

Volume IV Summary

If someone told you a story, would you accept everything to be true just because they swear it is so? Harvey Riley happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time when a gang member murdered his mark on the street. Intrigued by the idea of slowly deteriorating something beautiful, young Vincent toys with his prey until the inevitable moment where he must tie up loose ends from his crime.

Harvey must sort through what she considers to be her last relevant days of her life, trying to decide what identity she will leave behind and how the world will carry her legacy. Having inherited a fascination with storytelling from her mother, Harvey carries on the burden of surviving as an outcast in a hostile world previously established in relating stories.

1. Actor's Craft

She was a child. Young, pure, innocent. A child just like anybody else. Born into the world just like the rest. She was curious and bright, yet dark and solitary. She had loving parents and a good home. And the child was happy. She had her father's name and her mother's tenderness. She was even-tempered and timid. She was five then. And her name was Harvey.

She was five when her mother died, five when she started learning some of life's most important lessons. She felt alone, betrayed – forsaken. But she found a friend in her childhood misery. From the darkness of a child's tortured soul came Jack. They had each other, always. It was a secret she

kept for herself, for her own sake. Something that nobody could take from her, ever. And so she grew.

Her mother left her early, but her father survived. When she turned 16, he went blind, mostly anyway. And she took care of him. He needed her and she needed him. She had Jack to help. It worked out well over time. She'd grown up lacking a mother, but she'd turned out all right in the end. Or as close to "all right" as you could expect. Her heart was lacking, she tuned out the world most of the time. She was a loner for life. Jack was her only true companion. It's hard to describe him, he just "was". He had perfect timing, a flawless intuition, everything clicked. Jack and Harvey; Harvey and Jack.

She was a good kid, just...different. She grew technically alone. But if one person cares about you, just one, that's more than enough. There was Jack. She had him and that was enough to make it worthwhile. She was still unusual, nobody bothered with her in school; they blocked her out and pretended that she wasn't there. It's a hard thing to live your life with the world hating you; everything you are, never being good enough. Never. She handled it well in my opinion. Quite well, considering. But she'd had a good upbringing, she was a good student and a hard worker. She held a job after school at a tattoo shop. She wasn't allowed to do much, but they let her design patterns for the windows. She enjoyed it and they liked her.

The parlor was called "the Black Dragon," it was run by a bunch of freaks. Some of them she'd gone to school with, others were strangers to her. Either way, she liked them all just fine. They accepted her and even though they might've been a bit paranoid of her, they didn't treat her like an outcast. Not ever. They were a second family to her. It was great. Kind of like a fairy tale, only reversed; the pink was really black and the shine was shadow but nonetheless, it suited them all. Everything was as it was meant to be. The world was as peaceful as it gets. Perhaps.

It's not a fairy tale because those are boring. And ordinary. Harvey was far from ordinary. She was an only child; her parents couldn't handle two. She was raised just like every other little girl, or so it would seem so. But she had Jack. He changed with the seasons it seemed, always a new or different color. That's how he was – eccentric. Aren't we all? At least slightly, that little bit is what makes life worthwhile. The fact that every day is new and different, that is what makes us get up in the morning.

Harvey worked after school for a couple hours, then she'd meet Jack and head home. He was usually quiet, content with the world, happy to be with her and she was happy as well. The parlor was great too. Harvey was good friends with. Pike and Syn, they'd been put in charge by the Drakes. She'd only met them a precious few times, always wishing that they'd stay longer. There seemed to be a secret there, a darkness buried in their hearts. It was obvious. She wondered if they knew. They might've, they knew everything. Or seemed to. They were above all else.

Harvey was obsessed with the Drakes, she found them completely fascinating. They had something that she could only dream of. She was obsessed; she would stay at work, even on her days off, in the hopes of seeing them, even at a glance. There was something inspiring about what they had. Pike thought it was cute, Syn thought it was dangerous, and Harvey didn't care what either of them thought. She knew what she felt, and that was enough. She was young, as we all are at some point.

The Drakes were the owners of the parlor, given to them after the passing of its' true owner. They were kind and patient, yet dark and freakish. The kids loved them and they loved the kids. They were young, yet had kids of their own. The Drakes treated the employees as an extended family; they cared dearly for everyone and respected everyone as a person. They were all freaks, the Drakes most of all. But it was a family.

Raine and Darius Drake were the object of Harvey's obsession. They were in love, a love beyond all limits and rules. Absolute devotion, a force you don't reckon with. They had it. All the odds were beaten; all the rules were broken. They were something else, they really were. Together they were powerful; their pure dedication was present in everything they did, it penetrated their surroundings and contaminated everything. Harvey was just another casualty. And the Drakes understood their effect and were very careful with it. They were always compassionate because they knew from experience that we're most vulnerable in our younger years. Like I said, they know everything.

So what was so interesting about Jack and Harvey? Not much. They were freaks, they cared for one another dearly and were each other's balance. Without the other, one would be unhinged and frantic. But what made them interesting? I'm not quite sure. By observation, Harvey appeared to be a perfectly well adjusted teenage girl. But upon closer inspection, one might realize the truth. She wasn't well adjusted or happy. Harvey was housing a mixture of hundreds of opposing emotions. She was bitter and lonely, and it was during these times that Jack seemed to surface. He always knew when he was needed, he was there right away to hold her close and make it better.

Harvey had her quirks, as we all do. She carried a deck of cards with her at all times and loved to walk in the rain. She would write from time to time, nothing fancy, always free form. She drew a lot; she wanted to be a tattoo artist when she was old enough. And she could write music; it was her primary talent. She was born to be a musician, but she refused her destiny. She loved music, too much to risk society adulterating her efforts. She locked that side of herself away.

In school she was teased constantly for being the loner that she was, but she didn't seem to care. That was a lie. She'd find somewhere to lock herself away and cry until her eyes had

nothing but blood to shed for her sadness. She'd compose herself and go back out there, head high, and pretend that nothing happened. And in her mind, nothing had happened; it was just a part of the day-to-day routine of life. Wake up, go to school, have a small breakdown, go home, do homework, go to work – it was just part of the average.

Then the typical changed.

Harvey was on her way home from school; she was going straight to work today. The people never bothered her and she kept herself to herself. She walked at a fair pace, she walked everywhere, not that there was anywhere to go. But she went along as she usually did, but something caught her attention. Being the curious child that she was, Harvey went to look. And she saw a guy being beat up by a group of kids. They all stopped at once as the biggest guy took out a gun. He shot the other kid twice in the chest. And they all turned to leave. Harvey had watched in horror as someone was murdered. She ran. She ran all the way to work, without caring if they'd seen or heard her there. She ran until she felt her lungs might explode, running without looking back. She reached the parlor and went straight to the back to catch her breath. The artists watched her go by, but nothing was said because everybody knew that Harvey was a tad strange.

She stayed in the back, forcing herself to believe that it was just a nightmare and none of it was real. But there were footsteps in the front of the store, powerful, steady steps, steps that weren't familiar to her. And she knew. She knew right away that they'd seen her. She stayed curled up in the back, rocking quietly. Pike came back to find her there, rocking with her eyes closed. He put a hand on her shoulder.

"Are you okay kid? Someone's asking for you."

Harvey's voice was pleading. "Please tell them I'm not here."

"Alright, then where are you, and when will you be here?" Pike

was speaking with a hint of sarcasm, he sat and put an arm around the child. And she broke. For the first time in her life since her mother died, Harvey cried with someone watching. She had reason to be upset, but she cried about everything in her life that she hadn't cried about before. All of the pain in her heart came out, and Pike just held her like the child that she was. Syn came to find him, she left quickly to send the stranger away. This is where the story really starts. This was the beginning of something more, the first of a chain of events that would spell disaster for Harvey. This is her trip to Hell, her eventual downfall.

She cried for hours until nothing was left and it hurt to breathe. And Pike, her boss, held her. In the meanwhile, someone had entered the room, Harvey felt the piercing eyes but couldn't explain who it might be. Glancing up, the shadows shifted, and Darius crept out. When she got there and how, nobody noticed, not even I know.

Who am I? I'm not real, though I might've been at one time. Maybe I was always dead and I've just come alive now. Maybe it's all a pleasant fiction and none of it is real. Perhaps. Regardless, here we are. I'm going to give Harvey the story; it's hers after all. I watch everything as it passes, I say what is necessary from time to time. But I lack the emotional part of it, which is crucial. You can't tell a proper story without knowing what's going on in the character's heads. You just have to know, otherwise there's a void that lacks purpose. I've set the time and place, I've given you some of the cast, I'll leave it to Harvey to explain everything in detail. Have fun kids, enjoy the ride. We're all children from time to time, sometimes we always are. So, take care friends. If anytime, you never know, you need a friend, give me a call. The name's Jack.

2. When the End Comes First

Ever read a story, and it's a good story, but it's backwards? Maybe it's just me. My name's Harvey, which is a silly name for a girl, but it's the only name I've got. I'm 16, I go to school, I work at a tattoo parlor and I look after my father. Dad's blind, he's been that way for a little while now, it's tough, but we manage. I like work, the tattoo parlor's great; the kids there are amazing. They're all freaks like me, but that's cool, they're all very talented. I'm ranting, I should get to the point.

I'm writing because I was asked to, or told to. Maybe both, I'm not sure. I got into a little trouble but I'm not supposed to think about it. Mrs. Drake, well, Darius rather, she told me to write. I'm not sure why or for how long. She gave me a story to read and gave me some paper to write one of my own. The story was short but sad. It scared me a bit, I don't know why. I feel like I'm in school, I don't like writing that much, it's okay I suppose, but I'm no good at it. I want to make her happy, but I don't know what she wants to read. But I was told to write, so I'll just write.

It's a nice day, the weather's nice for a change. It's been changing constantly as the days passed. Tomorrow it might rain, you never can tell anymore. I'll be leaving here in a few hours to head home. Home, where's home to you? Is it where you feel safe? Where you live? I'm not quite sure where my home is, maybe it's this parlor. I'm sitting in a storage room, a considerably large one at that. And I'm very comfortable here, it's kind of scary if you think about it. The room is filled with boxes of sorts, I arranged most of them myself. They contain all manner of bizarre contents, as expected in the vocation of the place. I found a corner to

curl up in, I was at ease, surprisingly. Maybe she was right after all.

I would write about school, but that's a boring topic. My classes are typical, my teachers don't care and my classmates suck. It's school. My father is the only family I've got left, but he's blind. He's still kind and caring though; his pride took a hard blow when he lost his sight. He tried to be humble, but he refused to ask for help. I was the same way, I wouldn't ask for help either. But if the situation got desperate, I'd know enough to go to someone for help. I'd know to go somewhere and cry my eyes out until nothing was left. I never cried loud and hard like some people, you know, with the kicking and screaming. I shake a lot and bury my face in my hands to muffle the sobs. I don't know why I wrote that, maybe it's significant, if you read everything backwards. Some things make more sense that way. Some things only make sense that way. Logic's a hard one to tame, maybe some day. The backwards thing is worth consideration, I'll have to ask Jack later.

Jack. Even his name looks nice on paper, it sounds nice too, it kind of rolls off your tongue. Backwards it would be, "kcaJ," which doesn't matter. But it's fun to think about. Jack's mine as I'm his. I love him, he's the greatest person I know, he's my best friend, my only true friend. He's the only one that honestly gives a damn about me, and I respect him greatly for it. He's got that foreboding note going for him, the dark, brooding personality suits him. He's my reflection, just better than anything I could ever be. Where Jack came from, I'm not sure. One day, there he was. And we got along from the get-go – it was great. We spoke in whispers usually because I was afraid that if either of us spoke loudly, the dream of happiness might shatter. It was so frail that even a harsh whisper put it in grave peril.

Everything's a gamble, life, death; all of it. I carry a deck of cards with me at all times. They give the deciding vote in

my life, when I couldn't reach a proper outcome, high card rules. I'd shuffle the deck, take a card for the house and one for myself. Usually Jack took the house's card for me. I don't know, I answered everything with cards, some might find that odd, but it worked out for me. Some people flip a coin, I draw a card. I had painted the cards and laminated them, they were familiar to me. A kid in school challenged me once; I beat him at his own games in five minutes flat. He took the loss poorly though. He threw the cards at me and said a few nasty remarks. I just walked away, pride intact. It was an interesting day then.

Like I said, I carry cards always. I like the uniformity of them, the fact that it's all chance and luck. My favorite card was the ace of spades. It was the top card, the highest blessing you could hope for. Yet, in old legends of sorts, this card symbolizes death. This double meaning helped me fall in love with it. I had death with me at all times, he and I played our cards out one at a time. Whoever holds the ace at the end, wins.

The list of topics to write about is limited. Darius will be disappointed with me, but this is all I can do. I respect her greatly, but there are limits. I can't write, it's not what I do. She's an amazing person, both her and Raine are, truly amazing. They're above it all, everything, all pettiness is nothing to them. I want to sit and pick their minds, or better yet, their hearts, to learn the key to their tragic happiness. Maybe, if I ask them nicely sometime, they'll let me. Hopefully. I'm supposed to be pouring my heart out on paper – it's not working very well. I can't write down my problems, I can say them in a whisper, a slight tone above silence. Nothing more. Writing them down is proof, it confirms them; they become real. Reality's another story.

3. Faceless Odyssey

Here's the outcome of my ranting. Darius, who insists that I refer to her by her first name, read what I wrote, and she threw it back at me in disgust. The expression of absolute contempt on her face scared me, but it quickly faded. She sat down next to me and spoke in a calm tone.

"You're writing for someone, don't do that. It's a waste of time, writing doesn't have rules. Next time you write, put the pencil to paper and just let it flow. Don't think about it, any of it. Your true words are locked away in your heart, give yourself the chance to find them. No matter how pointless it may seem, who cares, just write. There's no such thing as bad writing."

This is where the story really starts. Those words stayed with me my entire life, when in doubt, I'd repeat them to myself. Writing is freedom, pure, unrestrained, absolute – freedom. My philosophy on writing is that I don't care. It'll be honest, complete, no censorship. I'm writing to vent, it's healthy, it's necessary. So, let's start with the bizarre happenings of today.

