

Loneliness and Reconciliation

Chapter 1

Seth looked down at the dark rushing river below the bridge he stood on and wondered how quickly he would drown. He didn't want to have to hold himself down too long. That would give him a chance to change his mind.

Would I float back up if I became unconscious? Oh yeah, it's only corpses that float. Heh. It's like nature wants us all to die.

Suddenly, warm memories rose shimmering in his mind, childhood memories in which he felt like sunshine, when the light within his heart seemed to warm the world in a soft glow, making colors more vibrant, made laughter sweet and sincere, and life worth living. He couldn't remember when he stopped feeling that way. But he hated himself for having lost that precious magic.

Hope pulled at Seth's heartstrings again, but he only dug his heels into his resolve. He hated how life wanted to perpetuate its own existence without caring about those who had to endure its suffering.

If reincarnation is real, Seth called out in his mind to the darkening sky, and if any god is listening... please don't bring me back. That's the least you could do for me.

The river's rippling melody sounded so sweet in the evening air. Traffic on the outskirts of the small city had nearly emptied from the streets, and the few cars that occasionally passed by would only think the average-sized and average-looking young man was just drinking in the scenery. The sun had set halfway, enough to shock the sky with tangerine, scarlet, and violet.

It's a beautiful night, Seth thought to himself. Couldn't ask for a better one.

It was late enough that the daytime creatures were relinquishing dominion to their nocturnal brethren. Bats chattered overhead, owls hooted from the trees, and a plethora of bird calls diminished into the quiescence of twilight. Seth couldn't decide if this harmonious, seamless interim was a reason to keep living in and of itself, or if it was the perfect time to let go of the burden he knew he could no longer carry.

No one will miss me. But..., he thought to himself, allowing his burdened heart to open for a moment. *...I suppose I will miss this.*

At that moment, a kind of peace and terror gripped him, as he knew that this choice was his to make, and his alone. There was no right or wrong answer. And that made it all the more painful.

Seth stepped up onto the parapet, his eyes filling with tears. Although the concrete wall was wider than his feet were long, his footing felt unstable as vertigo pulled his balance out from under him. He swayed and cried as a light breeze swept over the river, caressing his face with serene detachment. Seconds stretched into aeons as Seth stared into the abyss of the river, simultaneously the gaping maw of a ravenous beast and the embrace of a siren unashamedly promising tranquility.

Suddenly, someone pushed Seth off the bridge, and he was too terrified to cry out.

I-I don't want to die, some part of him pleaded to whatever could hear him as he fell into the inky blackness. The sun had finally set, and no gleams of sunlight streaked the waters. There was only darkness.

I don't want to die.

Seth woke up with the morning sun blinding his left eye. When he raised his hand to block the light, he saw his own face staring at him beneath a vibrant peach-colored sky. Or rather, it would have been him if he had dark wavy hair, gray eyes, was nearly a foot taller than he actually was, was leanly muscled, and had the bone structure of a Greek god. Still, there was something poignantly familiar about the stranger.

“Man, you take for fucking ever to do anything, even to wake up,” the man's cool, sly voice drawled lazily. “I was about to give up on your sorry ass.”

“...Who the hell are you?” Seth demanded. He felt a grimy film all over his skin and guessed that this smarmy stranger, whoever he was, had dragged him out of the river. “Why did you save me?”

“Why did you jump, asshole? For all intents and purposes, you only live once.”

“So?” Seth sighed. “Doesn't matter if your life isn't worth living.”

“Then why did you not want to die at the last moment?”

Seth froze. He was sure he hadn't said that last thought out loud. He was completely positive.

I guess the mind does crazy things when it's about to kill itself. “None of your business.”

“Actually, that's the entire reason I'm here,” the stranger drawled. “Honestly, I would much rather have stayed in what's left of your fantasy world than have to have this idiotic conversation with such a self-centered little prick like you.”

Seth pulled himself to his feet, his fists balled and blood boiling. “Who the fuck *are you*? I didn't ask you to save me, asshole. I would be drifting into peaceful oblivion if you hadn't wanted to be a self-righteous hero. Like you could ever understand why someone would want to end *everything*. You're probably one of those vainglorious fucks who has everything they want and wonders why everyone else isn't fucking ecstatic all the time. Guess what. *Life isn't perfect*

for everyone. Some people are fucking miserable, and suicide is the only thing I can give myself anymore. Or it was until some smug fuck pulled me out.”

The stranger rolled his eyes and sighed impatiently. “Yeah, you’re right, not everyone is as blessed as I am, and, guess what, there are plenty of people who would slit someone’s throat to be in *your* position.”

“So? *I’m not them.* The grass is always greener, you arrogant asshole. Only I wouldn’t kill someone just to look like you.”

“Wouldn’t you?”

Seth laughed. “Fuck no, you arrogant prick. You’re just some scumbag who wants to feel high and mighty and judge everyone for not being as perfect as you.”

“Yet, you are the one who is judging yourself for being imperfect.”

Seth suddenly snapped. He roared and launched himself at the stranger. The unknown benefactor pivoted to the side and swept his leg under Seth’s, sending the furious youth tumbling into the stony shore. His fall was only lightly cushioned by the patches of grass creeping onto the riverbank. Seth once again raised himself to his feet and screamed in frustration.

“Leave me alone!”

The stranger rubbed his forehead in frustration. “Believe me, I wish I could.”

“It’s a free country, fucker. Piss off.”

“Sadly, I am not a free spirit. I am bound to you. In a sense, I am you.”

Seth snorted and chuckled, waiting for the punchline, but the stranger simply stared back at him. Although there was sarcasm and callousness, there was no malice or duplicity in his eyes. “What do you mean?” Seth asked.

“I am who you wish you could be. I am one of your daemon, the spirits that guides your life. Or at least I would be if you weren’t such a stubborn ass.”

A moment passed before Seth bent over as hysterical laughter seized him for almost a minute, and only his loss of breath gave him enough repose to regain his voice.

“I’m sorry, could you repeat that?” Seth asked as he leaned in and cupped his hand to his ear. “I couldn’t hear you through all the bullshit you shoved in my ears.”

The stranger smirked. “Classy. I am one of your daemon. You could also think of me as your subconscious, the part of yourself that is your potential, fully realized self as you would want to be. Any bullshit you hear coming out of my mouth is what you have fed yourself over the years. The rest is as real as it gets.”

A chill ran through Seth’s body. Slowly, he backed away from the dark-haired man, trying to create enough distance from the man to safely run away. Given the man’s fitness, a mile would have been preferable.. “Ok... I don’t know what fantasy you’re trying to live out, but I would rather you left me out of it. I may want to die, but I don’t want to be maimed and tortured by a psychopath, thanks very much.”

The man tilted his head with feline grace and snapped his fingers. Immediately, an apparition of April, the only woman Seth had had a real relationship with, appeared before him.

She looked as she did the last time he saw her, her long, strawberry blonde hair hanging freely about her feminine, graceful, lithe shoulders and arms, an Iron Maiden shirt suggestively stretched by her curvaceous figure, and jeans that covered enough to be tasteful, leaving only a small part of her midriff exposed. She looked at Seth with condescending disdain before turning to the dark-haired man and caressing his face. She pulled herself towards him, pressing her body into his, and was about to kiss him before the man snapped his fingers again and she dissipated.

Black spots appeared in Seth's vision and he suddenly realized he had stopped breathing. Before he could breathe again, his stomach lurched violently and he dry heaved convulsively. As he managed to stand back up, Seth could not push back the dread overwhelming him as he stared at the stranger.

The stranger snorted in amusement. "My patience has been wearing thin since you started pitying yourself over that girl years ago. But I am feeling compassionate, so I will answer three questions. Choose them carefully."

"....What is... a... demon?"

The man rolled his eyes again in exasperation. "Demons are spirits that thrive on the mindless compulsions of mankind: rape, murder, anger, fear, etc. But *I* am a *daemon*. Big difference. You have... two. However, you have unraveled your sense of aspiration so much that you have nearly killed one and he is too weak to manifest. Fortunately for you, he's the more boring of the two. *I* am all the hopes and dreams that you had for yourself since you were a child. I was what was coaxing you to imagine, painted the tapestries of your hopes, and inspired you to grasp life with everything you had. At least, at one time I did. Until you buried me in your self-loathing. Second question."

Seth decided to suspend his disbelief until he could fully understand what was happening. Perhaps he was hallucinating, or maybe he had in fact drowned in the river and this was some kind of limbo, to be eternally tormented by what he had wished he had been all his life: confident, handsome, intelligent, something admirable. Something worthy of being loved. But until he could be certain he hadn't been drugged and this person was manipulating him to lure him into a cult or something, he felt better not upsetting whoever or whatever he was.

"What do you mean there are two of you?" Seth asked as he simultaneously tried to search the shrubbery around him and keep his eye on the madman in front of him.

This time, the man slapped his forehead with one hand. "I'll be nice and count this as a clarifying point. No one is going to come out of the bush and mug you. If I wanted something off your sorry ass, I would have already taken it. Everyone has two daemons, one light and one dark. The light guides your rationality, the dark, like me, guide your more interesting bits, like instincts, humor, etc. You gave up on a higher calling long ago, so your other daemon is practically a withered husk."

"... Why are you here?"

"Thanks for not beating around the bush," the man snorted. "I am here because the deepest part of you called out for help. That part of you that wants to live life again and embrace

what the world has to offer, but your conscious mind is too weak and scared to seize it. I am here to help you find what you think has been missing but has been right in your face your entire life, waiting for you to recognize it. Third question.”

“...What’s your name?”

“And here I thought we were making headway... I told you, I am *you*. But for the sake of simplicity, you can call me... Damon.”

