

Pinion

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It was a perfect world, arcing from the undefined roundness of its base to the perfect closure of its tip. From that round height, brilliance streamed down, streaking the dim colors of the elongated shapes that stretched up its curved sides with a golden brilliance that somehow brought them to life. And beneath it all lay a rich, magical silver that imparted its own quality of wonder, glossing over the sometimes mundane shapes and adding a certain sense of miraculous purity and beauty to the wonder that their elongated roundness brought.

It held everything she longed for, a sense of the normal skewed, not beyond its recognizable limits, but just curved around a core of liquid silver magic that she could always sense, but never find. The perfect world, the familiar wrapped around a core of beauty that seemed to slip from her like quicksilver in her everyday life...

“There she goes gazin’ at the shiny things again.” The cracked voice sliced through the ticking of clocks and the velvet of silence and then rose into a thin laugh.

Blinking quickly, more than a little irritated to be caught stargazing and off her guard at work, Kass quickly rolled the silver sphere from her fingers to her palm, and with an ease born of extensive practice, dropped it safely back on the pile of velvet curled to hold it inside the glass case in front of her. Feeling the blush of irritation and embarrassment slide hot fingers across her cheeks, she swore silently and cursed the fair skin that somehow always managed to go blotchy instead of rosy when she was upset or embarrassed.

“Didn’t mean to interrupt your dreamin’ time, girl. I know workin’ in a place full-a old dreams and shiny lost hopes like this must be a real distraction fer a lover of doo-dads like yourself, but...”

Staring downward, Kass watched the knuckles of her hands turn a livid white that stood out strangely against the tarnished chrome of the case. She bit her lip, swallowing hard, and willing the swell of irritation and upset to drop down out of her throat and let her breathe, to let her think, to let her do her job. It wasn’t fair; she shouldn’t be here, shouldn’t be stuck in this damned dead end job, trying to make ends meet when the ends were so frayed that trying to join them had become pointless a long time ago. It wasn’t fair; she had

always had that silent inner voice, the ache in her chest that told her she was meant for something special, meant to fly, and now...

Last night had been bad. Ronny had come home early from work, anger steaming out of every abrupt motion. He hadn't even spoken when he came in the door, just headed straight for the kitchen. She had known even then, suspected what had happened, but, like a stupid, she had wanted to help. They were supposed to be partners, weren't they? They'd talked about a wedding date; hell, they'd been together two years now. But they weren't partners much of the time anymore. Ronny wasn't the vibrant, fun-loving man she'd met at that concert two years ago. Something had changed, and most of the time she wasn't sure if it was her or him. There were times that she felt he wasn't fair to her, times she had packed her battered suitcase and then turned back at the last minute, clinging to a commitment she wasn't sure when she had made, and there were times she felt as though she were the fool, clinging to childish dreams and teenage rebellion when she should just suck up and deal with the reality of life.

But last night had been a bad one. As she'd suspected, Ronny had had another row with his boss about job expectations, and once again Ronny had threatened to walk out. He had mumbled out an explanation of what had happened, his voice punctuated by broad sweeps of his strong arms, his chin length hair falling over the smoldering lights of his dark eyes. And in that moment, Kass couldn't decide how she felt; part of her hated him for his temper, his endangerment of the job that kept them financially afloat, part of her sympathized with his troubles with his boss, and another part of her loved the fire that the anger woke within him and wanted to take him to bed for a good fuck.

He'd just stormed off, clapped headphones on his ears, and retreated into a world of music that he had cut her out of. She had retreated into the kitchen, hands wrapped around her stomach, conflicted, lonely, aching for something more. Time had ticked by unheeded as she stood at the sink, fingers wrapped around her stomach, staring out the dark square of window in front of her, her ears picking up the muffled rhythm of the drumbeats and the metallic click of Ron's fingers on the guitar strings as he stroked comfort for himself out of his favorite electric. She hadn't cried, just ached, watching the blur of headlights in the next street over, and staring at the moon and the dark birds perched on the power lines that arced

over the thin fingers of the barren trees. And she had realized that she envied those simple, elemental things. She wanted out – not to die, just to be out – to fly away and be free.

