. He was immune to their Divine perceptions. They couldn't read his mind, so he could surprise them. He later learned he could surprise Fallen and Demons, which secured and endangered his relationships with those beings. He came to depend upon this ability. It was his livelihood and chief defense.

He drifted back from his reverie to finish oiling and assembling the .44 magnum. He liked its weight. The assassin contemplated nothing. It was still early. A note at the front desk the night before told him he had an appointment with a Demon and former employer. They were to meet at noon. Killing the Cherubs had left the assassin restless. He needed sleep but had been too keen with adrenaline to get much the night before. He wouldn't nap; instead Felon let his mind go numb until nothing flickered there. He was too old to drift through his memories. There was too much in his head for that.

## **11 – Spy in the Ointment**

“Ladies and gentlemen.” Mr. Jay was standing in front of a tall wrought iron fence that completely enclosed the grounds of the St. Albert Hotel. The fence's uprights were set in a concrete curb about three feet high. Dawn and Mr. Jay had incorporated the construction into their act with the forever child climbing to the highest rung before swan diving into her partner's arms. At the moment, Mr. Jay clasped the fence lightly with one hand and braced himself against the concrete curb with a foot while the other dangled. Dawn climbed to a safe height, and clung there.

A crowd of fifteen people, men and women had gathered, most wearing the drab and formless business suits that were the fashion of the day. They looked just like the heavy stone and steel of the Level that pressed down on the building tops above. She thought that without faces, they'd look like lumps of the same material. Water spattered the pavement, dripping from a million leaks in the levels above.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Mr. Jay shouted over the echoing storm of traffic on the Skyway. He snatched off his top hat and swung it upside down at the crowd, gesturing to the collection basket at the curb. “I would like to ask if there is one among you who would be kind enough to assist me in this next feat of mystical prestidigitation.” He swept his hat back onto his head and then leapt lightly to the sidewalk. “You there, sir!”

Mr. Jay pointed to a man of middle pre-Change years who was leaning against one of the posts that held up the hotel's dirty yellow awning. Startled at the suggestion, the stranger almost swallowed his cigarette. He coughed on a mouthful of smoke shaking his head. He stooped to pick up a heavy briefcase but Mr. Jay was already upon him.

“Don't leave us just yet, Mr. Legate.” The magician held out his hand and grasped the stranger's whose eyes had gone wide with surprise. “That is your name isn't it? Or can I call you, Oscar?” He turned the fellow around to face the gathering.

“Oscar...” The man wore a flummoxed smile. “Oscar Legate.”

Mr. Jay smiled as a weak pattering of applause traveled through the audience. “Oscar I assure you that your hesitation while justifiable remains patently unnecessary. Your participation in today's experiment is as safe as walking across the street. In fact...” The

magician looked up at Dawn and gestured toward her. She dropped to the sidewalk, skipped forward and bowed. “I performed the same trick just the other day with the help of my good friend Mojo.” Mr. Jay smoothed the material over Oscar’s shoulders. “Of course, Mojo was a little taller than you at the start of it...”

Oscar’s eyes went wide with astonishment, and the gathered throng laughed.

Mr. Jay mimicked the man’s expression before continuing, “No, Oscar, I’m just pulling your legs of course. What I would like is to have your participation in a magical conjuration that comes down to us through the ages. A trick so profound that it is rarely taught outside of Egypt, a trick so spellbinding that the old gypsy woman who taught it to me did so only after extricating a promise that I never perform it while she lived.” He scowled then smiled. “So I killed her!”

The audience laughed as they closed the performers in a half-circle. The movement frightened Dawn a little. She skipped back to the iron bars and climbed until she was well above the group.

“Hold now. Come no closer!” Mr. Jay held a hand up. “We will need plenty of room for the magic to work.” The people moved to obey. “But not too far. You must watch closely. Behold...”

Mr. Jay left Oscar and walked over beneath Dawn’s perch where he had set his backpack. From it he slowly slid his walking stick. He whipped around too quickly for Dawn to register any of her concern with him. She didn’t like this trick and her nerves were already frayed by the presence of so many strangers.

The magician walked over to Oscar, twirling the cane as he did so. “Now Oscar!” He flashed the walking stick before him, and then gently held it out for his new assistant to inspect. “Please inform the audience of what your close inspection reveals about my walking stick.” He gestured with the cane. “Go on. Take it.”

Oscar took the walking stick, twisted its black enameled length in his hands, sighted along it like it a gun barrel, and pulled on its silver ends.

“And what have you found, Oscar?” Mr. Jay bowed.

“It’s steel with black paint on it. And the ends are tin.” Oscar smiled.

Mr. Jay’s head whipped up and he frowned. “Tin!” He snatched the walking stick away from him. “Silver—genuine silver! The very same taken from the Aztec ruins by the conquistadors.” Mr. Jay frowned at the man in mock seriousness. “Thank you, Oscar, that will be all.” The gathering laughed but quickly fell silent as Mr. Jay held the walking stick by one end. He flipped its dark length toward the sky, and held it out, his arm parallel to the ground.

“Since ancient times...” he began. Dawn inched herself a little higher. “Men of little faith have needed proof to convince their eyes of what their hearts could not *see*, but *suspected*.” Mr. Jay stepped forward. Slowly he walked around the short half-circle in front of the audience. “And so the priests of old were given the task of discovering methods for convincing doubters.” He laughed, and rolled his eyes—shooting mysterious glances at individuals in the group. “And so, I tell you now that by the same arcane magic do I come to you today to mystify...” He started to take slow circling steps. The upper tip of the walking stick began to follow his gyrating movements. “I come to amaze...” Mr. Jay stepped closer to the wrought iron fence. “And I come to *terrify*!”

With that he dashed the walking stick on the ground and a cobra ten feet in length appeared. It reared and hissed, at the crowd. They cried out as it took two slow lunges at

them. The people retreated further. Dawn could see the black scales speckling the creature's back; she could hear its belly rasp the wet concrete as it slithered.