“Wow, you’re really hamming up the whole daemon thing,” Seth chuckled.

“I’ll only be here for as long as you need me. Then I’m gone.”

“To where?”

“I said three questions.”

Seth scoffed. “You claim to be a spirit that resides *inside of me* and you think I’m just going to ask *three questions*? I thought you were supposed to be smart.”

Damon smirked. “Fair enough. Back to your subconscious. Believe me, I wouldn’t even have come out if it hadn’t deteriorated into such a cesspool. You really need to get your shit together.”

“And you’re going to help me do that?”

Damon nodded.

“How?”

“That is what we are going to find out,” Damon groaned as he stretched upward, his muscles stretching his black shirt as his joints popped. Then, he slumped and sighed with satisfaction. “Sadly, since you are such a stubborn sonofabitch, I don’t rightly know what it’s going to take to get it through to you. Seems rather Sisyphean, but, hell, it’s either this or rot away in the back of your head.”

“Or you could have let me die,” Seth muttered to himself.

Damon suddenly appeared directly in front of Seth, and his eyes blazed with red fury.

“*You* summoned me,” Damon snarled. “*You* are the one who is so pathetic he can’t make up his mind about whether he wants to live or not. If you want to end your miserable existence, be my guest. I would prefer sweet nothingness over listening to you bitch and moan about your own life since you aren’t man enough to make something of it. So which is it going to be? Are you going to let life crush you beneath your own self-pity or are you going to grow the fuck up?”

“... doesn’t seem like much of a choice.”

“No, it doesn’t. But it’s the only choice that matters.”

“... Fine,” Seth agreed, hoping that playing this sick fuck’s game would get the psycho to leave him alone. “What do we do?”

Damon stepped back, the rage in his eyes softening back into swaggering satisfaction. “First things first. Let’s get some food.”

Seth reached out and tapped Damon and was almost surprised when he felt flesh and bone beneath his touch. “I thought you were a spirit.”

“I am, though I am made manifest by your suppressed hope to love life again. Sadly, this is going to take some time, and I need to nourish this temporary body.”

"Whatever. That doesn't answer my question. How do we... do *this*?"

Damon smirked and waved his hand placatingly. "Don't worry, it won't be too painful. Long and short of it is, We're going to expose your fears and anxieties, one at a time, by comparing you side by side with the ideal you're not. That way, you can learn to accept yourself as you are."

“How is making me feel inferior going to help me in any way?”

“You already feel inferior. You have since you were a kid. We're just going to dredge it out of you to make way for acceptance. The hard way if necessary.”

“What's the hard way?”

“Jesus, you never know when to shut up. Come on. I want some pizza.”

With that, Damon turned and walked into the forest. Seth only then realized that the bridge he had fallen off of was nowhere in sight and that he had no idea where he was, as the river must have carried him downstream. He hesitated as Damon became increasingly obscured by the dense foliage.

Well... even if I am hallucinating, maybe my subconscious can lead me back home.

“Hurry the fuck up!” Damon called out, now completely hidden behind the vegetation.

“Fucking hell...,” Seth muttered to himself as he gazed back at the river one last time. He realized he could jump back in and, at that moment, the siren of suicide's lullaby haunted his heart again. But this time it felt cold and terrifying, and his feet backed away from the river of their own accord.

Seth grit his teeth in humiliation. *I can't even do this right*, he berated himself as he began walking where Damon had trailed ahead of him, back to a life Seth still didn't know if he wanted to live.

The two of them walked in silence for a long time. Seth refused to say anything because he still didn't know if he had just gone crazy or if Damon was the insane one. He still couldn't explain why he had seen April, or how Damon had somehow known exactly what he had seen and thought, but he figured it was best to observe and try to find any inconsistencies with Damon's story. But the tall, dark man just kept walking with an infuriatingly neutral expression on his face.

Eventually, they reached the highway that led back to town. Seth continued walking until he realized Damon was walking slowly backward by the side of the road and raised his thumb to hitchhike. There were a few cars coming down their side of the road, and most passed by with the drivers looking at the peculiar duo with skepticism. Not that Seth blamed them. He imagined they looked rather sketchy, especially having just come out of the woods.

But now that they were out from under the trees, the summer sun beat down on them mercilessly. Sweat soon dripped down both their faces, though Damon's sweat only somehow just made him seem more majestic as he unwaveringly strutted backward with his thumb in the air. Just as Seth was about to insist on the futility of Damon's efforts, a pickup honked and pulled over just ahead of them, gravel crunching under the tires.

"A little patience goes a long way," Damon said, slapping his hand on Seth's shoulder as he walked by him.

"So does shoving my foot up your ass," Seth muttered as he followed.

Damon swung the car door open and hopped inside and Seth climbed in beside him.

"Hello, boys," and a forty-something-year-old woman with streaks of gray in her black hair greeted them. She had green eyes and tanned skin that crinkled slightly with laugh lines. She wore blue overalls and a white t-shirt underneath and smelled of hay and dirt. "Couldn't walk the last few miles yourselves?"

"Just wanted the pleasure of a beautiful woman's company, is all," Damon replied as Seth closed the door behind him. "Luckily, you were in a gracious mood. Name's Damon."

"Charming," the woman smirked. "Cindy. A pleasure to meet you."

"What do you do for a living, Cindy?"

"I'm a farmer by trade. I mainly grow wheat, but I also have a horse ranch, and people come from all over to ride the trails by the river."

Seth began to introduce himself but decided the woman was too engrossed in conversation with the better-looking Damon to bother. Instead, he fixated on the scenery as Cindy revved the truck back onto the pavement. Cindy and Damon continued talking, but Seth lost himself in his apathy, focusing on the sensation of the wind cutting through the opening of the barely rolled-down windows.

Why the hell didn't I just throw myself back in the river? I'm just a pathetic loser and that's all I-

"And what's your name, sweetie?" Cindy asked.

"Oh," Seth said, nearly jumping out of the seat. "Uh... it's Seth."

"And what do you do?"

"....Nothing really," Seth muttered. "Went to college. Got a degree in philosophy. Hasn't amounted to anything. I was working at the gas station for a while, but they fired me for being late too many times."

"Not really a job I would want to show up to, either," Cindy conceded. "Any idea what you'll do next?"

"No. I had plans, but they fell through."

"What were they?"

"I'd rather not talk about it."

"Seth just tried to kill himself," Damon said. "I had to pull his sorry ass out of the river."

Seth wanted to open the door and throw himself out to save himself from embarrassment and hopefully finish what he had started, but Cindy tutted and asked: “Now, why would you want to do that?”

Seth sighed and tried fruitlessly to hide in the chasm he felt in his chest. “... Because I don’t feel like life is worth living anymore.”

Cindy snorted. “Well, you get the answers you want in life, no matter what question you ask.”

“Huh?”

“You’re sad, so all you can see are reasons the world is terrible and full of suffering,” Cindy explained as she pinned a few loose strands of hair the wind had pulled in front of her face. “Don’t get me wrong, there’s plenty of misery in the world, but how you choose to see life determines what you see around you.”

“Wise words,” Damon said. “Beautiful *and* intelligent.”

Cindy laughed. “Shut up, you. You’re nothing but a sweet talker.”

“I’m sweet at several things if you catch my drift.”

Seth rolled his eyes and watched the scenery pass by him as Cindy and Damon continued to flirt. Tension rose within Seth as he continued to sit in silence and tried to avoid thinking about anything while also unable to stave off his worries of how Cindy was judging him, though Cindy didn’t seem to mind his moodiness. He knew the polite thing to do would be to try to join in the conversation, but he loathed trying to pretend he felt happy when he was actually miserable.

Within a few minutes, they arrived back in the city, and Cindy was happy to oblige Damon’s request to be dropped off at the nearest pizza parlor.

“Well, this was fun,” Cindy said as she pulled into the parking lot. “I hope you both have a blessed day, and Seth?”

“Yeah?”

“Chin up, sweetheart.”

Easy for you to say, Seth thought to himself as he opened the car door and got out. “Thanks.”

“It was a pleasure, Cindy,” Damon said with a deep bow as he exited the truck. “I hope you have a man in your life who appreciates you as much as you deserve.”

“If you want, you can certainly fill the vacancy,” Cindy replied.

Damon clutched his chest with all the passion of an anguished troubadour. “Alas, I have duties to attend to. Otherwise, I would happily elope to your idyllic home.”

“Gotta take care of your friend?” Cindy whispered, though Seth could still hear. The concern underlying the secrecy just made his humiliation cut deeper into his gut.

“Indeed,” Damon said gravely. “But trust me, you’ll find someone. You’re the stuff dreams are made of.”

“As are you, baby. If you change your mind...” Seth heard Cindy rummaging around her glove compartment for a few moments before she said, “here’s my number.”

“It’s been an honor and a privilege, my lady,” Damon said, graciously accepting the paper with her telephone number scribbled on it.

“Bye boys!” Cindy yelled as she drove off back onto the highway.

“Finally,” Damon said. “I’m starving.”

Seth vaguely acknowledged that he was hungrier than he remembered ever being, but couldn’t find much reason to care. Still, he followed Damon’s eager gait into the restaurant.

As Seth and Damon sat down at a booth to eat, multiple plates of pizza in hand, Seth couldn’t help but notice that every woman in the restaurant had their eyes glued to Damon. There were snickers and whispers that Seth knew only happened when women were excited. Seth had never experienced such attention, but he recognized it from high school and college when the good-looking popular or artistic kids would enter the room. It always made Seth feel that every other male in the room was invisible, especially him.

Damon either didn’t notice or didn’t care that he was the sole focus of the room, both from appreciative glances from women and jealous glares from men.