I was on my way to work when I heard noises that drew my attention, so, being a typical teenager, I went to investigate. A gang, I assumed, was hanging around in the alleyway, watching a spectacle occurring in the center. I watched until a gap shifted between the kids to reveal their victim, bruised and bloody. I assumed that the leader was the one in front, dealing the majority of the blows. I was going to go for help, but the abuse stopped. Everyone took a step back, the poor victim tried to rise. And they shot him. I watched the body stagger under the blows, then collapse. Blood

stained the alley on all sides. I don't know when I blacked out, but they turned to leave, and I ran. I kept going, knowing that they would come for me, until I reached work. Why I broke down, I don't know.

I was witness to a murder. I could identify them, I'd seen most of them head on. And they'd seen me. The situation was dangerous, highly dangerous. There was a lot of risk involved here, I'd have to take my chances. That's a lot of trust though, trust in myself; I'd have to take a moral stand. Society demands that I take a stand against opposition, they demand that I stand brave and tall and take the blows as they come. But humanity had me shaking, it had me by the shoulders and shook me to try and draw me back. And I was torn between the two; adult responsibility knocking at the door while childhood fear tried desperately to climb through the window.

I hid myself away, Pike's presence was comforting. I cried, my body heaved with my sobs, everything shut down. And I heard them come, I heard their dull steps. And they left, they left when Syn told them. Syn was Pike's girl, they worked well together. They were a bit scary at times, but very warm and amiable. They were freaks, but they were friendly freaks. They were respectful and calm, I don't think I ever saw them upset or angry. They didn't yell either. How they managed their relationship, I'm not sure, but they did a good job of it. The shop was composed of good kids, all of which had issues.

And there was always the story of Lyric. Lyric was the one that got away from us all. The story of Lyric was legend. It happened years ago, long before my time, when old Sketch first got the place. Sketch kind of fell into it, the owner trusted him immensely. I never knew his real name, I wonder if anybody did. But there was this girl that used to come in all the time, a freak, of course. She knew everybody in the shop by name and story, and she always talked to everyone before leaving. From time to time, she'd bring her "fella" with her, the shop was renamed after her. That comes later though. She

had a long tattoo, it wound through most of her body, of a gorgeous black dragon. It was truly amazing, she managed to cover it up most of the time. The best part of it spanned her back, it was her trademark. She had quite a personality though, she truly did. She knew all the local gang leaders, though she was a member of none. She'd been shot, stabbed, beat up and nearly killed, yet she survived. She might've graduated from high school, she never made it to college though. And she never asked for help. Through her injuries, she never asked for help and refused the hospital. There were a few times when she had no choice, but still, she wouldn't discuss it. She was invincible it seemed. But we all crack, we have to bend, or else we shatter. When she shattered, well, let's just say...it was bad. Worse than bad, I thought the world would stop turning for this one. She was smart as hell and powerful, she was one of the most manipulative people that existed, but only when she wanted to be. Most of the time, she was cute and wholesome Lyric, love of the world. She was an inspiration. And to top it all off, her boy was one of those honor students. They were born enemies, yet, they pulled through. They were adorable together, it truly was a sight to see, or so the story goes. This was a bit before my time, of course. But we heard stories and have pictures. There were so many sides of the story, so many perceptions of her. But they all loved her, even her enemies. She was a legend.

Lyric's been dead for years now. The story of her passing is burned into my mind. She was like a daughter to Sketch, he had done all of her work personally. According to him, she was never cold, always smiled and barely flinched from the pain. Her boy died before her, only by a few hours. Nobody expected that relationship to work, it wasn't meant to. Yet, they managed, they made it work. They were hopelessly devoted to one another, absolutely in love. Nobody ever saw them fight, when they were together, they were unstoppable. Truly an inspiration. But he had a bad family, daddy was abusive, highly abusive. And the poor boy died from it. It was very

tragic, but it happened. His brother came to tell her. They'd never met before, never laid eyes on one another, but they shared a common bedfellow that day – misery. They say you could hear her heart break as it screamed inside her chest, its' echo thundering in her head. The child left her after a while and she went to Sketch. Only he knows what was said, and he never spoke of it. She talked to him for hours and set out from there, changed. She rounded up the crew and they set out with one purpose – vengeance. She'd snapped, or so I thought at first. That night she killed the father that had taken her beloved from her. She rights the wrongs committed against her. And she took her boy's siblings, left them in good care. Then she turned the gun on herself. Whether she cried during any of this is debatable. The funny thing was that Lyric never owned a gun, never. The gun she used was never found, it disappeared. Rumor has it that it was a gorgeous pistol and it had the name "Sketch" etched down the barrel. Just a rumor, which are usually false. But how funny would that be, well, not funny in the humorous sense, but ironic. It's like your father handing you the knife to kill yourself with, possibly even pushing the blade down himself. Sketch was heartbroken when she died, he renamed the shop for her. The Black Dragon was her home, she had no family, she went where the wind carried her. Lyric was always alone, she surfaced one day and lived her days one second at a time. Everything was decided on a whim. She was the wild horse that couldn't be broken. Not even Despair could force her to trot. So she gave herself to Death, surrendering her soul to Purgatory, she was still free. The legend of Lyric carries on; there are pictures of her around the shop. Only the devoted few know the full story, some don't know any of it. It depended on Sketch's mood. He was the storyteller, the gatekeeper and the key-master, he blocked all the locks, held all the keys but the story lived on. Forever.

The story of Lyric is significant for various reasons, not only because it is tragic. She was free in both life and

death. She was an inspiration, her legacy lived on with the shop, carrying through the employees. Lyric was 18 when she died, a political statistic. She forfeited her life for love; she could've moved past the pain and replaced her lost beloved, but instead she proved her devotion with the contract of blood. It was amazing; absolute proof of, "If love proves real". That was tattooed on most of the shop's employees somewhere. Raine had it across his knuckles on his right hand; Darius had it on the left. Both were shades of red and black, opposite of each other. Pike said he'd do it for me on my 17th birthday. It would finally unite me with the rest of the shop. Finally.

Jack understood how I felt; I explained the Lyric story to him. He listened quietly, absorbing everything in turn. He seldom gave advice, but when he did, it was great. He was deeply enlightened – I cherished him dearly. He was there to hold me when I shook, to help me when I cried. Why I cried to Pike instead of Jake, I'm not sure. I'll explain it to Jack later, I'm sure he'll understand. He's like a brother to me.

Back to reality, even though I'd much rather sleep. They sent me home, Darius brought me there, we walked the way, it wasn't long. I asked her if she was around when Lyric was. She stopped dead in her tracks. She looked at me blankly, searching for answers.

"Why do you ask?" There was a moment of darkness, a shift of shades in her eyes, I looked down at the ground. I shrugged my shoulders and told her I didn't know, just curiosity. Jack was watching quietly. Darius kept moving eventually, her mind a bit distracted. We talked about menial topics to pass the time. Reaching home, she took me aside by the shoulder.

"Don't go anywhere alone, someone will bring you to and from school and work. And be careful kid, they'll be out for blood. Watch your back, trust no-one."

I smiled and laughed softly, "Except you?"

She stared back at me, holding tighter to my shoulder. "No-one," she whispered, "Especially me."

On that note, she turned and left. I stood in shock for a few seconds before moving upstairs. My mind was a whirl of varied emotions and ideas, I wanted to hit a button and make it stop. But there was no button, nothing to stop the madness. I tended to my father, telling him nothing of the day's events. He's only worry for no reason – he had enough problems. He did some sort of work, I don't know what type of work, being blind. We were very distant at times, then there were times we'd be close. Today I avoided his usual questions, replying with the usual, "fine" when it was anything but.

I laid on my bed, staring up at the ceiling in silence. It wasn't really silence; there was music in the background, calming my mind, lulling my senses to a waking slumber. I felt torn between the dreaming and the waking. Sleep was nearly impossible, I tried at various points, all in vain. Jack went to sleep early, his conscience wasn't weighed down like mine was. I couldn't bring myself to talk about it anymore. By about three in the morning, I couldn't bear to think about it either. And by four, I slept, well, I might've.

Writing is my new past time, I have pencil and paper available at all times. I might not have any talent for it, but it's healthy. It's like emotional cleansing – it wipes everything out of your system until you're stripped to the bone. All that remains is ash. A distant reminder of a forgotten memory. That's all life is, a series of forgotten memories, playing through in reverse. I don't really know what's going on, I could almost swear that I'm sleeping. Maybe I am, if you get a chance, could you check for me? Please? If you only get one chance though, don't waste it on me.

I woke up the next day calm. The weekend was here, that meant

no school, just work. I loved the weekends. I went running out the door, kissing my father goodbye along the way, eager to face a new day. There was a guy leaning against the building casually, smoking contently to himself. He seemed to be waiting for something, but not in the overly excited sense. He got up when I started past.

"You're Harvey, right?" His voice wasn't soft, but it wasn't rough either. I nodded apprehensively, he just stood there, watching. He shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly.

"My name is Vincent."

Vincent seemed lively enough, he had his darker features, but seemingly friendly. Darius' words echoed in my mind, fighting for attention. I had shaken his hand by now, he seemed nice enough. Then again, you never can tell with freaks. He had a tattoo that snaked around his arm and hand, winding its way around. Something about his eyes was unsettling, they felt so...hollow. I didn't know where he came from, I was slightly intrigued to follow. Common sense went on vacation and forgot the luggage.

Raine, Darius' significant other, came out of nowhere like a rabid dog. He put himself between Vincent and myself, carefully pulling me away. A few threats were muttered in silent voices as Raine dragged me out. Vincent shrugged his shoulders and kind of sauntered off. I watched him go, avoiding Raine's searching eyes. Raine, Mr. Drake, seemed a bit upset with me.

"Didn't Darius warn you to be careful? It would be safer for you to ignore strangers. There's a gang of cold-blooded killers out to get you. Are you paying attention? Harvey!" He was shaking me by the shoulders, I don't know when I zoned out, but I was too preoccupied committing the knowledge of Vincent to memory. I hung my head down and apologized for being foolish. He was still upset, even after I apologized

another half a dozen times before he conceded. Raine escorted me to work, reminding me to be more careful. I promised I would be.

Work was fun, as always. I love the Black Dragon; it's like my home. I love the people, the atmosphere, the art. Above all, I loved the stories, everyone had a story. Pike and Syn had a story of sorts, nobody really knew it though. There were three or four other employees at the Dragon, I'll get into them later. Raine hung around the shop a bit, checking around into things and keeping everything functional. After an hour or so, he left, but only after asking me once more to be careful. And again I promised. Things returned to how they were meant to be. Or as closely as possible.

The next few days were routine, I felt that someone was watching me. And sure enough, Vincent resurfaced. He dressed in black most of the time, helping him blend into the shadows. Only his piercing eyes gave truth to his presence. He would acknowledge me from time to time, sometimes he'd just stand mute. At first, I didn't care, I just let it be. Over time, it started to bother me. I was constantly paranoid, so I asked Jack what to do. He was worried, he sent me to Pike.

Talking to Pike about Vincent was...bizarre. He sat motionless during the entire conversation, I could barely see him breathe. His response was calm and monotone, if you could call it a response. He got up and motioned for me to follow. I looked at him in confusion.

"Just follow me."

And I did. Through winding roads and busy streets, I followed. He led me to an apartment building that seemed forgotten by the world. I went up a few flights of stairs, careful to keep up. We reached a black door with the words, "All Hope Abandon," carved deep into its' face. Pike knocked, the dull thud echoed through the desolate halls. A child opened the

door, from his features I knew where we were. Sounds came from within the apartment, and the child made way for his mother. She looked disarmingly sedate. Pike left as I stood there in silence.

She looked me over carefully, checked the hallway, and ushered me in. The apartment was homey, all manner of bizarre artifacts covered the walls. I was left alone to my own devices while Darius went in search of her other. I heard the quiet hum of voices, and she was back as I continued to look around in awe. She seemed to creep up on me, slow, sinister...evil. I felt her hand on my shoulder as she urged me to sit. She remained standing, peering down at me. The leverage bothered me.

"What's going on?" The words were planned, they rolled off her tongue as if she'd held them there for centuries. I shrugged off her question. She raised her eyebrows in a quizzical gesture. She'd begun pacing around.

"He's dangerous, Harvey, please trust us. He's out to clean up the mess. You know who I mean," she concluded. I continued to shrug her off, I don't know why. She grabbed hold of the arms of the chair, glaring at me as she threw a stack of pictures at me. They were of Vincent mostly, some were the two of us talking. The majority were of him engrossed in violent and highly illegal activities. I jumped up in disgust.

"Stalking is illegal in all 50 states you know, you're beginning to scare me."

Darius looked upset, genuinely sad. She sat down, confused, taken aback. She was whispering to herself. I sat down next to here, apologizing for being so ungrateful. She looked at me with sorrowful eyes.

"You're like part of the family kid, we're trying to protect you. Gangs are hard to handle, I know from exp...well, I just know. Trust us, we won't let anything happen to you."

I looked at her when she faltered. Darius seldom ever faltered in anything, especially speech. Being typically silent, she had plenty of time to arrange her words. I questioned how she knew what she knew about gangs. All she could do to reply was smile. Or rather, grin, that sinister grin, that secretive glance of evil malice. I knew the truth, so I let it pass.

Vincent had a reputation about him. Of all the street gangs whose history survived through the neighborhood, Vince was rivaled only by one other. The ancient god himself – Cicero. Cicero disappeared, but his actions preserved him in the world's memory as the most heartless of gang leaders. Vincent was equally ruthless. And somehow, they got away with these things, they got away with murder. How, I'm not sure. They sure as hell didn't have any witnesses. They were concerned because they'd stop at nothing until I was "neutralized;" I was a direct threat to their livelihood. Darius told me stories, horrific stories, things that Vincent had done without a qualm. I could only sit there, frozen.

I stayed there, absorbing everything, silent. Night seemed to settle in ages ago when Darius stopped. She got up, walking the tension off. She lit up a cigarette and let the smoke fade into nothingness, watching half-heartedly. I got up and stood next to her; she handed the pack to me. I opened it gingerly and lit up with her, handing the pack back. Darius glanced over.

