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Eternal Cover Art © 2009 Jesse Fox

*Dedicated to all my fellow writers at the Pagan & the Pen especially
one writer in particular, Myristica as you embark on your adventure,
May the Goddess & God watch over you.*

Blessed Be.

Eternal

Jesse Fox

Watching and waiting. These things had been a huge part of his life if that was what you could call it. Nothing changed and yet everything changed; a true paradox if ever one existed. He'd walked the earth for so long he'd almost lost count of the years.

Tonight though was always the most unforgiving of those eternal nights.

He perched on the edge of the building's roof, shoulders hunched against the winter wind although he was long past feeling the cold. If he were honest, he was long past feeling anything. At least that was what he would like to imagine.

Three stories below human existence continued as it had for centuries. Laughter—sweet and musical—mixed with the crystalline flakes of snow to promise a single night of perfect love and desire. In an act as old as the world itself, gifts exchanged this night were in the name of love, yet he was alone.

Standing he stretched, muscles flexing beneath marble white skin, smooth and cold as the snow that surrounded him. Perhaps, he thought, this time would be different. If he had the strength, tonight he would destroy what should've never existed in the first place. He lifted his face to the stormy night sky the moon shying away from his luminous green gaze and recalled another night long ago in another land.

Eternal life without love was no life at all.

~*~

In the streets below, another soul wandered, lost and alone. He'd been happy only hours ago. Finishing up at work he was excited to celebrate his first Valentine's Day with the man he'd decided was the one. They'd met nearly a year ago while he was jogging in Forest Park.

He'd been down by the Boat House and he'd paused to tie the lace in his running shoe. As he stood an enormous dog had come barreling at him and in a panic, he'd turned to run, only to find himself knocked to the ground. Instead of mauled as he'd thought, the dog had barked happily and began to lick his face. His fear dissipated replaced by laughter so loud that at first he hadn't noticed the man.

"Toby, get the hell off him!"

The weight of the dog had suddenly disappeared and he discovered himself looking into the bluest eyes he'd ever seen. It was in that moment he'd fallen in love. Unfortunately, he'd never seen the truth in those eyes until tonight.

How do you react when you discover your lover with someone else in your bed that you've shared for eight months? You weep for the loss and the anger soon takes hold as if the tentacles of some beast born of Lovecraft's imagination. His anger had overcome him, blinded him, until Mitchell had backhanded him harder than he believed possible.

He'd loved the bastard more than he deserved, opening his heart, as he'd never imagined he could and this pain was his payment for daring to love. His heart felt ripped from his chest, leaving an open wound deep as the shadows that played across the snow tonight.

The sting of Mitchell's betrayal burned in his veins visible for all who passed him on the street to see; that is if they cared to look. His jaw ached, the coppery sweetness of blood lingering on his lips. As he passed one of the windows that lined street, a glimpse of his reflection from the corner of his eye caught his attention. Almost afraid to witness the damage Mitchell had done he turned; a blossoming pattern of bruises highlighted by the imprint of the ring he'd gifted to the man who'd betrayed his heart in favor of another.

"What? Are you that stupid? Look at yourself, Patrick—how could anyone love that?"

"It hurts too much," he told his reflection hand lifting to graze his cheek. "I can't live without him."

Death was preferable to life with a broken heart.

Long ago, he'd possessed faith in a higher being. His life sworn in service to his god he'd known without doubt that he'd done the right thing. That was before he realized that although God might be the ultimate force of good, his representatives on earth were far from it.

Along the rooftop, he paced, preternatural eyes searching out the stars that humans couldn't see through the clouds. He allowed his mind to drift back into those memories he'd hidden deep within his psyche. Memories of a life he'd rather forget for in that life he'd found love, lost love, and discovered himself resurrected in this damnable form.

He stopped suddenly as he caught a scent that he'd not savored in nearly 1800 years. Through the darkness, he glided, his head lifted as he sniffed the air, following a trail of invisible pheromones. The impossibility of its existence bewildered and frightened him. At the edge of the roof, he glanced down at the street below, searching for the source of his fear and...

Hope, he thought.

It had been so long since he'd felt that particular emotion. On the day, hidden in shadow, he'd watched the one he'd loved unconditionally laid to eternal rest hope had withered. That night he'd stolen into the crypt where his lover lay and wept as a child. Those who believed creatures such as he could not feel were fools.

Legs folded beneath him on the cold stone, arms draped over the engraved lid, he'd begged his god to return his lover. His eyes filled with tears that swelled over lush dark lashes to leave trails of crimson on ashen skin. He recalled lifting a hand to wipe away the moisture tainted with the blood he needed to consume. Staring at the liquid, he'd decided to say his good-byes in the only way he knew how. Fingertips pressed against rough stone he'd drawn the symbol he'd come to know as both that of his love and a reminder of the curse his people had placed upon him. That image would terrify those who betrayed him, but comfort those who had stood by him when discovered the next day.

A heart painted in blood.

~*~

Foot lashing out at a stray beer can on the sidewalk, Patrick's thoughts focused on Mitchell, and the pain that, with each beat of his heart, became harder to bear. *How* he was to do it, was the question

that fluttered within the cage of bone that trapped his shattered heart. He'd never been a violent person, but he wanted Mitchell to see what he'd caused. He wanted him to understand the depth of his betrayal and the result of his heartless actions.

Logically Patrick knew that Mitchell would not shed a tear if he died. The bastard that he was would laugh at a fool's last-ditch attempt to prove a moot point. Tonight he'd realized that Mitchell had no heart, no soul; he wasn't human in the spiritual sense, just a monster that drank people dry, and then tossed them aside for the next fool.

As snow began to fall, the distant bells of the Old Cathedral tolled the hour, turning from the reflection of a man he no longer recognized he stepped into the alley. On the far wall, he spotted a fire escape, a patchwork of rust and red paint, and strode toward it with determination. His family had turned their back on him long ago and now his lover had abandoned him. There was no one left to care about or to miss him.

He was nothing.

Another shadow that would melt in the light of dawn, one face among many whose death would become a sound byte on the six o' clock news, forgotten within seconds of viewing. Only a topic of discussion around the water cooler, come Monday morning.

Memory was strong, but not just on its own. It was a creature composed of things humans believed minor such as smell, touch, taste, and even hearing. Memory was the bastard child of the four senses, hidden away in the darkest corner of your mind only to emerge at the oddest moments.

For him it was worse than the human experience. Now, on average, a human lived perhaps eighty years if they were lucky. He had surpassed that by centuries. What he had witnessed, the evolution of mankind alone, it was incredible and there were days he would not trade that knowledge for anything. However, those days were few and far between.