“So,” Damon said with a mouthful of pizza. “Why did April leave you?”

Seth stared at his first slice of pizza. The scents of the sharp cheese and the fresh-roasted crust made his stomach gurgle. But Seth had realized long ago that caring about anything led to caring about everything, which always led to disappointment. He decided it was better to just ignore the humiliating scenario surrounding him and let his insecurity swaddle him like a blanket.

Damon snapped his finger once loudly in front of Seth’s face and it broke his reverie. “Look, the sooner you are honest with me and yourself, the sooner I get out of here, which is what we both want, believe me.”

“... She said I wasn’t good enough. She left me for someone who was.”

“That’s what she told you?”

Seth and April argued only once, when they last spoke to one another. The day it ended, a friend of April’s said she saw her with another guy, and asked if she and Seth were in an open relationship. Waiting for April to return home that day had felt like a vat of acid had begun to overflow inside of him. He held onto his rage and held back his tears until she showed up, determined to show her how much she had hurt him. Only she didn’t care.

You’re not a man, down there or in your head. You have the emotional stability of a twelve-year-old. You’re lucky I even pitied you enough to let you fuck me.

Her words still scorched his heart, even though it had been years since they were first etched there.

“Basically,” Seth finally replied.

“And you and I both know you haven’t had anyone else... sheesh, ever. Honestly, you don’t even like porn anymore. Not that I blame you. Who wants to just rub themselves while looking at a screen when you could have the real thing. On the other hand, pun intended, those wome-”

“Shut the fuck up,” Seth hissed. “I don’t know how long you want to keep this charade up, but stop pretending you’re anything other than some asshole who gets off on making others feel like shit.”

“You’re the one who is making yourself feel like shit,” Damon said as he took another huge bite of pizza. “You can’t let go of her. You broke yourself over her and now you believe you’ll never be whole again, that you’re less than nothing. You’ve put all your energy into your inferiority complex so that you don’t know any other way to operate.”

Seth folded his arms and scoffed. “Says the guy who could have his pick of any woman he wants. You didn’t even have to ask for Cindy’s number. So who the fuck are you to judge me for hating myself? I haven’t gotten a girl’s number once. No one has said yes when I have asked them out *ever*.”

“What about April?”

“I thought you knew everything about me?” Seth mocked.

Damon raised an eyebrow. “Think of this as therapy. You have to say it for it to mean anything.”

The vein of caustic humor Seth had let escape suddenly withered. “... She... she was the only girl who ever pursued me. Maybe it wasn’t for me. Maybe she was just bored and wanted something to play with. But it was the first time...”

“That you felt wanted,” Damon finished.

“Yeah.”

Damon nodded sagely and then stuffed the rest of the pizza slice in his mouth. “So what’s stopping you from asking someone out who *you* want?”

Seth scoffed. “Why subject myself to that humiliation?”

“*Potential* humiliation. And if she says no, so what? There’s always more fish in the sea.”

Rolling his eyes in exasperation, Seth explained as if he were speaking to a child. An exceptionally mature child. “Except I have nothing to bait them with. I have *nothing* that women want. I’m boring, I’m nothing to look at, I don’t have a job or money, and I... can’t even satisfy...”

“Stop judging all women by one bitch who broke your heart,” Damon said as he started on another slice of pizza. “Everyone is looking for happiness, and usually they hurt each other along the way. It happens. Move on.”

“Alright, smartass, if you are a fucking daemon, whatever the fuck that is, have you ever experienced any pain in your life? Have you ever felt the pain of rejection?”

Damon set down his slice and looked around to see if anyone was within earshot. "I have felt what you have put us both through," he said quietly as he finished chewing and swallowed. "You have shut down your sexuality and your desire to connect with anyone, not just lovers but friends too, and your inner world, *my world*, is becoming worse than a wasteland. It's turning into a prison filled with corrosion and decay. Even your *demons* think it's pathetic."

"So?" Seth sighed as he began slowly spinning the metal plate his untouched slice of pizza lay on. "Good riddance. I would rather spend the rest of my life alone than be betrayed again because I don't meet some whore's standards."

Damon then leaned over slapped Seth across the face so hard stars popped in Seth's vision for several moments. When Seth looked back at Damon, his gray eyes were cold and emotionless. "Everyone has the right to choose who they want to be with and why, even April. It was not her right, however, to toy with you the way she did, but all she did was show you her true colors. Don't paint all women with that palette. There are women who are strong and beautiful, regardless of what they look like, and have more grace in their little toe than you do in your entire body. Just because you are wallowing in the pain which you refuse to face doesn't mean you have the right to—"

Both of them suddenly realized that one of the cashier girls had been standing next to their table with two more slices of pizza and, to Seth's horror, the entire restaurant was staring at them.

"O-one of the other patrons wanted you guys to have these," the girl stuttered. Her round face looked stunned and wide-eyed, framed by her black franchise hat and her light brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. "She said you looked hungry."

Damon cleared his throat and accepted the free slices. "Well, how very nice. My brother never told me this town was filled with such generous people. Thank you very much, Mia," he added with a glance at the girl's name tag.

The girl blushed. "Of course, sir. You two are brothers?"

"Yeah, I'm visiting from the east coast. This is Seth, and my name is Damon."

"Nice to meet you both," Mia said without taking her eyes off of Damon.

"Fuck this," Seth said to himself as he pushed himself from the booth and stormed out of the restaurant.

Only a few seconds out into the summer heat and Seth could already feel sweat beading on his forehead and in his armpits, mixing with the grime and dirt that already made his skin itch. He almost made it to the edge of the parking lot when Damon caught up with him, holding multiple slices of pizza.

"Hold up!" Damon yelled as he slowed down from a run, not short of breath despite the sprint. "I'm sorry, I can't help it if a girl wants to chat. It would be rude not to."

“Rude?” Seth demanded as he turned on Damon, squinting as the afternoon sun nearly blinded him. “You have been nothing but a complete asshole to me the entire time you have been here. Get the fuck out of my life,” he snapped and walked away.

“Don’t be so melodramatic,” Damon said as he kept up behind Seth, his longer legs outpacing Seth’s hurried stride. “It’s not like you were going to ask her out.”

“That’s just it,” Seth exclaimed. “I don’t have that luxury. You have women almost literally falling into your lap and they don’t even see me. She didn’t even look at me *once*.”

“Maybe because you didn’t want to be noticed,” Damon suggested. “Pizza?” he asked, holding out one slice.

Seth tsked and slapped the slice away. With untraceable speed, Damon caught the pizza in mid-air several feet away.

“Never mess with a man’s pizza,” Damon said. “You could have just said no.”

“Can I say no to you? Can I tell you to just fuck off?!” Seth yelled at the top of his lungs. He continued to walk out of the parking lot but stopped when he didn’t hear a response. When he turned around, Damon was nowhere to be found. Seth shook his head and rubbed his eyes, but Damon had disappeared.

“Good riddance,” Seth muttered to himself as he began walking home, though he couldn’t shake the feeling that he had pushed away a precious opportunity.

Chapter 2

The sun had already baked the ground by the time Seth returned to his neighborhood. He could see the heat waves distorting the distance in all directions he looked, giving the impression that the world was contained within a small bubble centered upon him. Since there was no river in this part of town, and the rains had been gone for several months, most of the vegetation had browned into tinder under the sun’s relentless glare.

Although Seth found solace in the cynicism he felt reflecting on the indifference of nature, to his own plight and that of the dying plants around him, Seth tried to avoid thinking in general. Any thoughts that arose were pessimistic and Seth was too exhausted to debate himself over the pros and cons of living. Instead, he allowed his body’s impulse for sleep to take over as he mindlessly shuffled back to the ramshackle single-story home that he rented from the local slumlord. The rent was exorbitant for a house whose white paint was chipping off, with missing shingles and which was riddled with rot and decay. Seth hadn’t done well in college physics, but he was becoming increasingly certain that the house would collapse on top of him soon.

At least it would save me the trouble, he thought to himself as he pulled the keys from his pocket and fumbled them into the door.

The door opened up to the living room with the kitchen and single bedroom behind it. The small house was only slightly cooler than outside, and the heat amplified the dry stench of the shag carpeting that hadn't been cleaned in months. Somehow, the floor was decorated with even more trash and food crumbs than Seth had left before wandering off to inflict his own death. The TV was on and Damon sat on the worn green couch in front of it, lifting a bag of chips to deposit the last of its contents into his open mouth.

"Are you fucking serious?" Seth asked as he stood in the doorway.

"Eat shit, loser," Damon replied. "I told you, I can't leave you alone. I'm bound to your sorry ass until you finally decide to off yourself again. In the meantime, I'm going to pass the time with some quality brain-liquidizing entertainment."

"How did you even get in here?" Seth demanded as he tossed his keys onto the coffee table in front of the TV.

"I can walk through walls," Damon answered with a mysterious wave of his crumb-covered fingers.

"Wait, really?"

"No, dumbass, you left your back door unlocked," Damon snickered as he rubbed the crumbs on his fingers into his mouth and the remainder into the grimy couch. "Not that anyone would even want to steal anything here. The most expensive thing you have is your computer, and that isn't even second-rate."

"Hard to afford anything nice without a job," Seth said as he slammed the door behind him and went to the kitchen. He paused, resisting the urge to replenish himself before giving in and drinking some water to quench his thirst. His throat was so dry and his stomach so famished that the first cup of water actually hurt going down. When his body begged for more sustenance, he reluctantly opened the fridge but forgot that he hadn't been to the store in weeks. All that was left was a yogurt that had expired a few days ago. Seth smelled it just in case, but his empty stomach retched at the scent.