"I thought you didn't smoke."

"You thought wrong."

She grinned, "When'd you start?"

I coughed a few times, shaking them off simply, "Just now."

Darius helped me get used to the awkwardness of the moment, and everything was fine. We stayed in that moment until she glanced at the time.

“I’ll take you home.”

And she did. We walked home, through the dark, searching. We were both watching for him, the demon himself. But we couldn’t find him, or rather, I couldn’t. Darius was a hard one to analyze. She never really let on everything that she knew, the important details were kept safely locked away, away from incriminating eyes. Her eyes were the safest place to hide your soul. Despite all else, I trusted her; I felt myself stop shaking, it’s just one of those things. She followed me to the door and refused to leave until a minute or two after it clicked closed behind me. I stayed on the other side and listened for the steps to move away. It felt like forever.

My father was already sleeping, I tucked his blankets in and went to my own room. A figure sat on my bed, patient, constant. My heart was racing as Vincent got up. He was smiling his typical broad grin, I couldn’t breathe. He approached where I was frozen and reached behind me to close the door. He stood barely a foot away from me.

“There, now we can have a nice little talk. You should’ve told me that your father’s blind, would’ve saved me quite a bit of trouble.”

He had his arm around the small of my back as he led me to sit in a chair. He looked around the room quietly before seating himself. He sat perfectly relaxed, calm...sinister.

“Awful nice little room you’ve got here, I let myself in and have been here for ages. You should have been home hours ago. Trouble at work?” He dared to smile, to grin that sinister little grin of his. But I was frozen. I was within mere feet of a notorious murderer. Yet, I was still alive?

I remember hearing myself babble, “What do you want with me?” My voice was high and childish, but he didn’t laugh. He got up and sat down again – next to me. I could feel him breathe. He looked at the ground a while before speaking.

“You’ve heard some things about me, I’m sure. Probably terribly things. I’m sorry for what you’ve heard, but I won’t deny it. Most of it’s true. This is difficult for me to do. I’m a business man, you understand, right kid? I do what must be done in order to continue operating. You understand, right?”

I nodded. I don’t know why, but I did. He did seem genuinely upset. I don’t know what possessed me, but I hugged him. I don’t know what happened, but I felt I had to. And poor Vincent just sat there, lost, amazed – damned. The worst curse in human morality is conscience. That alone is what makes, or breaks, good people.

I felt something drop from him, his arm lowered to his side. He had a gun, I stared at it in silence. He’d meant to kill me, but then I threw him a curve. He looked genuinely amazed. I backed away from him, the silence was horrible. I needed Jack, but he’d long gone to sleep. The killer of killers just sat there, both of us at a loss for words. He turned to look at me.

“Are you insane? Are you mad? You’re supposed to be dead right now.”

“But I’m not.”

“Yet.” Something about his tone wasn’t right. He was like a child and I wasn’t afraid anymore. A simple touch had him on edge, just a touch. I started going through his pockets, he didn’t even try to stop me. Finding what I sought, I lit a cigarette, “borrowed” from him, lighter and everything, and sat smoking with him. After a few coughs he took it from me and smoked the rest himself.

‘These’ll kill you, don’t screw around kid.’

“If you don’t first?”

Again he paused. Where this burst of courage came from, I'm not sure. But I was ready for everything, anything that life could throw at me. In Hell, this fellow would be a god, but I had him faltering all over the place. He got up abruptly and paced the room, gun held loosely in his right hand. There was a silencer over the barrel, he did come with the intent to destroy. Yet, I lived. Every breath I took was a mockery of him, every moment more that I survived was a crime. How I survived, Heaven knows. And so, there we were.

He was pacing around aimlessly for a while. He was nervous, uptight, annoyed. I refused to bend to him. He stopped and glared at me.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Do you just not care if you live or die?"

"You can't stop the inevitable. And how do you plan on getting away with it?"

"I'm the undertaker's son."

I still wasn't scared, but I realized something then. The undertaker's son, could you imagine? Growing up surrounded by death, loss, and misery. He was bred for black, he was born to wreck havoc. I felt bad for him, but not afraid. I stood toe to toe with him, but he refused to look back at me. I hugged him again, holding him close, trying to evoke some sort of response. He backed away eventually, looking at me in silence. And he moved to leave.

"Your life is yours, you've earned it."

"How?"

He smiled, speaking, "By daring to embrace Death when no one else would."

And he left. I was alone again. I felt my heart might explode, but I lived. I had gone up against the biggest of all tigers, yet I stood. The blood rushed through my veins and all I could do was stare at where he'd been. Should I tell Darius? She'd be...well, I don't know how she'd react. She might be proud that I stood my ground, she might lecture me for not finding a way to call her. I don't know, it's just...bizarre. I decided to go to sleep and let it go. But some things can't be let go of, especially if they don't want to go. This was one of them.

I forgot about it for a while, but curiosity got the best of me. I went to the phonebook, decked myself in black, and left in search of a funeral parlor. It took a bit of time, but I found it.

The place was welcoming, dark, but there was a pleasant feel to it. A voice called to me from another room, I seated myself as I was told. And I waited. Steps approached, solid, even steps from a hidden room. I knew it was him without seeing him, this place seemed familiar. He stopped when he saw me, confused by my appearance, but he smiled nonetheless. I stood to meet him as he approached. And he dressed nicely, the suit threw me off, but it was still him.

"Business or pleasure?"

I smiled back at him, "Research."

He stood there, looking me over, carefully noting every shadow or tint. Like I said, I was decked in black, bordering on freakish. I was thankful that my dear father was blind. The last few times he'd seen me, I could pass as normal. He as a tad thrown off by the change, but I didn't let it bother me. Ironic how I was decked and he was in a nice suit.

I kind of smiled and went outside, he followed me out. I turned to see him standing there. I looked up at the sky – it was raining. My coat came down to my ankles, he'd get soaked standing there. He approached me, still smiling. I stood my

ground.

“Why are you really here?” he questioned softly. I doubted that this was the same ruthless murderer that I had heard such horrible stories about. Reality’s tricky like that. The funny thing was that I didn’t have an answer; I forgot why I’d come, assuming that I’d ever truly known. And he knew it too, that I was clueless. All he did was stare down at me and smile. I went to step away from him; he took hold of my arm.

“If you ever get bored of living, let me know?”

“But that’s the point of living.”

He tilted his head, “What is?”

“Trying to get bored of it. But when each day is another chance to turn it all around, there’s a purpose to getting up each morning. The idea of getting bored is a challenge.”

And dear Vincent was silent. I left him standing there in the rain; I walked away, leaving nothing but the echo of our words in the moist air. The rain kept falling, despite any turn of events, it would continue until it saw fit to end. Rain’s interesting that way. It never rains when you want it to though. It’s usually a spur of the moment inconvenience, usually. But on this occasion, it was perfect.

My love-hate relationship with Vincent was highly eccentric, but only somewhat. He still presented a threat in my book, but I was careful. He didn’t scare me, hard as he tried. I’d usually smile or laugh. Vincent’s hard to understand and almost impossible to explain. I could destroy him just as easily as he could kill me. It was bizarre, but most things are. I walked away that day like something out of a movie, coat sweeping in the wind. He just stood there and let me go, watching. I knew his name, his job, his story. Perhaps I was slightly intrigued by the mystery of it all. Or maybe I was just excited about someone noticing me, even if it was for all

the wrong reasons.

4. The House Always Wins

I am a statistical impossibility.

That is my explanation of myself. My theory, you could say. It made sense if you really thought about it. Jack was my best friend in the world. I've never done drugs, never drank, I don't fuck around and until recently, I didn't smoke. Being raised primarily by my father was rough enough, the stress of school added to the flame. All things considered, I turned out pretty well. Honest, reliable, intelligent – I beat the odds. It was somewhat comforting to me anyway. Maybe I'm just weird.

It's been a while since I last wrote. Darius and Raine still insist that someone accompany me to and from work. I liked Syn the best. She was dark and foreboding, but an amazing character. She loved Pike, or seemed to. That's the thing with Syn – she was neither good or bad – she was always indifferent. She had emotion, but nothing extreme. I doubt that she ever cried or screamed, her voice was low in itself; she seldom spoke at all if she didn't need to. Most people thought she was a mute. I loved her though, her cynicism toward things was hilarious. But she was cynical without being truly bitter. It was kind of...well, you'd have to know her. Syn's personality just didn't make sense.

Then there was Pike. Pike was content with life as well, but he was more social, he could handle people simply without preparing for days. There were stories he told off the top of his head, truly amazing stories. He was one of those freaks that everyone thinks is only going through a phase. He was typically even tempered, yet he was with Syn. They were

perfect for one another, but it wasn't supposed to work. Their personalities should've clashed, but it never happened. They were the ones that broke the rules; they rewrote the book to suit themselves. It was kind of interesting. But there was a difference between Pike and Syn and the Drakes. When you saw the Drakes together, you're swept with an overwhelming joy and peace of mind. They're so perfectly devoted that they affect their surroundings. With Pike and Syn, it was sweet, but not quite fully matured. Not quite.

The house always wins. If you play long enough, it'll take you, it takes everyone. People like the Drakes or Pike and Syn were the few who'd take the house, leaving nothing but ash in their wake. That's how things are. Together, they were unstoppable. Even alone they were barely vulnerable. I admired them all greatly. I wished that I could explain it to them, but I couldn't. Words all fell tragically short of the truth. Most of life is tragedy, but they went through it and came out on the other side, and they came out better.

I made it a point to write a bit here and there, at least something a day, whether it be organized ranting or disorganized raving. Either way, I wrote. I spoke to Jack less and less; he kind of sits in the corner and watches me work. He's a quiet one, but he gives opinions from time to time. Jack's like a brother to me; he'll always be there to take care of me, always. I trusted him with my life – he'd never failed me. Never, in all that time, not once. That's a pretty impressive track record. He's standing now, watching curiously. He doesn't smoke or anything either – imagine that. Two statistical impossibilities finding one another, how improbable indeed. Sometimes, funny things happen. Only sometimes though. If funny things happened all the time, nobody's notice, they'd get bored. Just a little variety is sufficient, no use getting carried away with it. You know?

That's my point to living, sometimes. I'm in search of the routine, the typical, the ordinary. Once my life falls into

that groove and I'm absolutely positive that there's no chance of salvation, that's when I'll know that it's over. It's a dangerous arrangement, but it's mine. We've all got our arrangements, our ideas, principles or motives. That's life. Poor Jack, he thinks I'm slightly bizarre. My beliefs aren't really...conventional, but that's what keeps things...interesting.

Work's the same, everything's calmed down a bit. Darius came in at one time. She sat herself down and stared at me. I didn't hear her right away, but I could feel the burn of her eyes. She looked at me curiously.

"How'd you do it?"

"Do what?"

"You're still alive, it's been a month or two. How'd you manage that one?"

I smiled, "No faith in me?"

She shrugged, "More like no faith in him just letting go."

I don't know where my sinister side came from, but I crept my way over to her and spoke very slowly, slightly above a whisper. "But he did, what's your excuse? You were mistaken. The killer of killers is nothing more than a baby tiger."

She got up, surprised, not truly annoyed, but shocked. She was on her way out the door. "My excuse? I've got years of experience. And even though the tiger's young, he's still got fangs and claws. Don't be a fool kid. The killer of killers has it in his blood."

"What do you mean?"

"He's Cicero's baby brother, the illegitimate, the prodigal son."

With that, she left. She left me there to ponder the facts and

figures, to solve the problem. It didn't add up. Cicero had an older brother, he was the reason Lyric was dead now. He had a younger sister, I forget her name. But Vincent? Vince would've been a newborn when it all happened. Maybe...everyone knew the family history. Some people believe that Cicero killed his father, those who know better know that Lyric did it. She avenged her love; she could rest peacefully knowing that he'd burn in Hell. For all eternity. Everybody knew the story, the tragic tale of downfall. The story was legend, twenty years had come and gone, yet the legend endured. True love lasts forever. And ever.

The family name was Merrick, the father's name was Jasper and the mother's name was Erika. His brother's name was Magus, his sister's name was Elysium. And Cicero, and Vincent. Jasper Merrick married his wife and had the kids young. At the time, he was a good man and they loved each other. But when times got bad, he couldn't take the heat. He snapped, started drinking, became abusive. And his wife hung in there in the hopes that he'd change. Of course, he wouldn't. He fooled around too, hence Vincent. It took a bit of research to help put all the details together. To give a brief description of the chain of events that would lead to collapse.

Erika threatened to leave, he'd beat the hell out of her. Magus stood up and got himself killed. While this was going on, a woman named Julie was tending to Vincent, the son that Jasper refused to claim. Her brother was set to have a "talk" with Jasper on her behalf, but she held him back. One night, he left regardless. That particular night was when Lyric avenged Magus and left Erika to think on her crimes. Erika broke down and sat in the bed, abandoned, crying her eyes out. It was like this that he found her. And he held her and listened to her cries and he told her his news. And she couldn't bear it anymore. He comforted her until she calmed down a bit, then he called the cops. He helped them commit Erika, the first step in rectifying the years of damage –

irrevocable damage. And as Lyric put the gun to her head, paramedics were working on Jasper. He lived for a few agonizing hours. And Cicero was settling in with his new family, Elysium as well. She never liked it much though, it wasn't for her, and it corrupted Cicero absolutely. And Vincent fell between the cracks. Through mishaps, he became a ward of the state, constantly moving. He never knew family, but when he got a bit older, he began to question. Then he began to look. He resembled Cicero and Magus; the story was legend. Finding his origins was just the matter of asking. And then he found his mother. And he got the truth. All of it.

She told him everything, and I mean everything. She told him that he was a mistake and she'd been young. She couldn't handle a child and her brother forced her to put him up for adoption. He wasn't even a year old when it'd been done. Well, he didn't take well to the truth. He's the undertaker's son by adoption, and it was the undertaker who'd helped him cover up the murder of his mother and uncle. They were his first. The dear undertaker loved the boy so much that he'd do anything to protect him. Artemis Tyme, that's his name. Drowning in denial, that one, drowning. No chance of freedom once you're in that deep. No chance at all.