“...but, well, I had a visitor, and I figured,” the old, cracked voice again cut through the pictures of memory, returning her to her attempt to swallow and the pale knuckles curled around the edge of the case, “since y’always been so kind to me that I’d bring him over and see if there was anything amongst your pretty things he’d like to have.”

“John.” Kass raised her eyes past the ghostly reflection of herself in the case in front of her to look at the old Native American who had spoken, “you ca-“

She broke off, her mouth freezing around the words as her gaze, already steeled to deal with the withered-apple of a vagabond who had broken her earlier reverie, landed instead on the man who had entered the shop behind him.

He seemed tall, although the dark crown of his head barely blurred out the 6 on the ruler glued to the wall beside the door behind him. His dusky skin was perfect, his shoulders broad enough to make her ache, and the morning light coming through the grimy shop window behind him spread around him like a glimpse of paradise, its light breaking the dark of his hair into the color of fall leaves as it wrapped around him. But the one thing Kass could not tear away from was his eyes. She shouldn’t have been able to pick them out against the glow of the morning and the shadows of the shop, but even through the murk, they picked her out and encompassed her, sparking memories and feelings she thought she had forgotten a long time ago.

“I can’t what?” The old man stepped forward, squinting pale blue eyes in his wrinkled face. “I’m a customer same as any other, and you’ve no right ta turn me out, young Miss Kass. It’s not like this is Buckingham Palace, y’know.”

“Well...” Kass bit back a sharp answer, letting her gaze wander around the store, past the dusty light fixture desperately competing with the light from outdoors to the row of battered Fenders and abandoned stereos and settle on the faded lettering on the window, so familiar that its internal reversed view no longer challenged her tired eyes: Sikorski’s Pawn and Jewelry. The swell of anger faded away, replaced by a now-familiar hollow. She sighed and felt one side of her mouth lift, “y’know something, John. You’re right.” She scanned

the mixture of greys and browns again, taking in the familiar shapes, “look around with your friend if you want to. Doesn’t seem to be much of anyone else interested today.”

“Thank y’kindly.” The weather-beaten face split into a grin and a gnarled brown hand came up to tip the ostentatious drover’s hat perched atop the matted grey and black hair that straggled to his shoulders. Returning the hat to his head, he straightened, angling a gap-toothed smile at his companion and spreading his arms wide. “All the cast off treasures of the world at our disposal, Michael-boy, just shinin’ and waitin’ to be found.”

Kass leaned back against the wall display listing firearms available and payment policies that had hung unchanged behind the counter for the full two years of her employ and watched the two men, the old and the young, walk around the store. They made a bizarre pair, the old man capering, chuckling, and launching into one story after another, his arms akimbo, his spry body constantly in motion, and the young one silent, carefully picking up an object here or there, fondling it, and returning it to its place. Following them with her gaze, Kass couldn’t help but chuckle at the comic figure the older man cut.

John Oscine had been a regular visitor to the store since shortly after she’d landed a job there. It certainly hadn’t been her dream job, but it was 40 hours a week that helped to pay the bills and keep she and Ronny in groceries. She went in spurts, scanning the papers for a better position, applying only to be rejected, and then falling into a slump of depression. Some days it seemed as though the pawn shop was her destiny...or her doom. John had arrived less than two weeks after she’d taken over the counter from Mr. Sikorski with his hunched shoulders and racking cough, and she clearly remembered the first day he had walked through the door, a bit of pitch black against the smoky sunlight of the front door. She had been terrified, though she’d tried not to show it, certain that the crazy homeless man who had just arrived was going to stab her and take off with the cash register. Certainly John’s appearance failed to encourage confidence; he was razor thin and perpetually stooped, although the few times she had seen him straighten to his full height, she had been shocked at how tall he actually was. His clothes were always changing, always of questionable cleanliness, with his battered hat being the only constant. Although he never specified a tribe or location, John consistently claimed to be Native American, complete with a rather impressive series of rants regarding the behavior of the white man and his respect for the rhythms of life. He had, on several occasions, regaled her for an hour with listings of the

white man's crime, usually punctuated by reiterations of the fact that he could survive on the carrion cities left behind, but all folks weren't as lucky. Certainly his skin was dark enough to support his claim, as was the thatch of grey and black hair that peeped from beneath the rim of the leather hat with its loop of clay beads and pair of feathers that stuck up from the band, but his eyes kept her from being convinced. Pale as the morning sky, they always twinkled at her, always teased her, even when John's voice was serious.

