

Volume III Summary

Once upon a time, two lovers decided that they would cheat time and live forever. They built a family on the streets of misfits and delinquents, setting out to take on the world together. As a unit, there would be no force beyond their control – until a jealous rival seeks to burn their contentment. A vision of a family where blood is insignificant, the cast endures both in past and present as they illustrate the adults their youth brought them to become.

As the young gang of friends is tormented by premature deaths of their peers, they are forced to find it within themselves to evaluate what is more important to live, and die, for. Darius and Raine Drake are the foundation of this group of sinners desperately hoping to prove the strength of wisdom, honor, and most importantly – love.

1. Delusional

To the world that raised me, the family that nourished my growth and the friends who helped me establish myself in society.

To the ignorant, the arrogant, the foolish and enlightened – the structure that makes this existence like no other.

Here is a story of stories, my story. It has no end and no beginning, it simply is when it is, as it is and shall be. From this my identity is established.

Welcome to my world.

The small universe that I've made for myself as my life

expands is open now to you, to your prying eyes, your ideals and decisions and motives.

This is for you, to you and all that will come afterward to see and be witness to, to understand and consider.

Simply to love . . .

Or hate.

And this is where I leave you, with this all to bear in mind as you consider the details of my story, of *our* epic tale. To understand, you'd have to live it, which is impossible. But to show you a vague glimpse, maybe that small show will be enough.

Enough for what? Enough to prove useful.

Enough to leave an impression on your mind; an impact in your soul.

Don't think immediately, don't break down and analyze right away, just take it all in the first time around. Anything after that doesn't matter to me, just as long as you read without conviction, without judgment or consideration.

There's no thought involved in reading. The true meaning will make itself known without you having to stop and think; it'll sink into your subconscious eventually.

So . . . welcome.

I do hope that you enjoy, but be warned of what you're going to read. It's not the usual, because my life isn't typical. It's far from ordinary, extremely so.

You're warned in advance of the amount of eccentricity you'll encounter in this scrambled description of my existence.

So are you bold enough to continue? Or have I frightened you off.

Hold tight for the ride, keep the train on the tracks and bear in mind all I've told you in pretense. Don't tell me what you think in the end, I don't care.

Here's to you, your patience and open-mindedness toward controversy, change and humanity. Here's to your teachers, peers and acquaintances.

Enjoy the ramblings of a young fool and his more foolish compatriots; bear in mind all I've warned of and think blindly.

Again, to the basic idea –

Love

Or Hate.

Decision is Destiny.

2. Despair

Ever stop to think about a commonly accepted idea? Deconstruct the main idea, finding that it lacks cause. Concepts like religion and politics are less complicated than the controversy would make you think. Unnecessary debates, anxiety, pain – it's like going to war over a whispered insult. Blindly following ambitions with no purpose – definition of life. The bottom line? It goes on.

Dark night with a cold chill in the air; the rain doesn't make things any easier. Walking down empty streets to busy crowds, brewing with tension. It hangs in the air, accumulating with the rainfall. From silent repose to thoughtless pondering, the emotions rage on in New York's hectic society. I

appreciate the stormy weather that citizens loathe – it's necessary. Rain washes away the sins; gives way to rebirth. My parents must've understood my ideals prior to my birth, considering that they named me after my "obsession". Raine, dark, solitary, child borne of my . . . "unusual" parents. I prefer the term – enlightened.

Of all the world, there is one other like myself. Darius, my closest friend and confidant; similar to my own character, she possessed certain quirks. We didn't grow up together or anything silly like that; a day came and we just "were". She moved into my building awhile back and we met. More like loathed one another, but so it goes.

Back to what I was saying, the more important truths. People as a whole are ignorant of their flaws; ignorance should be a sin. They've got greed, gluttony, sloth, anger, jealousy, lust, vanity – but no true sins. Ignorance, arrogance, pride, despair, delirium – there are infinite types of character flaws. Paranoia leads to conspiracy, more flaws. Funny how an ideal society could have so many disgraces. Outwardly the world appears somewhat content, though that's just the surface. Kind of like a lake – below the soft, serene surface lies an entire universe of creatures; the water's calm edge could hide various threats and consequence.

It's Saturday night . . . tick, tick. Seven o' clock. Tick . . . time slows down without purpose and moves swiftly for the same reason. Another tick, another breath wasted; add a lost moment to the pile. The rain counts the hours; ruining plans, canceling events – restoring nature. All events are a cycle, life's ups and downs, the weather, everything. Uncertainty has abandoned the world, leaving just the cycles . . . and the rain. The funny thing about rain, what makes it great is that it is constant. While our existence is simply fleeting, I can watch the trickles of nature and appreciate how it has seen all of history and will continue to after it has outlasted my generation. To be mortal is . . . exceptionally wasteful.

There are some purposes to survival, but very few – to achieve great things requires a lifetime of dedication – you can't start something great and then walk away. What you do in life follows you forever, riding on the coat-tails of your memory. But once your gone, it becomes a dream; simply a distant message.

After some time I became bored of the constant atmosphere, so I left my apartment and went downstairs. On the staircase a figure lurked, blending skillfully with the shadows. I already knew what I sought; continuing down the flight I said hello to Darius. She skulked from her dark corner, falling in step behind me.

“Two days,” she said half-heartedly. Looking up at me, she tilted her head slightly. “Getting to know my habits now?” She shrugged to signify her mood and smiled sarcastically.

“Your eyes,” I replied simply, pausing my step only for a second. Her eyes were truly amazing, they changed with her character. Now they reflected the rain, turned a dull gray, mimicking the outer atmosphere by sparkling and turning. The tints were never in the same place twice. On most occasions, each was a different color, making for interesting conversation. In response she looked away, considering the betrayal of her vision. After the brief contemplation, she fell in step behind me again.

We went down to the street and walked. There was no point, no purpose – just movement. There was nothing better to do. Darius stepped out to keep up with me; she was small and childish compared to my lanky structure. The rain hadn't slowed down any and we kept moving regardless, there wasn't much to say. Darius kept by my side, silently watching the few people rushing through the flooding sidewalks. The population was more dense today because of the weather; the few outside only were because they had to be. Except for Darius and myself.

There was no reason to be outside except boredom; hoping to find something to do. Boredom is the most ignored source of brilliance – it's unfounded as a waste of time. There was a moment of my life where everything seemed to stop; I realized I had changed. My emotional progress dawned on me later – a severely delayed reaction. My emotions shifted themselves without evidence of change until I put them to use.

Darius was special; she saw the world as a series of still pictures. No movement, minimal sound. Looking at cars passing briskly she would only see them standing still, frozen. Blink, a second passes; the cars shift in position – the red pickup is further down the road. That's how her mind worked. She believed that movement was unnecessarily necessary. All of life is moving, glancing by in an instant; by seeing one frame at a time, taking out the noise in-between moments eliminates wasted time and allows for appreciation. Darius could pass as a mute if she wanted, living a silent lie. It took years for her to train her eyes and mind to cooperate with her intent; once I got her to explain it to me in detail. She was drunk – beat the shit out of me the next day and made me swear to forget everything she'd said. I locked it away for reflection when boredom took over.

We circled the block and went back inside once we reached the building, our building. What to talk about? Darius, of course. How did we get to how we are now? We balance one another. First time I laid eyes on her, I thought little of her. Small in stature with dark features and a brooding glare. We were young – I knocked her down by mistake and she beat me up. I pinned her arms over her head, watching her eyes dance in response to my sudden show of authority. From there I started drinking heavily, on a road to destruction. One night I wandered in the rain; lost and drunk, searching for home. Blindly I found my building, locking my shaky glance on Darius. I felt a cough and remembered the hard floor, damp around me. Everything was black after that.

I woke up in a dark room in a soft bed staring at a crumbling ceiling. Trying to sit up brought all kinds of new agony; sitting up I looked around. The walls were a dark base color but had been covered on all sides with photos, words and sketches. There was the bed I sat on and a mis-matched set of table and chairs set up in the corner. Painfully I moved to examine the photos thrown messily along its' surface, sifting through the images. In the middle of the stack was a black and white portrait of myself. The racing of my mind tuned me out from reality as I stared at myself.

"What're you doing?" I heard behind me, approaching. Dropping the photo, I reeled around on my heel to face the speaker. She looked annoyed in an innocent, childish way. Backing away toward a dark window I asked what had happened.

"You passed out and you're sick," her eyes looked intently into mine. "I carried you up here while my uncle slept; he doesn't know you're here," she started to seem nervous, more anxious than before. I looked around the small room.

"Where'd you sleep? . . . why did you do all this?" My mind filled with ideas of subliminal messages, ulterior motives. She was a stranger in my familiar environment, nothing added up. I shook my head and turned to leave when she slammed the door in front of me.

"On the floor of the living room and because I chose to. Would you rather have died of pneumonia in the rain? Not very appreciative are . . ." her voice trailed off as she stared blankly at me. In a move I'd grabbed her and held her close, kissing her softly. The door was forgotten and I stayed with her for days. That's how Darius and I became closer than any imaginable. Words weren't necessary – it just was.

Balance is necessary in everything; life has death, Heaven has Hell; I had Darius. She was more than a friend or companion. Deeper than a wife, more compassionate than a lover, she was

beyond time as well as all else. We were the same for the most part now as we were in the beginning. We aged, matured and grew but otherwise were untouchable by time, fate, chance or destiny. Only one force controlled us – Love.

Being young's a trip, the mix of new emotions and ideas that manipulate the senses. Love's the most tricky of all – it'll knock you on your back and take the breath from your lungs and turn the world upside-down. Yet, Darius and I were beyond the vulgar reach of love or lust; passion had no words. We were still level-headed and foolish, as youth tends to be; but we had each other to share it with. Life granted us a melancholy relationship that we enjoyed completely.

Darius melted away into a corner, enjoying its' enclosure. Looking down the street I saw her uncle coming closer, grumbling because of nature's misfortune. He glared down at me as he passed, stamping his way up the stairs. Darius peered out from behind me, in her corner that had protected her from her uncle. The low muttering of her temper-mental uncle still hung in the air; she stared as if she could physically see the words. I held her for a moment until she pushed away roughly to move toward the stairs. Without a word, just a guilty glance, she ran up the flight after her uncle.

I stayed there awhile, watching the rain. I knew I wouldn't see her for a few days. Darius' uncle, Cid, wasn't the most pleasant man. He was . . . emotionally unbalanced – about three steps shy of being a full-blown delusional schizophrenic. By his particular manner you could tell what humor he was in; the weather heavily disrupted his mood. When Cid was young, he had a great life. High school sweetheart, engaged to be married – ideal. His folks were bible-beaters and fought hard against the wedding. One rainy night, the two went driving to clear their heads and discuss their future. A slick spot and a dark turn sent the car in a ditch, rolling hard the way down. She was dead and he was lost; the sickness spread as he got older.

When tragedy occurs, the mind shuts down. A characteristic common in those who take heavy mental blows is substitution. What I mean is Cid may get in a bad mood and take it out on Darius, but only because he thinks she's someone else. Everybody knows he's a little crazy, but ultimately harmless – to most people anyway. Darius took the blunt of it with a nod and a smile, she wouldn't talk about him, she just went. From what I gathered, she loved him and worried about leaving him alone. Her grandparents detached themselves from their children because of their religious devotion.

Cid was her mother's only brother; her father's side of the family had disowned him, so they were of no help. Darius was an outcast from birth and Cid was the only one "foolish" enough to take custody of her. She led a rough life but handled it well. From this I grew to respect and appreciate her; love and affection were always there, but loyalty, respect, and devotion take time to acquire and a lifetime to maintain. The ideal relationship between two outcasts of society; too perfect for planning and too deep for destiny.

Time slipped by, I decided to go visit a friend of mine. Up the stairs, three floors – the door itself was dark and foreboding. I knocked hard twice and waited in the doorway. There were some sounds of scuffling and the door opened to reveal a weathered-looking woman. Her eyes were tired and distant as she stepped away from the doorway. I stepped in quietly and waited. A dark shape rushed by then, past me and out the door. I nodded to the woman and left, closing the door behind me.

He moved rapidly down the steps flawlessly, threatening to trip. I hurried behind him to catch up. From several feet back I heard a yell and a thud. Reaching the bottom of the staircase I found him, sitting on the floor. Draven wasn't happy and didn't care to hide it. Looking to his left I saw a young girl standing, offering to help him. From what I assumed, they must have been traveling in opposite directions

when she tripped him and down Draven went. The anger glowed in his eyes as he sneered at her. Seeing me she gave up and ran up the stairs.

“Okay?” I questioned. Draven got up uneasily, glaring at the staircase. He shook off the shock and faced me. Nodding, he sulked away. I followed, cautious of his temper.

Draven is the complete opposite of Darius. He’s quick-tempered and seldom rational. He had a bizarre family as well. He seemed a bit unhinged, but he was all right. Loyal to the core, he’s the kind of guy who’d follow you to Hell and back just to feel the heat. His mother never said much, just stared wearily at the world as it passed her by. His father was a hard alcoholic and desperately abusive. From anger was born hatred; product of this being Draven.

He lived here about as long as Darius and he shared her dark features. He was structured large and knew the reaches of his strength. Generally he was in good humor and protective of his friends. Draven was one of my closest and best friends; we’d been through a lot already in a few short years.

He lurked back and forth in the shadows for a while slowly, adjusting to the pain of falling down the stairs. After awhile of getting his frustration out, he looked at me, as if realizing I was there for the first time. Blinking a few times, his eyes turned friendly and calm.

“Hello,” he said quietly, rolling the word over in his mind. He seemed absent, thoughts elsewhere. We went outside and sat under a small overhang, talking about random topics; conversation between the delirious and the abstract. Darkness started to settle in as day grew into night and the long hours felt weak and feeble. We listened silently to our building’s routines; the usual conversation, day to day schedules – Cid’s yelling. As hour passed before he stopped, so Draven and I went inside to find Darius. The rain started to slow down a

little, only a little. It's been awhile since we had seen sunlight, but hopefully, soon . . .

Darius was sitting on the stairs alone in profile. She seemed different though, something was wrong. I edged closer to her slowly, waiting for some sort of response. I never got any sort of answer – she just stared vacantly into space. As I moved closer, she shifted her stance, turning away. After considering something unknown she jumped up and started up the stairs. I ran after her, leaving a confused Draven standing around alone.