The Merrick family history and the tale of Lyric go hand in hand. They're told for all manner of purpose, whether it be to inspire, to warn or just to entertain. I loved them, every detail, even the dark parts. And Vincent...I owed my life to him as he owed his to me. He got tense when I hugged him because he'd never known affection. He was born of anger and malice and from it, he learned well. Vincent was exceptionally good at what he did; he was bred for it from birth. Could you imagine being bred for one purpose alone, just one single idea? Vincent came into this world broken, that's probably how he'd leave it as well.

I thought the entire saga was truly amazing. Honestly, truly...I don't know. Words fall tragically short. It was horrendously

dysfunctional, but it was mine to hold near and dear. Most of the characters were dead now – Erika hung herself in the hospital. Jasper, Magus, Lyric, Julie, her brother, even Cicero was gone. Sketch and Madison were gone, so was Syrius. I knew the stories to them as well. Everything has a story behind it, only some are actually worth telling. These were worth telling. The Drakes handled their stories; Syrius and Madison were taken care of, preserved for eternity. But the Merrick family destroyed itself before they could record everything significant. It was left for the witnesses to hold and protect, despite all else, and continue for eternity.

That's the funny thing about stories; it's an art to tell them, but it's a blessing to know which ones are worth saving. The best kept stories aren't locked away in books for the garish light to fade. They're locked away in our hearts and souls. We take care of them, we hold them near and dear, we cherish them despite their faults. A good story is good, no matter what. You don't have to know why, a good story explains itself. It was a tragedy, the way it all worked out, but it was crucial to my life. I kept the warnings of the saga in my heart. I was in love with the characters though, Lyric especially. Her entire persona, I loved hearing about her. Her mannerisms, expressions; I would stare at the pictures of her at work for hours. It was addictive. The house always wins.

All of life is a game of luck; great things are accomplished only by willingly taking the leap common known as "risk". Risk is scary though, the prospect of jumping without a net is terrifying. But it's necessary, as most great things are. Some are minor, some are momentous. I loved the idea of risk, the point and purpose. It was highly admirable. Most people refuse the unfamiliar – they don't know what they're missing. Oh well.

I would sit for hours and consider the history of the Merrick family. On occasion, I'd visit the cemetery and stare at the names all in a row. There's a sick uniformity in death. Think

about it, when you were born, the hospital kept babies in those little plastic tubs to stay until they went home. The containers were in neat rows – names printed visibly somewhere. In death, you get your little rectangle plot with your name etched in stone. The difference with death is that it's forever. Once you're in that little plot, you're done. Chips in, cards on the table, it's done, forever. Forever's a hell of a long time, or so it seems. Death's a scary concept as well because it's the ultimate risk, the everlasting "What if?" and it has survived and will continue to even if forever comes to an end. Death lives, its' legacy is our vocation. Always.

So the days came and went, lived and died, and I adjusted myself accordingly. Work was constant, it usually was. My 17th birthday was in a week or so; I'm psyched. My father gets all "emotional" when I get older, he'll usually talk about Mom. She died over a decade ago, but sometimes you just can't let go. Her name was Faith; her maiden name was Nolan. Our family name was Riley. I would carry the name with me, I had no intentions of getting married, and if I did, I'd keep my name. I never really spent time planning things like that. You can't depend on tomorrow; technically, you can't even count on today.

Mom was something else. I don't remember much of her, but the light in my father's eyes when he talks about her tells me that every word is true. When he went blind, he cried for days. He said that seeing the world was insignificant; the torment of never seeing his family again was beyond damnation. Yet, he pulled through it. I had other family I didn't see much – Uncle Declan and Aunt Hope, Aunt Melissa, and my grandparents on my father's side. My mother's family was primarily deceased, most of which occurred during her young teen years. Poor Mom. I'd be seeing my aunt and uncle for my birthday. They had three kids, can you imagine? Deklyn was the oldest at 19, Rook was my age, I was older by mere months, and

Salem. The names don't tell much of gender – male, female, male. Salem was 15, going on 16, all very close in years, close in features as well. They were the notorious Nolan kids. They never went looking for trouble, they had it on speed-dial.

One of the interesting tidbits of my family history is that I have godparents. My father ranted to me about them without giving names. From the way he spoke of them, I decided to just let it lie. And my birthday crept closer, mere days. I took Pike up on his offer, deciding to tattoo, "If love proves real," on my left wrist. As promised, he would do the deed on my birthday exactly, and not a moment sooner. After a bit of harassment, it was planned for 12:01 that morning. He's such a sweet guy if you really know him.

I'm not one to make a fuss over getting older, actually, it's kind of depressing. But at 17 I'm one year away from being trained as an artist. And if some strings were pulled, maybe I could start sooner. Maybe. I could talk to the Drakes.

School's annoying. My work is usually vandalized or it simply, "disappears;" I've got close to nothing to show for my efforts. The classes are boring and repetitive – ultimately useless if you really think about it. Or maybe I'm the only one that really thinks.

Vincent was around, every now and then. Sometimes I'd stop and talk to him, if he was alone. His...friends scared the hell out of me, after what I'd seen, trust was out of the question. Assuming, of course, that there ever really was a question, maybe just an answer. There was something about Vincent though, he was a freak, but to an extreme. He had handcuffs on his pants most of the time, like a trademark of sorts. He was interesting. Jack warned me about him, but I've been talking to Jack less and less these days. I know that he's only trying to help, but I can handle myself. I'm not a child.

It was the day before my big 17th birthday. I was at home, sitting, writing. A knock at the door startled my hands' continuous motion – I quit my task to answer. My father couldn't answer the door; we had a sign outside to explain that any sort of visits should be rescheduled. We didn't know many people, so a knock at the door was uncommon. So I got up to answer. And naturally, there he was – Vincent, waiting patiently. I didn't quite know what to do with him. So I went out in the hallway to speak with him.

"I don't get invited in?" He seemed confused, bordering on insulted.

"What do you want?"

He kept taking steps toward me, I kept backing away. He kind of grinned to himself. "I wanted to see you." He seemed serious, content, relaxed.

I didn't realize I was backing away until my back hit the wall. He was still there, carefully in step in front of me. He held me in place, I could feel my heart stop. And he bent down and kissed me softly.

"Why, you're shaking, kid."

Something started and ended right there. I'm not quite sure how or why, or even what it was, but it was something. I couldn't move, I could hardly breathe. He was still there, holding me close. After half of forever, he let go and backed away. We had to pry ourselves apart, being as how I found myself clinging to him. He was content with the confusion he'd caused. Silence became an old friend as we just stared in silence. I don't know what had possessed him, but I didn't mind.

"What just happened?"

'Love's a fickle son of a bitch.'" He moved to leave, stepping

away slowly.

“Love?” I whispered.

‘Happy birthday, Dek’s on his way up.’

“How do you know?”

He smiled, stepping close, whispering, “Because I always know where my boys are.” He kissed me on the cheek, then turned and walked off, hands in pockets. “A fickle son of a bitch,” he said simply as he moved off.

“Love...” I repeated to myself. My body slid down the wall until I was curled up on the floor. I put my head in my hands. I heard the footsteps approach, but I refused to look up until the steps stopped. Dek stood there, he bent slowly to meet my eye level. Then he turned and sat with me.

Deklyn is my uncle’s namesake. He was the family protégé, but he was a disappointment. Trouble followed him naturally; at times he seemed dangerous and highly abusive. He dealt in all manner of illegal activities; I think that he’s a drug dealer. But I loved him regardless. And he might have cared about me as well. He sat down and lit himself a smoke after searching through countless pockets for the pack. Unable to find a lighter, I lent him mine. It took a while for him to put two and two together. He got around to it eventually, just without words. I took the pack from him and lit up for myself. He didn’t bother.

“How long?”

He let smoke out, watching it quietly. “How long what?”

“How long have you worked for Vincent, been in a gang?”

“Aw, c’mon Harv, don’t start now. How about you, when did you start smoking? You’ve been around with Vince too.”

I sat in silence, quietly watching the smoke shift. I looked over at him. "So what are you doing here?"

He seemed to have forgotten himself. "Here." From the depths of his coat, he brought a package. It was a bit on the heavy side, I took it, eyeing it curiously. Dek watched contently, taking longer pulls. "Open it."

I carefully opened the box, its' contents were nearly arranged. A handgun was tucked inside – a few clips nestled beside it. I just stared in awe. It was gorgeous, yet I was afraid to touch it. Dek coaxed me into picking it up.

"It was made especially for you. It's...it's the same as the one she used," his voice trailed off. I knew what he meant, but...how would he know about my obsession? And why was he giving me a gun, loaded, with rounds to spare. I put these thoughts to him.

"It's a tough city, kid, you'll need to be able to protect yourself. Just take it, don't tell anyone about it, this' our little secret. It'll help me sleep at night if I know you're able to handle yourself."

"You might get more sleep if you were alone," I punched him in the arm jokingly.

"Maybe." He grinned that devilishly charming grin of his. Darius was on her way to me when he got up. I closed the box abruptly, keeping it carefully tucked under my arm. The two were introduced before Dek made his way home. Darius looked at me questioningly, but shrugged off her suspicions.

"Ready to go?"

"Been waiting."

"Hopefully not too long."

“No, not long at all. Only half of forever.”

She smiled a bit and we set out. We'd all meet up at the shop so the deed could be done. I told Dad that I was going to be gone a while. He let me go, being I was getting older. We walked quietly, the streets were calmer now. A certain kind of people come out at such late hours. Darius was unafraid, she seemed oddly at home. I still had the box clutched in my arms. I held it as if my life depended on it. A jackhammer couldn't pry it from me.

Jack was home, asleep. He was frustrated with me, and I can't say that I blame him. I haven't been paying him much mind lately, he doesn't agree with my insanity. I'll have to sit and talk with him for a while. He'll understand, I'm sure of it. He always does. Jack's just that good. The poor deprived child. Whatever will we do with him?

5. If Love Proves Real

The shop was dark, as was expected at midnight. Raine, Pike, and Syn were there, waiting for us. I didn't consider this such a group effort, but it truly was symbolic. This would be my first tattoo, but it connected me to the rest of them. We all sat around a while, talking for a bit, aimlessly.

“So, kid, which one do you want to do this?”

I looked down the line of faces, patiently waiting for an answer. I handed them each a sheet of paper and had them write the words a few times. I took the sheets, circled the parts that I liked and showed them the order. They'd each do one word, the colors shifting from blood red to black and back again. Eventually, I sat down and it started. The order would

be – Pike, Raine, Syn, and Darius. The experience was different with each one. Pike was precise; he worked efficiently and effectively. Raine was careful, slow, he'd ask if I was comfortable. Syn was like Pike, quick, silent. They hardly broke a sweat. Then Darius. Darius was cold, bordering on cruel, lacking in compassion. She was the job, though her eyes reflected her true emotion. She avoided my gaze, aware of their betrayal.

It didn't take long at all. The immortal words were there, and would continue to be, always. Being right handed, it was easier, obviously, to cut on the left. Having the words there wasn't just out of necessity, it was protection against myself. I wouldn't dare to tear into those timeless words, the trademark phrase. The think that four simple words could hold so much bearing. Just four simple words. Nothing more.

We sat around a while, Darius took a few pictures. Their lives were preserved in photographs, the shop was filled with them. Darius insisted – a picture is forever. There were endless shots of her and Raine, how they got taken, I'm not sure. But they were amazing, at least to me. The pictures were crucial in our lives, they were proof, they were real. They would last until Time died. Always. In this world, nothing is forever, nothing lasts. But pictures, they'll continue after their subject has long left this mortal realm. I truly pity the blind, they're missing out on a true gift. Nothing can substitute for the art of pictures, Darius' element. She taught it excellently as well. Maybe I could ask her to teach me someday. Pictures truly are moving, they move the mind further, faster than the written word ever could. It simply *is*. Darius worked in grayscale, black and white. She said that color was merely a distraction – everything seemed gaudy. Yet, she'd find ways to paint red into her work. To her, it wasn't a color. It symbolized her life, her death – her blood. And it might've been. Nobody knows, except Darius. And her lips are sealed.

The night wore on. I still clung to the box. Pike and Syn left us. And I was left with them – the Drakes. The legend. They walked in perfect step with each other, as if they planned it. Even when they changed patterns – flawless. They just seemed so in love, you could feel it from them. It surrounded them, mixed with the air, constant. It was almost intoxicating. I was drawn to them, though my conscience warned that I'd overstayed my welcome ages ago. Both were sedate, lost in each other...yet...hauntingly intense. I tried half-heartedly to excuse myself.

“Wait, stay a bit longer, we want to talk to you. Just a bit.” Darius' eyes were soft, maternal. I nodded my approval and we continued. For another hour, we walked, reaching a dark alley. We stood in it to talk. The two looked around, the mood quiet, grim. Something had been lost here.

“This is where the legendary Cicero met his end. It was from that rooftop that dear Vincent watched. It was here that Lyric lived and died years earlier. It was here that lives were destroyed. This is the edge of oblivion. Something is lost on every trip.”

“And on this trip?”

Raine approached, “Your ignorance. Tack it to the wall, let the blood stain it, as it does all else. Let it wash away your defenses. It's wasted.”

I backed away from them abruptly. “What're you talking about?” My voice was higher, nervous, weak. I held the box tighter.

“Don't be alarmed, please, Harvey, trust us?” Darius' voice was still soft, pleading. Her eyes were a glow of soothing colors. They moved close, boxing me in, they laid a hand each on mine.

“Allow us to be reacquainted. We're your godparents.”

Now this is when reality went on a road trip, perhaps a permanent one. Who knows? Certainly not me. Words failed me as I uttered worthless fragments.

“We’ll explain, in due course. Do you know how to use that thing?”

I stopped breathing. “What...are you?”

“The gun.” Raine smiled simply, as if referring to the weather. He looked at the sky in a somewhat quizzical fashion. He was bored with the weather’s recent consistency. Or so he seemed. I don’t know which of them was speaking, it didn’t seem to matter. I remember the box leaving my grasp, though I’m unsure as to how. It doesn’t matter all that much either way. It’s just a box.