Mr. Jay bellowed. "Behold!" He raised an arm, and the cobra turned toward him. The audience held its ground. "True. I come to mystify." The snake inched forward. "To amaze and terrify..." The snake's hood spread wide and black, its body coiled to spring. "But I come here to *entertain!*" On the last word, the cobra struck at Mr. Jay's open hand. And it was gone!

The magician twirled his walking stick with his fingers. The crowd exploded with applause and cheers.

Dawn's heart was thumping in her chest. It always looked so real! But her inner voice wouldn't allow her the time to worry. *Now!* Hide in the applause. *GO TO WORK!* She leapt down from her perch and landed beside Mr. Jay. She clapped her little hands as hard as she could, and barked out "Bravo!" in Mojo's gravelly voice. She skipped over and picked up the collection basket, and moved quickly from person to person. Caught up in the excitement, hands threw approving coins and bills.

"Thank you!" Mr. Jay bellowed over the noise. "Thank you good people of the City of Light!" Dawn was just starting back toward him when his eyes went wide. He rapidly scanned the faces of the gathering. Dawn danced over to him. A worried look crossed his face as he whispered, "Fifteen, now fourteen. A face is missing. Time to go."

She thought the trick might have scared someone away, but Mr. Jay's grim glance silenced her. He raised his hands again, smiling. "Thank you. Thank you! But we must leave now. Look for us though. Look for us..." A worried expression clenched his features when his eyes focused on something.

At just over three feet tall, Dawn could not see what Mr. Jay was looking at. He hurried to his pack and slung it over his shoulder. Dawn was at his side in a flash.

"What is it, Mr. Jay?" In her agitated state, she forgot to use Mojo's voice.

"The man who left is bringing friends," he said, shouldering his pack and turning to the gathering. They were just starting to break up, some making hand gestures like striking snakes. Then Dawn saw through their legs that three people in dark overcoats were crossing the street toward them.

Mr. Jay's lips were at her ear. "Run with me, Dawn!" He pushed her ahead and she sprinted as fast as she could. The magician loped easily at her side. Behind them, a man shouted.

The St. Albert's Hotel stood on a corner where Oceanside Boulevard met Landsrun Street—many blocks onward, she could see where the road swept up to fuse with the Third Skyway. Mr. Jay pelted headlong up the sidewalk. Dawn was keeping up to Mr. Jay on the short sprint. Ahead she could only see one long city block. The street was crowded with cars, and the sidewalk with pedestrians going to lunch. They struggled ahead. Luckily their pursuers met the same resistance.

*Run!* Said the grownup voice inside her head. *Run girl run!* Her hat and little boots jingled ridiculously.

"Stop!" a man shouted.

"There!" Mr. Jay motioned to her. On the left was a ramp that led down into a large dark underground parking garage. Dawn did not hesitate. The air was cold and wet on the ramp and her feet slipped on the damp asphalt, but she was nimble and took extra care.

They scrambled through the darkness with fluorescent lights flickering overhead. Behind them echoed the sounds of pursuit.

Mr. Jay pointed to a red door. Dawn followed him to it, and ran through as he shoved it aside. They scrambled up some stairs turning round and round. The door opened below them, heavy footfalls pounded. The entertainers ran.

Dawn didn't think. Her mind just chanted, "*Run, run, run!*" Heart laboring she sprinted. As the stairs switched back on themselves, there were doors. Finally, Mr. Jay flung one wide and she followed. They were in a hallway. Thick carpet covered the floor.

"Hotel!" Mr. Jay had slowed to a jog. "Give me those." He snatched off Dawn's hat, and stuffed it in his pack, then motioned for her shoes. "Quickly." He shoved the jingling shoes away. "That will help." He looked up the hall. A smile burst across his face. "Perfect!"

Dawn followed him to a pair of steel doors. An elevator? Behind them the door to the stairs swung open with a bang. Mr. Jay swung his walking stick and stabbed the buttons on a steel panel between the doors. The bottom button lit up.

"Come on, now! Don't make me a liar," he said to the doors, biting his lip and flashing his eyes back the way they had come. "I just said you were perfect."

Dawn panted, her legs were trembling, but adrenaline surged through her when she heard a voice call down the hall. "This way..."

"Don't worry about them, Dawn." Mr. Jay had noticed her eyes growing moist as she looked back the way they had come. "We simply need the elevator. Whatever our pursuers will do, they'll do, if the elevator does not get to us in time. However, that is only a *possible* future. Be optimistic." He smiled weakly.

Dawn could not pry her mind from the sound of heavy footfalls approaching. Then a quiet chime rang and the doors started sliding apart. Mr. Jay shoved her through and squeezed in before they finished opening. He pushed a button set in a steel panel. It had the number *one* on it. Then he started jabbing another button that said, "Close Door."

Their pursuers sprinted along the hall toward them. She could feel the vibrations of their approach through her bare feet.

Then the doors ground shut. She heard another voice. "Stop!" There was a hard thud as something hit the closing door. Dawn grabbed Mr. Jay's hand when she sensed elevator dropping.

A huge grin spread across her friend's cheeks and his eyebrows arched.

Dawn squeaked when the elevator shuddered to a stop. Mr. Jay grabbed her hand. "Don't worry so much." He straightened his top hat. "We will leave in grand style."

The doors opened. With half-closed eyes, Dawn saw an old couple standing there hand in hand. The man wore a pair of thick glasses, and the woman had a giant hat. Startled, they stepped back to let the strange pair out of the elevator.

Dawn held tight to her friend's hand as they crossed a red-carpeted lobby. There was a desk clerk and a couple of old men reading newspapers by a fireplace. Mr. Jay led her down three short steps to the sidewalk. He took her to a taxi that waited at the curb.

"Six blocks west, please," Mr. Jay said to the driver as the taxi pulled away from the curb. Dawn squeezed his hand until he looked down at her.