Gradually, she'd become used to the strange old man with his explosive entrances to the store and his long stories. He came in almost every day, and wandered around the dusty room, his weathered hands and sharp eyes taking in item after item. And sometimes he bought something. Well, she corrected herself, got something. Usually, he bartered for whatever struck his fancy that day, sometimes with things he had traded her for days or months previously. He ceased to make her skin prickle and instead became almost a welcome change from down and out mothers and skinheads with questionable sources for money and merchandise.

But never, in all the time he had come to the shop, had he brought a visitor. And what a visitor. Feeling suddenly self-conscious, Kass pushed herself away from the wall and busied herself with a display of rings on the counter as she realized that she had not looked away from John's "visitor" since he had walked through the door. There was something about the man. Something, she noted to herself, other than the fact that he was fucking drop-dead gorgeous. He drew the eye in a quiet way with a magnetism...

She shook her head fiercely, as if to shake away the unintended train of thought. He was her type; that was all. From his dark hair to the cut of his jaw to the worn leather jacket and battered jeans, he fitted into the mental picture that had inspired a rather random assortment of relationships since her high school days. Silly girl, she reproved herself silently, he's probably married, a looker like that, and even if he isn't, as soon as you open your mouth, he won't be interested in you.

With a vicious snap, she pulled a ring off the unsympathetic display hand, and jammed another in its place. Damn it, she couldn't even have a fantasy anymore without second-guessing herself. What the hell was wrong with her? Dropping the replaced ring into a slot in the box of rings on the counter, she glanced up at the younger man, and her heart lurched. He was holding a guitar.

She'd always loved music, loved musicians. Her father had more than once grown impatient with her dreamy idolatry at the shrines of a series of bands, and more than half of her significant others over the years had played with, been previous members of, or aspired to start a band. In the worst nightmare of her life, the only thing that had kept her afloat was music, a thread of beauty in the dark, a promise of hope. For her, music was magic, and there he was, all dark, handsome six feet of him cradling a Stratocaster like it was a newborn. Kass felt her knees weaken, felt an embarrassing creep of electricity below her stomach, and swallowed hard.

As though feeling his eyes on her, the man – Michael, John had called him – nestled the guitar back into its stand and stepped back from it, his fingers lingering on its long neck. Kass bit her lip, a wildly unlikely series of images and emotions flashing through her. For a moment, the parade paused, focused on a single thought, and she prayed that Michael would not come over and talk to her. Better to worship silent from afar than be spoken to and make an ass of yourself. She bit her lip again, bit it until it hurt, the dust of the shop stopped shimmering with imagined magic, and the world seemed a little more normal.

“Kassie?”

She turned at the sound of her name, already rankling at the use of a diminutive on the end. In front of her, only John's hat was visible above the glass of the counter, the stiff spines and delicate fringe of the paired white and black feathers in its band bristling over the bubbled chrome. Through the two panes of glass, she could see his face, eyes squinted in concentration as he studied something through the case. She cast a quick thanks skyward that the back of the case was paneled and there was no chance he was contemplating her hips.”

“What?” She stepped across to where the man squatted, peering into the case more out of habit than necessity.

“Can I hold it again?”

She sighed, the shake of her head more habit than anything else. It always came back to the same thing. “All right.”

With practiced accuracy, her hand snaked inside the display, fingers closing around the silver sphere she herself had been holding when the two men entered the shop.

Presenting it with a flourish, she pulled her brows together, her lips pursed into a moue of distrust,

“Be careful with it, you know.”

“I know, I know.”