At the top of the flight I caught her arm, but she pulled away. I kept going until I realized a darkness on my hand. Moving to the window, I saw that it was covered in blood. As I ran up the stairs after Darius, I tried to discover why I hadn't seen it sooner. I followed persistently to the roof where I found both Darius and Draven. Her back was toward me and Draven stood closer to me, trying to coax Darius into calming down. I stepped closer, slowly edging forward.

"Darius, it's alright, let me help you, let me get Raine," Draven pleaded calmly with soft, caring eyes, giving a gesture toward me to keep quiet. She started to walk away from him, whispering to herself. Draven stepped closer, as did I, moving together we dared nearer. But for every step forward we took, Darius took two more. She was nearing the edge, I couldn't hold back. I jumped forward to grab her, but she fell away from me, sliding backwards slowly. I remember watching her fall gracefully to the ground, screaming as I lunged after her. Blinking, everything moved backwards, I found myself back on the staircase.

Time stopped for that moment. I was in a waking nightmare where my worst fears were realized. The funny thing was that none of it was real. Darius was climbing the stairs in front of me; I hurried up, still trying to clear my mind. I saw Draven at the other end of the hallway, trying to box her in.

She moved past him to the roof with us on her heels. The memories of the dream were vivid, my stomach churned as it all played out. Draven started talking as I reached out and grabbed Darius. Holding tight, I turned her to face me. She was covered in blood, eyes downcast, looking lost. She shook in the cool breeze as my mind fought to separate reality from surreal.

I had Draven walk her down and talk to her as I replayed the events. In the "dream" I had seen her fall, she's turned to face us before falling backwards. She smiled; a cold, chilling gesture of cruel fate. I saw the blood; Draven's despairing glance. But it wasn't real. Most of it was, except her death. I found a dark corner to loathe and enjoyed its' cover. Ten minutes passed until I decided that all that mattered were the actual events. She was alive; we would be all right. The delusion left me for a short while as I looked for Draven.

They were sitting on an old stairwell, long since abandoned by society. Darius rocked back and forth, her head in her arms as Draven attempted wearily to console her. He stood and left, giving me an acknowledging nod. I took his place, wrapping my arm around her. Silence settled in for a long while as she rocked back and forth gently. The world moved on; sirens passed, people lived and society flourished. All that didn't matter as long as we had this moment.

"I stabbed him," she whispered, scared of her own accomplishment. I questioned whom in a neutral voice, though I already knew.

"Cid, he was . . ." she stopped to reconsider the story, "He was in a mood and came after me. I was just . . . self defense . . ." her voice trailed off again. Her head rose as she spoke and nodded in conclusion, confirming the smooth sound of the tale. I stared down at her bloody, tear-ridden face with compassionate eyes, putting my coat around her. We walked to my place so I could clean her up and hopefully find out what

happened. Using some warm water, I gently wiped away blood and tears, careful of her eyes. They stared past me, empty, full of confusion and agony. The color shifted from red, mirroring the blood's texture, to gray: neutral, lost, cloudy.

Time's the best illusion of all; it's fleeting when you need it to stop and it pauses when it should fly. Seconds became hours as we sat together, watching the night settle in. It was dark and the rain had stopped by the time another word was spoken.

"I'm sorry," she whispered softly in my ear. I kissed her bandaged head to let her know that I'd heard and drifted off to sleep. Wild dreams of death and damnation plagued my mind, keeping me from a peaceful slumber. Images of dark rooftops and cruel grins haunted my subconscious, bearing my sanity to the ground. Impossible nightmares led to screams and panic, only to find that I was awake again in silence. Darius slept peacefully with her body curled over mine, her breathing steady and rhythmic. The pleasing sound helped me relax and enjoy a peaceful rest.

The morning came and I found myself opposite of how I started. Everything was peaceful, no memories to disturb my dreams; simply peace. Darius was looking out the window, using the glare to reflect herself. I don't own a mirror and neither does she, we've only seen ourselves in pictures. The reasoning behind it can't be expressed in literal terms. She felt softly at bruises and bandages, assessing the damage. After some time she was satisfied with herself and came back to me. She was calmer now, subdued from the harsh events. My family was waking; Darius hid quickly as my father entered to see if I was awake. Once he left she emerged, gave me a quick kiss and jumped out onto the fire escape. From there, I don't know where she went, only that I didn't see her for some time. The rain had stopped as the sun dawned on a new day, bringing hope and opportunity. Each day's a chance to turn it all around; today was just another fleeting chance.

Draven was roaming the halls, scaring children and causing trouble. He saw me coming and stopped pacing, leaning against a graying wall to wait for me. An uncaring shrug meant that he knew I was there and acknowledged that there were a few things to discuss. My mind wandered aimlessly as Draven did the same, listening for something new.

“Crazy night huh?” he said in a low tone, questioning whether the topic should go on. I nodded, considering my own reaction.

“He’s alive you know,” Draven said in a soft whisper, looking at me with a knowing glance. His gaze said something more than the obvious, “Cid, he’s fine. The hospital’s taking care of him, one stab wound in the stomach. They were able to fix him, what a miracle of science,” he concluded with a frown, his voice echoing his facial emotions. I nodded again and considered the circumstances.

“Now what?” My voice lost something when I realized what could result from this. There were several factors involved in a situation like this.

“Cid gets help, he’s required to join a rehabilitation group, upon other things. Darius . . .” his voice trailed off. “Well, either Child Protective Serves takes over, or a family member steps in, only until she’s old enough, which isn’t long from now.” His eyes turned to the floor, hiding any emotion or feeling. None of her family would help; CPS was a horrible solution – there was no way out. I voiced my frustration to Draven, but all he did was smile quietly. I wanted to hit him just to get rid of that silly little grin of his.

“Well she’ll be okay, she’s got family,” his eyes danced as a thought moved through them, leading to revelation. We sat in the hallway as I waited desperately for an answer to my hopeless situation. In a minute, all of life was lost. Draven rocked me by my shoulders to get my attention.

“Her brother is taking responsibility,” he whispered,

emphasizing the main idea of this statement. Draven changed in character then, giving an uncharacteristic smile and a hinting glance. I considered the idea, but it was an unstable reality that would fall away and re-create itself time and again. Sibling, Darius' an only child, or so I thought. Of all people though, Draven . . . it didn't add up.

I stopped thinking so hard and everything fell into place, somewhat. I just accepted what was said and got up to move around. Pacing helped thoughts slow down and make sense. I left truth sitting quietly on the floor, waiting for a response of sorts. I just kept pacing for a while before heading home and sitting quietly. My family never bothered to question my habits, so I was able to rest undisturbed. The day passed swiftly, more swiftly than expected. I dozed off to sleep shortly after the sun set, bringing about the day's end. Tomorrow would be ever more interesting.

The sun's rays were bright on that new tomorrow; its' shine stung my eyes as a fresh dawn settled in. I stood wearily, observing the fresh day with a keen eye. Darius lay curled up on my floor like a child, resting peacefully. I decided not to wake her; I just closed the window to darken the room. Picking her up gingerly, I set her in my bed under the covers, careful to make the room dark should my family step in. I stood back to creep away when I heard a whisper.

"Thanks," Darius said in a dreamy voice as she slipped back into her unconscious state. I sat in a chair for a while watching her as the earliest hours were wasted. The soft rhythm of her breath soothed my mind to help everything become more clear. I heard some talking outside my room and, recognizing Draven's voice, I left Darius to sleep.

A cheerfully bleak figure awaited me outside the door, which I knew to be Draven. He grinned happily and ushered me out the door of the apartment without much of a "hello" to my family. They didn't mind though, they loved him. My family loved all

of my friends, except Darius. Because she was different; because she was free. She didn't trust in government, she didn't blindly follow Christ. They hated her for her liberty. And most of all, they hated her because she was *mine*.

Draven smiled constantly until we were in the hall, keeping his devilish charm going for my parents. "Where is she?" he asked suddenly, as if he'd waited an eternity to ask those three words and how his existence depended on my answer. I told him calmly where she was as he dragged me to the fire escape.

"We're due in court today to determine custody, you have to help me get her to go through with this," his eyes had taken a desperate turn, like he was on the edge of sanity. I realized that there was something more to the story, behind the hidden truth and mystery. We crept into my room silently; as I carefully woke Darius, Draven sulked impatiently in the corner. I saw now that he was dressed as "normally" as he could manage, looking very adult and intimidating. Darius awoke in mild confusion, in which state I kissed her and went back to the fire escape.

From outside I heard hushed screams and quiet arguing. After my parents left, the voices grew louder and more troubled. I peered in to see pacing figures moving quickly, brooding back and forth briskly. Creeping back in through the window, I saw the two on opposite sides of the room, frozen. The words were lost, events a distant memory. Draven stepped closer to Darius, speaking softly, plain. I watched the look in their eyes, the same pleading desperation. I moved toward Darius unconsciously, hoping to do something of worth. I would do anything to help her, anything.

"Darius, if we don't show up, they'll decide your fate without you and come to collect. Please, trust me now, if not ever again. I just want to help now, everything's changed," Draven spoke soothingly, as if speaking to a child. She was like a

cat in a tree, cornered by logic; it was time to come down. She embraced me quickly and led me out the door.

The apartment was empty from my parents' departure. Darius moved around nervously, pulling me out the door. Draven was left standing in my room, alone. I followed Darius aimlessly to the door of her apartment. It was changed now, the doorframe seemed darker and more foreboding. A cloud seemed to float there, oblivious to man or thing. I pushed the door open slowly, allowing it to creak noisily on its' ancient hinges. The rooms were dark and abandoned. An open window left carelessly had allowed rain to puddle on the floor. A cat wandered around the rooms lazily, dark in color and mysterious in character. It blinked eerily at us before nestling itself on a chair. Every instant we stayed it watched us, glaring as we passed. It dared not venture nearer than it knew safe and we didn't disturb it.

I moved to Darius' room so that she would follow. She walked with her head down, shaking at each movement. I held her close for a while, feeling how cold she was, letting her share my warmth. I whispered in her ear to get dressed; my words seemed to enchant her as she moved flawlessly afterward. After some time, footsteps echoed in the nearly empty apartment as Draven emerged from the shadows. He seemed tired, less joyous and light-hearted. He found a chair and was seated, as if everything was simply part of a dream that he was recalling fondly.

"It's been a long time," he said half-heartedly. The body language showed him in a deeper meaning; he was telling himself something which time already knew. He was remembering a distant memory, like a dream long forgotten. To him it might've been a nightmare. He glanced at me as if we'd just met for the first time. A deep sigh and a heavy shoulder heave brought him back to reality. Blinking slowly, he began to talk:

"You must be wondering," he started, leaving the statement how it was. "It started a long time ago, a nightmare best left undisturbed." His words seemed final and definite, making boundaries around truth. "But you deserve to know, you have every right to know. I was born a year before Darius. From the moment I first saw her, I knew she was different from myself. So I protected her – from everything. Many times she hated me, but in her heart she still loved me. Draven and Darius, the ideal children; ideal to everyone except our parents. When they died, I left. She told me that if I left her then, I may as well never come back, I was dead to her. But I had to go, to get away, you understand, don't you?" he questioned. This was the first time he directed anything to me and I was caught off-guard, a deer in the headlights.

I sat sheepishly considering the question. I simply answered in the affirmative to get the rest of the story.

"So I went," he sighed, "and she was lost to me. I've been in so many foster families I lost count. I wasn't always so angry; she kept me calm. Over time I got worse and things didn't change. Eventually, I ended up here and I searched out Cid. The first time I saw her again was with you," he stared up at me with guilty eyes." I realized then how much I'd missed, so much time wasted. I couldn't let her know that I was around. We'd both changed in appearance and general character, but I knew her immediately. Her eyes still held that tragic glow I'd seen as I left home."

We both looked toward where Darius was changing. Going over Draven's words, I let it all sink in. "You only befriended me to protect her and get closer, didn't you?" I heard myself ask suddenly. His sorrowful eyes were still downcast as he sheepishly agreed with me. The backstabbing son of a bitch, yet I shrugged it off.

From there silence settled in like an old friend. I could understand the hatred that Darius felt and the regret that

Draven knew because I was subject to both. What got on my nerves was that I was dragged in the middle of their family conflict. It was stupid and childish.

Darius emerged at that moment, looking disarmingly simple and “normal”. Everything that a typical adult would frown on was carefully hidden; her room was meticulously clean as well. I understood the reason for that – in case of court inspection. Her manner was refined – played the part of an innocent child, free of sin or flaw. We all played our little roles carefully; she was already in character. Nothing was said, they just moved out the door, leaving me standing alone in the darkness. My sole companion was the cat, its’ coat shining as its’ eyes burned.

For a while I waited, when that did nothing I went home. My parents were still at work, stuck in the endless cycle of routine 9 – 5 hours day after day. I don’t even know what they do. They might work in a fast food restaurant for all I knew, or became multi-millionaires twice over. The bottom line was that I was clueless; the worst part was that I didn’t care. About my family, my friends, myself. Everything was ignorance – the lack of personal knowledge I possessed amazed me. I didn’t even know Darius’ last name. My mind found gaps everywhere; nothing was complete. The idea was new and provoking, like giving a young child a new math problem to worry over. I sat in my room in a daze, the only sound being the ticking clock. The never-ending tick that reminded me of the wasted time. I watched it tick perfectly, a cycle that couldn’t be altered. I remember blinking and seeing the cat again, stalking through the house. It too was ignorant of many things, yet it thrived. Abandoned, weary, it watched me with steady eyes. I saw that it had begun to rain again. With all that in mind, I got up and sat with paper and pencil. It was then that I began to write . . .

3. Devotion

My words are honest, uncensored, unthinking. The truest form of writing – no hidden messages, nothing between the lines; simple words. No prior planning or ideas, just pure expression. That's what it's supposed to be, after all. Rules and restrictions are foolish, put in place to make potential writers too afraid to try because of embarrassment, from not knowing the proper usage of a grammatical symbol. I write what's in my heart to say, though my mind may not follow.

It was dark, day long gone to rest, when Darius and Draven returned. They moved down the street steadily, heads bent from the rain in each other's shadow. They ran up the stairs to the apartment; I heard the vivid steps as they passed. I was surprised when a hand tapped my shoulder and I wheeled around to see Darius, looking tired but smiling weakly. She'd edged in so quietly that I wasn't sure if she was real.