"That was exciting!" he whispered.

## 12 – Lots

Sister Cawood's tongue snaked over the brown skin at the nape of the Mormon representative's neck. The Mormon did not return the favor, opting instead to kiss the pale flesh between her breasts. Sister Juanita Powell was an attractive woman of pre-Change thirty years. Her long black hair, threaded through with silver fell in ringlets, perfectly framing intense brown eyes. The couple had become close friends fifty years into the Change when Karen had attended the San Sebesta Inter-faith Christian retreat near the rim of the New Mexican Crater. They'd become lovers three decades later when Powell was assigned to administrative duties in the Archangel Tower Mormon Offices. The affair was a close-kept secret—and the orgasms more intense because of it.

Powell was in love with Cawood so overlooked the nun's interest in men. Cawood loved Powell, but lacked the courage to tell her the full extent of her interest. Powell was a lesbian. Cawood's tastes had yet to be fully defined. There was no agreement between them, but Cawood knew from their late night talks that too much information would crush the Mormon. So she lied every time they met.

But she depended on Juanita's insights, and found the Mormon's beautiful body responsive to her every touch. Able's visit and Cawood's hangover left her useless for work—half an hour of staring at her coffee cup said as much. At ten she'd taken an elevator to the Mormon's office to talk. Able had dredged up the past, and Cawood needed a distraction. But Juanita smiled impishly and started kissing her the moment she entered. A passionate exchange brought them back to the Mormon's apartment and they had been making love for an hour. Cawood was distracted all right. The physical tastes and sensations pressed in on her. She dove so deep into her lust that she almost snarled when Juanita stopped her.

"Hey!" Juanita blurted, closing her thighs over the sister's neck. "Let me catch my breath."

Cawood looked up, her vision foggy; then she smiled. Straining, crawling upward, she pressed Juanita's lips and their tongues met. They rolled over the bed, giggling in a pink embrace.

"You aren't feeling guilty are you?" Juanita said, still sporting the traces of a Spanish accent. She rolled a fingertip around the sister's hard and rubbery nipple.

"No. Never—any more." Cawood lied. "I'm sorry—I got caught up. You're so beautiful." Her hands slid over the Mormon's full hips—dallied a second between her legs. A wave of passion rolled over them. "It's Able, he came in with another crazy scheme."

A hot emotion flitted behind Juanita's eyes. "What now? He wants to put on an addition?" They both laughed. Building the Tower had consumed the lives of everyone involved. "A carport?"

"No," she giggled. "Able loves the tower." Cawood's mind rolled over the notion. "So do I. It's not that." The sister remembered Able's earnest face. She realized how important this was to him. How important their spiritual intimacy was. He trusted Cawood. "He's just getting revved up again." Juanita's body went rigid. The Mormon's hand clasped on Cawood's wrist.

“Can’t he bother someone else?” She shook her head. “I like Able, don’t mistake me. I do. But always he goes to you.” She kissed Cawood again, her body softened. “What does he want now?”

“I can’t tell you.” Cawood sighed. She ran her hands over Juanita’s soft shoulders. “I want to. I do. But, he trusts me so much.” *And he shouldn’t!*

“Don’t you trust me?” Juanita’s eyes glimmered. “I won’t tell.” She patted the bed sheets, slid her hand over Cawood’s vulva. “You trust me with this.”

“I know, Juanita. I do.” Her breath caught, and she closed her eyes. This was what it was all about—relationships: the sharing of trust, of intimacy, giving and receiving access to the soul. But it was God’s. It was the Holy Mother’s. *I’m so fucking bad.* A desperate part of her mind searched her memory of Juanita’s apartment. Liquor, there had to be liquor. “Able won’t trust just anyone. And he trusts me.” Why not tell? Her mind snickered. The whole thing’s a joke!

“I like that about you.” Juanita’s warm spirit returned and they shared a kiss. “I guess he does too.”

Cawood remembered first meeting Able. She had been on a personal revival of sorts, after falling far from grace fifteen years after the Change. She had tried to blame the difficulties with her vow of chastity on the fact that the Change apparently halted her aging process, leaving her in the body of a young woman for far longer than any nun ever had before. Before long she stopped blaming anything at all, and dove into the erotic world of human sexuality. Vows and chastity were thrown to the wind, and she had cavorted with any interested man or woman.

God had left her behind with the sinners, so she would sin. But, she hit bottom after going on a drunken binge with two men she met at a Catholic sponsored conference on Poverty in the World of Change. She woke up naked in a hotel bathtub. As she hurried to leave, she discovered one of the men was dead from an overdose of barbiturates. Cawood was already struggling with the new realities of dying and the thought of becoming one of the walking dead was too terrifying. And for a time, she was scared straight. For a time, the fear brought her back to her faith.

She took this new passion for life to the lost souls in the streets of the City. They would shuffle out of their despondency long enough to listen to her loving words about God and faith, and while salvation was rare, she spoke the Word of God, and speaking it gave her the strength to remember her vows.

She spent the following years praying with ragtag groups of the lost and homeless, and revived her Bible studies. She worked at mission houses and shelters. Cawood even began to think that the Word held the answer for the Change—a reply to its dark challenge. Trials defined a person’s faith. And understanding the trials became her passion.

While working at a methadone clinic on Level Two she stopped on the street one day to speak to a group of forever-teen addicts who hung around looking for handouts. They’d given her the predictable guff, but she had hope for one of them who had hesitated before walking away. As she bent to retrieve her bag, a man stepped up to her. He was tall, blue-eyed and wore a deeply creased frown on his face. “You have Faith, Sister! *Hallelujah!*” Then he blushed. “I hope you don’t mind. I overheard what you said to those poor unfortunates.” He continued to blush. “Inspiring.”

“Thank you, sir.” She had studied his demeanor. His head was large, his visage somewhat wasted. “God’s love is the answer.” She gave him a longer glance. “You’ve accepted this, brother?”