6. Family Portrait

Click.

Advance to the next frame. Focus...stay still. Click.

Seconds really.

Let me, if I may, write you a story. Not a very pretty one, but a story nonetheless. Not a real story, more of a stating of solid fact in chronological order as best as my mind can manage. That makes it a fairy tale, no, a novel? Perhaps. Or maybe it’s just silly. Plain, simple, and silly. We’ll see. Where to start? Anywhere, nowhere, doesn’t matter. I don’t know where I’m going, so anyplace will do.

Mom and Dad got married a long time ago. There was Jack and there was me. There was, of course, family. Our legacy is a

stretch of stories – we're all writers. Most of us, sometimes. Somehow our history was saved through primary or secondary parties. It's kind of bizarre, but most things are nowadays. Now, where was I, or was I still nowhere? Maybe.

So, I was born. Turns out that Mom and Dad were good, close friends with the Drakes, they'd all grown up in the same neighborhood. Vincent's real mother and uncle had been close friends of my father's, he was deeply grieved to have lost them. Mom wouldn't let him launch a dangerous vendetta. He loved her and I too much to disagree. So they knew each other from the neighborhood. Made sense. I think they all had gang ties, hence the loyalty. Dad was a cop, he might still help them, though I'm not sure how. I don't remember Mom much. Her brother, Uncle Declan, he's still around.

Uncle Declan and Aunt Hope were beyond bizarre. They'd fight for no reason, then kiss and make up. Melissa was Dad's sister, like I said, she was dead. He had another sister, missing in the world. Missing...probably on purpose. She chose to be gone. That's a hell of a choice to make. Back to Uncle Declan – three misfit children. Deklyn was the bad seed; he cared for nothing. No girl would stay by his side; they all feared him too much. He was a dealer – that scared enough people. Rook was my age, proper, perfect. She was everything I hated because she is ignorant. Rook, short for Brooke perhaps, I never asked. A rook is a black bird resembling a crow or raven. Eccentric parents, what more can I say? And then there was Salem. He had his father's wisdom, his mother's smart-ass remarks, strength and stubbornness on both sides. I respected him greatly for keeping with expectations. I was his elder, we were cousins, though he felt like my best friend at times. Or my worst enemy.

Now, let me think. Something's missing I'd imagine. I might know more about the Merrick family than my own. Scary huh? My family legacy is wide and varied, it spans in several directions due to gang involvement. So there's the blood line

and the loyalty line. Funny thing is, the loyalty line ended up as mostly cops. Isn't that ironic? That's another story you know, of Damien's crew, of the Hopeless Martyrs. And this alley is part of it. The real unifying force is...you guess it? The Black Dragon, of course.

Everyone goes to the Dragon. Whether by chance, by fate, by direction or otherwise, we all end up at the Dragon one way or another. My folks were casual friends with the Drakes, close enough for the Drakes to be my godparents. Or maybe there was no better solution, you do silly things out of desperation. Really silly things. Human nature, perhaps. Maybe.

We're all drawn to places for certain reasons, sometimes that reason is difficult to find. The shop was a sort of vortex, it drew us all in and, in turn, it would do with us as it will. Some were destroyed in the fray, some were given power. Some got both. Thanks to the shop, and the great family, we had endless amounts of stories to show for our pain. And no two freaks were alike. Could you imagine?

Allow me to demonstrate. My father was the street bad-ass, but he knew when to move on, he knew that to be taken seriously, he'd have to let go. Mom never was a full-blown freak, she was just an outcast. See, there's levels and specifications that define our eccentricity. A freak is a general term, it covers a broad range of bizarre folks. An outcast is that kid in the corner, content, but outside of the standard social borders nonetheless. All freaks are outside of society's binding walls. But a true "freak" dresses the part. Dad was more of a Goth, he favored black above all else. Raine and Darius are freaks, on several levels. Uncle Declan was bordering on normal, he was like a closet Goth. He, like his sister, was an outcast. Him and Mom were friends with mostly freaks, though they themselves weren't all that bad. Then, compare the shop kids – they were freaks. The Martyrs were Gothic misfits – they didn't belong anywhere. And the personalities made them even more varied. It's not as complicated as I make it sound.

We were all individually eccentric and as such, could relate to each other on surprising levels. All of us had dysfunctional families because every family is screwed up. Perfect doesn't exist; it's a pleasant fiction that merely gets us through the day. To accept who and what you are is your only salvation. We were free, we had each other and ourselves. To be a freak is to be free of society, free of judgment. All that remains is yourself.

Most of us were artists. How the family survived, I'm not sure. We had all sorts of deals working in our favor. Some were cops, there were rules and limits. We protected one another, no favor was too much to ask. Our loyalty knew no bounds. When one suffered, we all suffered. I hear stories. They say that the streets were calm and safe when Mom died. Nobody would disrespect her passing with vulgar crime. I hear of loyalties that transcend mortal devotion, trust held despite all else. The loyalty alone, the stories...

All we have is stories. Forever. We'll always carry them in our hearts and souls, the burden stays on our shoulders as we pass it on. It started with my mom's tragedy. Since then, I've collected a few more injustices. I keep them, written or remembered, locked away for myself. Everyone knows the stories, the clans tell tales of the legendary. Raine and Darius are legend, some bet on how long it'll last. Those that know better know not to bet on when, but how. Time stopped for them, and only for them. The true legends outlast mortal ends. But they had love. True, honest, pure – love. Devoid of borders or boundaries, they made their own rules, always. That makes greatness, their open idea about everything. They were dreamers, yet they were realists. My parents clung to reality; they weren't much into the arts. The Drakes were that pair that overcame the odds, set their own standards and came out better for it.

Stories are easier to pass along than anything else. Because they might be true, but there's room for fiction as well.

There's the possibility that it might not be real. Stories are edited, improved, usually honest but partially dishonest. This combination is what makes them worthwhile. There's that delicate balance that tempts us, usually successfully. That's why everything worthwhile is a story, and all great stories last forever. My family preserved ours, the Drakes covered their end of it, I'm here tying together the loose ends. They're not a series of separate stories. They combine to form one tragic epic that spans generations. It records our suffering, our joy, failures and triumphs. It's all one long continuous story that started, "once upon a time," ago and will continue for half of forever.

That should explain my direct family and my godparents. I won't waste time on those that are already gone, their stories have already been told. There are friends, loyal companions and trusted acquaintances; they all play important parts. The biggest group of such "connections" was the Hopeless Martyrs circle. They were a gang of kids years back, one of the "leaders" was my father's sister. Dad's family was bizarre, I'll get to that. The Martyrs were a big group, they came from the suburbs, only a handful made it here. There's another important group to consider, there was so many, please, bear with me. I'll find the point eventually, I just got a bit sidetracked. Sometimes it's hard to organize one's thoughts. Sometimes, it's impossible.

Back to Dad for a moment. Dad's family is highly dysfunctional – I never met them. When Dad was a cop, they were on good terms, but only briefly. They never approved of his dark ways, he was disowned early on. Dad's got two younger sisters, Melissa and Andrea, I should use the past term – had. After graduation, Melissa started growing up, following her brother's example. Again he was disowned and this time, he didn't care. Melissa was grieved by his leaving, Andrea didn't even remember; she's locked out the pain successfully for years. Melissa ended up with a dark crowd, eventually

appeasing her dark desires of death. She hung herself on her birthday. Nobody told my father, how he found out, I'm not sure. But he fixed it as best as he could, sending his sister off for counseling and eventual foster care She disappeared in the system. As most tend to.

Between the pain, the war, the madness, my father was considerably well-adjusted. There was another legend though – the James family. All the freaks know of them, all protect them with their lives. They are Aunt Hope's relatives, the image of perfection with constant good intentions. They were infamous for harboring runaways, helping the wounded, or giving shelter to the wanted. Mrs. James was locked away ages ago, she snapped. Her husband was the better of the two. His son went out in the world, became a success, as he was meant to. His other daughter, the baby, stayed with him in the house, lest he be lonely. They symbolized salvation, there were no rules. Nobody was turned away at the door, nothing too extreme. All misfits welcome, day or night, rain or shine. They were truly an inspiration.

The really funny thing is the family tree; we're all connected – by madness. We're all together by tragic twists of fate – Vincent's "father" buried most of us. If you count all the players, it'd equal more than 50. You must be lost by now, I try to discuss the important few. You've got the names to match the roles, just in case. The important players are the kids at the shop, the Drakes, Vincent and Lyric. It's kind of funny, not in the humorous sense; but ironic. I don't know, maybe it's me. We were all born and bred through pain and misery; grief was my babysitter, darkness – my closest friend. Yet, we all met different ends. Some fell to the temptation of suicide, some were murdered for their freedom. Some changed, matured, grew out of their freakish ways. And the rest of us? We were lifers.

It's not really possible to "grow out" of something like that. It's always there, lurking in the shadows, ready to destroy. I

plan on accepting it. Acceptance is necessary to move on in life, I'd be wasting my time and effort if I didn't embrace the truth. Truth is the key to freedom, it either binds us or sets us free. And I like my freedom.

Family is important. There are all kinds of families; there are relationships bound by things stronger than blood, we all have something. Correction – most of us. I have my legitimate father, I have true blood relatives. Then I have godparents. And the kids at the shop. I'm truly blessed. I take it for granted you know, how fortunate I am. I really am thankful. I wish I could do something for them in return. I can try. That's all any of us can do – try. Effort alone is priceless; it's just about as important as family.

I love them all dearly, I'd do anything for them and I'd never replace them. They were absolutely priceless, to me, they were the image of perfection. I figured that a few paragraphs dedicated solely to them is only fair, considering the huge role they play in my life. And it's easy to get lost along the way, caught up in the shifts from dreaming to waking and back. That's just the way it worked. Family's trust, it's loyalty and honor. It's forgiveness, peace, understanding and acceptance. And of course, family is love. Free, unabridged, devotion and caring for your fellow man, woman or child. It's a familiar kind of love, something that matures and is tolerated. Every once in a blue moon, that kind of love blesses strangers. Only very blue moons.

And so there I was. Standing in the infamous alley where legends were born and died. If you listened carefully, you could hear the screams. You could feel the tension, the blood long wasted, stained deep into the walls. It was everywhere and nowhere all at once. And apart from the ghoulish cries, the screams and howls, there was silence. Absolute silence. And it was silent because it was pure, you could feel the tears, lost to the sky. And the solitary shot, the ring that echoed endlessly, singing damnation and pride. I stood there,

afraid of the demons, fearful of my mortal soul. And the words just died away with the phantoms.

They took careful hold of me, and we left. I was drowning in revelations on the brink of madness as I stood, teetering over oblivion. But I never fell. I might've faltered, but I never fell. The brink of madness. We walked quietly, nowhere in particular. Their parental feeling toward me made sense. They truly were something. Raine's mind wandered, he forgot a lot. I don't know if he chose to forget, or he just couldn't help it. Darius told me that his writing would sometimes reduce a catastrophe to a mere whisper. It was his way of handling the pain. He tried, as best as he could. They brought me home with some new things to consider. I bade them both a good night; they smiled at me.

"Sleep? Why, it's only tomorrow." Darius' voice was chilling; they spoke in riddles at times. I liked the pretty sound of it, though the actual phrases were bizarre. Then again, we were anything but normal, I'm afraid it runs in the family.

7. Measuring Forever

A legend now, long since dead, once said that, "Forever is a hell of a long time." She might've been a genius; she might have been insane. Either way, the statement is fairly valid. Nothing is ever, "for sure," there's always a chance, the slight possibility. You never know, right? There's no such thing as a "fair bet," never. Regardless, she was right – forever does just so happen to be quite a long time.

I got home sometime in the early morning and went straight to sleep. All manner of bizarre dreams haunted my subconscious as I struggled to maintain my sanity. Stories, people, places,

all manner of crazy notions upset my fragile mind. I remembered the box being taken from me, or I thought I remembered it. Separating reality from fiction became more complicated the harder I tried. Eventually, I was left to forfeit to sleep; I just stopped caring. And the darkness took over.

I woke up to Deklyn lurking around. He was just wandering aimlessly, poking things here and there. He was looking around curiously, amused. I felt confused – he seemed so childish, naive, sometimes innocent. It was ironic, how misleading it could be, our perceptions versus reality. He looked over at me casually.

“So this is where the damned sleep?” Before I could question him, he started moving again. “Where’s the box?”

And that’s when the waking and the dreaming merged. I realized that I didn’t know. I was scared to face him. But he knew, he knew without words. I sat up in bed and turned away from him. Deklyn edged closer.

“Where is it, Harvey? Don’t tell me you lost it. Do you have any idea how important that gun is? Harvey!” My silence bothered him; he jumped onto the bed and grabbed me. He shook me by my shoulders. “Say it! Tell me that it’s gone!” I tried to reply, but all that remained was silence. He scared the life out of me, yet I found my voice.

“I know who has it.”

“You do huh? So why do they have it?”

“I don’t know.”

He only seemed to get more upset. He took me by the throat and forced me to face him. His eyes narrowed, “What do you say we go collect it?”

Then salvation came. Uncle Declan’s voice called from outside

the door, my cousin jumped back immediately. Ironic, the big drug dealer was terrified of dear old dad. Hilarious.

My cousin might have been a schizo, bipolar at least. He scared me more than I cared to realize. And he's family. He left – confused, slightly lost. And I sat on my bed, quiet. My uncle came in shortly after, I remember muttering wasted responses to him. My dear uncle cared about me sincerely. His wife was suspicious of me, or so it seemed. She barely spoke to me and on the rare occasion that she did, she never had anything worthwhile to say. Worthwhile, it would be more accurate to use the word, "positive". But she was family. And maybe she was right.

Uncle Declan sat with me a while. He was one of my favorite relatives. I only ever saw him truly upset once – when Mom died. They truly were something. Truly something. He was his sister's keeper. And to keep my mom is something remarkable. He kept to it, always loyal to her. And when he lost his charge, he snapped. But he bounced back. After a month of drinking and outbursts, he came back. He'd been to Hell and back. His sister's keeper. And he was good at it. Absolutely amazing. And he was like Darius, he knew everything, he just kept it carefully locked away until it was absolutely necessary. I think he knew about his son's illegal activities. What he did to stop him, if anything, I don't know. But he knew it all. As his only niece, he treated me as Mom's replacement. I loved him dearly.