"How'd it go?" I asked, half afraid to know. She sat herself on my lap, more from lack of effort to stand than anything else. She sighed heavily, curling up in my arms. "Everything's fine, he got custody," she grinned mischievously, "We made them think that we were normal." She laughed half-heartedly, getting comfortable in my lap. I kissed her forehead softly.

"What's your middle and last name?" I asked in a childish tone, laced with laughter. She herself laughed, amused at my question. After a moment she saw that I was serious. "Riddle," she laughed, "Darius Alyson Riddle," she replied at last. The name was truly unique. "And Draven's name is Draven Icarus Riddle," she laughed again. The two names floated in my head like a new favorite song, I whispered them over and over until Darius quietly hushed my rambling. She looked at me playfully

and asked mine.

“Raine Edward Drake,” I replied simply, as if I’d just decided on it. She stirred carefully before whispering, “Darius Alyson Drake,” and with a small grin, she fell asleep. I carried her out the open door I’d left absent-mindedly and brought her home. Draven was sitting in a chair, alone in the darkness with the cat in his lap. Petting it softly, he welcomed me. I moved to Darius’ room and tucked her into bed. Her eyes fluttered as she watched me carefully, asking for me to stay without a spoken word. I told her I’d return and walked back to Draven. He was as I’d left him, his manner steady yet emotionless.

Our perceptions were changed now, we viewed one another differently. In a few short days we’d matured and respect intensified. I went out to the hall to find the same girl who’d tripped Draven; she stood in the hall wide-eyed and confused. I moved past her back home, reminding myself to return to Darius. But as I descended, I sensed someone watching me. Looking back I found her behind me, carefully matching her steps to mine. The silent stare burned through my spine, urging me on. Without a word I quickened my pace and went home, closing the door behind me. I heard the steps outside stop and pass. Strange people . . .

The new dawn came bright and fresh. I went out to see who was home, only to find the place empty. I watched the careless time pass, deciding how to waste the day. I crept upstairs to see Darius still asleep, then back down to change. I found the most typical clothes I could find, tying a tie as I moved to the door. I decided that today I’d make changes. What brought about my sudden excitement, I’ll never know. But I set out to get a job.

Life’s fleeting; it’s a cycle of joy and sorrow. Nobody lays in a bed of roses everyday of eternity without feeling the thorns. I’d seen enough sorrow and seems fate wouldn’t be

making any good fortune for me. So I'd help myself. For a long time I was ignorant of many things made obvious by others. Ignorance is a funny thing – it's like describing the vividness of the sunset to a blind child; he can only hear you, he must trust you. But to hear of something he'll never be able to do for himself makes him bitter and less attentive.

The streets were a little busier as the masses moved rapidly. I moved from place to place searching for a job. I tried everywhere in every profession. My general appearance led some to promptly say no to my question, while others were more socially accepting. I wandered past a tattoo parlor, admiring the designs in the window. The street continued to flow around me.

"Coming in?" a voice asked shyly, detached from my dazed perception. I turned quickly to see the persistent stalker girl holding the door open, watching me nervously. I heard a deep voice yell, "No loitering!" from inside, moving closer. A weathered looking man emerged; I assumed that he was the owner. He glared at me, turning a compassionate eye toward the girl. I muttered an excuse about job searching and turned to go when she grabbed my arm. I couldn't understand the attachment issues.

"Why don't you apply here?" she questioned urgently, the gruff man still watching. His eyes softened as he came closer to me. "So you need a job? Any friend of my girl's a friend of mine and deserves a chance," he spoke without hesitation, pride booming in his voice. I followed them both inside, explaining that I knew nothing about the business. I found myself sitting anyway, talking absent-mindedly about myself. The girl wandered off as I spoke.

"No experience? I could use you for basic stock and all, but if you could pierce or tattoo it'd help me better," his voice was thoughtful. He thrust a notebook in my lap and told me to draw. I sat motionless, dazed. "Draw what?" I questioned

mentally. He shrugged, "Anything, everything; whatever's in your heart to draw." My mind raced as my hand blindly began to work, moving briskly. The only noise was the pencil's scratching and the man's pacing. After ten minutes passed, he grabbed the book from under me, carefully examining it. An uncomfortable silence passed as I waited for some sort of response. He kept pacing quietly, dropping the book in my lap. Darius' eyes stared back at me from the page's pencil strokes.

"You're hired," he said softly, patting my back as he wandered away.

The young girl re-emerged and sat shyly across from me. I watched her movements carefully, searching for more information. No clue of her personality was revealed except her obvious nervous nature. Her downcast eyes evaded my own, trying desperately to stay focused to that one spot. Her voice was solid yet soft; defiant but curious. She told me to come back tomorrow to work everything out. As I got up to leave, I saw her eyes lock on the notebook I'd left, abandoned. She was still staring at it as I slid out the door onto the street.

Darius stood outside nonchalantly – she drew no attention to herself, although she stood out from the masses. I kissed her quickly, suddenly feeling guilty. She moved to walk away as I ran in front of her.

"What's wrong? I got a job."

She smiled a sorrowful grin. "Nothing, I'm happy for you." Darius was different then, tired. Her steps were inconsistent – balanced yet drunken. She tripped at one point – I reached out to catch her. A faint smell of alcohol woke me up from a trance; I brought her home.

By the time we'd gotten back I realized that she was bleeding from her arms from jagged cuts with small glass fragments in them. Draven was nowhere to be seen, I was too busy to care. She was calm yet almost delirious by this time, I tried

desperately to get her to explain what happened. She rambled aimlessly about all manner of things to distract my attention. It took twenty minutes to take care of her physical wounds; the mental ones would require a lifetime.

Night came swiftly; I sat awake on the couch with Darius curled up in my lap, safe in my arms. She was peaceful, her chest heavily slowly in time with my own. I looked around the room, hearing a distinct tone. A phone hung neglected by its' cord, the tone unmistakable. I moved her gently onto the couch so I could hang up the phone. Upon closer inspection, I saw a dark spot on the floor. I found the carpet moist, smelling of alcohol. Large glass shards lay on the ground, the largest pieces stained with fresh blood.

The phone clicked down quietly as I bent to pick up the pieces – a comparison to our current situation. The jagged edges glimmered in the evening light as I sat thinking.

“Cid died,” I heard Darius whisper quietly. “Complications,” her voice trailed off, ending in eerie silence. It made sense now. Cid’s death evoked some sort of remorse, but also it made Darius responsible. It was murder now, but it was an accident. I returned to the couch, taking her in my lap again. I held her tightly to my chest as muffled cries emerged to match the tears that stained my shirt.

I remember dreaming; sharp, vivid thoughts preserved in the subconscious of a delirious mind. Dreams that were waking nightmares, I remember screams and insane thoughts. I woke up alone on the floor, drenched in sweat. Darius was up, looking vacantly out a dim window, glancing back at me carelessly. I got up groggily, remembering the broken alcohol bottle and the grim news of death lurking. The glass had been cleaned up, the blood stains covered; all distant memories. I moved to Darius but was shrugged off. I crept out quietly, returning home. Showering and changing, I rushed off to work.

I saw Draven in the hall as I passed; he seemed pensive at this early hour. I updated him on the latest news and he ran off to support his sister. His *sister*. The word still haunted me. I moved past the memory and found a familiar face at the foot of the stairs. The girl was there, smoking absent-mindedly, glancing around casually. Seeing me she seemed alarmed, coughing on the smoke, attempting to act nonchalant. She was startled obviously, I moved to her slowly.

“Stalking is illegal in all fifty states you know,” I heard myself say. She laughed softly, daring not to ruin the silence.

“I live here, it’s not stalking. I’m Madison,” she told me sharply.

“What’s your first name?”

“I told you, Madison,” she seemed confused, as was I. The slight error made me grin sheepishly before muttering my own silly name. It echoed through the silence that had returned like an old friend. Sensing the uncomfortable atmosphere, we moved to the street to enjoy the brighter atmosphere. We walked to my new job slowly, speaking plainly about common topics like weather and general society. She seemed nice enough, just overly tense. I questioned that along our walk.

“What do you mean, nervous? I’m fine,” her voice pleaded with me as she tried desperately to convince herself. She looked away from my cold stare.

“What is it?” I heard myself ask softly. She seemed evasive but still boldly answered. “They say things about you . . .” her voice trailed off before finding solid ground to proceed, “Bad things . . . they say that you’re a gang leader, a hoodlum, a murderer . . . your eye is like that from bloody brawls . . .” her words ceased abruptly.

I was shocked for several different reasons at once. The harsh

words, accusations – much to keep in mind. My eye? I quickened pace to the tattoo parlor and gazed at myself for the first time in years. Sure enough, there was a long gash down my left eye, a long straight line stretching down my cheek. It tapered to a thin point, standing bright red against my pale complexion. I sat amazed, entranced, for a long time. I was utterly amazed. Turning, I found Madison sharing my reflective gaze. She looked scared, silently watching for a response. I just nodded kindly, urging her closer.

“I’m not a hoodlum, I’ve killed no-one and the only gang I lead is my group of friends. I’ve seen fighting and violence, but I’m far more serene than I’m made out to be.”

She seemed a little relieved, still a bit worried, but calm nonetheless. I moved to the back to see her father and begin work. It was decided that I could become a certified, legal artist and piercer. I was to be taught to tattoo by him and I’d attend classes to learn the rest of body modification. It would take time to do, but I signed up readily. The day flew by quickly and the boss seemed pleased. Madison was only seen for fleeting moments, moving about. I came to learn that she was a talented artist.

“You’re done for today,” my boss told me, giving a little smirk, “Unless you want something.” He was looking me over closely, focusing on my left eye. “I can cover that with some ink if you want,” he watched my consideration. I turned from him and stared again into the mirror, my eyes reflecting themselves. My decision came fast.

“Sure.”

I don’t remember pain. Or sleep or dreams. Just blackness, a void. Emptiness. I woke up groggily to Madison’s bright blue eyes, narrowed with concern. Noise, click, tick . . . noise . . . voice, no, a name. My name, slow, questioning. Yes, I remember responding senselessly, empty words. Pain came back,

the left side of my face ached, the pain seared, rushing through my veins. Burning – as I stared out of my right eye slowly, everything was dim and painful. I winced, clenching my eyes shut and tried to go back to sleep. I was shaken awake.

Darius was there, watching me with tender eyes; loving gaze being mine. She stayed, calling my name, helping me up. I clung to her, grasping for the headache to stop, the world to stop spinning. I told her I loved her and I longed to see her, but couldn't because everything was dark. She shushed my random speech and helped me sit up. I loved her.

Deceit. Absolute trickery. Mockery of emotion. Made a fool of. Ignorant of my true surroundings. And from that world, I awoke. Madison helped me sit, looking confused and embarrassed. My delusions made her appear to be my love. A white bandage was taken from my face so that I could look gingerly in the mirror. The red line was covered by black for the most part, leaving a sharp red triangle. Two little spikes connected the line on my cheek to the bottom of my eye. It made my eye look dark and foreboding, outlined in black and red, my left pupil faded to gray. I smiled to myself, admiring the work that had driven me to pass out from the pain for it was tender. But I endured and now I gazed at myself and knew I'd found something of purpose. A new passion was born as my blood raged.

Night had settled in as Madison led me home. I recognized Draven outside catching a smoke as we approached. Madison grew more nervous, grasping at me, hiding behind my brooding figure. She whispered urgently in my ear:

“Hide me now and I'll tell your girl nothing of your delusional rambling. I'll explain later.”

The thought of blackmail added to my blood's boiling, but I helped her sneak past without attracting Draven's attention. He looked at me casually, shrugging his shoulders against a

chilly breeze.

“Syrius is out,” he said quietly. I saw the brightness in the corner of his eye. He threw a newspaper to me, “Read.” My eyes glanced the page when the cold touch of steel graced my neck and an ancient familiar voice said, “Yer money or yer life kid.” I pulled myself out of the hold and embraced my old friend and brother. He smiled a smug grin and pushed away, attempting to spar with me. We went back and forth, laughing carelessly.

Syrius . . . there’s a lot to say. He’s like family, we grew up together. He was confident and cocky, like all guys, but humane. Ole Syrius had a girl once, but she wasn’t happy. Killed herself and Syrius too, he was never the same afterward. He’s the oldest at 20 now; he looked young and old at the same time. He looked rough now, just out of some head-shrinker joint for a while, some sort of rehab. He’s an orphan too, ole Syr, but a damn good kid nonetheless. The cops caught him awhile back and put him through all that foster care nonsense when he was younger. Been through a lot, a lot . . . his girl died in his arms. Nothing to be done. That’s the tragedy that is life.

We raced upstairs, Draven included, to see Darius, least I did. I left the other two outside the door. Syrius got weird around girls; I didn’t want to rush anything . . . unpleasant. When I could visit him in “rehab” I brought her a few times; each time he reacted differently. Emotions ranged from joy to hatred and his speech ranged calm and even to distorted and impulsive. I went inside and saw Darius pacing around, tidying random items around the room. My footsteps seemed to echo endlessly in the uncomfortable silence as I waited for her to realize I was there.

“Your eye,” she whispered, her back still turned to me, “You’re angry that I didn’t tell you sooner . . . but it’s fixed now.” She turned, “Something’s different.”

I moved closer to her, "I'm not mad, and what do you mean, different?" She turned at this, looking pensive. Words were lost, she moved close and I embraced her, whispering softly that Syrius was outside. If she cared, it didn't show, but she didn't refuse when I offered to go see him. The place looked brighter as we moved toward the door. I realized how much more welcoming it seemed without Cid, still cold and dark in places, but much different. Things were changing in a subtle, yet rapid way but none of it was significant – there was just us stepping through the door.

Syrius and Draven were engrossed in conversation, catching up on the latest in life and society. They were leaning against the wall side by side, throwing a glance as we left the apartment. Draven grinned his sly smile and Syrius seemed a little taken aback. I introduced them, for the first time they could physically meet without separation, and they stood staring for a while. Silence leered at the reunion of friends, two of which stood in opposition, hands locked in a friendly courtesy. I saw the muscles in Syrius' entire body freeze, then spasm slightly. He blinked, returning to reality, and stepped back, muttering to himself. We didn't bother to say anything at the moment.

Darius wasn't alarmed. Something that always amazed me was how the strangest parts of human behavior never scared her. Of all the crazy things we'd seen, she never flinched. Even as she stared at Syrius, who could pose a potential threat, she never moved. Not a word was spoken, nothing to interrupt an unusually tense moment. She led us down the stairs and outside where we caught a smoke. From there, we went walking aimlessly, talking about whatever came to mind. The entire time, Syrius' eyes couldn't meet Darius', or refused to. Tension built and hid carefully behind the jovial atmosphere of reunion.