“I have, and share the message with all His world. And I shall ever strive to do so. This darkness assails us from the outside and we must not allow it into our hearts. The sun no longer shines on us from above so those of us who remember it must remind our brothers and sisters who have forgotten. For the Light remains!” His thick lips moved expertly around the words.

“Sometimes they only see the clouds that cover it,” she had said, the man’s gaze was open and honest.

“That is why my mission is to building a shining beacon for all the world to see. A Lighthouse of Hope so the storm gripping the world will claim no more of our brothers and sisters on the rocks of despair. We must light the way.” He reached out a hand, and she clasped the warm flesh in hers. “I have seen the passion with which you speak. And you speak while so many are silent. That tells me there is a will to live inside of you, and a will to live is evidence of hope. I need that hope if I am to accomplish what I struggle so long to do alone. Sister, let me tell you of my mission for it comes Heaven sent, and I can carry this only so far alone. I think you will agree that there is but one choice for us.”

And Reverend Stoneworthy had told the sister of his mission. All of it: his fall from grace, the Angel and the Tower. He had already done much work, and the plans for the Tower construction were being drawn. But resistance among the gathered faiths slowed things. With her help he could expedite this mission. So compelling was the light in his eyes, so seductive was the passion of his revelation that Cawood saw this as a penance for all, and so she committed herself to the difficult task ahead.

She dove into the work like a heaven sent shower and scrubbed herself clean with endless meetings and protocol. Together, with the help of like-minded people of God from the four-corners of the earth, they labored to raise the funds to build Archangel Tower, and in its construction—they believed—the introduction to the manifesto for salvation.

And they succeeded. Combining their passion for God had made them unstoppable in their ability to influence and innervate. Gradually, the Tower grew slowly at first, growing in speed with each passing year—as its magnificence was understood. For as the structure grew, so also did its image as a beacon of hope. Stoneworthy’s mission became the mission for all. Within Archangel’s thousands of rooms would be headquarters for the world’s religions. Theologians would be called there to study the Change, to divine its meaning. Archangel Tower reached out to God.

Dark waves of guilt buffeted Cawood’s mind. *Rest Your weary ones. Bless Your dying ones. Soothe Your suffering ones. Pity Your afflicted ones.*

“Hello?” Juanita’s face moved close; a smile played at the smooth corners of her mouth. “I hate to interrupt.”

“I’m sorry.” Cawood smoothed her hair. “Just thinking.” *Damn it, Able.*

“Well, you just snuggle in here.” Juanita’s lithe body pressed hot and close. “I’ll try to get your full attention.”

Cawood felt a tingle run through her body from the base of her spine to her breasts. “You’re so sweet.” Her nipples rubbed the Mormon’s. “I’ve just had an idea.”

“What could that be, Sister Cawood?” Juanita’s hands explored her belly. “Oh, dear, I must thank Able. It is pleasant being your distraction.”

And as they embraced, Cawood fled from her lies and her faithlessness. She immersed herself in sin until it felt like drowning.

### **13 – Employer from Hell**

Felon hated the cold. The chill wind that tore at him rode the crest of a Winter rain. The frigid weather system was plowing through the day like a glacier, dire and destructive. Its impact diminished or increased in relation to your location in the City. The City population created heat and certain elevations in the Levels trapped it. The metropolis had its own environment, and it all revolved around humidity and the dispersal of water dropped by incessant rains. The middle Levels were warmest, the upper Levels, ironically, the driest and the lowest, were the coldest. The damp air flowed downhill.

The assassin pulled his overcoat tight around his chest and spat a curse. Of all the sensations, cold was worst. He hated the cold because he couldn’t prepare for it. They could forecast the temperature, but they’d never be able to tell him how cold it would feel. And the Change made it entirely unpredictable. He couldn’t even count on seasons. His business depended on speed and sensation. He couldn’t afford to be constricted by thermal underwear and wool suits. Gloves were out of the question.

Felon clenched and unclenched his bare hands like he was strangling the air. The fingers were numb; but the gripping action moved the blood and kept them supple enough to work the .9 mm automatic in the large front pocket of his overcoat. He was on his way to meet a Demon. Instead of his client’s luxurious Level Five office, he’d been given instructions to meet in the basement of a six-story parking garage on Level One—which had to be one of the coldest places in the City.

He parked his rental car two floors up, and descended the rest of the way on foot. He’d be an easy target in a car within the cramped confines of a parking garage. A pedestrian couldn’t be parked in and gunned down.

Felon took no chances. His client had exceptional taste, followed the rules of the Unholy Compact, and dealt fairly in the past. But he was a Demon, and by his nature unable to easily accept restrictions. The Unholy Compact was a book of laws that balanced off the equation of the Bible.

Fallen followed the letter of the Compact like jailhouse lawyers, convicts who studied law to force their own release. Knowledge and command of all the loopholes in Cosmic law was a driving force in their Infernal lives.

Demons were ungoverned twists of passion, and subordinate to Fallen for that very reason. They paid lip service to the Compact, but were not bound by it. They adopted affectations of sophistication to counter the perception that they were subordinate. A Demon once explained that they were powerful beings that predated human civilization. They evolved alongside humanity from dim dark beginnings and were around before the Egyptians, the Romans, or the Stone Age Britons invented their complicated religions. Ancient humans actually begged them to play God. The association corrupted them all eventually. The arrival of the One God created a psychological self-destruction felt by all.

This God and his followers called Demons evil, and cast them in the Pit. But something must have happened to the One God, because the Change came and ended their long period of bondage. The Angels had returned, and Fallen walked the earth in little disguise. But the Unholy Compact remained as an ancient agreement that all feared breaking in case that brought the One God's return.

Felon was meeting with Baron Balg, a powerful Demon who claimed to be three thousand years old. He paid well. Balg's personal assistant, Senji Shaiko had set up the meeting and its location.