He lifted it on wizened fingers with a curious grace, raising it to catch the light, even as Kass had earlier. His pale eyes reflected the pale glow, somehow lent magic by the silver of the little sphere, and a smile creased his wrinkled cheeks as he turned the ball delicately on his fingertips.

“Such shine...” he murmured, more, Kass thought, to himself than to anyone else.

A smile curved her lips unbidden as she watched him. No matter how he annoyed her or freaked her out, she couldn't blame him for his fascination. The silver orb was her favorite thing in the shop too. It wasn't anything that amazing in the grand scheme of things. Certainly, not noteworthy enough to attract the attention of bargain seekers and garage sale veterans who paraded through the shop, their suburban haircuts and tailored clothing coupling with their whispered conversations to speak louder than any words that they were treasure hunters slumming in search of adventure. But the little ball had always fascinated Kass, enough that when Mr. Sikorski had mostly disappeared, leaving the running of the store to her, she had relocated it to a place of honor atop a pile of black velvet on the top shelf of the case. The little sphere was perhaps three inches in diameter; solid silver, at least according to the appraiser, save for the tiny chime hidden at its center. It had no visible seams or marks, just a perfection of silver. It could reflect with frightening clarity, bending the straight lines of the world to its own perspective, or it could blur a reflection, echoing the world as though seen through a veil of water. There were days when getting lost in the purity of its reflection and the thread of music from one of the abandoned stereo systems were the only things that fed her soul and got her through the mundanity of the day.

Silently, she watched the man opposite her, watched the wrinkles in his face seem to lighten as he gazed in wonder and open avarice at the small sphere.

“So pretty,” He cooed to it, adjusting his hand so that the silver caught more of the light. “Would,” He lowered the orb, closing a weathered palm around its shiny perfection, “would you trade for it, Kass?”

She sighed, shaking her head, “I told you before, John...”

“You’re asking the wrong question.”

She stopped, the end of her sentence frozen on her lips, half forgotten. It was the first time John’s friend had spoken and his voice was just as she had imagined it, low, clear, masculine. It cut across the dusty space between them as though it didn’t exist, caressing her thoughts, piquing curiosity where there should have been annoyance at being interrupted. Kass looked up, squinting through the sunlight to where the man Michael stood, one hand resting lightly along the frets of a guitar on a stand and the other shoved into his pocket. The light streaming through the window cast him into shadow, rippling around him in a hazy halo that deepened as she squinted, trying to gain a better view of his face.

“What you *should* be asking,” he stepped forward, out of the blaze of the front window and into the shadow of a shelf of CDs and abandoned stereo equipment, his chin lowered and his eyes, suddenly visible in the dim light of the shop, boring into Kass across the space of worn carpet, “is *what* she’s willing to trade for. There isn’t a thing in the world that doesn’t have a price, a sacrifice that makes it worthwhile. It’s just a question of what you have that she’ll take in exchange for that bauble.”

He raised an eyebrow, his eyes never leaving hers, and Kass felt her stomach lurch. She felt lost, terrified, powerless. She swallowed hard, and tore her gaze from that of the man across from her, mentally reprimanding herself. It was silly, stupid, she told herself. It was the same thing that had happened when the guy who looked like Trent Reznor had come into the shop the week before to pawn a guitar; she was a flighty girl who got all mixed up in front of handsome men; she was...she heaved a deep sigh. She was a lot of things, but none of them changed where she was. Much as she usually hated conflict, and as much as she was under the spell of this Michael guy, she was just going to have to handle it. And, she reminded herself firmly, she *could* handle it.

“Well then.” John’s husky voice breathed the smell of earth and street across the glass countertop at her. He’d risen to his full, strangely tall height, his eyes pale in the dark tan of his face, the silver orb still snagged in the creased tan of his fingers. Standing across the counter from him, she suddenly felt small. John didn’t frighten her or confuse her like his friend did, but there was something about him when he gathered together his dignity that spoke of more than a life lived as a vagrant. He was quirky, crazy perhaps, but there was a deeper set of dreams and hopes beneath the battered hat and the stiff feathers. For a

moment, she wondered again about his past, about where he had been and who he had been before.