Walking around aimlessly, we passed by my job, dark and foreboding. Shadows cast from higher buildings made the parlor

look sinister and evil; animated drawings in the windows were twisted into demonic creations. Darius seemed to approve as the childish air came over her and she smiled at the designs scattered over the window. Syrius was watching the streets and the sky, gathering topics of contemplation for later. Something struck him then and he froze, his eyes wide. I turned and recognized Madison, coming in our general direction, head down, hands in her pockets. She was wandering, like us, going nowhere in particular. Syrius stood frozen as she saw me and approached.

“Hey, having a good night?” Her eyes moved from person to person, resting on Darius, moving quickly into the shadows when she saw Draven. He, like Syrius, seemed confused and couldn’t stop staring.

“Who are you?” I remember Draven’s authoritative tone, demanding truth. When she refused to answer, he jumped forward and grabbed her by her shoulders, dragging her into the light. A small gasp escaped him as he tottered backwards.

“I’m sorry Draven, I couldn’t tell you. After my sister died, I was sent away by my parents. They thought you might have had something to do with it. Things have changed, I’m sorry, for everything . . .” she looked at Syrius and we all stared at one another in awe. What was going on?

I convinced everyone to go to Darius’ apartment to figure everything out. We traveled in silence and ascended the stairs in the same fashion. Through the doorway, we all sat and stared at the floor; Syrius spoke first:

“I’ll tell you my piece first. Your girl, Darius, looks like my old girl, Faye . . . just takes me back awhile.”

The mention of the name made him shake, as did Madison. She got up next.

“When Raine came in for a job and was asked to sketch

something, he drew a girl which looked hauntingly like my sister – but it was really Darius. After my sister died, my family sent me away, I was forced to lie to my boyfriend because I didn't think I'd be back. But here I am, faced with the loose ends left before I left. My sister, Faye . . .” she paused, watching Syrius, “Well my parents felt that it was the people she hung out with that pushed her too far.”

Everything came full circle as the truth set in. Darius had made them stop because she bore the face of a dead girl. Madison was Draven's old girl from awhile back, I remembered her now. She'd changed her appearance since then, as most of us had. Darius seemed lost, distant from the rest of us. Her eyes moved from Syrius to Madison and back again. Draven got up and went to another room, Madison close behind. Darius got up after they left and moved to Syrius. His eyes were moist and empty. She bent low, hugging him, holding him close, whispering gently into his ear. I watched quietly as they stayed like that for a while, until Syrius stopped shaking. When he was calm, she let go softly, kissing him on the cheek and forehead, and she returned to me.

“He'll be alright,” she whispered softly to me.

“What'd you say to him?”

She smiled her small devilish grin, “That's between him and I, and God,” she laughed in a general mocking tone, climbing carefully onto my lap. She was gentle, as always, as she curled up with me, watching me intently. I heard Syrius mutter something to himself. I asked him to speak up.

“All of life is pain and suffering, anger and hate, and in the cycle of never-ending salvation and suffering, I'm the dancing fool at the end of the tunnel, the ignorant jester who does nothing but smile and babble heresy while chanting hypocritical nonsense to confuse more sane-minded individuals.”

Darius and I both stared in disbelief at the source of such profound terms. He seemed a bit shocked himself as he refrained from speaking anymore. He curled up in the chair like a child and closed his eyes. Nothing more was said as we all slowly fell asleep; Darius in my arms, Syrius in the chair, Draven and Madison locked away, hidden from conviction.

The next morning was less eventful; we'd all forgotten the drama and strived to move on. Madison emerged from the dying shadows, disoriented but conscious. As she wandered around, I heard Darius whisper:

"You think he screwed her?" I looked down at her devilish grin, that childish charm that made me laugh softly. I tickled her sides as she struggled to squeeze away from me, laughing loudly. Her eyes were gentle and warm, a welcoming shade of blue. I felt the sting of being watched, finding Syrius looking upon us quietly.

"Yer worse then young'n's," he tried to snarl, but smiled wide at our playful nature. Madison was a little stressed because she couldn't go to work in the same clothes from the day before, it would raise suspicion. Darius grabbed her abruptly and dragged her off to her room, passing a sleepy Draven. I heard the mutter of voices and Darius' speech, a small laugh and Draven's shuffling footsteps. He was grinning too as he sat down.

"What's so funny?"

"Your girl there just asked me if I screwed Madison, " he chuckled to himself, a pause.

"Well?"

He leaned in toward us, "I'll tell you the same thing I told Darius – gentlemen don't boast of their conquests or defile their loved ones with pettiness such as that."

“What’d Darius say to that?”

“She said I was a fool for trying to confuse her but she wouldn’t hold it against me that I was a sentimental gent instead of a typical bastard,” he was still laughing a bit.

“So ye didn’t then, right?” Syrius’ speech style differentiated him from us. I understood what happened but we lost ole Syrius along the way. Draven and I both laughed until Syrius’ eyebrows arched in confusion as he too gave in to laughter.

Madison came out right then with Darius hovering behind her and we all stopped. There was something about the two of them there, their feminine beauty bold and limitless. Pride came shining through from them both as we all stared in awe. There was a general silence as the feeling of accepted change crept over us. For a long time, Darius was the only girl in the group, alpha female – she accustomed herself to us and our traditions, she was like one of the guys. We could joke and mess around without boundaries; she was as tough as we were, if not more so. But in all that time, she never expressed herself as a girl; never risking her stature of respect.

Now was a momentous occasion because she wasn’t alone. Madison and her were a separate niche in the group, they had each other for support. Darius had someone to treat her like a girl, someone new and interesting. They looked like statues, frozen in their powerful pose, more beautiful than the gods.

The sun was settled comfortably in the morning sky as we walked to the tattoo parlor. The reflection on the glass windows made a slight shine of rainbow color that pierced through objects, breaking all concepts of physics. The parlor was empty except for Madison’s father, moving around listlessly. As we all entered, he looked up joyfully to see his daughter’s return. He hugged her quickly; holding her close, then eyed us over one by one. His sight rested on

Syrius and Darius.

“You can get started son, working,” his voice trailed off, “I remember you,” his eyes narrowed at Syrius. “You killed her, didn’t you?” What business have you here, get out!” His words became louder and more abrupt as he broke into a sort of a yell.

Syrius is a strong kid, but the look of hatred on the man’s face before him made him twitch, eyes lowering. His spirit was within stone’s throw of breaking, but he stood firm.

“I never hurt her, I loved her, it was you that hurt her. I loved her, I was there when she left us; when the last breath came, I was with her. Where were you?” The words were sharp and vindictive, his glance narrow and glaring. The man staggered under the blow as Syrius moved to leave. We said quiet goodbyes as he left, the door’s slamming definitive of his absence. And so there we stood.

I followed Madison off to start lessons and routines. Draven crept out silently, leaving Darius to observe the new surroundings. The man prowled back and forth, irritable and loathsome. He stopped when he saw that she was still there and stared at the delusional vision. I watched warily as I worked, he stood frozen in time and thought. As Darius sat, as did he. Quiet overpowered all else as emotions raced, silently. I went back to work, hearing their voices every so often. They flowed at times like music, harmonizing together, sweet words that told a story. I kept to myself until there was a concluding silence, where I waited for some notion of peace.

The day dragged on as Madison taught me all that she knew, carefully taking the time to go over everything in detail. I watched and absorbed information, locking everything safely away in my mind. I’d start classes soon to become a licensed artist and piercer, and a damn good one with the guidance I had. Time passed swiftly, continuous, as things changed. The

world, society as a whole, everything was new and different. The threshold of change stood between Heaven and Hell, awaiting the ignorant. And he arrived and was man, void of conviction or any fear for his fellow man. All traditions lost, the world was new.

I got up and went to work everyday, becoming a statistic. As age approached and opportunity left, we all changed. Pain and suffering befell us all, but it was normal. We survived as our society decayed; survival – only the strong of heart manage. The future generations weren't prepared for change as the world shifted, spirit was lost. We all were then as we are now, and will always be.

4. Prologue

A new day crept over the horizon as I stared with appreciation at the marvel of nature. Sneaking through the quiet rooms I found my son sleeping soundly, nearby slept his sister. They were perfection born to flesh, given embodiment. Like angels they slept, chests heaving rhythmically as the clock's tones settled into the background. I kissed them each and moved to leave without upsetting them. Much to do in the new society. I kissed Darius as she slept and crept out the door; time for work.

Syrius and Draven were outside, dressed and ready. We went down the familiar road together as friends, and now, comrades. The world was changed, the society more . . . uncontrolled. Violence had run wild as hysteria over-ran the nation. War. The social concept is highly understated. History came full circle, a repeat of the riots during Vietnam, only worse this time around. Hatred turned into a contagious disease, a virus

that plagued us all. The idea of war is hard to grasp until you're in the middle of it. Then it's a nightmare. Hell is never really "real" under you can feel the heat of the flames.

We'd all been drafted a long time ago, or maybe it just seems like a long time. The days away from those we loved were long and fleeting. We weren't really drafted, more or less it was paying back the government for being a pain in the ass as a youngster. So there we were, the three of us. Uncle Sam tried to get Darius too but couldn't because she was pregnant and had to stay with the kids. Here's to beating the system one last time.

The three soldiers we'd become walked together through the deserted streets, empty of the hectic holiday crowds and seasonal joy. Snow covered the city, giving it a deceiving air of innocence and beauty, hiding the true nature. The people who did happen to stray out of their homes were quiet, some hostile. The duties of the military stretched beyond the battle front. We had no time off, we were always on duty. I think we all took well to the adjustment of doing justice; enforcing the law instead of breaking it. Time had flown by in a heartbeat, barely a glimmer. All amounts of evil arose to destroy human nature. Christmas was a distant memory.

This war made the U.S. seem heartless. The draft age was dropped to 16 when they realized the amount of manpower necessary to win. Children, young children, instead of going on their first date, they earn their first kill. We were men now, old enough to decide for ourselves, but kids? Our enemies were strong and idealistic, but evil. Reminiscent of Vietnam and Nazi Germany, but different. A new war fought in new ways for the new generation of fools; ready to perish, to give up everything of value for a torn bit of fabric, our faded, glorious flag. Our reason to fight, characterized in cloth.

The new war was different in many ways, not just sheer size but the idealism involved. Times had changed, drastically.

The enemy was driven by madness and they refused to break. So there we were, in a new conflict with new enemies, sacrificing . . . everything for the "cause". What were we fighting for, or against? Freedom to be individual in a conflict against those who sought to make everyone the same – blind, thoughtless fools. The enemy preached to conform society but using illegal means. Gene therapy made special operations soldiers unstoppable; governments strived in a race to create clone armies.

Many countries were involved in the new, currently untitled war. Our NATO allies came into the dispute after they too were attacked, as we were. Similar to Pearl Harbor, we were hit unexpectedly at several locations simultaneously to cripple our nation's will to be unique. The country that was the core of evil doesn't matter, their reasons and methods are all that affect us. So Syrius, Draven and I were soldiers, fighting for the common good. Loyal ambassadors of freedom and justice.

Darius escaped the draft as the sole civilian parent, our children's only caretaker. Madison wasn't as fortunate; she was drafted and sent off elsewhere. She wrote to tell us how things were on her end. Rumor was that she might be shipped to the front lines soon; we all prayed that she didn't. We were all very protective of her and Darius. They were like sisters to the entire group, even though one was married and the other engaged. Draven was too nervous to read her letters on his own anymore, his bad temper only strengthened with age.

And there we were, walking the streets as comrades in arms, brothers. It seemed a century ago that I'd gotten my job at the tattoo parlor and we'd all met. Sketch, Madison's father, was back in the war, stationed near the fighting. Here at home, war waged on as citizens lost their reason. Madness was in the air like a disease. Idealism caused revolts and violence as blood flowed in the very streets. Through this insanity we moved to our post.

The building was dark, like all the rest and looked abandoned. It was our station though, so we checked in and got our assignments. Security for the most part, as per usual. Checking I.D.'s at the door, giving directions. The same as always. So we went to our posts and watched the day drag by slowly, meeting at meals, then back to routine. An officer stopped us on the way out and eyed Syrius, then moved to the rest of us.

“Come with me.”

We followed blindly through abandoned buildings, old and damp, in silence, marching in unison. At the end of the darkness was a light, faint, but steady, greeting our approach, waiting patiently as we had in the world above, motionless. A door opened and we stepped through without a glance back.

5. Destiny

The day came at last for my first tattoo and piercing as a licensed artist. Tension crept through my body as I was brought into the room. I remember seeing a girl talking to Sketch, the voice ringing in my head. Darius turned in the chair to face me.

“Ready?”

I blinked in confusion, my first tattoo on flesh and it had to be her. My fear of screwing up mounted higher. She smiled softly, got up to kiss me, holding me close, and stared back at me. She trusted me, I knew I couldn't fail. She sat, nodded approval to Sketch, and turned her back. I remember holding a piece of paper with a design, one of mine.

“On the back,” Sketch confirmed, and walked out quietly. I helped Darius get comfortable and settled in. I started slowly, trying to be precise but soft. I could hear her calm breathing, watching her muscles tense. Every so often she’d mutter something to herself as her fists clenched. Time stopped from there, then resumed one grain at a time. I spoke to her to make sure that she was still conscious, moving carefully. Two hours passed as insignificantly as brief, fleeting moments and it was done. She got up slowly, a little dazed, but alert.

“Not done yet,” she whispered, her eyes moving to my left. I saw a piercing kit, left by Sketch in easy reach. So Darius was to be my guinea pig overall. When all was said and done, my girl had a sore back and a ring over her eye, the same eye that I had darkened on my own features. I was authorized though and held a true job that I loved.

I had to help Darius out and back home; she stayed until I was done for the day. She was immensely loyal and I loved her for it. Devotion was defined by the two of us; side by side we faced opposition, balancing each other out to stay standing. I couldn’t be complete without her, there was always something missing. She’d bared the physical pain of a large, intricate tattoo on her sensitive back to help me face my fears. If I could cause her pain without conviction, then I could handle anything. Sketch and Madison couldn’t have been more proud.