"So kid, you're getting on up there in years huh?" He smiled wide, content with himself at the moment. He looked me over carefully. "Have you been good?"

"Of course, Uncle Declan."

"That's my girl."

"Always."

“You sure? Maybe you’ll change your mind and you won’t be mine anymore.”

“Only if you don’t want me.”

He bear-hugged me. “Want you? You’re never leaving my sight. You get any prettier, I’ll be your constant bodyguard, got to keep the loons away.”

“You’re silly.”

And he took a deep bow. “Thank you. But at least I’m an honest sort of silly, instead of a silly sort of honest.”

“I didn’t know that there were sorts.”

“Of course.”

“Since when?”

He was still smiling. “Since always.”

Our conversations were usually abrupt like that. We were family, we didn’t need long explanations. They were a waste of our borrowed time. It should be a sin to waste time. At least a crime. In the end, I hugged him and he left and I was happy. He could always make me smile. Always. I changed and went out to make an appearance.

Now remember, Dad’s blind. He’s been that way for years, I don’t think he knows that I’m a freak, which is better. Yet, knowing his Goth past, he might be proud to have paved the way for another misfit. He’s a weird one. They were sitting around the living room – Declan, Hope, the three kids, my father and Jack. Dear Jack, despite our differences, he wouldn’t forsake me on my day. We all sat around and told stories, fool’s stories, but stories nonetheless. Rook was the odd one out; she couldn’t understand that we were freaks. She might’ve been slightly appalled. But we didn’t care. Deklyn stayed mostly silent, Salem contributed. There was an exchange of

pleasantries before we all opted to go out for a while. My father missed the waking world – it was a happy return.

We walked awhile, as it tradition with us, it's a sort of family dysfunction. Rook was complaining the entire trip; she bothers me you know. Just a bit. Just because she's so ignorant. And Salem loved it, I spoke to him most of the time. He'd be a good one when he got older, a freak, but still a good one. People kept out of our way as we passed, it was easy to understand why. There were seven, no, eight of us total, mostly in black, decked out from head to toe. We did seem slightly intimidating. And my father had his seeing-eye dog, a beautiful black lab named Shadow. Anyway, back to point.

We walked even when it began to rain, despite Rook's protests. My dear uncle was sick of her too. She kept whimpering, he grabbed her and threw her into an alley. She didn't scream, the look of surprise on her face told why. He composed himself.

"For just a moment, just once in your life, can you act like my child?" And he turned away. We all looked on in horror, but I couldn't stop smiling. Aunt Hope was frozen, speech left her, just...frozen. She wasn't angry or upset either. Declan went to her, his jaw set and she hugged and kissed him. We started to walk back home; Rook fell in step begrudgingly behind us.

And the day was only half done. My family stayed with Dad a while, I opted to go visit the shop. Salem opted to go along, my uncle wouldn't let Deklyn go. Like I said, he knew everything. So we set out for the shop, walking again, talking quietly. Salem was clever, he was quiet, but his mind was always working. He had the potential to be highly dangerous, he just chose not to be. Could you imagine?

The shop wasn't all that busy, everyone was glad to see me. Darius and Raine were floating around somewhere, I was glad to

be there, even though it was my day off. I introduced Salem around a bit; he fit in with the misfits perfectly. I strayed away to talk to Darius, who was sitting at the counter, reading quietly. I stood over her.

“Where is it?”

She looked up with a childishly innocent grin. “Where is what? Are you all right?” She kind of smiled past me as Raine swept by and stood with her. The two of them could be so horribly sinister if and when they wanted to. I could feel my spirit breaking – I couldn’t take them on. I stood my ground for a moment, waiting to break. They nodded their surrender; my box was produced from under the counter. It was just as I’d left it, I could’ve cried.

“How did you know about it?”

“Because we know all the stories...and besides, these streets were ours long before they were ever Vincent’s. Remember, nothing is trivial, all knowledge is useful.” Darius’ voice stopped, she was leaving herself open. Raine stepped up to cover for her.

“You should learn to use it properly, it’s a nice decoration, but throwing it isn’t very effective. I can show you, if you wish.”

“If I needed to use it, I imagine I could figure it out.”

“Could you? How about defending yourself if it’s taken from you?”

In a series of motions, Raine was over the counter, grabbed the box and had the pistol leveled at me. His hand didn’t shake, he didn’t blink, he barely breathed. And I was shocked, everything just stopped. And dear Darius just sat and smiled, indifferent. It was like a circus act, I stood there as Darius got up and crept over. She stepped in front of me with a

confident grin on her. Blink and you would have missed it. She hit him, turned his hand around and the next thing you saw, he was on the floor as she waved my gun triumphantly. She handed it to me, bent down to Raine and helped him up. With a hug and a kiss, his pride was restored. Blink and you would have missed it. I think they're insane. I had the gun in hand, I couldn't move. They were laughing and smiling. I just stood there. I couldn't decide whether to be angry or scared. Darius crept up to me slowly, she walked in this funny crooked, childish way, diagonal steps. She touched me and I remember jumping, I don't remember why. The eyes softened and she started digging through her pockets. She produced a cigarette and sent me away. I could hear Raine's protestation to her as I walked out, then he was silent.

"I can't win with you, can I?" he muttered.

And her reply was simply, "Nope, but you're more than welcome to try." They were kissing when I looked back, I sat out in the alley to be alone, my mind racing. I took out paper and wrote as the shaking stopped. The usual shadow came from nowhere, Vincent, as per usual. He wandered his way over slowly; smoking himself, he was oddly at ease. I was under a slight overhang to keep from the rain.

"Hell of a day, right kid? Merry happy, you know?" He sat himself down next to me, looking at me sideways. "What'd I tell you about smoking?"

I smiled at him, "That you're a hypocrite and I can do whatever I want."

And he laughed. He's insane you know. He patted me on the head, "Good kid." I could've killed him, but he sauntered away free and clean. Or partially. He just kind of paced around in the rain.

"You don't have rules, do you?"

"I don't like cages."

'Well now, that's silly. Some are necessary.'

"Name one necessary cage."

"One? Devotion. How about loyalty? Or trust? How about love?'

"I don't believe in love."

It was now that he stopped. He came at me and grabbed my arm swiftly. Despite my efforts, he was like a vice. He turned the arm over and pointed to the fresh ink. I stopped my struggles, he held tight.

'Now, what was that you were saying?'

"If love proves real. That's different."

"I don't see how so or why."

I pulled myself away and moved to leave, "You will."

He laughed a little, bouncing on his toes. "Promise?'

"I don't make promises."

"How about an arrangement?'

"Not those either."

"No cages, right?" He seemed pleased with himself.

"Forget the cage – no chains."

"Someone ought to break you."

This is where I turned to meet his gaze. "Someone ought to try."

And I went back to the parlor. Everyone was back to where they were when I came in. Salem was talking to Raine. He seemed to be enjoying himself. He'd probably end up here in later years;

most of the family goes through here. Darius and Raine made room for people – there was always room for one more. As the night settled down, I decided to get home. I collected my box and Salem and we left. I walked him home first, he didn't live far. Then I was on my way, Jack met me along the way.

I felt better talking to Jack. It'd been a while since we spoke seriously. He's been worried about me, I can't say that I blame him. Smoking annoyed him, I promised to quit shortly, I just liked how it stopped my shaking. He let it go and we talked plainly. He held me as we walked – I loved knowing he was there. If everything else around me shattered, he'd still be there to help me pick up the pieces. Jack was comforting. He only spoke when he absolutely had to, but even his silence was calming. He was forgiving of my ignorance, which is a characteristic that's very rare in our day and age. Home wasn't far away, our trip was quick. Jack lived with us, having nowhere else to go. He was like a brother to me, my father remembered him when he was a mere boy. Our stories are bizarre. That's the family for you.

The boy was somewhat typical but it was interesting I suppose. I was in my room considering the day's events when I heard a noise outside. And the stalker returned. I got up quickly to let him in as he clawed the window sheepishly.

"That wasn't supposed to be locked."

"What the hell is it with you? Don't you have better things to do? Important people to kill, a life?" I kept my voice low to avoid waking my sleeping father.

"Calm down tiger, I forgot to give you something, merry happy." He threw me a box and he was gone again. I looked at it cautiously, considering my options. Curiosity for the best of me and I opened it. Inside was a letter, long, carefully written. Under it was a chain – long, silver. And a bullet hung from it. Written on it in nice black letters were a few

short statements. "Harvey Riley," was the top line, and under it was, "A promise kept." I couldn't figure out if the bullet was real, it seemed real enough. I kept it around my neck and it stayed there always. I don't know why I kept it; the thought kind of scared me. And yet, I kept it. I might be a freak. And I sat down and read the letter that accompanied the solitary bullet. I read it over and over again until I couldn't bear to see it any longer. And I tucked it between my writing because it is crucial to my downfall. Vincent's letter of un-harnessed honesty and nightmarish evil haunted me, and yet...I cried.

8. My Dearest Friend

This is my gift to you, my promise to you who have none. Your life is mine, my dear. You managed to get away with it this long, but I will come once I tire of you. Just wanted to make things clear – you're living on borrowed time.

I haven't quite figured you out yet. You're flirting with disaster, in case you didn't already know. There's a lot to say, I'll get around to it.

Your family and mine don't have a pleasant past; your beloved "Drakes" killed my darling brother. Cicero was a legend – he deserved a hero's death. We will clash, them and I, don't get dragged into it. The best way to get to someone is through their loved ones; keep your friends close, enemies closer. Don't be a fool – I'd be very highly disappointed with you. And suicide doesn't fit into the plan quite yet. Terribly sorry.

To be honest kid, I don't get it. You're supposed to be dead by now. I've killed without remorse or conviction; I shot my

own mother. And yet, we're having issues with you. You're the only one I've ever faltered with. You are the only one to survive my judgment. One, out of years of pain and madness. I haven't determined how or why yet, but somehow...there's something special about you. I don't think you realize how gifted you must be to make it this far. Life is for the living; don't forsake it. I'm a cold one – I gave up on emotion a long time ago. But with you, things are different.

Love's a fickle son of a bitch.

I can be honest because it's necessary, and because you're mine. You dared to touch me, to hug Death. I don't remember any affectionate touch before you. For your...bizarre courage, I give you time, and the promise of a quick end. Hopefully we understand one another. You took a business situation and made it personal. So let the games begin, my dear friend. Keep well – take care. Hell has sent an angel for you; somehow you managed to stay one step ahead. Congrats, but let's see how long the triumph lasts. Perhaps a fair challenge. Finally, an equal.

So here we are. Enjoy the gift – it's my promise to you. When the time's right, I'll let you know. You've forfeited control of your life, whether you realize it or not. It's mine, be careful child. I wouldn't recommend doing anything foolish. The bricks are being put in the wall, slowly, one by one. Your downfall is inevitable because it is my personal concern. Scared yet? Knowing you, of course not. Keep on laughing, kid.

I'll be seeing you. A promise kept.

Forever.

9. The Torn Prince

And the days were fairly routine. Vincent lurked around, they started training me at the shop – I was ecstatic. I would practice with the gun at night, Darius and Raine taught me, each being an expert shot. Raine had military experience, where Darius got it from, heaven knows. She seemed to have a hand in everything, she was never caught off-guard. After a few weeks, I was a natural for the art. Ironic, if you really think about it. Sometimes that's the way it goes.

A lot of thoughts plagued me at night, keeping me from peaceful rest. There was just too much that didn't add up, people knew things they weren't supposed to. The gun was a mystery in itself. Darius and Raine knew; Deklyn gave it to me, but very hesitantly. He didn't seem very sure about it, I don't know. Deklyn had me worried, there was more to him, there had to be. I decided to do some research. Research, meaning become a stalker. The results of my efforts weren't necessarily useless.

Deklyn was one of Vincent's lieutenants; being higher up on the chain, he was privileged. He was feared and loved in turn, more so the former. He was notoriously ruthless in his dealing habits and he'd beat anyone on a whim. Vincent's gang were all similar in their ways, they were uniform; like a deck of cards, they had variation in ranks. Deklyn was carefully situated on God's right hand. And it didn't seem to bother him too much. He carried a series of weapons, at least two firearms at all times. He smoked, but I don't think he used. He drank like a fish though. The entire gang structure was highly bizarre. Deklyn was highly solitary though. He had a bad temper to him; he might've been bipolar. Most of the world left him alone. Every so often someone would push him. And he'd bite them...hard. He was known for shooting the really annoying ones.

There was one that wouldn't quit. She seemed to be everybody's girl, primarily she'd be hanging off of Vincent. Her name was Bekka. I don't know if she was just stupid or too stubborn to care. She'd hang around Deklyn a lot and try to get him to vent. He was mean to her on so many levels; I wanted to go warn her that he's a jerk. For days, weeks, she'd try to be friendly. Vincent would tease her relentlessly. But she refused to quit. Deklyn stabbed her through her hand. He was having a really bad day – she hugged him. As she pulled away, he grabbed her and shook her. But Bekka wasn't touched. He narrowed his eyes, held her one arm and stabbed straight through, pinning her to the wall. The really funny part? She was right back at it the next day, poking and prodding to get him to talk. They earned each other's respect. And poor Vincent was left dumbstruck. All types of bizarre. Bekka was the rain on a sunny day that catches you without your coat. She was everyone's girl, but when she was Vince's, she was only his. And hence the rift of emotion began.

A rift began from something so simple. And seeing Deklyn's loyalty, I began to question the gun. Maybe Vincent was behind it? Perhaps. The rift among loyal friends swept through the streets like a hurricane. It was silly if you really thought about it. I never realized that dear Vincent might be the jealous type. But he was. Deklyn was behaving himself, you know, as good as he can manage when Vince approached him. They laughed and joked a bit, as guys tend to. Then Vince took it a step further. Provoking a mock sparring match, Deklyn wasn't seriously concerned. Vincent dislocated his shoulder, broke an arm and beat the hell out of him. The best actors...