"Bet you wish you had some pizza, dontchya?" Damon asked.

"Choke on it," Seth said as he tossed the yogurt into the trash. He then pulled out the last cereal bar he had in the cupboard and began munching on it. "You probably don't even need to eat."

"Meh, even if that were the case, I still would for the enjoyment of it."

"I'm going to bed. Turn down the volume."

"Whatever," Damon replied. He reached around the couch, grumbling to himself until he fished the remote out from between the cushions and barely adjusted the volume.

Once Seth was in his room, he dropped onto his bed and curled up into a ball. As exhausted as he was, he couldn't manage to let sleep take him. Every time he felt himself drifting off, recollections of what had happened and his anxieties would creep out of the shadows of his

mind and pull him from blissful reprieve. He tried relaxing his muscles. He tried focusing on his breath. He tried pushing the thoughts from his head. But all his efforts only built up his stress and resentment towards living and after several hours he gave up on the effort and went to shower off the grime that chafed him all over. When he finished, he returned to the living room where Damon was still watching TV.

“What should I do?” Seth asked the daemon.

“Are you serious this time, or are you just going to go whine in a corner again?”

Seth sighed and leaned against the drywall, the plaster cool to the touch. “... I’m sorry. I seriously don’t believe you are what you say you are. But you say you can help me. Please. I’m... just so tired of trying to find answers... and tired of running away from the ones that I find.”

“Well, let’s start with that,” Damon replied, slapping the space on the couch next to him and turning off the TV. “What have you tried?”

Seth pushed himself off the wall and then sat down wearily. His body felt like it had battery acid running through it and his mind felt hungover. Now that he was trying to focus on something other than falling asleep, he could barely keep his head up. “The first thing I tried... was therapy. *Actual* therapy. But it just felt like we were going around in circles. I would talk about how I felt, my past, and the therapist just nodded his head and kept stupid questions like, ‘and how does that make you feel?’ or just describe my emotions for me, like ‘you feel hurt by your parents’. I don’t need someone to tell me what I’m feeling. I’m living it, day in, day out.”

“Sounds frustrating,” Damon said. “Though I remember your parents being nice, even after the divorce.”

“For fuck’s sake-,” Seth groaned and pulled his hair. “They weren’t there! Even if they were in the same room as me, they were never *with me*. I had to constantly pretend to be nice because any time I let anything real out of me, they would just shrink away or deflect or give me the fucking silent treatment if I got mad and hurt them. So I just... never let anything out. And I just felt more and more dead inside... I remember one time I was at a friend’s house about a year after my parents divorced. Even though I was sad, for that one day, everything was still bright and beautiful. And I remember thinking to myself: ‘this is the last time I’m going to be happy.’ And I... think that’s true. I think that was the last time I felt genuinely happy. I started shutting down after that. Friends stopped inviting me over, and I never invited them because it didn’t occur to me that they would want to spend time with me. And the more I walled myself off, the more that became true. I started getting bullied because I was the weird quiet kid who kept to himself. I did pretty well in school, but that made other kids bully me even more. I stopped caring about pretty much everything. I would just come home, do my homework, play video games, and go to sleep. I just stuck to routine to keep from feeling anything. Anytime I did feel something, I just wanted to run away from it.”

“Hm,” Damon mumbled thoughtfully. “Explains the repression issues.”

“You already fucking know this,” Seth sighed as he closed his eyes and sunk deeper into the couch.

“Like I said, you have to say it for it to mean anything. It’s like sucking poison out of a snake bite.” Then, Damon cleared his throat and put on a mock professional voice. “But tell me, how does this make you feel?”

Seth sighed and let himself sink into the pit in his chest he had been running away from. He was so tired of running. The mere thought of pushing away from his suffering made him nauseous now. “You know what I hate the most about this?”

“My dazzling wit?” Damon asked.

Seth snorted. “It’s the fact that... I did this to myself. Sure, I got bullied in school and my parents had their own baggage and couldn’t handle mine or didn’t want to... but I *chose* to be a recluse. I *chose* to shut down and push everyone away. I’m completely alone because *I chose to be*. And now, I don’t even have any friends.”

“And that’s why you latched onto April,” Damon said.

Gritting his teeth, Seth did his best to ignore the frustration of going over the same things he had gone over in his mind thousands of times trying to find a solution for. He considered giving Damon a final ‘fuck off’ before going back to bed, but for some reason, talking about it now felt different. “Yeah. I hate myself for being so obsessed with women. I know *intellectually* that none of them can *make* me be happy. But... I just want to *be* with someone. And I want someone to just want to be with me.”

“Also, sex is nice,” Damon added.

Seth opened his eyes. “It’s more than nice. Before April... broke up with me, sex with her felt... like the most meaningful thing I could do with another person. It wasn’t just pleasure. I felt...”

“Loved.”

“Yeah...,” Seth said, breathing in sharply as he felt his heart break open a bit. “At least, I thought so.”

Damon sighed contentedly. “Yeah, I remember. Good times. Man, like seriously, back then, your subconscious was *prime* real estate.”

“Happy to be of service,” Seth smirked. He only realized he had started crying when he blinked and a tear ran down his cheek. He hastily wiped it away as quickly as he could, but then gave up halfway through as he knew it was pointless trying to hide something from Damon.

“Good,” Damon said as he kicked his feet onto the coffee table. “Now we’re getting somewhere. Unlike in college, where you actively avoided every opportunity to connect with people. And *yes*, there were girls who tried to flirt with you, don’t deny it.”

Seth’s insecurity demanded he dismiss Damon’s claim, but he knew it would be dishonest. “Yeah. Once again, I fucked myself over.”

“And then you tried to get all puritanical after college. At least, until you fell off the wagon and started bingeing porn. Some of which, by the way, was verging on disturbing, even to me,” Damon said with a grimace, but quickly seemed to realize his humor was no longer helping the situation and stopped smirking. “Sorry.”

Seth chuckled and genuine laughter almost escaped him, but it felt too painful. “I guess I figured if I couldn’t find love from other people, I would try to find it from God, or the divine, or whatever. Or, maybe if not from spirituality, I could find *something* there, in the community at least. Tried a church down the street. It felt good, for a while. Except the more I tried to fit in, the more I tried to connect with people, the more they wanted me to fit into a mold, to ‘redeem my forsaken soul’. I already felt broken then, and I didn’t need someone to give me ‘unconditional love’ as long as I pretended to be something I’m not or feel something I don’t. I also tried a meditation group at the college., but that ended up with the same result.”

“How so?”

“You know the idea of liberation or nirvana?” Once Damon nodded, Seth continued. “It’s this state of perfection where nothing can touch you and you aren’t attached to anything. But the more I tried to attain that, the more disconnected I felt from myself, and I just ended up feeling guilty and inadequate for not wanting to give things up, even if they weren’t really good for me.”

“Like?”

Seth hesitated but figured that if Damon was what he said he was, he already knew what Seth was going to say. “Drugs. Masturbation. Video games. Distractions. Every time I tried to let myself just... play or take it easy, I would just end up feeling like shit for not striving for perfection. But the more I felt like that, the more I just resented spirituality altogether. So I decided to give it up.”

“I see. And now...?”

Seth finally let go into the couch completely and let the darkness he had been fighting permeate him. “Now, we’re here, sitting on this couch, trying to figure out how I can go through life without wanting to kill myself.”

“That’s not what we are trying to do.”

“What?” Seth exclaimed. “That’s what you have been saying this entire time!”

“No,” Damon said slowly, wagging a finger in front of Seth’s face. “What I *said* was that you need to learn how to live again. That’s not the same as not wanting to die.”

“How so?”

“Living *for* something that is real and meaningful to you is how you live a fulfilling life. Trying to not kill yourself is just going to keep you running in circles.”

Seth raised his eyebrow skeptically. “...And that’s what we’re trying to figure out?”

“Mhm. So, what’s meaningful to you?”

Sinking deeper into the couch, Seth let go of the strands of hope talking with Damon had tangled around him. He had asked himself questions about meaning and purpose so many times that the words themselves felt hollow. “I don’t know. I feel so tired, I can’t even think straight.”

Damon bonked Seth on the head. Hard. Once Seth was done cursing, Damon tutted. “Meaning isn’t something you can dissect. It’s something visceral, magnetic, experiential. It’s completely unique to each person and if you over-analyze it, you just end up lost in what you *think* you should want rather than what you *actually* want.”

Seth growled as he rubbed the top of his head. *That's gonna become a bump.* "... I don't know. I don't... feel drawn towards anything."

"At least you recognize that. Knowing that you don't know is the first step to actually knowing. You should know that. Remember good ol' Socrates?"

"Sure...but how does that help?"

Damon then stood up and stretched. "Because then you are open to finding it out for yourself. No one can tell you what makes your life meaningful. You have to understand that for yourself." Then, Damon walked over to the door and opened it, allowing a current of cool air to pour into the room which somehow vivified Seth. The sky was once again painted with purples, blues, and reds as the evening began to set in. "Come on, we're going out."

"To where?"

"Don't know. We'll see where the night takes us."

Gravity and the prospect of sleep kept Seth glued to the couch. The idea of another night adventure made his stomach queasy, but eventually, he pushed himself up. "Fuck it," he sighed. "Let's go exploring."

They had made their way down to the river by the time the sun had just finished disappearing under the horizon. As the half-dried-out river cooled the hot summer air, a breeze began to sweep the area, and Seth was reminded of that moment before he had decided to step on the parapet. The contrast of temperature and relief the wind brought to the scorched atmosphere soothed his weary soul.

"What's this?" Damon asked, indicating at Seth. "You shifted."