After all this time, all he wanted was simply love. Perhaps that was an odd thing for a creature such as himself, but even among his own kind, he was an outcast. Most of those he'd crossed paths with had embraced their thirst with an intensity that frightened him. When he'd walked the earth as a mortal, he hadn't been an evil man, but a man of God always kind and empathic to his fellow humans.

The curse he suffered was born of darkest magic and human cruelty. All he'd ever wanted was to bless others with the ability to experience what he could not. As a young man, he'd discovered that he was attracted to others of his own sex. The church had believed it wrong, a twisting of what God had desired when he created man and woman. Raised to believe in that creed he'd sought answers within the church and despite the Romans outlawing Christianity, he'd risked his life to spread the Word of Christ.

Over the years, he'd raised in the ranks of the infant church, a bishop when Claudius II had, in his power hungry insanity, declared marriage illegal. His faith in his god had been so strong he'd defied the emperor marrying lovers in secret for although he was unable to find love he knew its importance. Then Claudius' soldiers captured him, betrayed by one of his own who chose to abandon his faith for the power of Rome.

He tried to shut out the horror he'd experienced, the pain and degradation, but after nearly eighteen centuries, it still haunted him. Each passing year this holiday, that celebrated his life and love, cruelly reminded him. The very church who had cursed him with this endless existence mired the truth of his relationship with Lucius in a cloud of political manipulation.

Their only concern was their own embarrassment if the public discovered that the man they had blessed with sainthood was nothing but a perversion. Therefore, they buried the truth just as quickly and efficiently as they had buried his earthly remains never knowing what their betrayal had created; a blood thirsty eternal monster. He'd never wanted any of this and now the fates were once more torturing him with the scent of his beloved.

Focusing all his energies, eyes closed, he listened intently to the faint sounds of the city; music, voices, and traffic. Even with all the noise of the city, he could pick out the tiniest detail from the whirlpool of life. The sound he heard was faint weeping, so faint as to be inaudible to human hearing.

He opened his eyes—gaze focused downward—and noted a young man climbing up a rusted fire escape, loose coat billowing around his legs. Tracking the man with his eyes he reached out with his mind and listened, his face tipped skyward and nostrils flaring as he inhaled.

Have to do this...no other way.

The corners of his mouth turned down, eyebrows drawn together in a frown. Above the clouds drifted across the sky, and the first flakes of snow began to fall. They dusted his face and caught in the web of his dark lashes as the frown deepened.

I can't continue without him.

“My beloved,” he whispered, awe in his voice, “I have found you again. Perhaps, I was wrong. Perhaps, tonight will not be my last night in this world.”

With that final thought, he backed up and ran towards the edge of the roof, powerful legs pushing him up and over the edge. His coat spread out around him in the air, the cold wind rushing past him, and thick ebony curls dancing around his face.

At the top of the fire escape, Patrick stepped over the edge and onto the roof with a heavy sigh. The snow was falling harder now, flakes skimming along the pebbled surface, and starting to drift in the corners. He paced the perimeter of the roof, looking out at the city. All he'd wanted was to acceptance and love for the man he was. Had that been too much to expect?

He glanced up at the drifting clouds, hands burrowed deep in his pockets, and shivered at the thought of what death would be like. Would he just cease to exist or was there really something on the other side? Would he end up burning in hell fire as his father insisted the day he kicked him out of the house or was there a higher power out there that would understand and forgive him for the mistakes he'd made?

Walking to the edge of the roof, he inhaled trying to calm himself as he stepped up on the ledge. Far below lovers were leaving restaurants to head back to their cars, huddled together beneath the flurry of the ever-increasing snow. The tears that had refused to fall before now welled over his lashes, and dripped down his wind burned face. *No one will miss me*, he thought.

"I would miss you."

Patrick, surprised at the gentle voice, lost his balance, and fell backward arms flailing. There was enough time for him to think he would find out exactly what death was when a strong hand encircled his wrist, plucked him from the air, and deposited him onto the roof. He fell forward carried by the momentum of his body to land on his knees with a jolt that vibrated up his spine.

Fingers splayed in the snow he knelt there struggling to catch his breath for a moment before the worn leather of two boots appeared in the line of his vision. He lifted his head, focusing on the man in front of him, and for a split-second, he swore his heart ceased to beat.

He was tall, taller than any human had the right to be, and yet he wasn't bulky, but rather slender and graceful. Two eerie feline eyes studied him from a pale, heart-shaped face, surrounded by luxurious shadowy curls that fell to broad shoulders. Beneath those hypnotic eyes, a broad nose just added to the illusion he was staring at a jungle cat. The man's mouth was wide, lips too pink against the opalescent skin.

His mouth worked, but the words didn't seem to want to come. As he watched with terrified eyes, the man's lips tipped in a smile, dimples appearing beneath high-sculpted cheekbones. He cleared his throat, licked his lips nervously, and found the words at last. "Who...who are you?"

Crouching down, so they were eye to eye, the stranger tilted his head to the side, eyes narrowed to slits as he continued to study him. Then he leaned in close and inhaled deeply as if he were scenting the air around him. His smile widened, one hand lifting, and long slender fingers threaded through Patrick's tousled blonde hair cupping the curve of his skull. "Beautiful," he whispered gaze settling on the bruised skin of the opposite cheek. "Why would someone damage such beauty?"

Patrick started to reply before he realized the man wasn't really asking anything of him. He continued to stare into the stranger's eyes and the sudden thought that he'd seen this man somewhere before came to him. Although he was certain if he had, he would have remembered where. As they continued staring at one another, it dawned on Patrick that there was something different about the man, something not quite *real*.

He tried to pull away, but instead he discovered himself leaning in until their lips met in a light kiss. The touch of his lips felt familiar just as the face did. Patrick gasped as he felt the gentle tease of the stranger's tongue. He should pull away, finish what he started, but he couldn't. Instead, he parted his lips, inviting the delicate caress in.

The man sighed, gentle voice filled with longing as he accepted Patrick's invitation. "Lucius..."

Betrayal was bad enough, but betrayal by someone you believed both friend and brother was worse. He sat in the dank cell, knees drawn up beneath a rough wool robe, and stared up at the tiny slit, sunlight streaming through in a golden beam of warmth. Eyes closed, he began to pray basking in the warmth of God's love on his bruised face.

Claudius had been furious when he refused his offer. He hadn't just refused he'd been adamant that there was only one god and that god was not Claudius. The look in the emperor's eyes had been one of madness, but he knew his belief would sustain him through whatever punishment Claudius saw fit to level upon him. There was no way he could have known just how insane the Roman was.

Execution was his punishment for daring to defy the one true god, Imperial Emperor of Rome, Claudius II. There was a unique twist to the punishment though that the crazed emperor had decreed, a three-part execution. First, he was to be beaten, and then stoned. Finally, his body whether it still breathed or not, was to be crucified a warning to those who chose to defy the emperor.