As the sky darkened, we moved through the listless masses toward home. Darius was quiet, smiling to herself to deny the soreness. We saw Sirius running ahead of us, cutting through people, with Draven close behind. Something was happening, as always. We jogged swiftly to catch up. Once at home, we saw them mount the stairs and we followed. Reaching the apartment, which had become our unofficial lair, we found them pacing nervously.

“That was so much fun!” Sirius was beaming with excitement.

“Fun? We could get arrested!” Draven’s temper had him beyond rationalism as he kept pacing. Arrested? What had happened in a few short hours? The answer would change our lives forever.

I grabbed Draven’s shoulders and shook until he calmed down. Calmly I demanded the story, or a fiction close to it.

“Trouble Raine, we got into a bit of trouble; assault, robbery, threats, resisting arrest . . . all in such a short time.”

“But how?”

“Stupid choices, Syrius’ thinking . . .” his eyes glared at Syrius who stood smiling a couple feet away. He seemed very pleased with himself overall. What possessed either of them was beyond me, but we needed control – now.

“Assault . . . was anybody killed?” Draven’s eyes were downcast as he glanced back to me, holding his temper. He shrugged somberly and shook his head. Syrius seemed the restless, unthinking child and Draven the wiser, yet still ignorant, parent. Darius was sitting, watching the drama ensue in silence. I turned away and grabbed Syrius.

“Explain – what have you done? Or I’ll throw you out the window myself.” The smile faded as his features darkened and became more hostile. He pulled away from me in one move and grinned again.

“Didn’t you feel it just now? The power, over yourself, over others – couldn’t you feel the strength?” He grinned wider, “That’s what I’ve discovered, out there; violence, fear, robbery – it’s all power and respect from the weaker beings.”

“And it’s all illegal!”

“That’s what makes it so exciting! If it were legal, I wouldn’t care . . .” he was interrupted by Draven’s cold words.

“Are you insane? Do you want to be sent away again? Do you? You’re going the right way to be committed again. You’ve lost your reason and I won’t go down with you because your train jumped the track.”

So there we were – silent, lost, dazed. All eyes turned to Sirius to see the effect. He was momentarily taken aback and flinched slightly. He appeared dark and sinister at that moment, leering at us. “One time,” he whispered, “Come with me one time and see for yourself, we’ll all go together, as a group. Then you can judge for yourselves.” Nobody really wanted to risk it; it was dangerous. But then again, all great things in life are a risk. Nothing truly worthwhile is accomplished through talk and planning, only through action does change come.

“I’m in,” I heard the familiar voice that I loved from next to me as Sirius’ grin spread widely. He was pleased and had every reason to be, he’d succeeded in gaining support and winning the war. I nodded my approval as Draven threw his hands up in disgust. Madison appeared then, as a sheep amidst the wolves and all we did was breathe. Not a word passed then as mental wheels grinded harshly and we waited for a plan to formulate. Of course, Sirius had one –

The next night, it was decided, we would go. As soon as the sun’s rays dipped below the horizon, the “one time” would begin. Sirius would take point through the night’s events, quitting at dawn. We’d even recruited Madison to join us. Five of us went out to the streets as violently rebellious youths. As a gang, we wrought havoc on all that we touched. Time flew by and we grew closer, more united by our dangerous vice. We robbed places and people, scared some beyond mortal fear and beat up young ruffians such as ourselves to establish ourselves. The sad truth, the melancholy irony was that after the one night of veracity, it was obvious – we were a gang.

The breakdown was as follows:

- Syrius was our leader because of his lack of conviction and innovative ideas. He was the fathering spirit of the Ravens; his charms persuaded citizens to cooperate.
- Draven bent under the pressure of truth and became the best fighter to help balance the charisma Syrius possessed.
- Madison had an interest in the violent aspect and stayed loyally by Draven's side; in time her fighting skills would surpass most of us.
- I was second in command because I held characteristics of both Syrius and Draven, yet I was rational enough to keep us "straight edge".
- And Darius, my faithful lover; she kept with us, put a hand in on the chaos, but didn't voice a reaction. She'd just watch with her innocent, child-like eyes.

Over time, these descriptions changed dramatically; Syrius became more brutal and heartless as the rest of us questioned everything. Morality, leadership, justice – everything was questionable. I worked by day, ravaged society by night and was merry. We drank more and talked less but improved our new art. Darius took on a job with me awhile at the tattoo parlor, boosting the reputation of our little shop – The Black Dragon. Life was set up perfectly, and when Darius as ready for her firsts, I was in the chair as she'd been. We were united. Now and forever, as it always was and would continue to be. Some things are beyond change from the start, this was one of them.

The worst side effect of our new existence was the change we went through mentally and emotionally. Fights were physical and hardly forgotten, ideas of mercy and forgiveness evaded our minds as brutality took a solid hold. Our ride was interesting to say the least and educational in terms of human social behavior. Comparing the numbers, we found that the people who fought back only did so for the sake of venting frustration; overall less people fought back. They'd rather go

to the police and get sympathy then fight for what they believe in and risk embarrassment. And that was the social idea in society. We succeeded countless times because of laziness. That's all it comes down to; those who fought violently were rewarded, we'd let them go unharmed. But the rest, we showed no mercy for their ignorance. Ignorance deserves no reward, save time and silence. And of course, pain.

On this one night though, we sat around scheming and drinking and debating here and there about what to do. Darius sat nestled with me, Madison curled with Draven; they were the larks of our group and we spread our dark, wide wings over them as cover. They were protected as by a watchful older brother from a lustful boyfriend. They knew it too because we had our own morals. The rules we started with were simple:

1. The larks were to be protected by all and never struck by any man in the group or outside unless involved in a proper brawl.
2. Those who fight back as hard, or harder, as we do will be rewarded with peace and property.
3. None are permitted to commit crimes in the name of the group without overall consent.
4. You may not quit your brotherhood for anything besides arrest, marriage or death.
5. Breaking these conditions is punishable by terms decided by group's democracy.
6. None speak about the group outside of its' members.
7. If plan fails, return to point A immediately; run today, fight tomorrow, sell out none.
8. New rules may be put into use only with consensus of the entire group.

And from these ideas, we were reborn as the Ravens and our larks, the dark predators of the sky hovering over the delicate songbirds. Time was kept in mind subconsciously as our plans matured, as did we, and weeks became months.

Witnessing what we found on the streets educated us on the harsh truths of society. This knowledge helped us gain the advantage and learn how to work around it. Knowing the rules helped us know where to bend and how to break them. So there we were, children of the new age, result of war and destruction, offspring of heartless mentality. Of all the explanations, the most simple is best – we simply were.

From the dark haven we moved out, deciding to go about our usual routines and then some a bit later than usual. The dim-lit alleys were home most commonly to our prowls, and we roamed there now to see what we'd be offered by the lowly streets. Victims came and went throughout the night, our malice fueled by their pain. We bore discrimination against few, but we had our morals. Most kids we fought were our general age group; adults were usually what we ended up with. Small children, the elderly and most women were free of our persecution. Mostly we'd beat on criminals, vulgar fiends much like ourselves, the idea of capture looming nearby at all times.

By dawn we'd robbed five people and beaten down eight law-breakers. Arm in arm we went home as the morning warmed our backs, caressing the shadows on our faces, chasing away the night. Cops eyed us steadily as we said good morning, voices full of mocking and laughter, and up the stairs we went. Sleep came quickly and the cycle continued, tomorrow – another day of madness and mayhem. The ride was fun, losing the truth for a little while of justice. The Ravens' flight was free and rebellious, until something happens and I knew eventually that our wings would be clipped . . . and the cage door would slam shut.

A night befell us where we were in a situation. Rain poured violently overhead, so we all decided to go back home and watch from the comfort of home. On the way back, a scuffle caught our attention, so we went to see. A group of boys our age were tossing around, what appeared to be, people. Upon

closer inspection we saw that there were two girls, bloody and bruised, hidden behind the dozen or so males. One was on her feet, being tossed and groped as the other was held to the ground. The rain's downpour had carried their screams to the clouds, where only gods could hear and weep for their misery.

Syrius started walking toward them briskly and proceeded to hit two of the closest fellows hard in the jaw. He grinned at them slyly, "Can't we play, gents? Come pick on somebody yer own size, if ye dare," and all was silent. The boys stared at us in shock; the odds were definitely in their favor. As we waited, one stood from the ground, he'd risen from over the wriggling girl and returned Syrius' mocking grin. As he adjusted himself, I realized what was going on as we'd happened by. The girl on the ground had been raped and her friend was in line for the same fate. Both were crying quietly as threatening glances were exchanged and tension grew. I don't remember who struck first, but a fight started instantly.

The rain became a dangerous enemy in the brawl, the constant motion betrays your mind and our soaked surroundings made standing firm nearly impossible. We were all dragged into the fray as weapons made contact and bodies dropped. The girls watched in horror, huddled in a corner as we fought. Syrius grabbed them and forced them to leave as the whine of sirens grew louder. Cops on the way and nobody would leave; determination or stubborn-ness? Mostly stupidity. When the sirens were deafening, Syrius called to break up, abandoning the bodies lying broken on the ground. They grabbed at us and tore at us as we left the alley, seeing the cops approach.

The last thing I remember was falling down and seeing Darius help me up. Syrius, Draven and Madison were ahead of us as we moved on. I heard a gunshot sound behind us as the police stopped to catch the others. With luck the girls were safely home, as we'd be soon. Blending into the masses I realized that I was alone; Darius was gone. Lackeys from the other gang

mingled in the crowd from all sides to box me in. I saw one of them in front of me, staring intently, head cocked to the side. I demanded to know what was going on, but I got no answer, only pain. I remember bending and falling, and voices and a glimpse of Syrius and Draven.

“She’ll see you in Hell,” they whispered as darkness settled in. I remember curling up in the dark, abandoned by humanity and society; utterly alone. My eyes were shut tight, keeping myself encompassed with darkness. Blinking them open, I saw Syrius’ worried face, Madison looking equally weary as my mind stumbled to remember the details. The words that followed were sorrowful and simple, “We’ve got trouble friend.”

My heart stopped as I saw that two of our merry band were missing. The three of us left had gotten away with it. Syrius was covered in blood from various stabs and cuts; he barely seemed to notice. Madison was beat up a bit too, not too much, but still roughed up. I recall stammering some names and maybe a few questions. Syrius’ expression was grim.

“They got Draven, the cops found him on the street with a bullet in him, they have him in custody, he lived. Darius was beat up pretty bad too, had two bullets, some bad stabs . . . she’s in custody too. We’re being framed, those bastards set us up . . .” his anger subsided as misery returned. “We’re in a tight spot now Raine, a real bad tight spot. We have to do something.”

Plans, alibis, thinking; everything after Darius’ name was a gradual murmur. She was well beyond my warm reach, I longed for her caring embrace. The truth must be told, to save her, to save us. Those backstabbing bastards would pay, I heard myself repeat my mental ramblings to Syrius. What was there to do now? I should have had her stay in front of me . . . I voiced my frustration to a mute Syrius, his expression blank yet compassionate.

"We need proof Raine, we need those girls, and if we don't find them before they find us, we'll hang, we'll *all* hang. As for the kids, we'll get revenge, in due course, but first we need to plan; I don't even know what they got out of Draven and Darius."

"Nothing."

"What'd ye say?"

I blinked absent-mindedly, "They told nothing." There was no way to know for certain, but I knew in my heart of hearts that I could trust her and have faith in her, and Draven was like a brother to me. My mind swam with thoughts of what to do now, the events were so jumbled.

"I was fortunate in finding you when I did, they'd given ye a swift hit in the stomach to bring ye down, they were fixin' on doing some nasty damage so's the police could grab ye too. Cicero's a spineless bastard, we'll get 'im alright." The words danced in my head, the events, Sirius' unique accent and language . . . until the named rested on my mind. Cicero, a name, one that I'd remember in a distant nightmare. The way Sirius' mouth moved as he said it, the word enclosed in a frown.

"Who's Cicero?"

Syrius' expression altered severely and he moved to leave the room, to escape Madison's watchful eye over us. She stayed where we left her, motionless, waiting patiently to be informed. Loyal, even without Draven. Sirius' character change in the recent moments was staggering; he stayed enclosed in silence, recalling memories, distant ideas. His troubled mind brought him back to me eventually.

"Cicero is the leader of that gang, I haven't seen him since . . . well, since Faye died. I've known 'im awhile, but . . . well, 'e's a violent one, needin' anger management, ye know?"

But we all got along, I was part of 'is gang, unofficially, but 'e was a weird one, ye know? So things were okay for a little while, then the mortar cracked between the bricks." He sighed to himself.

"He's got something to do with Faye, doesn't he?"

Syrius' eyes revealed the truth, as his vision betrayed him, anger welled and he contained emotions contained for a long time. He was shaking, staring at the floor.

"He hated her. Cicero's a genius, an evil, nightmarish demon of our world; nothing stopped him or brought about compassion. He 'ad the icy exterior to stab his mother in the back as she's hugging him. He never knew kindness, so now he's the Prince of Pain. Cicero, named for the ancient Roman of the same title, is equally, no, more – brutal. I remember Faye's pleading to get away, but we'd be dead if we left. So we fought and tried and failed."

I listened in silence as his voice flowed calmly, his accent making it beautiful as the story was illustrated before me. From time to time I'd ask minor questions and nod to signify understanding.

"She was gonna go to the cops, finish it, screw 'im at 'is own game. But Cicero knew, as he always did. I was demanded to turn her over, when I refused, I was beaten and left in the rain as they searched 'er out. Of course, she was found. I beat the windows n doors until I found one that gave'n, but it was too late. She was on the floor on her back, head to the side, beaten and bleeding, trying to move. Efforts to move were wasted, as I entered, I found Cicero standing over her, syringe in hand. I ran for him but was forced back, held by strong arms. Watched helplessly as he shot his mixture into her neck and stepped back. I was hit hard forward, stumbling off the ground to her. Only now did Cicero move away. For once in his life, he truly seemed caring."

“She was going to destroy us,” he whispered, “It’s better off this way, let it be, come with me.” His arm was stretched out to me in brotherly companionship. I could hear the rasping breaths. I broke away from Cicero and held her. A sad expression crept into him then, he apologized and left.”