Seth huffed. "I've just always loved this time of day... night, whatever. Twilight. There's a stillness to the world, even if there's traffic and people around. For a while, everything just feels perfectly balanced. Heat balances with cold, light with day, the stresses of the day with the relaxation of sleep."

"Not to mention it's beautiful," Damon replied wistfully as he looked up at the sky. The city was small enough that the light pollution was minimal, and several stars had become visible through the orange haze that was spread across the night sky. "It's easy to understand why humans worshipped things like the night sky and the stars."

"I suppose. Sometimes stuff like religion and spirituality seems so stupid and ridiculous, without even bringing up the atrocities it inspired. But I guess it's also a way to make sense of the world... to feel safe, like you belong amidst... all of this. I guess it could also be that sense of wonder you get when you just really look at something. You feel almost connected to it. Is that what spirituality is?"

"You could call it that," Damon said as he rubbed his stubbled chin. "You could also call it being alive. *Really* alive. When you see things as they really are, you don't put them in a box

or on a pedestal or look down on them. Being willing to experience life ‘as it is’ is as wondrous as it is terrifying.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Seth conceded. “Doesn’t really help me when I feel like shit, though. I usually just resent the fact that I’m alive.”

“At this point, you’re just doing that to yourself,” Damon said, gently patting Seth’s cheek. “Yes, April hurt you. Yes, you’ve been alone most of your life. But the past doesn’t have to limit what is, right now, unless you let it.”

“Easier said than done. But I suppose I’ve made a habit of treating myself like crap.”

“You said it,” Damon said as he began walking to the main drag. “Down for drinks?”

Beneath Damon’s nonchalance, Seth sensed ulterior motives. “You’re *not* going to hook me up with a girl.”

Damon turned back to him with a devilish smile. “I’m not. You are.”

Seth shook his head in disbelief. “Why would *any* girl want to be with me when you’re in the room? At best, I’ll just end up being the second choice. More likely a fifth choice.”

Damon walked up to him and put a hand on his shoulder. “If a woman is ranking everyone in the room who she wants to fuck based on physical appearance, you aren’t looking for the same thing she is. You want affection and love, even if it’s only for a single night. Sure, you want to have sex. Everyone does. It’s only natural. But just because you aren’t a perfect specimen doesn’t mean you aren’t worthy of the care and attention you desire.”

“Not a perfect specimen like you?” Seth jabbed.

“Hey, you made me this way,” Damon laughed. “Not that I’m complaining. I don’t have quite as high a standard for relationships as you do. I’m just happy to enjoy the night.”

“Of course you are,” Seth sighed and rolled his eyes. “Fine. Let’s go get trashed. Just don’t bring anyone back to my place. The walls are paper-thin, and you would probably bring the house down on our heads.”

“Don’t worry,” Damon assured him. “The only thing I’ll be breaking is her bed.”

“I seriously don’t feel comfortable just prowling around for sex,” Seth told Damon as they walked down a dusty avenue.

They walked by log and adobe buildings with strings of light woven between them that lined the streets, the windows on either side reflecting one another with motes of light sparkling in the darkness. It was Friday night and there were plenty of people out, though most were heading toward a brightly lit plaza in front of Seth and Damon.

Damon was once again drawing stares, some of which he returned with a smile, but otherwise continued strolling. “Ok, it doesn’t have to be sex, but leave yourself open to the possibility. Let’s just try opening up to people and see what happens. It doesn’t have to end in romance. You *could even* have women who are friends.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Seth growled. “You don’t need to be a patronizing asshole.”

“Pretty sure ‘patronizing asshole’ is my middle n-,” Damon suddenly stopped talking and froze, staring at an adobe wall.

“What is it?” Seth asked, perturbed by the shocked look on Damon’s face.

Then, a wolf’s grin spread across Damon’s face. “Come on,” he said as he sped back into motion with purpose.

“What the h-,” Seth began, but Damon was already outpacing him and Seth had to jog to catch up.

They rounded the building to find themselves in the glow of a bright yellow neon sign hanging above the entrance of a bar called ‘the Sun Room’, which was located in the corner of the plaza. Clamoring patrons stood outside in an open patio surrounded by a wooden scaffold wall that could be covered with a retractable roof. There were men and women smoking outside the entrance. The venue was packed. People laughed, yelled, and spoke loudly in order to be heard over the local jazz band that was playing outside.

It was exactly the type of place Seth hated to be.

“Let’s go find someplace quieter,” Seth said as he began walking past the entrance.

Damon grabbed him by the collar and pulled him into a playful headlock. “Nope. I already see several lovely ladies casting us inviting glances. Plus, this music isn’t half bad.”

“They’re sending *you* inviting glances,” Seth replied as he tried unsuccessfully to extract himself from Damon’s grip. Once he finally managed to do so, they were already inside the bar. Now that Seth was inside, the rhythm, melody, and cadence of the music had begun to coalesce in his mind and body, and although he felt awkward and alien, he began to feel welcome. “Yeah, the music’s good,” he called out as he looked around the room. “But wh-”

Seth suddenly noticed that Damon had sauntered to the bar and was engaging three women in conversation. They weren’t the most beautiful women in the place, and Seth could see the disappointment on some of the other women’s faces, but Damon didn’t seem to mind. He seamlessly introduced himself, indicated toward Seth, and waved him over. Gritting his teeth, Seth complied.

“He’s my younger brother,” Seth overheard Damon saying as he walked over. “He’s really shy, but he’s got a good heart. I just lost my job back east and he’s been kind enough to post me up until I get back on my feet.”

“Aw, you poor thing,” a girl with long red hair said. She was dressed in a dark brown mini dress that accentuated her curvy figure and complimented her creamy skin and full lips. From the other two girls’ deferential body posture, she was clearly the most extroverted of the three. “What was your job?”

“Consulting, actually. Mainly trying to help people and businesses get back on their feet. Rather ironic, now that I think about it.”

All three of the girls laughed, and as Seth approached, he saw the other two girls inspect him closer. The one closer to him had dark hair and striking blue eyes, but they were filled with

disappointment as she apprehended Seth's appearance. Seth almost turned around to leave until he saw curiosity in the last girl's eyes. She was shorter than the other girls, dressed in an azure sundress, and had short blonde hair and dark brown eyes that were deep, warm, and lively. Seth only realized he had been staring too long once she blushed, but from her playful smile, she didn't seem to mind.

Is she feeling alright? Seth wondered to himself. *Probably has had too much to drink.* Yet, despite his certainty that this girl was either in need of glasses or was perhaps severely dehydrated, or was messing with him, or was being polite, whatever the reason, even if it didn't amount to anything, it felt good to simply be looked at by a woman without being dismissed.

Damon noticed the exchange without missing a beat. "Would you ladies care for drinks? I'd hate to impose if you are already set for the evening."

"Actually," the blonde-haired girl said, "We do have finals coming up, so we should probably--"

"Continue to enjoy ourselves while we can," the redhead finished. "My name is Alanna," she added with an extended hand.

"Damon," he replied, holding her hand a split second longer than necessary. "And you two beauties?"

"Sara," the dark-haired one said. She seemed rather annoyed that Alanna was receiving most of Damon's attention and that Damon's brother wasn't what she had hoped for, but she smiled sincerely.

"Tristana," the blonde-haired one said. "It's a pleasure to meet both of you."

Damon whistled loudly enough to catch the bartender's attention without being a nuisance and handed him two hundred dollar bills. "Whatever the ladies would care for, please. My brother as well."

All of the women ordered hard drinks and Seth ordered a stout. He didn't drink much, but he figured he could at least enjoy the company of the lovely women.

"Let's step outside," Damon suggested. "It's a beautiful night and this band is getting its groove."

"Let's," Alanna agreed. "I can't wait to see how you move."

Damon bowed. "Eager as I am to appreciate your prowess, I can only dance with women I know more than skin deep."

Alanna blushed and whispered something in Damon's ear as she rose from her seat. Whatever it was, it caused Damon to lose his composure for a moment, which Seth appreciated immensely.

"Well, then," Damon said with a small cough. "Shall we, ladies?"

Alanna, Sara, and Tristana grouped together ahead of Seth and Damon as the five of them walked through the crowded bar. As they navigated the crowd, a thought occurred to Seth.

"Wait," he said to Damon. "Where did you get money from?"

"I swiped it on the way to your house."

“From where??”

“Pickpocketed by bumping into some asshole who parked his Corvette in two spaces. I considered it a parking ticket.”

Seth began to protest, but Damon raised his hand to silence him. “Look, you can berate me for being immoral, or we can put this money to better use than that jerk ever could and entertain these ladies. Tristana seems to like you.”

“Sure, probably beca-”

“Stop making excuses to stop living your life,” Damon interrupted, placing his hand in front of Seth to stop him in his tracks. “She may like you a little. She may like you a lot. If the only thing you think can happen is rejection, you don’t leave yourself open to the possibility of anything else. Take a chance. If you get hurt, no big deal. I’ll be here for you, whatever happens.”

“Won’t you be too busy with Alanna?”

“Sadly, you take priority,” Damon sighed, but with a wink to let Seth know he was kidding.

Once they reached the outside patio, the sweet coolness of the night caressed Seth’s worried mind and lightly sunburnt skin..

Oh well, Seth thought as he followed behind Damon. *Might as well enjoy myself.*

They found a circular table near the perimeter fence which looked out onto the river as it snaked by the back of the compound. The trickling whispers of the water entranced Seth for a few moments before he noticed Tristana was looking at him.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked him.

“Sorry, I get kinda distracted sometimes. I was just sort of... listening to the water.”

Tristana laughed. “Don’t worry. I think people would be a lot saner if they listened to nature more often. To me, there’s nothing more soothing than wind whispering through trees. It always makes me feel so at ease.”