He didn't want to die, no sane man would, but he refused to compromise his faith even if it meant living. Unlike Gnaeus, he wasn't willing to sell his soul for thirty pieces of silver.

A faint sound interrupted his prayer and he glanced up to see a young man of perhaps seventeen or eighteen, dressed in a simple wool tunic. He was quite beautiful, slender yet muscular, skin pale as fresh goat's milk, and short hair of gold that reminded him of the very sunlight he sat in. The garb he wore was that of a workman and though it was quite dark within the holding cells, he carried no lantern. That was when he realized the boy was blind, his beautiful brown eyes empty. Though some would see it as a flaw, he only thought it made him more beautiful.

"Bishop?" the boy's voice was soft and musical.

He cleared his throat and stood, bare feet padding along the dirt floor, "Yes, child?"

The boy frowned. "No, insult intended, Bishop, but I am no child. I will be eighteen in two days."

"My apologies," he smiled as the young man approached the opening in the bars, small bowl cradled in his slender hand.

Returning his smile, the boy extended his hand. "Apology accepted, Bishop. I've brought you bread and a skin of water."

He accepted the offering. "There is no need to call me by my title. My people have excommunicated me in fear of your emperor."

Head tipped to the side a faint smile on his full voluptuous mouth, he whispered softly. “I am Lucius and if I am not to call you Bishop, then what shall I call you?”

“Valentinus, my name is Valentinus.”

~*~

Patrick pulled back from the kiss and looked up into the stranger’s eyes. “You called me, Lucius.”

A faint blush colored the stranger’s cheeks as he pushed up to his full height and turned away. “I am sorry.” How could he explain what he saw in those warm, human eyes was Lucius, lost centuries ago to the tides of time? He’d learned long ago that human souls were reborn. It didn’t matter how many times they reincarnated though, they always possessed the same scent.

Pushing to his feet, Patrick gave a quick rub to his aching knees, and stepped closer to this man who’d drawn him back from the edge of death. “Please, don’t apologize...I don’t even know your name and you saved my life.”

He turned at the touch of Patrick’s hand on his arm, gentle warmth that reminded him of sunny days in an existence he’d thought lost forever. “Valentinus was my Roman name,” his words thick with emotion. “But you may call me Valentine.” Eyes going wide Patrick took a step back, shock in his eyes. “Do you remember?” a smile of hope appeared on Valentine’s face.

“Remember what? What are you?”

That was when he realized his secret had begun to reveal itself with that simple kiss and the smile had clearly shown it. He lifted one hand, fingertips settling on the elongated teeth that had descended from his gums. Desire did that, but he hadn’t lost control like this since he’d been a fledgling. Valentine shook his head, fear flaring in his inhuman eyes. “Please, don’t be frightened. I’m...” the words stuck in his throat, but Patrick had no problem saying it.

“You’re a *vampire*.”

Valentine inhaled an unneeded breath. “You are not frightened.” It was a statement not a question and his confusion amused Patrick.

“No,” Patrick moved closer, hand cupping his cheek. “I knew when you saved me you couldn’t be human, but I thought you were the Angel of Death come to collect my soul.”

Flinching at the gentle caress, Valentine closed his eyes, blood-tainted tears dripping down his face. “I am no angel, but I am death.” He whispered. “I have been since I woke in a mass grave outside Rome nearly eighteen centuries ago.”

Patrick’s head tipped to the side, thumb stretching out to sweep through the crimson river of his tears. “Have you been alone all this time?” he questioned, compassion in his eyes.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

That is a good question, he thought. He looked into those familiar eyes and raised his hand, tangling fingers in the other man’s hair. He looked so like his beloved Lucius in this incarnation. Sometimes the souls that were reborn did, but it was rare. Normally, there was no resemblance to their previous bodies.

“I had one man who I loved. I was human then, my love for him greater than anything you might dare imagine. They tore him from me, made an example of me to any who dare defy Claudius.” His chest ached with the memories that rose unbidden to blind him.

Patrick stepped back so he could get a better look at Valentine’s face. A kindness within him seemed to glow beneath his preternatural skin, one that few humans possessed. “You’re him, the Valentine of legend?”

His head dipped in acknowledgement, dark hair hiding his eyes. “Yes, but I am no saint, the church made sure of that when they turned their backs on me.”

“They turned their backs on me as well,” Patrick replied. “They say I’m an abomination in God’s eyes.” He tried not to cry because he’d shed enough tears. “How did you do it?”

Valentine pulled him close. “I hid in the shadows until tonight when I decided to end this eternal torment. I prayed that the powers above would forgive me and then I received a sign. After centuries, roaming the world alone, and forgotten except for a lie created to cover the darkest of betrayals, the powers led me to you.” His lips pressed into the soft silk of Patrick’s hair.

“Me? Why would you be led to me?”

“Because little one, you are my Lucius reborn to the mortal world.”

Lifting his head from where it rested against Valentine’s chest, Patrick looked into his eyes. “Lucius was the man you loved?”

“Yes,” he sighed.

“Why do you believe that I’m him?”

The burning curiosity in his eyes made Valentine smile—really smile—in far longer than he cared to admit. It surprised him that this mortal man was unafraid of what he’d been cursed to be, but then perhaps what he’d ran from was far worse. “It is difficult to explain. We can scent the uniqueness of each human soul. Your scent is identical to that of Lucius.”

“And what does my soul smell of?”

Valentine had to pause and think for a moment. He’d always held Lucius close to his heart even after it ceased to beat. His gaze took on a faraway light, face softening with the memories that had only brought tears and anger before.

“Sunlight,” he smiled. “His soul smelled of sunlight, violets, and fresh turned earth. The scent of sweet jasmine and the salty air of the ocean surrounded him always.”

“And you smell this now?”

Valentine inhaled deeply, burying his nose in Patrick’s hair. “Yes, I smell it all. It is the scent of love—and of home.”

“Then take me into your world.”

“Do you understand what you ask of me?”

“Yes.”

Without another word, Valentine lifted Patrick into the cradle of his arms, and sped along the rooftop, a blur of shadow and moonlight beneath the cloudy sky. He launched off the building and into the air, the colors of the night vanishing in a rush of wind.

When they landed on solid ground again, it was the concrete of a balcony on one of the many buildings converted to lofts. Without a touch, the doors leading into the loft swung open of their own volition, and Valentine settled Patrick to his feet. With a gentle smile, he motioned for Patrick to follow him.

A trail of ice glided up Patrick's spine as he stepped from the snowy night over the threshold and into what he could only describe as another world. There were no interior walls just towering vertical iron beams that rose from the floor to support the nearly 30-foot ceiling. Horizontal beams crisscrossed the ceiling and cornice pieces of iron curved upward giving the loft the appearance of an almost steam punk version of a medieval cathedral. Spinning on his heels, Patrick took in everything, wondering if he were a fool for trusting this creature that shouldn't exist, but there he was. Not only that, but he claimed to be the priest who the Church came to know as St. Valentine.