Felon uncurled his hands and nonchalantly dropped them into his coat pockets as he walked down the ramp. His numb fingers rested on his gun.

A figure stood at the far end of the parking garage, shadowy in the dim overhead light. Balg wore a black broad-brimmed pimp's hat with a long scarlet trench coat. Red and white wingtips protruded from beneath dark purple trousers. A calfskin glove covered the hand that twirled an obsidian walking stick. Long curved ram's horns arced through the brim of the Demon's hat. His eyes had an amber glow that flared a deeper red when he caught Felon's gaze.

"My dear, Felon." His voice was harsh and gravelly. His face though human, had bestial qualities: broad nose and wide mouth full of sharp tiger's teeth. A fringe of dark hair followed the underside of his jaw. "Sorry for the short notice!" Neither of them wasted time on a handshake.

Felon nodded. Demons liked to intimidate. Since Balg could take any shape, the assassin knew he had left his horns on for a reason.

"Felon..." The Demon's features fell as the assassin approached. "You look exceptionally grim today."

Felon twisted his lips, hating the small talk.

"Cold?" Balg gestured with his cane and a ring of foot-tall flames grew up around them, colored them with passionate red light.

Felon snarled. It was foolish to make an obvious show of force when their meeting place had been chosen for secrecy.

"The City is bothering you, no?" Balg's features twisted with concern.

"Irrelevant." The assassin fished in his coat pockets for a cigarette. He lit one.

"Relevance is relative," Balg said. A cigar appeared in his hand, lit and smoking. He took a deep pull on it. "A revelation for you, perhaps?" He laughed low and coarsely.

Felon's back warmed from the ring of flame.

"Oh, can't we drop this sad back and forth? We're friends. Let's talk like friends!" Balg smiled fiercely.

Felon said nothing. His face was stone.

Balg's features dropped as he studied the assassin's face, and then broke into a toothy grin. "You are a fucking snake. I offered the sign of friendship. Please feel free to take me up on it at your leisure." Balg straightened, both hands resting on his cane. "You have worked for me before and completed each task with your painstaking professionalism. You're the best in the business." The Demon stepped smoothly forward, reached out to slip a hand under Felon's elbow and then thought better of it, drawing him on with a nod of his head. "Of course, you're the *only* one in the business." The ring of flames broke before them as they walked, the fire now tracing a path on either side. They crossed the slush-covered garage floor.

Felon drew in on his cigarette.

“And normally, the objects of my disaffection are of the human or...” He smiled and pointed upward with his cane. “*Other* variety. But, I have a special job I would like you to take care of that involves a competing organization.”

*Fallen.* Felon thought. Whacking Fallen was dangerous. They had no allegiance with their own kind and had little to do with each other. Put Fallen out of the way: wash a partner out of the firm. Bump someone off that occupies space in the chain above you, or someone who is busily climbing below—the ends justified the means every time. Business was harsh in the Infernal world, and few would seek revenge for a dead competitor. But, all Divine creatures felt the transgression of a mortal stepping beyond his place. And like it or not, they were Fallen, and had fought the Great War against Heaven. Felon would be a fool to think that there were no quiet alliances, and no chance of revenge. It was big money.

Balg’s massive brow wrinkled. “I didn’t quite catch that. You must forgive me but you were thinking about something there, and I almost caught it.” He chortled. “*You* force me to read body language!”

Felon’s stomach tightened. Balg was testing him.

The Demon chuckled. “Mirgeth, a Fallen of some power, has taken it upon himself to fall rather lustfully for a certain young human woman, with whom I have similar intentions. Unlike myself, he tries to win her affections with lust. He has for some time been sending her an Incubus to tend to her physical needs in her sleep. Such attentions are dangerous to a mortal, for there is no satiation for the Incubus. He will always please her, for he himself will never be pleased.”

“Who does Mirgeth run with?” Felon shook his head.

“A freelancer formerly with Lucifer,” Balg said and smiled with yellowed carnivore teeth. “Don’t misunderstand me, my wolf. Mirgeth isn’t the target. This is *family* business. I want you to hit the Incubus who has been rather successfully foiling my attempts to woo the young maiden. With him prodding her every fucking night, why send flowers?”

*Woo.* Felon knew what that meant. The Incubus was interfering with Balg’s attempt at manipulation or outright possession. Incubi and their female counterparts, Succubae, were Demons. They were a subclass of that Infernal type, much like Cherubs were of Angels.

He nodded. Felon knew that Incubi were dangerous creatures that could use sexuality as a weapon. Not Fallen, but killing them wasn’t easy.

“I’ll need access to her home. And there’s the chance she will see me. I don’t like that and if she’s yours, I can’t put a bullet in her.”

“Of course not, Felon. No. No. No bullet’s in her—please! Remove the Incubus. I understand there is a great deal of risk. But like anything,” Balg said with a chuckle, “you will have a price, Felon. Do not worry about access to her bedchambers; I have a copy of her house key for you. And I know her habits and patterns. I watch her,” he said huskily, a string of saliva suddenly running past his fangs. “I shall tell you exactly when you can enter her home.”

“*You* whack him,” Felon growled. “Family. You’ve got the right.”

“Actually, Felon he is family.” Balg’s eyes glowed along with his cigar. “Stahn is a relative of mine. I suppose a *nephew* in your terms. I would be uncomfortable punishing him personally.”

“Price,” Felon started, before any more information was imparted. The assassin didn’t want to know the rest until his price was accepted.

“Of course.” Balg’s smile resembled a snarl. “Fifty thousand dollars in lost Incan gold. That is the ore value, some of the artifacts are worth twice that, should you endeavor to sell them *as is*.”

“Eighty grand in ingots,” Felon said. He wasn’t interested in fencing antiques. “Forty up front delivered to the Coastview Hotel by six tonight.” He lit another cigarette, turning to conceal the shiver that ran through his hands.