“Locks clicked as I heard my fate sealed as the sirens sounded in the distance. I held ‘er then, the gentle face I loved bloodstained and sweating. I kept ‘er close to me, she clung to my arms as the breaths grew more rapid or stressed and her eyes looked past me. We never spoke then, rather, nothing of importance. I apologized over and over, crying for her to stay with me. She just dismissed my words and said that she loved me. I held ‘er until my limbs went numb, until that very last breath; the poison had done its’ work well. That’s how the police found us, the syringe free of fingerprints, nothing of evidence except her body, grasped in my arms . . .” he paused, dulling his voice to a whisper. “So they sent me away, claimed murder/suicide. Cicero I never saw, the last glimpse of him was as ‘e left and condemned me to his hellish existence. That bastard . . . and now two more fall prey to ‘is games.”

I sat in silent consideration. So, there was a scandal about everything; a conspiracy linking us all together. Now was intermission, the actors were in place for Act II and we, the lowly scene-shifters put together the setting of the next chapter, the grand finale at the end of it all. Time to take action; curtain!

6. Loyalty

The room we entered was bustling with consistent activity, officers rushing back and forth to make plans. We stood

apprehensively in the doorway, awaiting a command or even proof of acknowledgment. Maps covered the tables, various locations highlighted and detailed with photographs. We stood silently in place for five minutes before being asked to move elsewhere. An officer led us away to a quiet room on the side.

“Boys, we’re going to train you up for special operations, being we’re lacking in that general area. We need intelligence, covert operations, technicians, mathematicians, field operations, snipers . . .” the list trailed on. I saw Syrius light up along the way.

“Sir, I volunteer for sniper training,” he said excitedly. Before I could think, I heard myself agreeing with him with Draven in tow. The officer took some notes and nodded approvingly at us. In another ten minutes we were gone, back to our barracks and packing for transfer. Our new post wasn’t far, kept us all together, the three would-be snipers. With training in a specialized field like that, we may qualify for the front lines. A lot of thought raged through my mind, all of it returning to my family. Work and family concerns plagued my conscience as I neatly packed away my uniforms and belongings for the transfer.

Leaving the old post wasn’t too bad; a change of career was more exciting than the security shift all day, every day. I met Draven and Syrius at the gate where we caught a bus to the new base. A tired looking young assistant cadet waited for us patiently, saluting clumsily as we came upon him. He led us past the refined headquarters of the elite, down to the desolate den that would be our home, the Wolf’s Den, home of silent assassins, sniping from afar. They would become our mentors and brothers in combat. The cadet gave us a brief tour, yawning wide, and bid us farewell as we returned to the Den. The shack was empty of soldiers; we found beds already made for us, so we made ourselves at home. There were a total of ten beds, identically uniform, all lined up in an orderly pattern around the room. Overall, there was a very homey

atmosphere that put our trio at ease.

We were instructed to find the commander, swap paperwork, and get moving. With the aid of some oriented cadets, we had everything established in no time at all. Once directed to the shooting range, training began. Our new colleagues were practicing in unison, joking around between shots like men in a bar, their voices lively and fun. With our presence announced, they stopped and looked up to see the "fresh meat". The largest of them climbed out of his sunken hole and came at us with a harsh glare.

"Listen here, I'm in charge of you bastards, do your job or we shoot you and let you die, no time for sarcasm or attitude or any other wise-cracking." His threatening features cracked at our slight look of fright and he gave a booming laugh.

"Just messing with you, welcome to the Wolves, I'm Alpha."

Once lessons started, days flew by briskly. Every day I'd wake up, go to work, come home and repeat tomorrow. Every so often I slept on the base, Draven and Sirius stayed there full time. Our new job strangely suited us, as we became Wolves ourselves. Each man had a nickname from the military alphabet. Sirius was Sierra, Draven was Delta; and me; I was Romeo, our names coming from the first letter of our names. Our brothers in arms were compassionate toward life but nonchalant about destroying it; they were an extended family.

Madison still wrote; battle was affecting her mind and body. Letters that used to be thoughtful and neat were now hurried and illogical. Some were hardly letters, just scrapes of paper, sometimes bloodstained, simple messages scribbled on them. Mostly, "Send Draven my love, I long to be with you all again, 'till next time -" So that's where we stood currently, on the path to war, waiting for a peace that would never come.

I walked through desolate streets at night, on my way home to those I'd neglected. I crept in to avoid waking everyone up,

my efforts wasted as I found Darius waiting by the window, smoking serenely. She was at peace, her mind probably far from rest, as always. The kids were long asleep of course, but I moved to see them regardless. Just as I imagined, sleeping peacefully, chests heaving as they dreamed their innocent dreams of peace. Peace . . . such a foreign idea, an alien concept, extinct from society. I longed for it, the end of this conflict, to allow me to spend time at home, with my family. I was missing their childhood, as I'd missed my own. Simply making up for lost time . . .

Darius followed me around silently, her feet barely gracing the ground. We went to the living room and sat together, the cigarette put out but the smoke still misty in the air. I leaned over and held her, quietly grasping as tightly as I could onto her warm skin. We both stared off into the distance as night wore on.

"I've missed you," she whispered, "We've missed you. Please don't go." Her voice was childish, pleading innocently with me to stay with her, her and our twin angels. The decision wasn't mine to make, only the hardship mine to carry. And I bore it as my comrades did, explaining again to Darius that I couldn't quit. She knew the obvious truth, if our positions were reversed, she'd never quit. We had kids; I was fighting to save them from my fate in the future. My sacrifice would be their salvation.

I held her until the morning sun rose over the horizon; I was off today. We watched the sunrise in the earliest dawn hours together, dreaming of seeing such a rise over a peaceful horizon. Various warnings of justice sounded through the street, the city came alive, but we didn't care. The kids would sleep and the streets would flow with people, but we were together then; she was all my reasons. No amount of dignity, pride or patriotism could measure enough for my reason. This right here, this gentle life in my arms and the two others ten feet away were my only reasons, the single

answer to why I must fight. Not for government or religion, but for love.

This day was ours and nobody else's. Darius wanted a job outside of home but I pleaded with her to stay for the kids. They were so young and impressionable, we had to raise them good and proper so they'd be good citizens. So she stayed as I trained. But today was ours. This single day would remain beyond all else, if it all crumbled in the end. As soon as a reasonable hour came, I woke up the twins myself. They were five now, old enough to walk, speak and think a bit. They were ours though, the most bizarre truth of all. Darius and I were embodied in smaller, younger, handsomer selves, the image before me was strange.

Now, to set a time frame – The war started when I turned 24. Darius was sent away for two years, until we were both 20. When she got out, we were married and the kids were conceived. I'm 26 now, 8 years passed since the great ordeal of our youth. The kids came a bit before the war, unfortunately for them, to grow up in conflict; the nightmare of good parents. Syrius hit 28 by now, Faye's gone for 10. Her official anniversary was coming fast, the day after our wedding anniversary, Darius and I – Halloween. Draven was 27, engaged to Madison, of course, scared of losing her before they could go down the aisle. Madison was 24 now, the youngest, with my 25-year old Darius in front of her. So, there we were –

The war raged on with no sign of closure. Each day would bring a new tragedy, fresh grief, renewed anguish. Our children would remember it all as a passing nightmare, a darkened part of their lives beyond comprehension. Payge Fayth Drake and Dante Set Drake were born in the hot August air, carrying names of lost friends and family. The war I actively survived would merely be a chapter in a history book. Just black and white print on a dull page read without interest or purpose. They'd learn from me the measure of peace and pride, my service to protect them. As they woke up, blinking their

angelic eyes softly, they focused on me with awe. I gathered them up and prepared for the day, rushing them into clothes and through meals. Their eyes shone as the four of us left to walk the urban maze as I'd done as a youth.

The city was surreal at such an hour, as the benevolent and the brutal slept together peacefully. We went to the park, played with morning creatures; we had no cares. The rational idea of worry and paranoia were distant ideas we neglected to consider. The four of us were a family, the kids running free, my wife watching them from her scrutinizing gaze, her mother's eyes. When she moved to tell them to slow down, I grabbed her shoulder and held her back, watching helplessly as they seemed to fly. I held her against my chest, whispering softly in her ear:

"Just watch, see how happy they are? Once they know, it'll never be the same, they won't be as innocent ever again. Just observe."

She relaxed, her eyes shifting shades as she held onto me. We glanced at the empty park, our free-spirited children; life as a whole. For a brief moment, for that minute, time stood still.

7. Suffering

We created and destroyed our lives, making stories and excuses. Sirius' mind raced as his hand wrote furiously, adding details and statements. Our names were scattered across the sheet, connected by crooked, hastily drawn lines covering the sheet. He muttered ideas and clues and defenses. Time was running short, the cops could swoop in anytime. He jumped up suddenly and grabbed Madison, signaling for me to follow. We

ran out the door and into the street, moving away. Nerves had gripped Sirius, leaving him shaking and uptight. Glancing behind us, I heard the wail of sirens and a car pulled up to the building. He was right, they'd found us. We moved for the rest of the day from place to place, planning as we went.

"How do we find them?" His voice was tense.

Madison seemed abstract, unaffected by our dilemma, yet her mind seemed to be silently working, producing ideas somewhere in the silence. When she spoke, it startled us:

"Let the cops find them."

"What do you mean?"

"We get taken, we get questioned, they'll need the victim to have a case. Cicero isn't a plausible witness, nor is his gang."

The sound of his name echoed in our minds, Cicero . . . repeating endlessly. But how did she know the name, the dreaded curse that brought such pain. The dark shadow of the past hovered around the name, that harsh title that brought consequence down on us, following on our heels. Sirius looked at her with an expression unsuited for description, words couldn't carry the emotion. His eyes were cloudy as his jaw set itself against the despair in his soul.

"Not plausible . . . how'd you know?" he whispered.

"How couldn't I? Cicero was Faye's close friend until the end, until . . . well he was right there, and she trusted him even as he put the knife in her back."

So she knew the truth. The name still lingered, the idea of betrayal and murder, kids killing kids for ridiculous reasons, pointless war. Everything before that point made sense though.

A noise caught our attention as cans rolled and shaped

shifted, our ragtag trio broke into a run, away from family, away from police, friends, away from politics, from consequence. I remember an abrupt pain and then, the ground, hard and cold. Starting to rise, I found a familiar face above me, smiling a sinister grin. Cicero, of course, waiting patiently. He looked human for a moment, only a second, then back to the previous snarl and glowering gaze. I stood to face him.

“So ye got yerself away from the ol’ coppers eh?” His words were accented and unreal, a pattern very close to Sirius’ speech. He laughed some more as I heard more scuffling and saw my fellows. Cicero merely smiled, bending close to me.

“Time to pay the piper.”

I remember falling again, blood and gunshots. Pain embodied as a flame, tearing through my entire. I could feel blood running through the dirt around me in bloody rivers, licking my fingers softly. Sleep came quickly as the dull sound of escaping footsteps echoed, trapped in my ears. From there, the world blacked out and I slept, as we usually do, devoid of further thought.

I dreamt many horrific dreams, one after another. The first was of physical war, men killing one another; all the soldiers had no eyes. They’d been torn out it seemed, blood ran down their cheeks and stained their faces red; drenching their hands in blood. Then the men’s war shifted half a dozen times to peace or children, then back. The last few were truly horrific, as my fellows and I took part in the horrible tragedy. By the end of the night, we’d all died and returned and died again, screaming or silent. Of all them, the last was the worst:

Darius sat, watching the rain, silent yet alert. She spoke to me half-heartedly, oblivious to emotion. I replied to her, after awhile she softened and acknowledged me. From there, the atmosphere shifted and nothing was logical. Something wasn't right here, a subtle, yet hugely obvious idea, was looming overhead. The long-ago nightmare of her death repeated in my mind as I watched her; I wanted to die, to scream, to see, anything. But the world had passed away, leaving me alone with Darius, no, an image of her. As she spoke to me her eyes were empty and without purpose, her words cruel and hurtful. As she died again in my mind, I died in front of her, because of her. She was killing me, slowly, painfully, drowning in silence. Nothing but darkness, cold, unyielding shadows grasping with Death's grip to tear at me.

From this horror or horrors, I awoke. The horrible fiction faded away as I felt myself returning to reality. Movement stopped, then white, fading to dimmer shades. A room, square, quaint, a unique atmosphere . . . a hospital. The curtains were drawn around my bed as I tried to get a feel for my surroundings. Nothing significant except that I was handcuffed to the bed. Nowhere else to run, end of the line. A doctor came in before long and spoke to me roughly, pointlessly. Ultimately, I'd heal, in time, which I'd have plenty of. I saw a cop enter behind him, sneaking into the room's cold atmosphere. He came closer to me in a stalking step, planning his approach.

"So, this is what it comes to. A Good Samaritan kept you for us, awful kind of him."

I glared at him, Cicero's name floating through my mind. Lies, deceit, betrayal. That bastard, he'd left us in the street for the cops, which I told this ignorant fool. He just grinned at the wounded tiger, kept at a safe distance. He was arrogant, proud of solving the crime – he wasn't much older than myself, probably his first success. I muttered to myself senselessly, then demanded to know what became of my comrades. The answer I

received was sinister and I knew I'd see them again, soon. I was to leave the hospital in a day or two, and legal proceedings would pick up from there. What a promising future we'd obtained.

I turned away from the young fool and ignored the rest of his pointless words. Once he was properly frustrated he quit, leaving me to my own consciousness. I laid awake for hours, just thinking, simple consideration. When my mind tired of such moral trials, I found myself dazed on a harrowing path of righteousness. The delusion left me and I slept, peacefully, undisturbed. The miraculous slumber of the damned –

Was I damned? Yes, of course; aren't we all? To slow down rapid events and show you what the cop sees: A group of teenagers, well, young adults, (most of us were 18, old enough to be a political statistic) and we were causing trouble. We beat up other kids, stole from people at random; we lived an illegal life. Then, in a clash of gangs, they find only us left at the scene, two hysterical girls left to confirm that anyone present was responsible. The truth of our history and our current situation painted a vivid image for the cops. Time to make an example . . .

I remember waking up to rough treatment all around; yells and movement confused my sedated mind as I felt myself dragged away. Pain ran through my body as I saw bandages on my body, covering painful memories. I was taken away from the hospital and brought to a jail, and there I'd stay until court. I didn't get to see my fellows before or during the time I was locked away, accused of a crime I had no part in. The sad part of this mishap? Nobody cared to help me as I cried wolf time and again – my parents were quick to forsake me. Their son, their precious only child – they wanted nothing to do with me. The government wasn't prone to compassion, so I was utterly alone.