Perhaps, he had already jumped and this was death; a dream to ease the damnation he'd brought upon his soul by committing suicide. If that were the case then he didn't want to discover the truth or wake from the dream.

"It is not a dream."

He turned at the answer to his unvoiced question. Valentine had stripped off his coat and was watching him with amused eyes, a wine glass in each hand, one extended in an invitation. "How do you do that?" he accepted the offered glass and peered into it one eyebrow raised.

"We can read human thought. The stronger the thought the easier we can hear it." He lifted the glass to his lips and took a sip.

"Is this...?"

Valentine chuckled, "Blood? No, wine...a lovely 2003 Caterina Zardini Amarone. I believe you will find it to your liking."

Eyes never leaving the vampire's face, Patrick lifted his glass, and sniffed, the aroma of ripe cherries and cedar filling his senses. His eyes drifted shut as he brought the glass closer to his lips to take a cautious sip. Flavor burst along his tongue, sweetness that spoke of dessert rather than drink. He savored the sweetness with both scent and taste, lost so deeply in the experience he failed to notice Valentine had moved until he felt the weight of the other man's hands on his shoulders.

"Let me take your coat," Valentine breathed against his ear. "This is my home and I wish you to be comfortable, not frightened."

Patrick released a gentle breath, tongue darting out to chase the flavor of the wine that lingered on his lips. "I'm not scared."

"No?"

"No."

Cheeks shadowed by the lashes he peered through, he turned to face Valentine. Warmth expanded in his chest, to travel up the length of his throat and settle in his face as a rosy glow. Before the night ended, he was aware that he would come to know this man or creature, whatever he might be. He desired to touch that marble smooth skin and he desired the same of Valentine, even if that might seem fool hardy. He was perfection in his inhuman beauty, body tall, slender, and graceful clad in dark denim and a thick wool sweater that brought out the green in his eyes. Making them sparkle like emeralds. If he hadn't known better, seen the elongated teeth, Patrick would have believed him an angel not a vampire.

Valentine's lips curled in a sweet, seductive smile, reaching out to take the glass from Patrick's hand. "Please, remove your coat, make yourself comfortable."

He glided across the room where a gas fireplace stood, flames dancing behind a wrought iron screen. In front of the fireplace, a sheepskin rug spread over the hardwood floor, smear of snowy white in the flickering light of the fire. Around the rug sat three Victorian mahogany pieces; a chaise lounge, chair, and table all with claw feet and upholstered in rich crimson velvet.

God, I feel trapped in a gothic romance novel. He thought. It mattered not though. Inhaling deeply he shrugged out of his coat, and let it slip to the floor.

“Lucius was perfect in many ways. His family treated him ill though for they believed him flawed. I never believed it a flaw but rather a blessing from God. My beloved was blind at birth and saw with his soul rather than his eyes.”

Third glass of wine dangling from his fingers, Patrick sat knees drawn up and bare toes digging into the sheepskin as he stared into the fire. “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

Stretching out along the chaise, Valentine sighed. “Ah, yes a paraphrase of a quote from the infamous Plato.”

“What do you mean a paraphrase?”

Eyes focused on the glass in his hand, voice filling the room much as the shadows that surrounded them, thick with emotion. “Remember how in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities (for he has hold not of an image but of a reality), and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may.”

As Plato had written it, Patrick had never heard it. The emotion in Valentine’s voice caused a knot to form in his chest and he sensed there was far more to the quote than was obvious. “That’s...” he paused unsure how to voice the feelings that threatened to choke him.

Valentine lifted his glass, face hidden beneath the veil of his hair, and sipped the wine. Memories were vial creatures, he thought as he lowered the glass, voice barely perceptible to Patrick’s mortal ears. “Lucius adored the *Symposium*.”

Sitting his glass aside, Patrick pushed to his knees, and crawled along the velvety fur until he was kneeling by the vampire’s side. “Tell me about Lucius. I didn’t mean to upset you...”

“You did nothing to upset me.” Valentine whispered beneath his breath. “Memories rise and fall much as the tides of the oceans and sometimes they bring with them tears. Not even immortals can defy their cursed and venomous bite.”

“I do understand.”

Valentine turned, eyes sparkling through tousled curls. “Do you?”

The knot in Patrick’s chest grew larger at the gleam of doubt in those eerie eyes. He licked his lips trying to work some moisture up in his mouth when he suddenly discovered none. “My father turned his back on me when he discovered me in bed with my boyfriend—I was seventeen. There was no talking about the fact that I was gay. In his eyes, I was diseased, tainted by Lucifer’s blackened hand. It was win-

ter and he turned me out on the street with nothing, but the clothes on my back. If it hadn't been for one of my teachers, I might have never survived."

Valentine set aside his glass, reaching out to cup his bruised face. "And who did this wicked act?" his thumb stroked the blotchy colors.

"My lover," tears glittered in Patrick's eyes as he averted them to the floor.

"What sin could you have committed to deserve such rough treatment at the hands of someone who claimed to love you?"

"I was a fool." He choked on the emotion that squeezed the breath from his lungs. "I believed that I had found the one man I could spend the rest of my life with."

Sliding from the chaise, Valentine drew him into his arms, supporting his body as though it were frailest of porcelain. In that embrace, Patrick felt safe, protected, and found no need to conceal the pain that had troubled his life. A deluge surged deep in his belly, rising to constrict his lungs until he believed he was drowning in acid, the aftertaste bitter. Face buried in the folds of the other man's sweater he wept, as he hadn't since childhood.

No words exchanged between them, none needed. They were both damaged goods, both betrayed by those they trusted, their faith, and both had lost their lovers—one through betrayal and the other through the cruel touch of fate. How long they sat there was impossible to say until Valentine pushed him back against the plush rug and pierced his heart with a questioning stare.

"Return to me, Lucius, and we shall be together forever."

Once a fool always a fool, his mother had once quoted to him. Perhaps, that was true, but there was also another saying. *Third time is a charm*.

He'd been a fool the first time to believe his father would accept him as he was. The second time he'd been a fool to believe that Mitchell loved him and not what he could take from him. Now his third chance had arrived and though he might have been a fool before perhaps this time he would be charmed.

Valentine guided his trembling body back, stretching out next to him, fingers combing through his hair. "Do you truly want this, Lucius?"

"My name's Patrick...not Lucius."

Regret filled Valentine's eyes as he lowered his head to Patrick's chest. The steady rhythm of his heart soothed away the urge to cry out in denial that Valentine fought. He had to make him see the truth behind not just his existence, but all of humanity's existence as well. Even being a spiritual man had not prepared him for the truths that lay beyond mortal death. "You must understand."