Bekka was considered exclusively Vincent's, rumor has it that my brain-dead cousin slept with her. I think his little shoulder angel quit. That's a common sense rule, don't sleep with the boss' girl, you shouldn't even look at her if you don't have to. Deklyn stayed with us so that his father wouldn't go shoot Vincent. I hate guys. Dek just had the

spirit beaten out of him and he's defending his attacker. That screams stupid. He stayed in Jack's room for a few nights then relocated to the couch. He refused to go to the hospital – he had me help fix his shoulder. And he was fine. Bekka “disappeared,” or so they say. Translation: Vincent killed the traitorous slut. How terribly tragic. So Deklyn stayed with us a while and I was able to talk to him.

“Why am I different?” I asked him one night. He and I were on the fire escape, smoking calmly. He was overly sedated.

“What do you mean, different? Who told you that, you're unique...”

“No, you treat me different from everyone else.”

“You're family.”

“So? You don't care about Rook or Salem half as much. Why me? You've never hit me, never yelled in a tone that would break me, never made me cry. You ignore Salem and you beat on Rook daily. Why me?”

He looked me over slowly, up and down. He took a long pull, turning his head away from me to blow out the smoke. He considered his words carefully. “Because they're ignorant, they don't care. You've always cared. And besides, they've got half of forever. Your days are numbered kid.”

“How do you know?”

“I was there, kid.”

“That's how they found me!” I felt my blood boil, he'd given me up, they were trying to break me, completely off the deep end. I attacked him but did almost no damage what so ever. I gave up eventually, breathless, angry. I could've killed him.

“There's more to it than that, kid, please try to understand.”

"More to what? You're assisting in my murder."

"Suicide."

"And that makes it better?"

He hung his head low, "No, of course not." I think that he was on the verge of crying, I don't know why. He was shaking a bit, I crept over and curled up with him.

"He'll make you do it, you know."

"One person shouldn't have that much power, he should be taken down a few notches."

"Harv, you're being foolish."

"It's a fool's prerogative to be foolish, if honesty's included in that, so be it."

And he held me close, almost afraid to let go. He never held anybody, I didn't think that he knew how. He spoke in quiet whispers, saying, "I'm sorry," softly in my ear. I felt my heart bend, my conscience refused to yield, but there was no debating anything. He was broken, childish – Deklyn became that good little boy I used to know. Once upon a time.

"You can fight him you know."

"No, I can't. I chose my poison kid, it's just starting to kick in."

"But Deklyn..."

"No, my problem. Not another thought about it. Promise you won't worry?"

"I don't make promises."

"Not ever?"

"Never."

“That’s tragic.”

“Why?”

“Because a promise is more than an agreement. It’s...dedication to something, your vow of devotion. It connects you to something more, something greater than yourself. It’s a contract, a binding agreement. It’s trust, honor, it is loyalty to yourself. If not promises to people, you should make promises to yourself. Have some sort of structure. We all need structure.”

“I don’t need anything.”

“Now you’re being foolish. Some need things; some need people or ideas. We all need. We all need affection, to know that someone cares.”

“You don’t need anybody.”

That stopped him in his tracks. Everything he was preaching about – all wasted. His words were lost in the fray; nothing seemed significant. Point to Harvey.

I think I broke him. We all come to points in our lives where the truth is so obvious that denial is absolutely out of the question. He realized then what he was missing, and he was torn apart. I hit a major vein with that one.

“That’s not true,” he whispered, scared to say the truth any louder than necessary. He held me tight, cradled like a child. He was lost in the world of the waking; my dear Deklyn didn’t belong. And he knew it. The startling revelation scared him half to death I think.

“Why are you so cold? What happened, Deklyn?”

“I wised up. I learned better. Experience is a quick and patient teacher, never painless.”

“You got hurt, so what? Everyone does, Get back up and try again.”

I thought he'd snap my neck. I clasped my hand over my mouth after I'd said it. The shock was obvious in both of us, the silence was earth-shattering. Yet, he didn't move, he barely breathed. He just muttered to himself.

“You don't understand.”

“Then enlighten me.”

He got up, shrugging me off abruptly. Annoyed, he sulked away, away from my inquiring mind – off to sleep. I stayed on the fire escape alone until it got too cold, then back inside. A few minutes of contemplation and eventual rest. Sleep is the all purpose solution.

The next day, Deklyn was gone. Jack wasn't sure where he'd gone, except that he was, in fact, gone. He's taken the little he had with him – I doubted he'd be back.

It's funny to think how people can just up and walk out and be gone. It's funny to think that the chapter can end so abruptly. Be over before it started. Nothing's ever truly over, nothing ever really begins either. Maybe that's backwards. Or upside down, sideways. Slightly to the left. Some people are just foolish, absolutely foolish. Some always run, some are compelled to return. Deklyn came back one night, soaked from the rain. He kind of crept in during the night. Lost, dazed, alone. Aren't we all? Terribly tragic if you ask me.

Innocence is embodied in children, it's lost as we grow older and acquire new fractions of the forbidden truth that damned humanity. He seemed so pure, so honest, so...real. He was vulnerable and I loved him for it. We're all weak in our turn, but it's when the strong are secure enough to admit their weakness, that's the turning point, the conclusion that ends

all uncertainty. Uncertainty, that's an interesting concept in itself.

She was the janitor. She cleaned up the mess; she was there whenever she was necessary. She was the man...or woman rather, behind the curtain. The one you ignored. I met her by chance. She didn't speak either. She was a mute, or maybe she just wanted you to think that. She had dark features, most of which were constantly hidden under a long trench coat, black of course. She was the janitor. It used to bother me, how did the undertaker get to the bodies so fast, how did Vincent get away with it without someone stumbling across his crime? There had to be something. In their case, it was someone. She was always a quick phone call away; she'd carry the bodies back, bury or burn them, and know nothing of the truth. She didn't talk, or she couldn't. I wondered about that too. She was kind of like Death; you only ever came across her when it was your time. I didn't know who she was at the time; I only figured it out when she walked away. You could feel it from her. Everywhere she went, she carried the air of it with her, the dismal despair of life and its' termination. She never smiled. Never spoke and never smiled. And she was the one behind the curtain, careful to always be ready, to pull on cue every time. I wondered, how was it that she could bear to look at herself, to deal with what she did. How? How could you dare to tell yourself that what you were doing was right and proper? To help destroy lives? How could you even try to justify something like that? I don't even know how she got the job of being the world's shadow, hiding the mistakes. I never saw her in the daytime, never crossed her except those few times, she was always shrouded, dark. I couldn't even see her clearly; I couldn't determine hair length because of the combination of hat and coat. Always somber – no emotion. She was herself and belonged to nobody. She cleaned up after Vincent. She cleaned up after many people, only if she saw fit to, if the situation seemed proper for it. Not everyone was worthy of her services. I couldn't understand what made Vincent "worthy," being the

cruelly manipulative person that he was. Maybe I was just being naive.

She'd been doing it for years. Her age was impossible to determine, she answered to nobody but herself, swore no allegiances and made no promises. She took no orders and made no requests. Her existence baffled me. How could you live a life with nothing? No connections, no reasons, just live each day because it was necessary, but for no reason? I require a reason to get up and move, to continue on each day. I would talk to Deklyn about her. He would get quiet and self-contained and refuse to answer. I wasn't supposed to know about her. Nobody was. She was a walking contradiction. She was mystery and uncertainty embodied as flesh. She simply...was. There were no words to explain. Her name never came to me, my mind wondered over the idea that a creature like that could have a name. To give something a name is to make it real, to give it purpose and definition. She wasn't meant to exist, or to be real or definite. She was meant to clean the mess and move along. Never a word spoken. I saw her by mistake. And I remembered when I saw her that I'd seen her before. I'd heard about her before. Because *she* was the longest running legend of them all. Many believed that she wasn't a person at all. Some believed she was Death herself. Some knew that she was a person, but believed that she had no name. She was simply a specter of reality. Some thought that she was Lyric. But I knew better. Lyric was dead, she was gone. And she wouldn't be back. Ever. This one was very much alive. And the years didn't figure out right.

The legends go back for generations, tales of street justice and crime and family. But there's always one character that makes a cameo briefly in each tale. The character, decked in black, always dark, always present when necessary. The embodiment of Death, standing straight and somber, eyes always carefully hidden from mortal view. She was always present; they seldom had to call on her. But she never passed judgment,

she never handed out punishment. She would carry the bodies of the damned away – carry them to Hell or Heaven. But she'd never punish the condemned on Earth. She'd only clean up on those that she felt deserved to die. So maybe she had some sense of judgment. Not everybody deserved her efforts. I heard legends that she would find the names of those she carried away and she'd send a simple letter to the families to let them know the truth. Their loved one was beyond this mortal realm. Plain and simple. Can you imagine getting a letter, simple, plain, no date or signature? Just the truth you've known all along. She'd usually put something of theirs in the letter; a piece of something, a jewel, anything, something to let them know that it was true.

It's funny because everything that ever happens, everything's related somehow. I did find her name eventually. Deklyn told me to me in a labored whisper, it seemed to hurt him to say it. He made me swear never to repeat it and to forget I'd ever known about her and if I ever saw her, to run like hell. But she never came to the living. She only comes for the dead. How could anyone be so heartless? But her name was in my heart always. Her name is what kept my mind on her story. Because her name rolled off your tongue and the sweet sound hung in your ears and stayed echoing through your mind of eternity, it was that sweet. How could anyone be so cold? Because she had the name for it.

Her name was Elysium.

Elysium Merrick.

She was the missing reject; it made sense I imagine. Seeing her family, I wanted to understand what made her how she was. But it was obvious if you really thought about it. You didn't even have to *really* think, it was kind of obvious. The infamous Merrick clan raised nothing but rejects and misfits. Magus might have been a good one, but we'd never know. Magus was lost so young. Elysium had family, if you could consider a

half brother family. I heard that she was lurking around when they killed Cicero. She watched them bury him. And she dug him up and moved him. She moved him to where he belonged, where he would've wanted to be. She did this on her own, recovered a body buried deep, far down, she unearthed a hole made by two strong men on her own. Her age was a mystery, the years made it...distorted. But she was the black angel that carried the casualties away. She killed no one. She had no hand in the dealings of death; she just carried away the casualties. In the end, that all we end up to be. Victims. Wounded, empty, broken. Casualties of society. Aren't we all...

There were exceptions. If she knew that someone was damned, she'd follow them around, subtly, letting them know that their time was soon. If you saw her and you were still alive, the advice was always the same – run. Run as fast and hard as you can and never look back. After Deklyn left that time, I didn't think he'd be back, but he did come a few times, here and there, when he needed escape or shelter. I asked him about her once, I'd seen her lurking around from time to time. And Deklyn always knows a little something about everything. The look on his face...the shock and pain. He told me stories and legends and he found her name. He knew the name that lurked and followed him. He was damned. His days were numbered – his fate was sealed. He had betrayed Vincent a long time ago...and Vincent never forgets a vendetta. Sure, they beat him up, but that's not sufficient. Vincent had trusted him; he was higher up in the ranks. And he'd been betrayed by one of his more respected officials. Punishment was expected to be severe. Deklyn still had his life; I imagined that Vincent was doing to him what he was doing with me – playing with him. Dangling the mouse in front of the cat's swinging claws. Cruelty ran in the family. Elysium, the idea of her was...amazing. I couldn't define what made it so great, but the idea lingered, my mind worried of it ceaselessly. Maybe I have a slight obsession with death...just slightly. Don't we all? I don't give in, I don't lean over the edge, I just kind of dance along the line,

just close enough to sneak a slight glance. I think we all have that little side of us that wants it that tiny bit. I think people like Deklyn and myself wanted that a tad bit more, that's what made us freaks. Maybe? I don't know. He was great when he wanted to be. We loved each other and clung to one another because we were both damned. Living on borrowed time does something to someone. Elysium didn't lurk around me much, I saw her following Deklyn. He told me not to worry, but he'd warn me in the same breath. But I still love my darling cousin, he's my one watcher, my true guardian. Him and Jack are what keeps me...sane. They help me to live.

I was a bit out of my skin one night, and I was kind of considering suicide. Not seriously, but halfway. I know, it's weird. I do it sometimes to see how it feels. To make the idea of death more...common. I become more comfortable with dying the more I think about it. I know...I'm sick. But I write letters about it and everything and I make it out like I would do it too. I wrote one letter, it's my favorite one.

"Here's my resignation, I signed it in tears, I hope that's alright, as payment for the years, the years of misery, the years of discontent, the endless madness, the things that we all meant. Here is my resignation, I signed it for you, nice and red. With blood my soul is sealed, for eternity until I'm dead. Here is my resignation, I quit, I gave my best. I gave my heart, my soul, my sanity, and it died with all the rest. This is my resignation."

I don't know why I liked that one so much. I had it on my wall somewhere, painted on in red. Deklyn, during one of his random little visits, found himself staring at it aimlessly for a while. He had his head a bit tilted and he was reading it to himself in a sort of whisper, you know that tone that you use when you're reading something and kind of muttering it to yourself without realizing? When you read aloud and need someone else to tell you that you're able to be heard? I know you know what I mean. Maybe I just explained it wrong. I do

that sometimes. You know? Explain things wrong...explaining things is rough; you have to be careful. One wrong word can be anything. Well now...seems I got off on a bit of a rant, I was talking about my suicide stunts. Well, now, "stunt" isn't the proper word. See, you practice a stunt and you work it until perfection, absolute perfection, and then it's a success every time, and it's still a stunt, but not really. It's more of a trick if you can do it right every time. I don't know...whatever you'd call it, I thought about it a lot. Maybe I'm just slightly insane. Slightly. Then again, Vincent did warn me against it. Why I decided to abide by *his* rules...I don't know. I'm not all that keen on rules. They bother me. Rules are silly, you know?

Anyways...the suicide stunts. Deklyn read that off my wall and he looked at me in this silly kind of way and he just kind of held me awhile. I didn't understand. He told me that I didn't have to because I was beautiful and nothing else mattered. And he told me that he hoped death wouldn't change me. I stayed with him and we stared at my words, my dysfunctional words carefully written in the middle of space. Deklyn knew them by heart after a short while.