I'm ahead of myself – jail. The jail was large in structure,

solid and dark. Built of stone and brick, this structure existed well before me and probably would outlast me as well. The conditions were good for jail, considering the general stereotype though the truth couldn't be denied. My days were routine, I woke, ate, worked, went to counseling to glare at the counselor, and repeated until the day was done. This routine controlled my existence for what felt like eternity, though it was only days, weeks. Some state appointed moron was my defense against unrelenting politics. The day I was to go before the judge, it seemed my fate was sealed; I accepted that I'd never see them again.

The judge was old, burdened with his judicial duty, and looked down at me with a glare of power and scorn. He spoke strongly, showing no compassion as evidence was presented against me. The judgment and damnation of Raine Drake had almost passed when witnesses were brought. The state was against me; they had Cicero – the upstanding citizen – as witness. But in the middle of his testimony, the tide changed. I saw his eyes widen as he sat on the stand pompously, acting before his great audience. I turned in my seat as the two girls entered the room, watching him with a sharp gaze, the hate evident in their expression. They sat, waiting for the jester to finish his story, and they took center stage afterward. My freedom, *our* freedom laid in the goodness of their memory, locked away with shame, released for us by justice.

They spoke in horrifying detail, recalling events with vivid detail and surreal description. I could feel Cicero shifting in his seat as the words pointed justice along the road to salvation. My lawyer was a weak, spineless man, but the knowledge of inevitable success fueled his questions. The critical moment came as he asked them earnestly who was responsible, if it was me or not. When both replied no, it wasn't me, my heart leapt from my chest. Another crucial moment – Who was responsible, was he present? Time stopped.

To explain what was happening at the same time requires a

moment put on a pause. As the stories wound down to conclusion, Cicero crept closer to the door. As he did, the speaking moved faster, piercing him, stopping him. As the girl's words became more rushed, my lawyer became inflamed, lost in the moment. He paced rapidly, clenching his fists, pounding paperwork and yelling truths. As we reached the conclusion, the room went into an uproar as the girl on the stand rose and pointed at Cicero, several steps away from the door, his salvation. The guard grabbed him as he made a run for it; everyone was standing and yelling, the judge pleaded for order. And there we all were, and I sat there in silent awe, smiling as Cicero tore and fought, only to be dragged away, still proclaiming his innocence.

Tick – next moment. Time resumes. The charges against me were dropped and the cases against my cohorts dropped as well, plus a nice government-issued apology, nice turnout, right? Not really. As I left the courtroom, I was brought back to collect my things for the reunion. I waited as patiently as love would allow, planning my words carefully. I was in a car being sent away, the events of a few weeks already locked away from conscious memory. The only thought to cross my mind, the only word of importance my heart knew to know was one: Darius.

The trip seemed longer than it was, we were all brought to the police station to finish everything up. I signed sheets blindly, ignoring instruction or lecture. I sat and waited, seeing Madison led in with Sirius close behind. In another minute or so Draven joined us as we stood in soothing silence. I waited patiently, emotions beyond containment, but the faces around me still seemed grim. I looked over the faces, searching for something. Sirius took my shoulder and we all left as a group.

“Raine, she's gone,” he whispered softly, keeping calm and sincere. “They sent her away to be figured out, ye know, shrinks. She went a bit crazy, I don't know, just . . . ye gotta stay strong kid.”

Words were lost, emotions confused – nothing mattered. I blanked out, stammering useless responses. I recall being led home and movement ceasing once we were safe. She was gone for an undetermined length of time, gone from my grasp. Everything that I am snapped; when I looked up I was alone with Syrius, his face darkened. He looked older now and more gray, more senile. He knelt down by me, searching for words. I don't know what made me snap, but I could feel my eyes tear as he sat with me.

Anger came into my heart as I realized how silly it was, that she'd been caught because of Syrius' brilliant scheme. I narrowed my eyes at him, ignoring his heartfelt gesture. I could kill him then, my misery had all subsided into hate as I glared. I started to talk, trying to ease my pain; it was his idea, he was to blame. I caught him off guard, sending him to the ground. His expression of shock was priceless as I exacted my revenge. He struggled vainly as I hit him repeatedly, tears running down my face. He fought weakly, yelling for help.

The door opened and I was dragged off, I remember staring at Draven's confused face, Madison helped Syrius to his feet. He was bleeding and in pain as he came over to where Draven forced me. His mood was vindictive; I waited for consequences.

"Feel better?" he coughed at me.

"Yes, I do actually."

He nodded, bringing his head low, "Good. Do me a favor next time and warn me, okay? Thanks."

As the adrenaline left my blood and order returned, pain did as well. Physical, mental and emotional suffering knocked me off my feet and out of myself. I realized for the first time that I was vulnerable in both mind and body, an idea that bothered me. Weakness was an idea that got under my skin, being open to attack scared me. I sat as my mind swam in ideas of delusion and doubt, considering the events of our lives.

Tragedy was the overwhelming theme – now what to do?

My head throbbed so I took my leave and decided to lie down awhile. We were in the apartment; I refused to see my parents. Most of my things were already brought up; I'd grown more distant over time. I couldn't really sleep, I just laid there, eyes shut, blocking out the world. I heard the door open softly.

"Go away," I whispered, hating my own voice. But they didn't leave; they sat near me and just sat. I could hear the breaths in the silence, even, calm. My eyes stayed shut as I repeated my request. Again, I was denied. By the third attempt, I received a response of sorts.

"No, and you should talk to us, control that temper." Madison's voice was resolute as it bounced off the walls and repeated in my mind. I didn't move or respond, even as she spoke more, just silent.

Now, what'd she talk about? Us, the gang, our future, our past. She talked about Faye, Syrius and Cicero; I stopped paying attention long before I heard the familiar tone of Darius' name in my subconscious. What'd she say? I don't remember, maybe she does, it was an awful long lecture. When she stopped, I didn't hear that either. Yet she stayed, she waited.

"It was because of you," she whispered, "you put her where she is. There's nobody to blame but yourself."

My eyes opened then and I looked at her in awe. Such blasphemous words, such harsh tones – I sat up and stared at her with contempt. How could she make such blind accusations? I asked her, quietly. She blinked in surprise to hear me speak, stumbling over her words.

"Because she told me so."

Everything went black again, nothing was rational. Darius would never say such things, this was madness! I felt the anger rise, boiling to the surface, but I forced it down. Madison just looked at me vacantly, void of emotion or consideration. I just sat there anyway, for the hell of it, and forgot. I got up and walked around in search of a drink, something to drown the pain. Finding nothing, I went to lie back down, Madison still sitting where I'd left her. She seemed pre-occupied. I sat again and stared at her.

"Sorry, she wasn't serious, she was in pain. I'm sorry." Madison's voice was barely a whisper, barely real. I just nodded as she sat, lost and confused. She couldn't go home; she was home now. So there we were – the lark and the damned. Torn between sanity and the illogical, there we were; abandoned by society with nothing to consider but the truth, the honest truth. I hugged the dazed child before me then sent her out to Draven. The parting was in silence.

I slept that day, and for many afterward, talking to no one but myself. The days ceased to be of import, they came and went as people and places – just dragged on. I don't remember dreaming or thinking much, simple existence was tiring. Nothing was significant then, I was alone, plain and simple. But it wasn't plain and was far from simple, so what to do now? What should result from this wasted time and lost breath, what would be the proper solution? The correct solution would be to get up and move on to better things. There are no better things left. My family has forsaken me; my job was lost – only friendship remained. Once the dust cleared, that's all that was left, just them. My friends, my comrades – my traitors.

There was a moment where I remember Sirius coming in to see me. If he spoke at all, I don't recall his words, they were ultimately devoid of purpose. Everything was devoid of purpose; sleep and drink drowned it all out. Days turned to weeks of absolute nothing, wasted efforts and forgotten memories.

Another day came when Syrius came to visit. He pushed me out of bed and dragged me out the door, trying to get my attention. His eyes were warm and welcoming as his voice droned on. When I heard Darius' name I came back and looked at him.

"We're going to see her, Darius, look sharp," he whispered tenderly in my ear, softening his tough character to help me grasp the statement. I stumbled away from him, groping for clothes and changing as quickly as my scattered mind would allow. I tried desperately to clean up but no matter what, I still looked like an alcoholic waste of humanity. The weather was a bit cloudy; I heard music out the window, quick, high-spirited tones that would make most people energetic. I went out and saw the three sitting around quietly, the silence seemed fictitious. I hadn't seen all three of them together in whatever stretch of time that I'd been isolated. They all turned and stood to face me, appearing more alive. I walked with them, carefully keeping in stride through the masses. Wherever we were going, I didn't care as long as she was there; I'd go to Hell just to glimpse her loving face, for she alone completes me.

8. Honor

Stop and backtrack a bit. The high times – can't see the bad without appreciating the good, to understand why we took the risks that we did. I think more logically than I write, so you may find it easier to follow along, so try to keep up –

The gang mentality is complex, yet similar to an infection. It affects your subconscious and spreads, corrupting your methods and morals. So, what made me want to start a gang? Not merely

because I could, but because it was necessary. What started the downfall of my harmless fellows and ended only in misery? I did, I began this, but why? It's not that I'd betray my allies for a silly reason, things just moved too fast to contain. To be part of a family, that's all I really wanted. Lacking a physical body, I created one for myself to suit such purpose.

I was locked away for a while and they used all manner of experimental treatments on me, hence my newspaper appearance. But none of it was necessary, no part of it at all. I'm my own shrink, only I can accept and understand myself. Those doctors have never seen something like me in a textbook, perhaps they never will. The principle idea is that all that government money went to waste on me, used for a noble reason but the wrong patient. My girl was my entire life, losing her destroyed me.

Before her – I was in a gang, true. I met her one night as we beat down some fellows; she stood eye to eye with me and took me on, without fear or apprehension. The gang before, Cicero's little Praetorian of sorts; I got charmed into that. He talked me into it, and lacking a true unity, I joined just to be part of something bigger than myself. So I joined and learned the lessons swiftly; you did your job obediently, asked no stupid questions and tried not to die. I was a natural, loved for my unique style and great character. When it all turned against me is where it all stopped making sense.

Cicero, to give a proper description. He was older in mind and body than me by a bit, not too much, I'd say two years or so. Big, hulking figure, mostly muscle; dark features but bright, scheming eyes and a mind to baffle most adults when he was young. I don't know what it was that made him so cruelly vicious, he knew just what to do to torture someone, when to get them, how to break them. He was powerful and intimidating and he used it to his advantage at all times. Nothing scared him and compassion was a foreign concept; I doubt that he ever

possessed the capacity to love. He was father and brother, lord and master; God. He made you what you are, and could therefore destroy you just as easily. Such misery I think he enjoyed as the laws were enforced. Cicero ran a tough group where the weak perished and the strong were untouchable. This creature molded me to his will, his nature turned violently to the worst. The only thing that kept me humane was Faye; I lived my days torn between Heaven and Hell. From the hard times I went through, you'd think I'd have learned better. Bottom line – humanity is wasted on the humane.

So the infection took hold and spread, leaving my mind a wasteland of old memories and shattered dreams. This mentality was mine and remained thus throughout the whole ordeal. It took a long time for me to break away from the accepted ways, even after I lost Faye. Therapy was the state's answer, being they couldn't charge me with murder. All evidence pointed to murder, or possible suicide, so I was sent away for a few years to be "improved". The thing about most people, that have the common misconception that we can change parts of our character we've had for ages. We're able to bury them, edit them, but we can't destroy those little character flaws that cause such trouble. They may be avoided for a while, but ultimately, they'll return, as everything does. So the mentality they tried to cure me of? It simply became dormant.

So the idea of returning to such a harsh existence isn't hard to accept. The need of fraternity never left me, it strengthened over time. As a social outcast, I could do nothing; by myself I had no power. In the absence of loyalty, I schemed and planned how to restore it; I had plenty of time to conceive intricate ideas for when I was free. From this punishment, I learned patience, a trait that I'm deeply grateful to possess. The general message? The shrinks are wrong – they couldn't possibly understand, no matter how hard they try. Why? Because to understand even the slightest part of it, they'd have to live my life; but they can't, so they'll

never know. Their therapy wasn't completely wasted; I did learn a thing or two. From them I came to perfect the art of deception, I learned to shrug off offense and to be patient to achieve one's desires.

And they released me back to the wild with the promise that I'd be a good little boy. Fools – too bad that it worked out so poorly. Well, poorly for the society anyway, not so much for me. I went out, renewed old alliances and started anew. Raine knew most of the saga; I knew that he'd be my right hand man once unity was established. He was loyal to his companions, to Darius most of all; he wouldn't betray me and I'd never hurt them. Cicero's mistake would be corrected through me. Reunion distracted my intentions, but I made the effort eventually. It started very simply –

Draven and I were passing through the mobs when a familiar face presented itself. An old friend, new enemy, he wasn't aware of my presence. One of Cicero's most trusted lackeys, a little lost and completely alone. Time for my return. He couldn't recognize me; I'd changed severely in appearance since my young childhood with Cicero. I walked toward him calmly with Draven at my side. In one move I grabbed him, sending him reeling. I lurked into an alley after him as he gathered himself. Ignorant, that's all he was. The fight was brief; we left the bastard on the ground, bleeding as he whimpered weakly. I whispered a warning in his ear to carry on to my Lord, then left him there, robbed of material items and pride. Draven was a bit nervous when concerned cops came after us, but evading them was simple. He was just set in his ways, Draven, he just didn't want to face consequence. I wasn't afraid – I'm a product of consequence.

It started with that brief encounter, that quirk of fate, which brought me back. My goal was obvious – avenge Faye, take Cicero down. The power that ran through my veins was intoxicating, I felt like the vessels would burst if I didn't let it out. Explaining to my friends, the purpose was unwound,

a solution learned from a riddle. My voice flowed as my blood heated my body in passion of my latest revolution. I sucked it in, the feeling of purpose and change. And I would lead them, they would define me; our family could stand any evil – and would.

The story of our beginnings isn't very amazing; I just found a good outlet for my desires. We spent night after night fighting, improving, learning. Rules were set, but we were all equal, nobody was more important than another. Raine would lead in my stead if/when I couldn't, though I wasn't much of a leader. We discussed our plans and voted, never proceeding by forced hostility. My methods focused on honor, knowing when mercy was necessary; we picked victims carefully. Most were in league with Cicero and were determined to stop us before we reached the top dog – they failed to sway me.