Eighty grand and you take the starch out of that little prick.” Smiling, Balg drew a tube of rolled parchment from his coat. “The customary contract.” He handed it to Felon.

Moving under the flickering fluorescent, Felon unrolled the parchment. He scanned it while searching an inner pocket for his magnifying glass. The assassin had bargained for information about such an item with another employer. A special film on the lens showed any magic script. He went over the contract with the treated glass. Balg’s invisible seal was there, a disemboweled ram crucified on jagged swords, but that was customary. He put the glass away.

“Pen.” The Demon reached around him. Felon took the steel quill from the heavy hand, and punctured the fleshy part of his thumb with it. Dark blood seeped up the length of the nib. He signed and handed the quill to Balg who drew some of his own blood and signed.

“Very well, Felon.” Balg put the contract away, before giving him an envelope. “The address, her habits, and the key I mentioned are inside.”

Felon shook the envelope.

“It’s a pity you can’t kill him slowly,” Balg said, bloodlust bringing more saliva from his fangs. “But I understand the limitations of your abilities.”

“I will remember your interest in my limitations.” Felon slid the envelope into his coat. “When?”

“Kill Stahn tonight.” The Demon’s lips drew back in a grotesque grin. “You may have to leave town soon. Everyone’s talking about the Cherubs. Paid for one and he whacks the other for fun.” He showed his canines. “Contact my office uptown for the rest of your fee.”

Balg faded out of sight. The magical fires flickered and were gone. The assassin shivered on his way up to the car. Felon got in, started the engine, and turned the heat up to full. He would look in the envelope when he saw the gold.

## 14 – Distraction

Mr. Jay had a *thing* for women. That’s what he called it: *a thing!* Dawn regretted asking him about it. “Look at them, Dawn. How can I love just one?”

Well what was that supposed to mean? Dawn didn’t understand his *wandering eye* so it frightened her and being permanently prepubescent left her little to work with.

“You won’t understand,” he explained whenever the subject came up. “You aren’t built for it—and you may never be. The whole business must be alien to you—picture books or not. Understanding *why* is irrelevant.” A spider of his fingers ran through her hair. “They are honey to me. And I’m a bee.”

Well what was that supposed to mean? Dawn liked honey too and loved finding it on their travels in broken hives and abandoned houses. But she didn’t think she was a bee. She loved honey, but knew it could be trouble. Dawn warned, “Too much will give you a sore belly.”

“If only, darling,” Mr. Jay moaned wistfully. “If only.”

It was because of his *thing* for women that she still didn’t know why the men were chasing them. In her heart of hearts the forever girl knew that his thing for women would never harm her; but it filled her with dread just the same. She just didn’t understand it. So she was sometimes overwhelmed by a fear that Mr. Jay would one day prefer the company of women to hers. Dawn felt queasy just thinking of the things women could do. She’d heard enough from some of the older kids at the Nurserywood. And a bad one Kevin once showed her a magazine. *Yuck!*

Dawn’s inner voice suggested that Mr. Jay might meet a nice woman who would like Dawn—perhaps a woman like her mother. But the forever girl hesitated to accept that. She just couldn’t take the chance.

Dawn contemplated these notions where she hid under the stairs that led up to this *new* woman’s apartment. Waiting was okay; she did a lot of waiting. And hiding too, there was lots of that. Mr. Jay was her only friend, and she knew he cared about her—in fact he went out of his way for her. His *thing* was beyond her and she had to learn to let it go.

This woman had caught Mr. Jay’s wandering eye not long after the taxicab dropped them off. She was dark-haired and of a pre-Change twenty or so—though Dawn was never good at guessing grownup ages. This woman showed off her bumpy woman’s body in tight black clothing and wore sunglasses. *Sunglasses?* The forever girl couldn’t believe it. The sun hadn’t broken cloud in a hundred years.

It was Dawn who first caught the woman’s eye—dressed as she was as a dark-bearded midget.

“How sweet!” the woman trilled from the doorway of a coffeehouse. “Such a cute little man.” She dropped to her knees so quickly that it startled Dawn—her nerves still blazing from the chase.

“Forgive me, little friend!” The woman gasped, shocked by the speed with which Dawn had moved. The forever girl watched her from behind Mr. Jay’s knees. “I just wanted to see your face!” The woman rose to her full height, eyes locking on Mr. Jay’s before exclaiming, “Your little friend is shy!”

“Wouldn’t you be?” The magician looked her up and down replying. “Frankly, the world has become a frightening place for *me!*”

The woman regarded him quickly before replying, “For me also.” Her features softened as she smiled down at Dawn’s bearded features. “I’m so sorry.”

Dawn only managed a suspicious half-smile and growled assent before Mr. Jay began, “We’re entertainers...”

His voice took on a tone that Dawn knew all too well. He had a voice for entertaining on the sidewalks and one for talking to Dawn, and another voice for talking to women.

After a few minutes discussion, Dawn discovered that the woman's name was Carmen, was marooned in the City after the Change so long ago, and still didn't know if her parents in Paris were alive or dead.

This whole exchange had taken place in the awkward space between a low brick wall and a wooden fence that ran out to the street in front of the coffeehouse. As people made their way in and out of the door, Dawn had to keep herself as small as possible.

The whole time that Carmen had talked, Mr. Jay listened and nodded and spoke and before long she invited him back to her apartment. Mr. Jay said it was on their way anyway so why not.

As she sat under the stairs and waited for the grownups to finish their *thing* in the rooms above, Dawn remembered the first time she had recognized a change in Mr. Jay's voice when he spoke to women. *She* rarely spoke to other people, so her knowledge of Mr. Jay's voice was intimate. It was the third or fourth time that he had used this voice that she asked him about it. He smiled.

"You've got to give me something," Mr. Jay said blushing. He picked at the ragged hem of his coat and twirled his dirty top hat. "I'm not much more than a beggar without it... And as much as I trust these women's hearts—their eyes, well they are another matter."

Dawn pressed the issue: "Is it a trick?"