"Understand what?"

He sighed, fingers trailing along Patrick's chest. "Religion and science are both wrong. There is no Heaven or Hell. There is just the universe—endless, vast, and sentient from which we are born and to whence we return. Destruction cannot be visited upon the soul, only that which is physical can die, energy continues on eternally."

Shifting to his side, Patrick cupped Valentine's face in his palm, thumb caressing the hardness of bone beneath flawless skin. "If that is true how did you become as you are?"

He swallowed hard, head lifting to gaze directly into Patrick's curious eyes. "Magic," he admitted, pain evident in his eyes. "I was a priest, a man for whom things were not so clear in the beginning with one exception—love. For me God was love and no man had a right to destroy that which God rejoiced in. It mattered not that I could not experience that joy myself for my heart was promised to my Lord and savior."

"Then what happened?" Patrick's fingers worked up his temple to tangle in his curls.

"I chose to defy Claudius the madman who fancied himself a God—the God. In my hands was a choice to hide my beliefs in the shadows or to stand up for what I believed right. He tried to tempt me with wealth and power, but I stood fast with my convictions and so it was that I discovered myself sentenced to die. The Church was in its infancy during my mortal existence and the leaders believed that I had overstepped my bounds. Thus they chose to deny me by excommunicating me."

“That doesn’t explain how you are still here though.”

Valentine sought the words he needed to explain his condition. As he did, he wondered if this exquisite creature could truly understand the enormity of the revelation that waited upon his tongue. He reached up to fold his hand over Patrick’s the warmth of his skin easing the ache in his heart. *What right do I have to take him from this mortal plain?* He wondered.

“The rite of excommunication was born of the darkest magic. They have hidden that fact for so long even they do not remember the truth of its origins. In truth, it is a binding curse. One that traps the human soul within the shell it inhabits upon death preventing it from returning to its true home. The pain is such that there are no words to describe it and only living blood may ease the pain. It strengthens the accursed soul that it might recall its human existence. Most of my kind though become as addicts and give into the darker part of their soul.”

He was sure, now that Patrick knew the truth, he would flee from his sight and then he would once more be alone. Eyes drifting shut he waited for the warm hand in his grip to pull away, but as the seconds ticked by it didn’t. Hope began to flow through his veins as he allowed his eyes to open and what he saw melted his cold, dead heart. Silent tears stained Patrick’s face, not tears of sorrow as he had expected, but rather tears of understanding and compassion.

“The pain doesn’t matter it’s the loneliness that does. I don’t want to be alone anymore.”

Love is a strange thing, Valentine thought. It makes the human and inhuman heart do things they would never considered acceptable at any other time in their existence. Loneliness and despair, eighteen hundred years worth, wiped away within the span of a heartbeat.

He watched with hungry eyes as Patrick pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it into the shadows revealing a body worth all the suffering he'd endured in that time. Smooth skin touched by the sun, kissed with light freckles across broad shoulders, and muscles engraved beneath. He recalled another body just as beautiful. As Valentine admired him, Patrick began to fidget, arms folding over his torso protectively, and cheeks rosy with the blush of youth.

"Stunning." he pushed Patrick back on the rug and straddled his hips leaning in to claim his mouth in a leisurely kiss, veil of curls shadowing their faces. His touch was deliberate and unhurried for he'd waited this long and they had eternity on their side this night.

At last, he pulled back with a smile as his hands glided over silken skin, fingertips tracing the contours of muscle and bone. A faint breath slipped from Patrick, his tongue darting out to capture the ghost of Valentine's kiss across voluptuous lips that begged for more. His hands continued down, fingers lingering on tight nipples as he shifted down, the pulse of Patrick's erection against the swell of his ass.

He pressed a light kiss to each nipple pulling a groan of pleasure from Patrick and he wondered what sounds he would make when the time came to call him over into his world. Patrick had agreed knowing what he would face as much as anyone could under the circumstances, yet it could go wrong despite that knowledge in numerous ways.

Head lifting, Valentine captured his gaze one last time. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am."

Patrick's simple consent was enough. He reached for the waist of his jeans, opening the button and sliding the zipper down as careful as possible. Patrick moaned as the pressure released and Valentine slid both jeans and boxer briefs down, the wad of cotton and denim joining the shirt Patrick had shed earlier.

Kneeling there, knees trapping Patrick's muscled legs, he took in the full length of the body beneath him, muscled but not overly so, natural musculature that Michelangelo would have longed to touch and sculpt in marble. Perhaps, he would have written epigrams in honor of the beauty he possessed as he'd done for his own beloved Cecchino whom he had lost not long before Valentine had met him. It was

over their grief that the two had bonded and now as he admired the beauty before him, the epigrams of Michelangelo came to his lips sweet as the wine they'd consumed earlier.

He lowered his body down, cheek resting against the sharp edge of Patrick's hipbone and closed his eyes, revealing in the enticing scent of arousal. "The flesh now earth, and here my bones, Bereft of handsome eyes, and jaunty air, Still loyal are to him I joyed in bed, whom I embraced, in whom my soul now lives." The passion in those words washed over Valentine and as his eyes drifted open, he turned his head and pressed a promising kiss to the edge of bone.

"Valentine," Patrick's hips lifted from the sheepskin in search of more.

"I am here, beloved."

Rolling on his hip, he pressed biting kisses along Patrick's skin until he reached his cock. He curled his fingers around the base thumbing the firm flesh then pushed up on his elbow. As he leaned in his tongue slid across the head gathering the fluid that pulsed from the tip. Beneath the skin, hot blood flavored by overwhelming desire called forth the thirst deep within his belly. His gums tingled as he ran his tongue along them and felt the tips descending, razor sharp and dripping venom.

Valentine took a moment and concentrated on controlling the hunger, a simple thing when one was his age. As they began to retract, he ran his hand up Patrick's erection, squeezing just this side of pain and then slid his hand down, working the foreskin down as he parted his lips taking the head in. Under him, Patrick gasped as his hips surged up. The corner of his mouth twitched, eyes gleaming with satisfaction as he relaxed his throat and took all of him cheeks hollowing. The taste was slick and salty like brine along his tongue the flavor stronger to his heightened senses.

Savoring the taste, he closed his eyes, and inhaled the scent of Patrick's skin as he continued to pleasure him. The sounds that escaped his lover's parted lips created a heat within his blood that he'd rarely experienced in his endless existence. He cupped his balls in his palm massaging them with an expert touch. When he noticed them tightening in anticipation of his orgasm, Valentine chuckled around his thickness, the vibration causing him to whimper and squirm. A quick tug down and a tight grip around the base of his erection halted his body's release.