“Yeah. I guess it’s easy to take the small pleasures in life for granted,” Seth said. He took a sip of his drink, looked over at Damon, and nearly choked as he saw him seated between Sara and Alanna, engaging both in provocative conversation. Although Seth sensed a tension between the two women, it seemed more playful than competitive.

I guess he just has that effect on women.

Tristana noticed his gaze and sighed. “Jealous much?”

Seth blushed with embarrassment but decided to be truthful. “A little. He always gets his way without even trying. To be honest, it’s downright humiliating to be... related to someone that good looking when I look like this,” he said gesturing to himself.

“I don’t know,” Tristana said. “You’re not half bad. Mostly it’s that sad look in your eyes that keeps you from being attractive.”

Seth chuckled. “What, I’m not allowed to be sad?”

Tristana bounced her eyebrows. “No, but self-pity isn’t exactly what most women are looking for. And are you saying that I’m not worth your time?”

“Not at all,” Seth said. “I just doubt you would be spending time with me if Damon had approached you.”

Tristana sighed in frustration. “Maybe you’re right. But he didn’t. *We* are talking. Or we were talking,” she finished and got up to leave.

Out of instinct, Seth reached out and grabbed her hand. “I’m sorry. I...,” Seth retracted his hand as Tristana looked at him with an ‘oh, really?’ expression. “Sorry... I- I literally have only had one girlfriend in my entire life, and it was years ago. I’m just... really scared. I’ve never just... talked to a woman out of the blue.”

Tristana hesitated a moment before gently sitting back down, the hardness of her brown eyes softening. “Guess what. Everyone feels that same anxiety when they try talking to someone they’re interested in. It’s scary to be vulnerable with someone you don’t know. But you won’t get anywhere if you just wall yourself off and push them away. Speaking from personal experience here.”

Seth nodded solemnly. “So... uh...”

“Maybe we could start off with what you do?” Tristana suggested.

Seth’s heart sank. “I... I’m... I was just fired.”

Tristana smirked. “Really? How can you afford to let Damon stay with you?”

It took a moment for Seth to register that Tristana hadn’t laughed in his face and walked off to find someone worthy of her time. “Well... I saved up most of the money I made. I have kind of a lot really. I never really get out, so I only spend it on groceries and stuff.”

“When was the last time you had a date?”

“... It’s been a while.”

“How long?”

“... Seven years.”

This time, Tristana choked a little on the drink she had been sipping. “Wow, you weren’t kidding. Why?”

“I told you,” Seth chuckled. “I’m fucking terrified. Women are so beautiful and I’m-”

“Nope, you don’t get to play that card,” Tristana interjected.

“What card?”

“Putting women on a pedestal,” Tristana said, waving her hand with grandiosity. “Not all women are the beautiful models you see in magazines, and we are usually a lot less pretty without makeup, except the lucky bitches who look stunning either way, like Sara and Alana.”

Seth looked over and saw Damon had draped his arms over the back of Sara and Alana’s chairs. Whereas Alana was being playful, even toying with Damon’s long black hair, Sara remained more reserved, though she was obviously trying to withhold a smile at a joke Damon had just made.

“I know what you mean,” Seth said as he leaned back in his seat. “Some people have all the luck. Alana and Sara relatives of yours?”

“N-no,” Tristana stuttered. “They are... really close friends. They’ve known me for a long time.”

“Did they drag you out here like Damon did me?”

“You could say that,” Tristana said, her voice muffled as she quickly took another drink. “They just, uh, want me to get out of my shell a bit. Loosen up. Have fun.”

“Damn straight!” Alanna suddenly butted in from across the table. “She can’t keep her nose out of a book! Seriously, you need to look up once in a while or you will miss the world! Ya know, the thing books are actually *about*?”

“However,” Sara said, her posture and diction immaculate, “books *can* provide invaluable access to information and perspective she wouldn’t otherwise be privy to.”

“None of which matters if she doesn’t come down from her ivory tower to ‘bless the mortals below’,” Alanna laughed as she took another drink.

“I’ll have plenty to teach after I get my degree,” Tristana said, folding her arms and leaning back in her seat. “If anything, you could argue that it’s my ethical and professional duty to stay focused during my education, as I will soon be shaping young minds.”

“You’re getting a teaching degree?” Seth asked.

“Mhm,” Tristana said with a smile. “Already in my last year. Just finished my practicum and am about to sweep my finals.”

“We’re very proud of her,” Sara said, beaming as she sipped from her drink.

“Eh,” Alanna said, “I would be, if she actually *wanted* to be a teacher.”

“No one is going to pay me to read books,” Tristana said, her smile disappearing.

“Not with that attitude,” Alanna said as she shot back the rest of her drink. “I think I want another. Mind if I...?”

“The tab should hold the night,” Damon said with a smile, but as Alanna left he raised his eyebrows at Sara and Tristana.

“It’s a debate we keep having,” Sara explained. “Tristana began with a degree in english literature, but fa- Tristana’s father convinced her it was impractical.”

“There’s a lot more demand for teachers than there are literature professors,” Tristana said as she leaned forward to grab her drink. “I like teaching. I’ll just have to tweak my focus a bit.”

“Yeah,” Seth said, biting back the jokes that came to mind about useless degrees. *Like I’m one to talk. Philosophy, for fuck’s sake.* “Still, that’s impressive.”

“What, that I dodged a bullet and am *not* going to completely screw up my future,” Tristana said with a smile and finished her drink.

“Well... that you know what you want. And you’re going for it.”

Tristana's smile deepened as she set down her drink and leaned in closer to Seth. "That's how it works. By the way, when you let yourself go, you're actually pretty cute. C'mon, let's dance."

"Saywhatnow?" Seth asked, startled.

Tristana took his hand and led him up from his seat and Seth didn't have the strength, willpower, or desire to say no. He looked at Damon helplessly who gave an approving smile and turned back to his conversation with Sara.

Seth and Tristana walked to the middle of the dance floor. The band was playing a moderate tempo latin groove. Tristana pushed herself away playfully from Seth and began moving sensually, wiggling her hips and waist in rhythm with the music and let her limbs glide freely about her. She then gazed beckoningly at Seth and he knew that his choice was a simple one. He approached her like a skittish deer, unsure of how to dance appropriately with a woman he just met, so he began to mirror her steps falteringly.

Taking Seth's hand, Tristana raised it up and spun beneath it, and didn't let go, letting her movements guide and loosen his own. Seth felt like he had to consciously force himself not to hyperventilate, and focused on her deep brown eyes. The more he watched them, the easier it was to understand how and why she moved and he saw the fire that made every gesture elegant and graceful.

She raised his hand again as the music came to a climax and spun into him, pulling his arm around her waist. "See?" she whispered breathlessly inches from his face. "That wasn't so difficult, now was it?"

Chapter 3

"Actually, yes," Seth replied. "That was fucking terrifying."

"But, worth it?" Tristana suggested as she slowly twirled herself away from him. The band had stopped playing, the audience was clapping enthusiastically, and the multi-colored dance floor lights highlighted beads of sweat on Tristana's face, neck, and arms so that her body glowed radiantly. Only once she had moved away from him did Seth realize that the mixture of her perfume and natural scent smelled of summer flowers.

"Completely," he replied, dumbfounded.

Tristana smiled beatifically and laced her hands around Seth's neck. Even though the song that had just started was quicker than a slow dance was appropriate for, the intimacy of the moment made it feel completely natural.

“So...” Tristana began. “What do you do in your spare time, Seth?”

Seth was having a hard time keeping his blood above the equator. “I... uh... like to... walk?”

Tristana giggled wholeheartedly. “A real nature boy. I like it. Do you ever go to the mountains?”

“I’ve never really been... Never had anyone to go with, and I was afraid I would die out in the wilderness by myself.” *Maybe I should have done that instead of jumping in the river. Then I would have never met Damon... but I wouldn’t be here either.*

“Are you ok?” Tristana asked. “You got distant all of a sudden.”

“Yeah... I...,” Seth shook the darkness out of his head. “Things have been pretty hard lately. I’ve had a hard time just finding reasons to... stay alive. N-not that being here isn’t one, believe me... It’s just that I... I guess I had given up.”

“It’s hard not to,” Tristana agreed. “There’s so much in the world that is painful. And it can be hard to trust in anything good again,” she added as she tucked her head under his chin. She was short enough that even though Seth was of average height, she fit comfortably in his embrace. “Like this. To tell you the truth, it’s been a while for me too. I was in a relationship for years. And then he just left, without a word. He didn’t even take all of his stuff. And it messed with me for the longest time. Felt like I wasn’t even good enough to say goodbye to, or to be given an explanation. But we are more than what others think of us. Infinitely more, if we let ourselves be.”

Seth didn’t exactly know what she meant by that, but he was just grateful to be in contact with her, to hold and dance with such a delicate, strong, vulnerable, and resilient creature that wanted nothing more to love and be loved.

Just like me.

Several songs came and went. People hooted, cheered, drank, sang, and cavorted around the two of them, and Seth barely noticed. The two of them had found their own rhythm to a gentle melody they made together in the slow cadence of their steps and the gentle way they held one another with care and affection. The darkness that had once strangled Seth’s emotions and drowned his hopes slowly relaxed its grip in the quiet tranquility of their dance.

Seth suddenly remembered that they hadn’t come here alone. “Hey, shouldn’t we go find Damon and your friends?”

“Hmm?” Tristana mumbled hazily. “Oh. Yeah, I guess.”

There weren’t many people left on the dance floor, so they returned to their table easily to find Damon, Sara, and Alanna were no longer there.