Again Mr. Jay blessed her with his secret smile. "Not like a card trick or some sort of illusion that confuses the senses. It's really just listening." Her friend pondered the point for a little. "In fact, it's mostly listening. You have to hear past the words to feel the emotion behind them." Then he laughed. "And there might be more to the process. It's hard to tell; but who would blame me if there were. I was too duty bound in my former life." He squinted in a villainous way. "But, I've always had a *thing* for women."

The forever girl drifted back to where she hid under the stairs like a troll. Carmen was nice to her during their walk to the apartment, but upon their arrival Mr. Jay had insisted that his friend, Mojo wait for them on the main floor—somewhere out of the way. He pointed with his walking stick. "My associate has had a terrible time learning a certain few card tricks. I must implore him to use the time practicing. We shan't be long, Mojo." He handed Dawn his pack, and the pair walked up the stairs to Carmen's apartment. The building was very old, like it was built just after the Change. Stairs at the end of the hall leading down suggested that the building protruded through the Level they were on. It was an old structure so Dawn had no trouble finding a place to hide behind some trashcans under the stairs.

While she scooted around for comfort, Dawn wondered what was going on up there. She remembered Kevin's magazine and felt like puking about what that crazy boy said. But she was curious just the same.

Mr. Jay's descriptions of what actually took place were vague and misleading. "We had tea..." Was the one he tried at first, until he realized that Dawn could have tea too, so he added quickly, "And talked about things that grown ups have to talk about. *Adult communication*, Dawn."

Dawn brooded on her backpack chair and picked at her sticky beard. Mr. Jay would soon come skipping and whistling his way down the stairs very soon, but she couldn't shake the anxious thoughts just the same. She knew it was sex up there or something like it, but she couldn't understand its attraction. Usually after these *adult communications*,

Mr. Jay would call her out of hiding, and the pair of them would make their way back to wherever their hideout was. As she stewed, her mind turned to dark imaginings.

What if Mr. Jay stayed up there all night? Or worse, what if Mr. Jay fell in love with this Carmen. *Real love*, not just the love he felt for them all. Dawn knew that sex and love were sometimes talked about like they were the same thing, but she didn't know what either was really. And as always it was while keeping these sad obsessive thoughts from her mind that she most had to fight the urge that inevitably sprang into being. *I have to go get Mr. Jay! Make sure he's okay!*

Only once, not long after she had first taken up with Mr. Jay, had she found that urge impossible to resist. That time, she was hiding in a backyard garden shed while Mr. Jay was busy having adult communications in the house with a big breasted woman who had really liked their act. They entertained that night at an inn Mr. Jay described as something from Henry Fielding but with rain. An old gas station he said less imaginatively, later.

Dawn only knew that it was in one of the dirty little villages that had cropped up after the Change—at a crossroads in the wild lands far to the north and west of any of the bigger cities and the highways. But as Dawn hid herself in this garden shed she struggled with this fear and the urge. What if Mr. Jay was tired of her company? It was only two years since her mother disappeared and a year since she found Mr. Jay.

The fear became too much, and leaping from her hiding place she ran into the woman's house—hot tears pouring over her round cheeks. Dawn felt terrible replaying that particular memory, but the shame always kept her dangerous urge at bay. She wasn't embarrassed surprising Mr. Jay naked in bed on top of the yellow-haired woman—also naked—not then, and not now. It was what Mr. Jay said after that made her cheeks flush red.

He had followed her back out to the shed when she ran. A light rain gave the grass a shushing sound as his boots slipped through it. Orange light from a lamp jumped in front of him. At first she had thought she would be punished, but even then, she couldn't imagine Mr. Jay punishing her. Instead of that, when he found her cowering on some tarps in the far corner of the shed, he had gently called her out. Dawn could remember the look on his face, he was sad not angry.

And he said: "I am sorry that things have to be the way they are, but they do. The open world is not safe for you, and yet I must live my life too. I will not deny it. Dawn, all I want you to do is trust me, have faith in me. I will never lie to you."

And he never had, as far as she could tell. But the memory always calmed her down, made waiting more fruitful than fearful. Mr. Jay would return, he always did. Hugging that hope to her chest she started dozing. But a thought brought her back. Why did those men chase them?

## 15 – Night Creature

Sister Cawood climbed out of the taxi. The driver stared in the rearview as she threw one, then another leg out the door. His eyes flashed wide when her spandex miniskirt rolled up her thighs. Outside the cab she paused to wriggle it back into place. Feeling his eyes staring at her every action caused pleasurable impulses to ripple over her skin. She bent at the window to pay him. His face held a look of passionate disbelief and desire.

“What?” She threw money in his lap. “You never see a girl without her panties before.” Cawood didn’t wait for an answer. A succulent and abhorrent realization tugged at the corners of her mouth as she wondered what he would have thought had he known she was a nun.

Orgasmic tremors ran down her legs at the thought. To look at her that way, had he known—especially if he was *Catholic*. The notion sent a pulse of pleasure over her abdomen and up her spine. She turned from the cab, pulling the purple and pink miniskirt over her butt. In addition to this provocative gear she wore a lavender plastic jacket and white cotton tube top. She had bound her hair on top of her head with a pink scarf. Purple pumps and matching rubber hoop earrings completed the picture. From a small belt purse she pulled a compact and cosmetics clutch. She touched up the bright lipstick without catching her gaze in the mirror.

*Mary, Mother of God we confidently undertake to repulse the attacks and deceits of the devil.*

The music pounded out of time to the rhythmic flicker of the neon sign. The sound, like all sound in the City came out distorted and strange as it bounced first off the buildings around and across from it, then as it returned from its echo off the solid Level above. Hissing car noises came from everywhere, echoing and reverberating among the City’s many facets. A light mist fell on a dark and noisome breeze. The pavement sparkled with the same pink as the neon sign across from her.