"Please," Patrick pleaded fighting against the strength of Valentine's grip. "I need more."

Valentine purred as he withdrew, releasing his cock. Losing the tight suction, the tease of Valentine's tongue was a loss he refused to accept, and he made it abundantly clear with both his body and voice. No one in his life had ever lavished that much attention on his cock and balls. It was Heaven and Hell entwined in an eternal battle for his release.

"Hush," Valentine whispered against his skin, "I will give you what you need. There is no need to beg. Be patient."

Shifting around he gripped Patrick's trembling thighs to force them apart then stretched out between them, pressing a gentle kiss to the inside of his thigh. Beneath his lips, he could feel the pulse of the artery as Patrick's heart pounded with desire. The hunger rose, his gums itching with the need to savor scorching blood on his tongue.

Instead, he lifted his head and looked up the trembling length of his new lover's body. The curved thickness of his lust, flushed with his life's blood, begged for attention with just its presence. "Do you want to come?" he hissed. His only answer was an eager moan. "Then it is time, little one."

Death and sex were siblings in the human world. The French understood that when referring to orgasm metaphorically as *le petite mort*. In Valentine's world, it was more than just a metaphor. When he'd been just a fledgling, in pain, and confused, Ambrosius discovered him hiding in the hills outside Rome.

Ambrosius was a Gaul, a warrior when he'd been mortal, changed on a battlefield by another of their kind against his will. He could have easily let the hunger rule him, but despite his beginnings, he had mastered his hunger. Taking Valentine beneath his wing he'd taught him how to control the hunger, to feed, and ultimately how to fight. He'd also shown Valentine that being a vampire wasn't an eternal death sentence.

As he lay there, stretched out between Patrick's thighs, he remembered the first time Ambrosius made love to him. He knew even between lovers who were vampires the venom could intensify the physical pleasure to unbearable heights. The last thing he wished was to hurt Patrick in any way.

"What is it?"

"Nothing...I just..."

Pushing up on his elbows, Patrick drew closer to him, eyes wide with concern and pupils blown with a passion that even Valentine in his infinite wisdom couldn't deny. As he knelt in front of him, lips parted the need that was evident in his eyes enticed Valentine from his doubts. His true nature revealed itself with the speed of his fingers as they tangled in the fine strands of Patrick's hair and yanked him forward. Their mouths clashed with bruising pressure and the hunger flared in Valentine's soul.

He inhaled the scent of Patrick's skin, his soul, and moaned in desire before pulling back to look in his eyes again. "You'll feel nothing, but pleasure," he breathed out, "do not fight the pleasure, give in to it, and ride the wave."

Patrick nodded.

Inhaling, he drew Patrick down against the softness of the rug, one hand caressing along his flank. He shifted his body from hip to back, parting his thighs with a light touch, and lowered his head. As the scent of desire, warm and spicy, overwhelmed his senses, he allowed his feeders to descend. His eyes drifted shut as his focus narrowed in on the resonance of Patrick's heartbeat, blood roaring through veins, and the essence of life curled around and through him.

His tongue teased at the inside of Patrick's thigh up along the juncture where pubis and femur met, layers of muscle and skin hiding away the constant flow of blood; natural flavor of his skin urging

Valentine's hunger on. His exploration ripped sounds from Patrick that echoed through every fiber of his being. He recalled nights spent in the jungles of Africa and India listening to the living jungle's song before the infamous *hour of silence*.

Jaw shifting, he pulled back, a human cobra preparing to strike, and strike he did with unerring efficiency; razor sharp bone pierced delicate skin, injecting toxin, and slid deeper to enter the femoral artery. Beneath him, he felt Patrick's pulse skip a beat and then increase as adrenalin rushed through his system from the initial shock. That first burst of blood was heaven, coppery and bitter as the darkest chocolate on his taste buds.

As the venom took affect, Valentine reached out, fingers curling around Patrick's erection, and stroked in time with his erratic heartbeat. His blood might have been heaven, but the music he made was far more exquisite. Back bowed, skin flushed pink, lips parted on a ragged breath, these things and so much more created a pulse of life within the vampire that he'd believed long departed.

Patrick though became lost in a world that was no longer gray and cold. The natural toxin injected in his blood, warmed his skin, and the world began to breathe again. Color was everywhere, jeweled tones that no mortal words could possibly describe. An ever changing brilliance he swore possessed a scent all their own. Now he understood why Valentine had told him to give in and ride the wave. It was overwhelming—magnificent.

He lifted one hand noticing colors that trailed through the air with the movement, luminescent and indescribable. The smile that lit up his face sent trembling musical notes of joy spinning into the air and for a moment, he believed his mind lost.

Valentine's lips on his skin as he drank from his thigh brought untold pleasures to his flesh, as did the touch of the hand on his cock. Hips lifting, he thrust upward, and with each thrust sparks formed around their joined bodies. Those sparks lifted and transformed into winged creatures resembling butterflies that glowed and danced around them. On shimmering wings, they skimmed along Patrick's abdomen to encircle his head and form a halo as he laughed. There was nothing but joy and light surrounding them as he opened his arms to death.

As his heart began to slow its rhythm, Valentine withdrew, a quick swipe of his tongue healing the savaged artery, leaving behind pink scars that would fade soon enough. He continued to stroke the erection in his grasp, leaning forward, and whispered. "Come, little one, come and release your grip on this mortal existence."

Body arching up, spine taut, Patrick did exactly that. Vision going gray at the edges his heart slowed to a near stop, breathe released from his lungs in a pleased moan.

Stretched out next to Patrick, he stroked long graceful fingers across his stomach, and lifted them to taste the thick liquid he'd collected. Salty with an acidic aftertaste so different from blood and yet it held the essence of life as well.

He found himself nudging into the damp curls of hair near Patrick's ear and released a faint breathe. "You are close to the doorway, but now I will draw you back." Sitting up, Valentine tugged his sweater over his head to bare his milk white chest. "I need you to drink from me now."

One nail extended out to a sharp point as he lifted his hand and sliced open the skin below his left nipple, deep crimson blood rising to the surface. The nail retracted and he leaned down, gathering Patrick's limp form in his arms, muscles flexing beneath the skin.

"Drink, my love, or death will surely come to you in all her darkness."

Patrick whimpered through blue-tinged lips as he blindly sought out the opening that exuded the sweet, thick nectar of immortality. His lips connected with Valentine's chest and he began to drink, blood staining his lips at first. When the first drops touched his tongue, the connection sparked between mortal and immortal. Beneath his lips, Valentine's body offered up more of the essence that would lock them together forever, and he drew deeper on the wound.