“Of course, he’s gone,” Seth muttered to himself. *Not that I blame him...* There was money underneath a glass next to a receipt. Seth checked, and it was more than enough to cover the tip.

“Hey,” Tristana said. “Do you wanna go for a walk?”

“Now? Uh, sure...”

As they walked out of the bar, Tristana took Seth’s hand and pulled him in the direction of the river, which they walked alongside for several minutes in silence. Crickets and night owls sang their own chorus. Compared to the boisterous music they had been dancing to, it was pleasantly haunting.

“Tell me about yourself,” Tristana said after a while.

“What do you want to know?” Seth asked as he stared up at the moon.

“What was your childhood like? What dreams do you have? What keeps you up at night?”

“Well, I grew up a-” Seth almost said ‘single child’, but caught himself, “... loner. My parents divorced when I was young, and I didn’t know how to cope with it. I kind of lost my ability to trust people. I just didn’t want to be hurt anymore. But isolation pretty much sums up my childhood.”

Tristana sighed. “Yeah, same here. I mean, my parents are still together but... they aren’t exactly the warmest people. Didn’t really impart a lot of social skills onto me, and I basically grew up with my nose in books.”

“Hell, better than I did. I just spent my days playing video games by myself. Wait, how long have you known Alanna and Sara?”

Tristana suddenly tensed like a startled deer. “Oh, uh, a while. It’s hard to tell really. What about Damon? He’s your brother right? You guys seem really close.”

“*Too* close,” Seth chuckled, dismissing Tristana’s odd behavior as having had too much to drink. “You could say he’s been in my head all my life.”

“That’s sweet,” Tristana sighed, twining her fingers around Seth’s. They shared an awkward smile, and Seth squeezed her hand a little tighter. “It’s cool to have someone who knows you inside and out.”

“Huh, you have *no* idea.”

“So... if you don’t mind my asking,” Tristana said carefully, “why were you so afraid to dance with me?”

A part of Seth knew that some form of that question would be coming, and he didn’t want to sound self-pitying and pathetic. *But anything I say other than the truth will sound disingenuous. Fuck it, this is the first time I have talked with a girl in literally years. Might as well go all in.* “The one girlfriend I had. She... kinda tore my heart out. Made me feel inadequate... worthless. Like discarded trash.”

“What a bitch,” Tristana remarked.

“Yeah, you could say that. But it’s hard for me to feel like it’s not true. Seems like every guy I see has something to offer, and I don’t. I don’t have a job, I’m not good looking, not good in bed...”

“And I take it you’re not well-endowed, either?” Tristana teased.

Although Seth knew that the joke had been well-intentioned, it hurt. “No,” he said tersely, letting go of her hand and stepping away to create some distance between them as they walked. “Thanks for reminding me.”

“...I’m sorry, that was cruel of me,” Tristana said, staring at the murmuring river running beside them. “I just wanted you to not take yourself so seriously.”

“Yeah, well when you’ve been alone for seven *fucking years*, it’s a little hard to not be pissed off about it,” Seth said through gritted teeth.

“But, you’re not alone *now*,” Tristana said, taking a step closer to Seth. “We were-,” then, her face twisted. She sighed in exasperation, folded her arms and continued walking ahead of Seth. “Forget it.”

They had been approaching a bridge lit by a street lamp, illuminating a few passersby on foot or in cars returning home from their nighttime entertainment.

They walked in silence until they were directly beneath the light, and before Seth could apologize for lashing out, Tristana said, “Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. Thanks for the dance, but I’m gonna head home.”

Seth was once again torn between his pride and the emptiness in his chest that wanted to beg and plead for her to stay. But he knew that would just be as pathetic as his self-pitying. “Alright,” he said finally. “Do you want me to walk you home?”

“No thanks, I’ll catch a Lyft.”

The awkward pause that followed made the pain in Seth’s chest even more poignant, but he knew the night was beyond the point of repair. “I’m... I’m glad I got to meet you,” he said, extending his hand.

Tristana nodded and politely shook his hand before walking in the direction opposite his home, taking her phone out to queue a ride.

Seth watched her go and felt her take the soft glow of happiness that had been radiating within him for a short time. He knew it was his fault for taking what she said so personally, but it had hit him right where it hurt most.

She wouldn’t have wanted to be with me anyways, Seth reasoned. Even if it had gone further, she would have just been disappointed and left me in the end. Guess it’s better to avoid all the heartache. With that, Seth ignored his heartstrings pulling him in Tristana’s direction and forced himself to turn and start walking home, the gurgling of the river now a painful reminder of what he had pushed away, and a temptation to avoid future heartache altogether.

Seth was sitting on the sofa, playing a videogame with melancholy while chugging the last of a six-pack to wash down the sandwich he had eaten, both bought at the gas station on the way home, when Damon burst into the living room.

“How the *hell* did you fuck that up?!” Damon demanded, his face contorted with rage.

“Shut up,” Seth slurred. “Neighbors are sleeping.”

“I don’t give a *fuck*,” Damon barked as he stormed over and ripped the controller from Seth’s hands. “You were *right there*. I could *feel* the connection you two made on the dance floor from across the room!”

Frustration and resentment finally got the better of Seth and he stood up and punched Damon in the face. Even though Seth had put all of his strength into the strike, he knew it had hurt his own hand more than Damon, but he didn’t care. As Damon turned back to regard Seth with cold eyes and a bloody lip, Seth growled, “I. Said. Shut. Up. You don’t have to worry about being vulnerable in front of women. You *look* at them the right way and they fall in love with you. You think I *like* being alone? You think I enjoy watching other people connect, have fun, and be intimate while I waste away alone in my head? I fucking hate my life, and I hate you for saving it and judging me for things I can’t control,” Seth finished, and then walked back to the sofa and dropped himself into his seat.

Damon didn’t move for a long time, but Seth refused to look at him. He could feel Damon’s icy stare, but he ignored it.

“You’re right,” Damon said. “I have a lot easier time making women want me. But that’s it. You want to know why I want you to have a life so badly? To learn to love? Because I can’t. I can’t connect with someone like you humans can. I can’t find the exquisite pain and joy and vulnerability of intimacy because I am what you made me to be: a sex-machine. Not a being with depth, personality, and the capacity to love, but just a fuck toy. That’s all I can ever see women as. That’s all you imagine sex and intimacy to be now. Just women flocking to whoever has the most money, the best looks, or the biggest dick. You’ve completely lost sight of the connection that gives sex meaning, that makes all the pain and frustration worth it just to look into the eyes of the one you love. I will never have that. And neither will you if you don’t get yourself together.”

“Fuck off,” Seth replied coldly. “I’m done with you.”

“... Is that really what you want?” Damon asked.

“Oh, now you fucking care what I think?” Seth laughed. “Get the fuck out of my sight.” Seth didn’t hear anything for several minutes afterward, not even the door opening, but when he turned to look, Damon was gone.

The next two days passed without Seth moving from his couch. He didn’t have the television on. He just stared at the textured drywall ceiling, forcing himself not to care about

anything, not to think about Tristana, Damon, or the life he was giving up on. Day and night passed in front of his eyes, light and shadow played across the bumps and patterns in the ceiling, making an ever-changing tapestry out of the plain white molding. Eventually, Seth rose, ignoring the painful gurgling in his stomach and the painful dryness in his lungs and opened the door. As he started making his way across town, he realized he didn't remember if he had closed the door behind him. And also that he didn't care. Slowly, he made his way back to the bridge he had first tried to take his life at. The journey took longer than expected, but it was the one thing Seth allowed himself to want.

Ironic that all my life energy is being directed to ending it all, Seth thought grimly to himself as he watched the rushing water below. It was the middle of the day, but there were no cars on the road. Seth remembered vaguely that it was Monday, and that most everyone would be at work.

Everyone's going about their lives as if there's something that matters, that makes this all worth it. All this misery. All for nothing. As Seth moved to pull himself onto the parapet, he felt the small part of him that wanted to live. It was weaker than before, more gentle, more pleading, and try as he might, he couldn't bury it beneath anymore, could no longer ignore the pain he had been hiding beneath his callous attitude, to himself and to the world. Of their own accord, his shoulders shook as he began to sob, and then he collapsed onto the concrete, and leaned against the parapet, unable to stop his cries from escaping him uncontrollably.

A part of him was grateful no one passed by as he wept. A part of him desperately wanted someone, anyone to come and tell him everything was ok. The rest of him was so tired he couldn't pretend that he wanted anything else but for someone to hold him, for Tristana to come back and give him one more chance, to embrace him as they had on the dance floor, just holding one another.

I'm such a fuck-up. I... she... who am I kidding. I'm not worth her time. I don't have a job-

Seth suddenly growled and smacked the back of his head against the concrete railing behind him. Pain shot through the back of his head. He groaned and touched the back of his head tenderly, but when he pulled his hand back, there was no blood.

I'm so sick of this bullshit I keep telling myself, Seth thought as he rubbed the back of his head. *No wonder I hate myself.*

Seth sighed and let himself settle back. The sun was almost directly overhead and the warmth, despite his dehydration, felt soothing. It touched the mass of pain he felt in his chest, and he flinched away.

But then, he let the warmth touch him.

Almost immediately, the pain shot through him like lightning and he curled into himself. But he also let the warmth in deeper. Slowly, the feeling of slithering agony writhing within him began to subside and the warmth slowly seeped into the cracks in Seth's heart.

I want to feel good. I want to be good. But... how do I know if I'm worthy of it?

He opened his eyes and stared up at the sun, though he had to blink away almost immediately.

Heh. Maybe goodness is like the sun. You can't stare at it directly, or it burns you. And yet... it shines on, just the same.