The bar was called “Carthage.” A stylized elephant was worked into the polished steel sign over the door. The name and image briefly conjured ancient memories from history lessons almost forgotten—brought vague references to Hannibal crossing the Alps.

“When in Rome,” she heard her voice say. It was a different voice from the one she used in Archangel Tower. This was deep and resonant. It was throaty and free. She snapped her belt purse shut and strutted across the street toward the entrance.

There was a lineup. Forty people from all walks milled behind a barricade. There were no telltale distinctions of class, just the type of thing you could find at a Level Four nightclub. It was a low enough Level to be exciting but high enough to be respectable without being too public—an example of the complicated end of the world social ethic. The rich tried to fuck the poor and the poor tried to fuck the rich. Nothing new, just more extreme—there were few illegal drugs anymore and most of them were sold at the counter alongside over proof alcohol.

As Sister Cawood jogged out of the way of a retro-Beetle van a number of Bully Boys in line started crowing. Bully Boys ran in gangs. She’d heard enough about them in talks with clients at the Relief Center to be wary of them. They promoted a sadomasochistic lifestyle with the onus on omnisexual behavior. Gang members could be identified by their habit of staining parts of their anatomies—usually bright neon reds, oranges or blues. They dyed the flesh around their eyes, ears and orifices. Their clothing was rubber and leather, with chrome and steel accessories.

She was thrilled and repulsed by their lewd suggestions and their graphic appreciation of her body. She could not resist smiling at their taunts or feeling guilty at her response. The catcalls she received caused her abdomen to pulse with pleasure. Her face flushed. For the moment, she felt safe from them, since they were stuck close to the front of a growing line behind a barricade, and would be unlikely to break ranks just to hassle her.

Still, she imagined what would happen if a gang of them ever got her alone—really got their hands on her. Her nipples tingled.

Their vocal approval turned to roars of indignation as she walked past the lineup and approached the two bouncers who stood like stonework before the door.

“Back of the line.” A blond man with a spider tattooed over his left eye gestured with his chin. He wore leather pants and a T-shirt.

“Oh fuck off!” she said, moving closer, running a fingertip up his arm to a steroid-enhanced biceps. “I’m freezing.” She dropped her gaze knowing the bouncer’s eyes would follow, and with two fingers slowly lifted her skirt a few inches exposing more pale skin. “You don’t want me to freeze...”

The Bullyboys howled at that one, booing and hissing her performance. A big one in the lead wearing rubber bib overalls pushed his dark welding glasses up.

“You bitch!” he yelled. She saw that his lips and strong cheeks were smeared a dark red. “You Brazil-waxing bitch! I’m on the highway to hell too!” This was followed by howls of laughter from his companions. “Shake your ass for them, Cherry!” they yelled. More laughter.

The other bouncer laughed along with them. “Yeah, you go in baby. You’re a peach.” The bald man had a Mohawk of bolts piercing the skin across the top of his skull. One of his hands squeezed her left buttock.

Cawood snarled and smiled at him, then moved through the door they held open. She made sure her buttocks ground against the bouncer’s groin. A grunt of pleasure and she moved past. She walked through darkness in a short hallway past a smoke-filled coat-check then the music caught her. A throbbing electronic beat hooked on something deep inside her body and drew her in. The vibrating air ran invisible pulsing fingers over her skin. Passion and shame colored her cheeks as she pulled a cigarette out and lit it. She watched out of the corner of her eye as men along the bar devoured her with looks. *Sodomy. Sin. Purgatory. Whore.* Cawood felt a tingle rush over her pelvis as they whispered approval to each other.

She took a deep drag from her cigarette and walked over to the bar purposefully choosing a point between two large groups of youngish looking men. She thought “youngish” because she knew that everyone had suffered the effects of the Change and were a century older than they looked. But she sidled in between a couple of tall men one black and one white, purposefully ignoring their gazes. She had noticed a pair of women eyeing her seriously but fresh from Juanita, she was not in the mood for more cunnilingus. She felt like a man.

“Vodka and seven!” she shouted at the bartender.

A pale redheaded man with serious lines around his mouth nodded and made the drink.

“Hey sister!” a man said to her left.

Cawood froze, fear coursing through her.

“Hey sweetheart,” a voice said on her right. She turned slowly. He was tall and muscular. His skin was as black as coal and shone with a blue light. “Can we buy you a drink?”

Her fear drained away as she looked at the man’s solid chest. “Yes, you can.”

“I’m Dave.” He smiled, the black light turning his teeth sun bright. “That’s my buddy Raul.”

Cawood turned to his friend. He had long sandy hair, was shorter than the black man, and of a smaller build.

“We’re waiting for our bro’ Sam.” Dave called her attention back by tugging at a loose locket of her hair. “We’re gonna trip.”

“Trip?” Cawood took a long sip of her drink, turning her back to the bar so she could see both men. “Where are you going?”

“Ah fuck,” Raul said, his eyes wide and pupils dilated. “Trains already left baby.”

“Hey sister.” Dave grabbed Cawood’s free hand. “What’s your name?”

“Call me Karrie.” Cawood smelled his cologne as she shouted her name.

“Here’s your ticket. Karrie.” He placed a small colored capsule in her hand.

Cawood looked at it, then up into Dave’s dark eyes. “What is it?”

“Fucking Salvation Baby.” He laughed showing all of his teeth.

“Salvation.” She held the capsule up in the weird light. “I need Salvation!” Cawood tipped her head back and dropped the capsule in. It tasted like nothing, but she washed it down with a splash of her drink. She looked at her companions. They slapped each other’s palms laughing. “Salvation!” Cawood felt Raul’s hand slide over her hips and pause over her tailbone.

“You’re fucking beautiful, Karrie,” he said, his breath garlicky with chemical traces.

“You’re not!” She laughed, and then kissed him wetly.

Raul looked up at Dave and the pair shared a secret smile. Cawood watched the writhing bodies on the dance floor as she waited for the drug to kick in.

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