Throwing back his head, Valentine cried out in ecstasy. Their souls were becoming one, bound by the power of the universe that none but his kind understood. The power that flowed through his veins now spread through the man who he'd saved tonight. There was something intimate in that bond that he'd never felt in his mortal life. It was all encompassing and his voice rose in a song of pleasure, one that soon turned to pain.

Instinctually, he knew something had gone wrong. He'd never done this before although his mentor and lover Ambrosius had explained it to him in detail. At the time, he hadn't understood why, but months later when a group of humans had murdered Ambrosius it had dawned on him. His mentor had known they were hunting him and he hadn't wanted Valentine to spend eternity alone.

Eyes clenched shut he inhaled unneeded air and focused on that distant memory. Ambrosius' voice, rough and raspy with drink, whispered in his mind.

To become one with your child you must share all that you are. Not just the physical or the existence that you possess now, but all you were before walking this path. You must share your humanity and your death.

“Patrick,” his voice broke with the tidal wave of fear that knocked the air from his body. “Forgive me for what I am about to do, but to have you with me you must know.”

His hands grasped Patrick’s skull with lightening speed, thumbs pressing to his eye sockets, and he let go. For the first time in nearly eighteen hundred years, he remembered his last mortal days on this earth and the pain rushed out in a flood, filling the blood that Patrick consumed.

~*~

“Where am I?” Patrick turned to Valentine shocked to discover his eyes tear-filled and reached out only to have him flinch away. “What is it, Valentine?”

A flush of shame colored the vampire’s face. “I thought I could do this, but...”

“Do what?”

“Part of the process is this,” he lifted his hands motioning around them. “If we are to be bonded you must know all that I have been before and after my transformation.”

Patrick frowned at the emotion in Valentine’s eyes, turning to take in his surroundings, and the frown faded. Why would this upset him? He wondered. A grove of olive trees surrounded them; the dying sunlight that skimmed along the evergreen leaves gave the trees the sculpted appearance of the purest silver. The beauty of it captured his breath and tore it from his body in a rush of wind. Beneath the low branches of the trees stood three shadowy figures, two men and a young girl, one of the men held the girl’s hand and the other stood before them speaking in a gentle voice.

He turned back to Valentine eyes wide with understanding. “This is the past.”

“Yes.”

Gaze focusing on the scene before them, he smiled at the sight of his lover as he had been before the church had cursed him with immortality. He wore a wool Alba, hooded cope clasped at his throat with a simple pin. His smile was beatific; cheeks flushed pink by the wind as he performed what was clearly a marriage ceremony.

Before Patrick could question him further the ceremony abruptly ended with the appearance of a group of Roman soldiers, swords drawn, and they forced the young couple apart violently. He went to take a step forward and Valentine reached out, hand settling on his shoulder.

“It is just a memory.”

At his gentle words the scene faded replaced by a dark, dreary cell, floor covered with straw, and there Valentine knelt, face upturned in a beam of sunlight that streamed through a small bared window. He was no longer dressed in the vestment of a priest, but rather the rough tunic of a Roman slave. His hands clasped in silent prayer his eyes were closed and there was a peace in his expression that surprised Patrick.

"This was where they put you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I defied the Emperor's law and he believed himself the one true god."

"Were you scared?"

"Yes, but I had my faith."

Patrick moved closer and this time when he reached out Valentine didn't flinch away, but accepted the comfort of his gentle touch. Around them, the scene shifted again. They were still in the prison, but this time they were seeing it from outside the cell. A young man stood in front of the door hands clasped with Valentine's through the bars. Sun-kissed hair and huge dark eyes, it didn't take a genius to know who this boy was—Lucius. They stood together watching the scene unfold, one that Valentine had lived.

"I cannot let you go," the boy whispered, voice soft with longing. "Let me help you escape."

"No."

"But I love you."

"And I you, Lucius, but this is my fate and I cannot allow you to meet the same. I will always love you and you must have faith for the Lord has gifted you with sight."

Lucius shook his head, curls bouncing around his face. "I hate him..."

"Do not say such things. He has blessed you."

"No, he has cursed me, given me a brief glimpse of the love that I could have possessed, before he tears you from my sight. What kind of God would allow that?"

Valentine reached out to cup Lucius' jaw, drew him closer, tears shining in both their eyes as their gazes met. "There are some things that we should not question."

Leaning in closer their lips met in a bittersweet kiss that left Patrick breathless. In that moment, he knew Valentine was right—he was Lucius. His hand lifted, fingertips grazing his lips, and tears welled in his eyes. "I remember...oh, God I remember everything."

Valentine drew him close, arms holding him tight, as everything came back in a flood of grief and anger. "I am so sorry, little one. I would have spared you this if it were possible."

Memories are wicked things that can destroy a man if given half a chance. Part of the reason Valentine had feared sharing his own was because they included Patrick's previous incarnation as his beloved Lucius. There were moments that even he hated remembering.

Escorted to the prison courtyard, stripped to his undergarment and chained to a whipping post the lead guard had beaten him unmercifully for the amusement of Claudius and his cronies. The first few strikes had been the worst, the pain nearly unbearable, his skin flayed open and his blood drawn out, but he'd prayed. His Lord and Savior had suffered far more at the hands of the Romans; torture, humiliation, and finally crucified. If Jesus could suffer in silence so could he.

The beating continued until he could feel nothing, his body slipping into shock from the pain. Eyelids drooping and legs collapsing beneath him, he continued to pray which only infuriated Claudius, his face flushed scarlet. The guard removed his body from the post and tossed him before the emperor, where he landed on his knees, rough stone tearing away the skin. Lifting his head, peering from beneath sweat soaked hair he smiled at Claudius before he spit on his sandaled feet. He may kill his body, but he would never destroy his spirit or his faith.

Dragged out of the courtyard, the guards led him to the hill outside where a group of citizens waited stones in hand and he laughed. His laughter only spurred on the crowd, but he hadn't cared. They could do all they wanted to his earthly body it mattered not.

As the first stones hit him and he crumpled to the ground. He didn't fight it at first, but then he'd heard something. A voice above the crowd, a voice he'd never thought to hear again—Lucius. His lover was there, witnessing the punishment he'd hoped he wouldn't see. With all the strength he could muster he'd pushed up from the blood stained earth, half-blind eyes searching out his beloved's face. Through the crowd, he could make out the jailer, Lucius' father, holding his son back as he struggled to reach Valentine. His screams shattered Valentine's heart even as he prayed he would stop.

Please, he thought, please walk away Lucius.

Lucius didn't walk away though. The last clear memory he had was of Lucius pulling away from his father and running toward him then everything went black.