Words are a funny thing. You don't think much of them, but they're stronger than anything else could ever become. Words touch your heart; they become embedded in your soul. They have no limits; no time can hold them. Spoken words last as long as you can bear to remember them. Written words last until the sheet fades. Everything fades with time – nothing is forever. That's just the way it works. I don't put things off anymore. My days are numbered; I accepted that truth a long time ago. It's foolish to take advantage of something that's not yours. Understand me? Maybe. I'm not quite sure if I even understand myself. That's kind of scary you know, not being able to know yourself, to understand what you're trying to say. I might be crazy after all.

Deklyn came and went. He's highly important in my life. He's a

key player for many reasons; I kind of strayed off the main topic. Deklyn, the heartless drug dealer, the one who willingly and knowingly betrayed his lord and master – I looked up to him. The hardened street hoodlum...he cared about me. He was the one that wasn't supposed to care about anyone or anything, he had no attachments, they were too dangerous – he could only depend on himself. But we were both damned, and being we shared our fates, we could talk and bond better than anyone else. We were closer in death than most are in life. Scary huh?

The shop was steady; I was psyched to actually participate. My new station as apprentice demanded respect and put me a step closer to my goal. And when the day did come, I couldn't stop shaking. It was that great. Sometimes shaking is necessary...well sometimes I guess. Life seemed tolerable enough. Vincent loomed around here and there; he was infamous for his unpredictable ways. And Deklyn came and went as he pleased, always eager to sit and talk with me. We'd spend hours in serious debate, or days considering the shapes of clouds. Bizarre indeed. But when your time is limited you'll do all manner of silly things to pass the time. Time's another really funny concept. Or maybe I just think it is. I seem to think a lot of funny things.

Deklyn got into this bad stretch once. He wouldn't come around as much, I couldn't figure it out. I went walking with Jack in the meanwhile, who was convinced that I was worried for all the wrong reasons. Jack was a great comfort. He came and went too, but he was always there when I needed him, he always seemed to know when things were hard on me. Jack was my guardian angel...funny name for an angel huh? But he's still mine.

Days became weeks and nothing changed. I started to forget that time was fleeting. I'd spend most of my free time writing being I had nothing else. I vowed to leave it behind, I don't know to whom, but I'd leave it behind. God help the person who

finds this, or maybe not. They might find it humorous. Or they might learn from it. Either way, it'd be worth something, and that's what I want. I want to know that my existence was something in this world, I wasn't just a black space in the midst of the insanity – I wasn't just another number, an addition to the statistic. I want to make an impact, leave a crater – be *something*. Anything. I'd hate to think that this was all a waste. The pain of existence, the suffering of survival...nothing more than trash. I know it sounds very pessimistic, on the verge of desperation, but it's true. I think we all feel this way. Nobody wants to be nothing; we all want to be something. We all want to count, to stand up for once and leave our mark and let them know where we were and what we did. That's what I think anyways...you don't have to believe me. That's what makes free will so great, you can choose what to accept or disregard. I love free will. But it's ironic. You can choose so much but you can't control the most important things. Life and death. Theoretically, you can, but not entirely. Because nothing is for sure. And nothing is always. And nothing is forever. Except love. And even that's a maybe, even that's a sometimes.

It wasn't long before the consistency ended. There wasn't reason for what happened next, it simply happened. I was going through my routines as I usually did and my father was becoming more...involved. He started to bother me and we fought more and more. I would rant to Jack for hours and all he could do was shake his head. He never really had any answers for me. Just expressions that I alone could truly decipher. He was at a loss and I was alone. I talked to Deklyn, I explained how my father bothered me. Deklyn didn't want to listen either. He would change the topic whenever I tried to talk about my...domestic situation. And it didn't get much better. The neighbors finally took it upon themselves to interfere and update my father on my activities, on my appearance and new habits. And he wasn't pleased. The fight that turned everything around started one day when I came home from work.

Clicking the door shut carefully behind me, I turned and almost walked into my father.

"Where have you been?"

"At work. Why?"

"The neighbors phoned, they saw that you've been running around with a gang, is this true?"

"I've been with Deklyn, aren't I allowed to associate with family anymore?"

"You know that he's in with a bad crowd. I told you to stay away."

"I can make my own decisions!"

Now this is the point in the conversation when I knew I'd overstepped my boundaries. This was stupid statement number one. My father took a step toward me, I was sure that he could sense my shock, my eyes wide with amazement. Who had said such harsh words? Surely this wasn't me...

"Your own decisions? You're own choices? You've done a hell of a job. Hanging around with hoodlums, making a bad name for yourself and smoking? When the hell did you plan on telling me any of this? Or were these all things you simply *decided* were best?"

"It's my life! What good would it do to tell you? You can't help me, Gavin!"

Stupid statement number two. Never call your parent by their given name, especially in times of tension or stress. Major stupid.

"Harvey, what the hell happened to you? What happened to my little girl? I want my daughter back. You're not mine. I deny you."

“Then I don’t care. I’m leaving.”

Now, my father’s blind, he’s been blind for years. But he managed to smack me straight across my face so fast and so hard that I hit the floor and didn’t know where I was for a good few minutes. I got up in an awkward motion, still shocked from the blow. My father’s jaw was set and I turned on a heel and walked away from him. He stood there, muscles tense, shaking slightly. And that’s when I said it. It was barely a whisper, but I said it.

“I hate you. I wish you’d just die and leave me the hell alone already.”

I packed a bag of clothes, paper, pencils...and I left. I packed my life up as best as I could and I turned my back and left behind everything I’d ever known with the intent to never return. It was raining at the time, naturally. And I had no idea where to go. The shop would be closed. I couldn’t go to the Drakes, I’d never find my way in the dark alone and the streets weren’t safe. I ended up wandering around aimlessly regardless. I wandered aimlessly until I saw dark figures lurking in the shadows. I quickened my pace and ended up walking right into a long black coat. My thoughts were racing; at first I thought it was Elysium. But this couldn’t be. The figure turned and held out a gloved hand to me, helping me rise. I looked into shadows and could find no eyes for comfort, no features to hold my attention. The people that’d be following me turned and ran. And the figure in front of me didn’t move. He just stood there, calmly. He, I assume it was a he. It surely wasn’t Elysium. I could hear the steady breathing. He still held my arm. Locked to death, all I could do was breathe.

He led me away, still holding onto me with an iron grip, features unknown, hidden behind a description that paralleled Elysium. He let go when I was in the infamous alleyway and stepped away. I kept my head down, soaked from the rain. I

watched his close cautious movements and questions started pouring out of my mind.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Me? I’m Entropy.”

“And who is that?”

I saw the shape of eyes shine in the darkness. They blinked steadily, were dark and foreboding, shining. He just looked at me intently. “Chaos,” he whispered. He was gone so fast...I was sure that he had just disappeared with the falling rain. And in a day I’d met disaster first hand. And he wore the same outfit as Heaven. Him and Elysium could’ve easily been the same, except he spoke. His eyes shone out, he wore a hat to hide his face, but he was more humane. He’d brought me out of a war zone into safety. I curled up as best as I could and slept in the furthest corner of the alley, far away from the world. Tomorrow I’d go home, I decided, go home and make amends with my father. Before too much time passed. Little did I know...

I got home, still soaked, the rain refused to let up. I walked in the door, careful not to make much noise. I wasn’t sure of the time – I think it was the afternoon sometime. There was an eerie silence to the place, I crept around making as little noise as I could manage. My father’s door was slightly ajar, I pushed it open carefully, calling for him softly. I explained that I was sorry. I opened the door all the way. And I passed out.

I woke up...I don’t know where I was. But I wasn’t home anymore. Shapes were lurking around, the longer I watched, the more vivid they became. Deklyn was creeping around quietly, careful not to disturb anything. I sat up abruptly and watched him jump and nearly fall over. He didn’t want to say anything; he hesitated to move. I stared at him intently.

“What have you done?”

“It wasn’t me, I swear, you know I wouldn’t...”

“Don’t lie to the child.”

Vincent stepped out from nowhere, dark and somber. His voice didn’t really startle me, I expected him to be lurking around as soon as I saw Deklyn. Deklyn stayed away, hiding in the shadows, careful of his leader’s darting eyes. Vincent moved closer to where I was. He sat down and looked down at me calmly. It felt like he was looking down, he might have been level to me in reality. I’m not sure. He spoke calmly.

“Be careful what you wish for, remember?”

And memories started coming back. The words on the wall in dripping wet blood, words he’d just spoken to me were saved on the wall over my father’s bed. They were written in his blood, clearly. My father’s body was on the bed, bloody, beaten...broken. The proud man he’d once been was long gone, only a shadow of his former self. I remember hitting the ground and nothing else registered. The image was burned into my mind. I stared at Vincent intently.

“You did this? You killed him?”

“Now, hold on, don’t jump to conclusions just yet. You asked for it, remember? Deklyn heard you. And he had to prove his loyalty again after that slight...occurrence a while back.”

My glare shifted to Deklyn, whose head was hung low, into his chest. He avoided me, moving around constantly. I wanted to scream, I wanted to get up and attack someone. But I remembered my senses, I was in a room with two ruthless murderers. Killers. I wanted my life back. I wanted anything. I wanted my father back. I looked at Vincent, cool, calm Vincent, who rose quietly and moved away from me. He was smiling that sinister grin of his, the gleam in his eyes

obvious.

“Have fun in custody court kid. And by the way, this is only the beginning of the end.”

And with that he left. He left me there, without a farewell, or a word of departure, and he was gone. I got up and faced Deklyn. And I hit him. I kept hitting him until my knuckles were numb, until I felt someone grab me and pull me off of him. He was a bleeding ball of flesh on the floor, curled up, crying to himself. I never saw him that weak before. And he didn't even try to fight back. I fought off the grip that restrained me, turning to face Entropy. His features were still carefully hidden – he eyes gleamed down at me. Elysium stood next to him, silent. The two of them matched to the last detail almost, yet they weren't the same. She kept a safe distance, her eyes dark. Deklyn looked at them in shock, rising to his feet shakily. He turned and ran out as well. He moved so quickly, you'd have thought that Death was on his heels. Maybe it was.

Elysium kind of snuck out of the room quietly. Entropy stood there, serene, stern, calm. He let go and just stayed there when I whirled around to face him. I fell back a step or so. He moved to where I'd been lying down and sat. He looked at me and took the hat from his head that covered his eyes. His features were all dark, naturally. He looked down at the floor quietly and looked up at me.

“You should go to your uncle.”

“Why do you care?”

“Because I'm supposed to.”

“Supposed to?”

“Yes. See, Elysium is the other side. She's the cold one, the gatekeeper.”

"But you're Chaos?"

"Yes. And Elysium is Heaven. Ironic huh?"

"I'm confused..."

"You're allowed. Let me take you home."

"Home?"

"For now anyways. Nothing's forever kid."

He got up and put his hand on my back and led me out carefully. I didn't ask questions. I didn't know if he belonged to Vincent, I doubted it; he didn't fit into the usual lackey mold. I looked up at him every chance I could get. They were opposites, the two of them, yet they matched. I questioned him when I could get up the courage.

"She's my other."

"Your...other?"

He smiled down at me calmly. "Yes. She completes me."

"You mean...you love her?"

"Love's such a petty, vulgar word, child. But if you insist, yes, I imagine I do."

"I'm not a child you know..."

He looked down at me and smiled a halfway grin, a half-hearted grimace. "Course you're not. Of course not, what was I thinking?"

And we walked the rest of the way in silence, side by side. Absolute silence. It got on my nerves, but he kept his arm across my back, the palm on my right shoulder. I couldn't run if I tried. For some odd reason, I didn't seem to want to.

"Are you...do you...are you with Vincent?"

"You mean the gang, am I a member?"

"Um...yeah."

"No. I'm not. I belong to nobody. Except, perhaps, Elysium."

"That's sweet."

"Is it?"

"I think so."

"And what do I care what *you* think?"

"I...don't know."

And silence resumed. We walked at a steady pace; he led me to the door and knocked, then stood again at my side. My uncle opened the door after awhile, sleepily. I wasn't sure of the time; I imagine it was early. We were both soaked to the skin, Entropy smiling broadly.

"I believe that this is yours?"

Uncle Declan blinked slowly, looked from him to I, and back again. He rubbed his eyes and nodded quietly. "Thank you Entropy."

"Always, dear friend. I do owe you, after all."

"Of course. Thanks again, my friend."

"It was a pleasure."

"Send Elysium my regards?"

"She might be over to see you soon herself."

"Oh...oh my."

"I'm afraid so, old friend. Terribly sorry."

"Deklyn?"

Entropy merely nodded, but shook his head as well. My uncle looked defeated, older than he was. He took me and ushered me inside. He spoke to my accomplice for a little while longer before shutting the door quietly. He turned to me at last, looking more tired than before. He led me to the couch and found blankets and pillows from a closet. He seemed to be muttering to himself, I didn't question anything. I knew that Deklyn hadn't come back; he hadn't been home in ages. My uncle went to bed himself and left me to my own thoughts. I sat there thinking for hours, and, finding that sleep had abandoned me, I wrote for a while. The conversation I'd heard at the door didn't make much sense to me, but the idea of my uncle knowing a creature such as Entropy haunted me. Bizarre alliances indeed.

The new morning brought little relief from yesterday's mixed events, and the more I thought on them, the more distorted everything became. My uncle explained to me as simply as he could find words that my father was dead and he'd assumed custody of me, as my mother's only remaining relative. My father's family was useless, we didn't even bother them. They came to the funeral, as was expected, and were scarce again shortly after. They never really wanted anything to do with him, didn't bother me much. And I moved in with Uncle Declan. They tried to have me stay with Rook, but that didn't work out too well. I beat her up the first night...my uncle wasn't pleased.

The life I'd known previous to this tragedy was lost forever; I could never go back to it. That old chapter of my life was finished; this was a fresh new start. To explain my new life requires a new end and yet another conclusion. Here's to the future, however limited.