So up to present, the night when my nemesis stood before me and our eyes met. He winked at me with his characteristic grin, and that brawl started. Him and I went head-to-head for the majority of the conflict; throwing punches, blocks, learning patterns. When the sirens approached, I knew what he'd prepare to do; he'd had me take part many times so long ago. I gathered my ranks and we broke and ran; I heard the ring of gunshots echo through the city, coming after us. Seeing that I was fine, I turned and helped my fellows as much as I could. My efforts weren't good enough as Darius was lost – the first casualty of my war.

The loss of Darius was a critical point in my life – I saw that I failed as a leader. They trusted me and I them, but the results weren't positive. To move a bit further – Raine. He self-destructed; I expected such a reaction. His hostility toward me was understandable, so I took it in stride. Nothing more to be done about it, just wait for him to improve. Without her, we were all lost, a large piece missing from our group. My mind ached from considering all options, how to save Darius from my fate as a child. She might think us fools and

bear hatred, lack emotion or otherwise once she got out, if ever. Only time could tell, and effort. Whatever it took, I'd help her. The solution isn't visible now, but it will be, soon
—

So let's give the story back to its' owner, the true storyteller, the only one worthy of telling it right and proper. Raine, faithful friend and loyal companion, keeper of damning lies and liberating truths. The story was never mine to begin with, and never shall be. It belongs to us all in turn, and we cherish it as such. The story isn't for us though, for our glory. More or less it's for those who follow in our stead, walking that fine line carefully behind, hoping to keep balance. In our world of disorder and misery, this was just the beginning of things we could hardly imagine. So here's to you, for it is only in your heart that our tale may hold bearing.

9. Truth

To illustrate the conflict that enveloped our lives, the war that stole youth's innocence. To attempt to comprehend the harsh reality within which we survived. The alliances were strong between countries; we were ultimately alone. Our country's allies helped us from time to time, as they too were victim, but fear overpowered all else. The majority of losses were ours; we took heavy casualties. The enemy had thousands to millions to throw away, to use at their disposal. They were brainwashed, forced into service by their government — a more extreme form of communism. The cruelty that existed was unprecedented, old traditions forgotten, honor lost in the fray.

Gene therapy – doctors finally discovered how to manipulate favorable traits while destroying harmful ones. Our enemy was trying to kill all those who were free in order to produce the ‘perfect existence’. It took years to perfect such technology, even today they don’t know everything about it. So gene therapy was limited to the elite or powerful, for they alone were worthy of such expensive solutions. The work done couldn’t make you live forever, it could help children born with defects; affects in adults were stressed and dangerous. The details of it didn’t bother me. Clone research ended abruptly when powerful fascists tried to bring back some of the most ruthless Nazi leaders in an effort to start this war early. Upon discovery, all results, findings, research and equipment were destroyed outright, only remembered from men’s sight.

The new world outlawed researching production of clones, though gene therapy was encouraged. Technology is great I suppose, the world is changing. The main idea is this – the war started because man fell victim to his own brutality. Our nature prevents peace; I think we fight only because we need to. Men need physical violence to survive, when none is present, they create purpose. The old men had reason to tell old stories and unearth buried corpses; the young were forced to their deaths by the fools. New discoveries in weaponry didn’t make the rifle or tank obsolete; production improved the economy. But the society suffered for it. Riots were common as blood flowed more rapidly into the sewers than water. The laws were stricter, the government held on with a steel grip. Those who ran from the draft were hunted down for reward money and imprisoned after capture. Children fought this war of savagery, mere children.

So what’s the bottom line? This new war sent us all to battle, willing or otherwise, only a few neutral territories were safe. At home we fought our peers while others fought in foreign lands. If by nothing else, we were united by conflict.

The same people we were raised with, our brothers in society now stood on the other side of the line, this was a war of nerves. Only the impenetrable succeeded while the compassionate died trying. I locked away emotion once I put on the uniform and there was only one thing that could break the chain . . . well, more like three things. And they were the embodiment of love and devotion with the brightest eyes in existence in the darkness that enveloped the world. They suffered from the conflict, as I did, but differently than myself. They were silent, watching carefully as my mind deteriorated and stood waiting to bring me back. My saving angels; guardians of peace.

Back to the matter at hand – as if we could forget. What a pleasant concept, ignorance of the true world. But training brought everything back into focus, our skills sharpened to a quick edge. The time it took to turn us into snipers was brief; we were natural in the art of merciful destruction. Darius wasn't crazy about the idea, but she didn't complain. Draven, Sirius and I were closer now as we were given actual missions of worth. An actual purpose in the physical war, a general change in our mentality. It worked out well, we felt invincible, as most young people do. News came of Madison's return home for a little while. The official letter said that she needed a little break from reality, more or less. In other words, she was on the edge of sanity and needed reassurance. So we were there for her.

She looked as if she welcomed Death with open arms, knowing that it held promise of the end, eager for joy. Her features were older, furrows etched into her brow where stress plagued her troubled mind. Draven held her for a long time, rocking back and forth in silence. She didn't talk much, as was expected; her nerves were easily shaken. We talked about topics unrelated to the war, the better times, but it wasn't the same. For the first time since she was sent off, we were together as the old gang. We met at the old apartment where

Darius and I now housed our family and mostly sat. She looked at the kids eerily, beings unknown to her. She hadn't seen children in some time I'd imagine.

"So young, innocent," she muttered, lost in herself. Once talking had stopped for twenty straight minutes, she got up to walk around, Draven close behind. There was a spare room within which we let them stay; Syrius opted against going back to base – he stayed on the couch. Unity returned, we were a family, complete in its' entirety. Syrius was the old grandfather, carefully watching over his flock. Draven and I acted as parents, guarding our larks with our lives. Madison held the role of infant – the more we tried to shelter her, the more she learned. "All Hope Abandon, ye who enter here," was now carved into the door to keep away neighbors. Hence, we lived –

I woke early the next morning as was routine. I crawled out of bed, careful not to wake Darius, and checked on the kids, sleeping peacefully at first. There's meaning to me watching them sleep, it soothes my troubled conscience. They're young, most of these events they won't remember, just a page in a history book when they're older. They won't understand the things that dear old Dad did to protect them; what I'd seen and done. To see them asleep, devoid of worry or stress, confident that their parents' wings would always be there to shelter them or catch them. The feeling in my chest lacked words. These moments fueled the fire in me, made me get up each day to fight. Two small reasons with shining black eyes that occasionally shifted color, they were enough. Madison and Draven were allowed their privacy, Syrius was already awake, smoking by the window, when I stumbled out to the living room. He gave the usual nod of acknowledgment before concentrating on the smoke's shadow against the light sky.

Syrius wasn't changed much by all this, I sat and watched him in silence as the scratching of my pencil produced the only sound. He had scribbled a note at random, leaving the shard on

the book I wrote in. It said:

“And I awoke one day and all the world was new and changed, horribly disfigured and grotesque, cruel and brutal, and I cried when I saw the shadow of what had been, and cried until I could cry no longer and stared at the vastness, realizing only then that it wasn’t a dream.”

Syrius did things like that, wrote random little thoughts like that, reflecting what was on his mind. I include his little thoughts here and there because they are significant. As our leader in youth, his ideas were held in high esteem, for we respected him. To say the words aloud was unthinkable; writing was less judgmental. A sheet of paper can’t talk back and respond to its’ contents, it’s your silent messenger. He had one such statement tattooed along his left arm on the side of his palm in bold, unrelenting letters. It hadn’t taken long as both Darius and myself worked on it, in accordance with his wishes.

Tick. Another moment wasted. I dressed as the rest of the house woke, one by one rejoining the world. I watched them rouse, sleepily rubbing their eyes as they passed. I was in uniform before the kids were completely conscious. When we left for work, Madison would stay and help Darius. I kissed my love goodbye as we left, noticing a peculiar quirk in her character. I left reluctantly, as everyday, with Draven and Syrius in tow. They were happier, more energetic, I could sympathize with their mood. We were together again, nothing would destroy said unity. We entered the base, assuming our second identities, becoming cold-hearted killers. The daily routines of training and practice had the edge kept tight as today’s activities were determined. A mission, an actual mission. Being green, our little trio was sent together, under Alpha’s supervision, out to work.

The plan – a group of radicals were planning a hostile situation; we were instructed to eliminate all potential

threats. There were several targets; each of us must hit two. These six men were the lieutenants of evil, our goal was to set up shop and hit them as they passed below. We were told as much as was necessary before being supplied and shipping out. So we prepared.

This would be the first live target exercise. The first time that there wouldn't be little black circles, more solid than paper or plastic. Human, flesh and blood, complete with logic, a conscience and a soul. It was my job to end all functions in a millisecond; hopefully he wouldn't even feel it. Just a slight pinch – a bit of pressure. I'd been shot before, the initial shock is powerful. A person, a breathing man, my fellow in society. My mind rolled all these thoughts through repeatedly, diving deeper each time. The targets would be pointed out on sight. Nothing to worry about – just a job. Nothing personal, I'd done it so many times before, point and click. I stayed alone then in mental preparation, waiting patiently.

The wolves were nestled on different rooftops, watching the quiet streets below, whatever masses left were milling around like docile sheep. The wolves sought to sort out the tigers that lurked below. My commander spoke evenly to me in my ear from hundreds of yards away maybe. I could hear Sirius and Draven check in, their tones professional; balanced and unyielding. I could imagine Draven questioning how he got involved in all this, locking doubt away behind stubborn determination. I lay sprawled out, flat as I could manage, staring vacantly at the usual environment. The radio clicked:

“You dogs ready to kill some heartless bastards?” Sirius' voice was dark, mocking reality. Another click led to Alpha's voice – a small scolding for breaking communication protocol, interrupted by a superior officer giving target descriptions. My first target was a tall man; he appeared dull and uncaring. All teams go. Wait, wait . . . there. In position, target, squeeze. The man below had a slight spasm before folding in

upon himself, blood settling on the ground around him. My mind froze as I stared at the body, lying on the ground, cold, dead. I blinked, hearing arguing in my ear. I ran to position two to take out my other target before people realized our ambush. I heard Syrius' voice yelling:

"It's a kid, c'mon, what's the matter wit ye?" His voice was joined with Draven who was also protesting his target. I took out my two and changed positions to acquire Syrius' target. I'd handled four out of six total targets, leaving ten minutes late. The voices in my head continued as I returned screams. Later on I found I couldn't remember what happened, it was just a blur. We were all dragged out of hostile territory, back to base for a good tongue-lashing. The words were lost, I don't remember anything much of the actual events. With each new kill, the world turned more inverted, until it was all black. I was being screamed at, or maybe I was the one screaming, I couldn't tell. I know we all left and were sent home, communication ended.

Phones rang, brief conversations, Darius' loving face. She was speaking to me, a soft kiss, down the line. Syrius and Draven sat next to me, staring into space; whether they were mentally conscious or not, I don't know. But there we stood, the moments all lost in the blur of action and decision. My thoughts all flowed together. Logic ceased to exist.

Now, stop. Rewind, and consider. What actually happened, what really occurred that short time ago was this. There were six targets, as planned. One was a young child, one was a woman, possibly carrying child, and the rest were men of various builds and ages. We each were assigned one man, but I was the most fortunate; I was assigned the remaining man. My two fellows had the harder targets. They were facing the emotional question of if they could do it, if they could do the job without question. They cracked, as was expected. What wasn't expected was that I'd finish the job they'd started. They had no problem shooting males; it was like shooting an enemy

soldier. But women and children were different. Even in our days as a gang we left women and children alone, it was just our morals. But now we were being commanded to kill them, it was them or us; our country demanded it. So there we were, and they couldn't handle breaking such traditions that were held in such high-esteem. So they couldn't act, they froze up. They never freeze up, but they did then and I was forced to react. And I did, I risked my life, I disobeyed strict orders to leave immediately, and I finished the job. I went to their locations and helped dragged them away, still screaming at the commander over the radio. And we left and were promptly sent home to rest after such an emotional day. They called Darius to explain what had happened in as much detail as was permitted. I was congratulated along the way for a job well done and thinking on my toes. I remember a handshake and muttering a thank you here and there and then I was home, with them, silent, staring. And Darius knew, even though she couldn't know, it would violate national security. But as she looked into our eyes then, from one to another, down the line of soldiers, she knew what had come to pass. And we were held and comforted and sent to lie down, where we could forget the horrors of the day, which we never would. I remember drifting off into an uneasy slumber, I awoke, got a quick drink to settle my nerves, and went back to sleep. My mind wandered over all manner of topics as I slept, dreams and nightmares, all kinds of horrific ideas. And yet I slept, peacefully, undisturbed, like a child; content with life.

The war had more than six casualties that day, there were nine. There were the six corpses, cold and dead, as they were now and would be for the rest of eternity. And there were the two lost souls and myself, the bastards who'd ended their mortal lives, sleeping pleasantly like children, dreaming our visions of peace and justice.

We erased the nightmarish event; it was replaced by justice. It was forgotten and we did it day in and day out because we

had to. It was the job to which we were assigned, to which we'd volunteered. We forced ourselves to move on, to carry on with what we were born to do. It was all we had, all we could do. So we moved forward and didn't look back on that fateful day or the corpses that lurked over our shoulder. We took lives and did it proudly for we were men of honor, soldiers of law, enforcers of the Constitution, protectors of freedom. Such was the universe of denial we created to save our souls, to protect our sanity from the lunacy that the world was swept up in. Each day was a new trial, another experiment of devotion, and we passed with flying colors.

This was war, this brutality, this anguish, this was the truth of it, this was how it happened. It's not all beauty and glory and honor; it's blood and death and loss. It's selling your conscience for a rifle and your soul for some bullets. It's absolute lunacy. Yet, we followed along, we played the parts we were given and we played them well. It was all we could do. One day the curtain would come down once and for all and the body count would be tallied and with a little luck, we'd all be standing on the sidelines, watching the sun rise of the horizon of peace, watching the dust settle and the smoke clear. The five of us would be there, leaning against one another, smiling and laughing. And it would all be a dream, a horrible nightmare, a distant memory. It would be pushed to the back of our minds and life would start again, and we'd be there to watch. Youth would make a new generation and our memories would become silly old fairy tales to laugh about when we're all old and gray. But that day would come, when the bodies were tallied and the treaties signed, and maybe then, maybe on that one day, would we admit to killing countless people without a shred of remorse.