When next he awoke, it was to a world that terrified and titillated him. The moon had shown bright, a sickle of brilliant silver against the blackness of the sky. Confused and weak, Valentine had dragged himself from a pit of rotting, desiccated corpses, and towards the mesmerizing light of the moon and stars. When finally he'd made it out, he'd stumbled to a nearby spring, and knelt to wash the filth

from his face. That was when he'd seen his hands or rather his wrists, each punctured by a hole, yet he didn't bleed. The sight of those wounds, bloodless and painless, caused him to scuttle back from the pool the terror of what he'd become dawning on him.

Seconds later he began to howl in pain as the first pangs of his unnatural hunger reared its head.

Cursed, he thought, *cursed by those who served God*.

~*~

"I couldn't stop it."

Valentine held Patrick close. "You tried my love that is all that matters."

"But you died..."

"And was reborn as you shall be, but first you must drink."

Lifting his head, eyes shining with tears, his lips trembled. "I don't deserve this. Death is all I deserve."

His words horrified Valentine. Death was the last thing Patrick deserved especially by his hand and he was not about to allow what had started to end. Grasping Patrick's head, he guided his mouth back to cut on his chest. "Drink of my blood, beloved. Drink and be reborn as I was."

At first, he thought that Patrick would refuse, but then he felt the cool softness of his lips, and he sighed with pleasure. Now revealed the truth seared their souls, binding them together as one. As the fire of their passion rushed through his veins, he gasped with a pleasure that overwhelmed his senses until he came hard within the confines of his jeans. A deep crimson blush flowed up his throat and across his face before he forced Patrick back and away from the flow of blood.

"Sleep now, little one. Sleep and awake to a world unseen by mortal eyes."

Hours later, Patrick woke with a start, sucking in a ragged breathe of air, his chest constricting as the air escaped when his lungs refused to accept it. Eyes going wide, he lifted one hand, pressed it to his chest, but no heartbeat greeted his touch. For a moment, he believed he was dreaming. *How can I be conscious and aware with no heartbeat or breathe?* He wondered.

Pushing back the woolen blanket that covered his body, he reached down, and ran his fingertips down along the inside of his thigh. He could feel two faint indentions where Valentine had bitten him the memory of intense pleasure flowing over his skin like a whisper of silk. His eyes fluttered shut and he inhaled again, but slower this time, and his lungs accepted the air, quivering with the memory of what they'd once been capable of doing without thought.

Valentine, he suddenly recalled the man who had rescued him the night before.

He glanced around the room and what he saw, he had no words to describe. Everything seemed to glow with an inner light, shifting, and shimmering. The coals left from the fire the night before still held a spark at their center, a star of warmth that no human could have sensed. He felt as if he were tripping on acid, just as he had when Valentine had drunk his blood. Cocking his head, he stood, the blanket slipping down his naked body, and pooling around his feet in a swirl of electrical sparks.

Cautiously, he padded across the room on bare feet to the windows now covered with heavy blackout drapes, a single seam of fading sunlight burning a line across the floor. He reached out with one finger and jumped back when his skin began to tingle. *This isn't a dream*, he thought, *Valentine is real and I'm a...*

"Vampire," he whispered.

"Yes, you are."

Turning his gaze settled on Valentine, standing a mere ten feet away, and what he saw captured his heart more than what his mortal eyes had seen. Through immortal eyes, he now witnessed the true beauty of the creature before him. His skin glowed in the darkness with the light of what he could only suspect was the soul within. Rainbows skimmed over its paleness reminding him of opals.

"You're so beautiful."

Valentine smiled and moved across the room, leaving trails of light behind him. "As are you, my beloved."

Before Patrick could reply, he discovered his body pressed tight against Valentine's, the vampire's fingers tangled in his hair, and their mouth pressed together in a passionate kiss. The taste of his

lips reminded Patrick of sweet cherries touched with a hint of salt. He wanted to taste more and he parted his lips, tongue darting out to trace along the swell of Valentine's lower lip. With a sigh, his lover, for that was who he truly was, parted his lips inviting him in with his own tease of teeth and tongue. Their kiss deepened and seemed endless as they explored one another's mouths, each curve and angle, at a leisurely pace. *There is no hurry, Patrick thought, we have eternity to discover one another.*

When at last they parted they both were enflamed with desire, but as he leaned toward Valentine he felt himself gently pushed back. Gazing up, Patrick frowned. "I want you."

"As do I, Patrick."

"Then why wait?"

"Because I have a gift for you." He smiled.

"What more could you give me?"

Reaching inside his jacket, Valentine pulled out a leather-bound volume, the cover worn, and cracking. "This is a copy of the *Symposium*, an illuminated copy dated from the 14th century. In one of my more introspective moments, I hired a young monk to create it. Some part of me always prayed I would find you again and when doubt would rise within my heart, I would read from its pages. It was my most treasured possession and now I gift it to the treasure that has taken its place."

Patrick accepted the book with gentle hands and opened it to the first page. The words inscribed on the paper made his soul sing with hope and love—a love born long ago.

ut meus diligo lucius

"It's perfect...I don't know what to say."

"There is no need for words. All you could ever say shines in your eyes."

He swallowed back the emotion as he noticed the marker. Flipping open the pages, his eyes widened; a rosary of coral beads with an ivory cross.

"Never fear the cross, for we were not made this way by a higher power, but rather by man's folly. We have nothing to fear from the powers for they understand and we like everything else in this universe are their children. When our time comes, they will welcome us with open arms and heal our wounds with their unconditional love. Even those of us who chose to kill are saved by the light as long as they welcome it at death."

Patrick extended one finger and ran the tip along the cool ivory still expecting a burning, but there was no heat only peace. "But the sun it...burned me."

“We are no longer human and our bodies have changed. Because of these changes, we have extreme photosensitivity, our skin can only bear the gentlest of natural light, but artificial light does not affect us. Most of the legends you have heard are nothing, but old wives tales.”

“I have so many questions.”

“All which will be answered in good time, but now...” his gaze traced down Patrick’s naked body and he wet his lips. “I cannot suppress my desires for much longer.”

A hint of pink bloomed in Patrick’s cheeks as he realized he was naked and he glanced up offering Valentine a seductive smile. “Then don’t,” he moved in kissing the hollow at the base of his throat. “I want you to fuck me this time.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

Before he could react, Patrick found himself lifted off the floor, and his legs wrapped around Valentine’s waist. Their mouths clashed in a brutal kiss as Valentine spun on his heel, gliding across the room his hands supporting Patrick’s ass. When he reached the rug, he lowered both their bodies until he stretched out over his lover a faint smirk at the corner of his mouth.

“What is it?”

Valentine brushed Patrick’s hair from his forehead with a soft laugh. “I was just thinking that you were worth all the lives I lived.”

“Maybe,” he breathed against Valentine’s lips, “it takes more than one lifetime to find true love?”

“When did you become so smart?”

Patrick smiled up at him, dark eyes shining in the shadows. “When I found you again and this time I refuse to let you go, my eternal love.”