Then, Seth's face went slack as he understood that he didn't have to prove himself to let good into his life, just as the plants and animals didn't have to prove themselves for the sun's light. Seth had fallen to his current state because he chose to destroy himself, to make the pain lesser by obliterating himself in it. Everything he had done, from hiding his emotions from his parents, to letting bullies and April to walk all over him, to lashing out at Tristana, to trying to commit suicide had all been a way of running from that pain. The world swept him up and knocked him down even in his shell, and rather than standing in the face of it, instead of letting himself be naked and afraid and accepting the pain with the joy and mystery of life, he had chosen to believe his life had no meaning because he was worthless. It was a vicious cycle of him being hurt, shutting down, and hating himself because he made himself smaller and smaller until he was almost nothing.

He felt broken, and the pieces of his heart seemed to grind against one another like pieces of fractured glass. But as he felt the numinous glow of life flow through him, those pieces fell away. As he let go, the vibrant light of himself began to shine through the pieces stained by the colors of his experiences. He knew then he could make all of his pain beautiful, if he accepted it as a part of the tapestry of his life, which could have meaning again, if he let himself shine.

Seth laughed hysterically for a moment at the sheer ludicrousness of the thought. He had searched so long for meaning outside of himself, in pleasing his parents, philosophy, April, religion, self-destruction, and even, to some extent, Tristana. Now, he didn't know what the meaning he had been so desperately searching for was anymore. But he felt it.

So... what do I choose? ...I choose this. I choose life.

"Pizza?" a cool voice asked him as a hand waved a greasy slice of cheesy goodness in front of him.

Seth looked up wearily to see Damon staring down at him with a compassionate smile on his face and a slice in each hand.

"The pizza in this town generally sucks," Damon lamented. "But, as a wise person once said: pizza is like sex. Even when it's bad, it's still pretty good."

Rising on unsteady legs, Seth practically fell onto Damon as he gave him a hug.

"Woah, you almost made me drop the sexy pizza!" Damon exclaimed, but he returned the hug as best he could. When they separated, he asked. "Are you ready to try again? For real this time?"

"Yes," Seth said with conviction.

"Good," Damon said, handing him a slice. "Luckily, I got Tristana's friends' numbers."

"That's not really what I meant," Seth said as he rested his hands against the parapet. Even though he felt radiant, his legs still threatened to buckle beneath him. "I'm... ready. For

everything.” Seth didn’t realize until now he had been smiling, which made him smile even more.

“Fair enough,” Damon said as he hopped onto the ground. “Do you want to try again *with Tristana*? I wasn’t exaggerating when I said I felt your connection from across the room.”

“That doesn’t mean she wants to see me,” Seth replied, suddenly unsure of himself.

“There’s a certain magick in the world that can bring people together,” Damon said as he handed Seth his slice. “If you let it.”

That night, Damon and Seth sat at the Sun Room’s bar again, in nearly the same spot Tristana and her friends had been sitting. Seth was almost superstitious enough to interpret that slight misalignment as a bad omen, and came close to asking the people sitting where Tristana had been to move, but thought better of it.

This depends on me, not where I’m sitting, he thought to himself. The stiff new shirt and slim leather jacket Damon had bought him felt suffocating in the hot summer air, compounding his anxiety. No words of wisdom occurred to him to give himself comfort. He had given up trying to think of what to say to Tristana, opting instead to gamble that he would know what to say in the moment.

“Don’t think about it too much,” Damon advised him as he sipped on a black russian, winking at the female bartender who had given him an overly generous portion. “You’ll know what to say when you see her.”

“Easy for you to say,” Seth chuckled as he pulled his collar and wiped the sweat from his forehead. “You don’t have to say anything, half the time. By the way, how did you convince... Never mind, I don’t want to know.”

“You really don’t,” Damon agreed, taking a long pull from his drink as he pivoted in his seat toward the entrance. “Tristana’s friends are... well, terrifying is putting it mildly. Hey, speak of the devil.”

Alanna and Sara just then approached them, with Tristana close behind. All of them were wearing slim jeans and t-shirts, but Tristana was the only one with minimal makeup. As Tristana saw Seth and Damon, she frowned and turned to leave, but Sara and Alanna each grabbed one of her arms and pulled her back.

“Funny you should say that, Damon,” Alanna confided as she and Sara positioned Tristana in front of them. “Since I think of the devil every time I think of you.”

“He’s a distant cousin,” Damon replied. “Sadly, he doesn’t get out much. Really strict dad.”

Alanna and Sara chuckled, but Tristana remained stoic, looking everywhere but at Seth.

“Tristana...,” Seth asked sheepishly, but then dove in fully into his words. “Would you like to dance?”

Tristana looked at him with indifference. “Not particularly.”

“How about-” Damon began, but everyone looked at him so pointedly, he shut up immediately.

Probably the first time that’s ever happened, Seth thought to himself. “Could we walk then? I... I would like to talk to you.”

Tristana looked vaguely annoyed. “Whatever you have to say-”

“Is best said in private,” Sara interrupted. “The river should be cool and relaxing I think,” she added, pushing Tristana toward the back gate she and Seth had walked through before. Seth rose from his seat, and for the first time, Tristana looked at him with naked dejection. Then, she began walking toward the gate, and Seth followed.

“Good luck,” Damon whispered. “I’ll hold down the fort.”

“You’re going to hold to your promise,” Alanna said as she and Sara approached Damon. “We have a long night ahead of us.”

“Certainly, ladies,” Damon agreed. “After we know our mission is completed,” he added, nodding for Seth to follow Tristana, who was almost out of the gate.

Seth jogged up behind Tristana just as she was about to leave, looking around as if to find an escape route. She looked at Seth for a brief moment before walking toward and then alongside the river, and Seth walked behind her. After a few moments, he pulled off his jacket, as not even the cool air around the river was making it tolerable, and almost dropped it his hands were shaking so badly. If Tristana noticed, she didn’t show it.

The awkwardness stretched into painful uncertainty before Seth said, “I’m sorry. And I’m sorry I can’t think of anything else to say. But I am. You gave me a chance, and I fucked it up.”

“Yup,” Tristana agreed plainly. “That you did.”

“Look,” Seth said, pausing in his tracks and facing her. She noticed and stopped too, but didn’t turn to face him. “I don’t know what women want. Some people say you like to be chased, others say you have to be cold and distant and let them come to you, but *I don’t know*. And I don’t care. I just want you to know that I want to be with you. I’m not going to lie and say that I’m over my insecurities or promise that I can be all you could ever want, because neither of those are true. All I can do is show you all I am and hope that you... accept me. As I am. Baggage and all.”

Tristana sighed with her eyes closed and then turned to face him, watching him with suspicion. “You have a lot of baggage. Surprised you can walk straight.”

“Same here,” Seth chuckled, though he clutched his jacket tightly with sweaty hands. “But I’m done with letting it weigh me down. And I know you have your own story and your own baggage. And I’m sorry I’m such an asshole that we haven’t talked about you, but I know that you’re hurting, too. I couldn’t look past my pain and selfishness to see that. I know now that I can only see you as you really are when I accept myself as I am. We’re both fragile. Sometimes I feel like I’m going to break into a thousand pieces. But I want to take the risk of you breaking me, even if I have to pick up all the pieces by myself.”

“Of course you would think I’m like that,” Tristana laughed, and Seth could sense her walls coming back up.

“It’s not that,” Seth said hurriedly. “But... you’re human. I’m human. We make mistakes. We hurt each other. It’s inevitable. But... I think we can also learn to love each other. And that’s what makes it all worthwhile.”

Tristana was silent for a long time. Seth thought he saw her eyes watering, but didn’t comment or move to comfort her, not wanting to presume to know what she wanted.

“You know what drew me to you?” she asked eventually, her voice cracking a little. “Why I looked at you instead of Damon? It’s because you felt more real. Sure, Damon’s beautiful and all that... but there’s more to you beneath the surface. And I want something deeper than just sex. But, I honestly don’t know if I want to let you in any more. You hurt me. Asshole,” she added with a sad small smile.

“I know,” Seth said, taking a step closer. “And I’m beyond sorry. I did the exact thing I was afraid you would do to me. But... could we try again? Please?”

Seth was surprised how quickly Tristana moved to kiss him, and his nose felt bruised as it crashed into her cheekbone, but he didn’t care. He dropped his jacket into the dirt and fell into the kiss, pushing his body gently into hers, letting their skin, muscle, bones, and warmth press into one another. He felt her, trembling and precious, and felt his own fear and joy burst together in a moment of agonizing ecstasy. When the kiss ended, both of their cheeks were wet, their tears blended together on one another’s faces.

“Let’s... take it slow,” Tristana whispered, still holding herself close enough to Seth for him to feel her hot breath on his neck. “If that’s ok with you.”

“I’m happy just to be with you,” Seth replied, pulling her in closer. “All I want is what you give me. Nothing more.”

Across the river, Seth saw a lighter flicker which then ignited a cigarette, illuminating Damon’s face for a brief moment. Damon waved casually, his silhouette outlined with moonlight, and Seth smiled in return. Even though it was so dark Seth couldn’t make out Damon’s expression, he somehow knew Damon could see his. Then, Damon turned around and began walking away into the night, until all that was left was the smoke dancing in the moonlight, slowly rising from where the daemon had stood.

Tristana laughed quietly as she pressed into Seth’s chest, and it made Seth’s smile even more. Her right hand left him, and he thought he saw her wave out of the corner of his eye, but when he turned, he saw no one.

“Was someone there?” Seth asked.

Tristana shrunk back and whispered, “I’m not sure you would believe me if I told you.”

Seth did his best to keep from laughing as he kissed her forehead and held her face in his hands. “Try me.”