“What will it be?” The blue eyes bored across the space between them. “He’s right, Kassie, there’s always a price asked and offered. It’s the way ‘o things. What’s your price? What is it that I have that’s worth this trinket?” He held up the silver sphere, its pale surface gleaming between them, his face suddenly calm as he repeated his question, “What’s your price?”

Kass met the pale eyes, her throat dry and her thoughts whirling. Her mind pounded her consciousness with a thousand thoughts, not a single one relevant or useful. She hated this conversation, hated the notion of sacrifice, of everything having its price. She didn’t like the tall, clear John who wanted to bargain with her for the little piece of silver she had come to consider part of her shop, part of her life. She didn’t want to be here, didn’t want to answer his question, didn’t...

She shook her head, trying to clear it, to silence the plethora of pounding thoughts. She had to think clearly, to answer. She could simply snatch the silver sphere and tell John to take his friend and leave. She could tell them that the sphere wasn’t for trade for anything. But, she hesitated, it would be hard. John was stubborn, and he had fondled the silver sphere almost every time he had come into the shop for as long as he’d been coming in. She could try to pass him off, turn him down, but it wouldn’t work. She blinked again against the pale, hard gaze across the counter; this man wanted an answer, a proposal for trade, and he was going to get it. Forcing the bitter spit down her parched throat, she licked her lips with a dry tongue. She would make John an offer. She would ask for something he was not wiling to give up, something too precious to relinquish.

Lifting her eyes slightly, she felt a smile touch her lips. There were only three things about John that never changed amid the tattered clothing, stooped stance, and indifferent cleanliness: his eyes, his worn leather hat, and the feathers that adorned its brim – one black as night itself, the other brilliantly white. Those three things defined John Oscine; his eyes were out of the barter equation; the hat, considering its extensive contact with the matted mass John considered his hair, equally so. But the feathers were something else entirely. Those were what she needed; those were what she would ask for.

“I’ll trade you the sphere.” Her voice sounded raspy in her own ears, strained thin as though stretched too far to be quite itself. Angry, she licked her lips again, trying to moisten them, to make herself appear calm, in control, anything but the way she felt. She leaned forward, the skin of her arms pressing against the fluorescent-warmed smoothness of the glass, lowering her eyes for a moment to rest them from John’s sharp gaze before she lifted them again, trying to meet the diamond stare with calm. “But I have to have something in return. From you, John, I’ll take those two feathers.” She tipped her chin toward his hat.

The silence stretched from a heartbeat into a breath, and from a breath into a moment. Kass stayed where she was, leaned forward over the counter, unsure whether to straighten up. She could hear the tick of the clocks on the steel shelving to the left of the door; she could hear the trickle of sound from the stereo unit in the back room. Around her, the smell of dust and musty sunlight mingled with the musky smell of John’s clothing. She balanced on the counter, feeling a twinge as her weight pressed against her forearm on the glass and the skin and muscle protested the pressure placed on them.

Unbidden, a prickle of uncertainty rose from the gaps in her self confidence and tickled at the back of her mind. Perhaps she’d made him mad. Perhaps she’d miscalculated. Perhaps...

“All right.”

The words were so soft that at first Kass wasn’t sure that she’d heard them. Squinting, as though, she chided herself, that would make her hear better, she looked up at the angular man opposite her. John was not looking at her anymore. Instead, he was looking at the silver sphere, still balanced in his fingers, his gaze one of sadness and longing. Love. The word appeared, uninvited in Kass’s mind. He looked at it with love. She felt something ache and tear inside her; that was the way she wanted someone to look at her. No one looked at her that way; Ronny had looked at her with desire and pride, but never that kind of longing. And now he rarely looked at her at all. Love. She shoved the thought and feelings to the back corner of her mind, behind the mental door marked ‘to be dealt with later.’ Right now, she reminded herself sternly, she had other problems.

“All right?” She raised her eyebrows, drawing herself up to her full height, and doing her best to look professional.

“All right...” John looked up at her, the longing still there, still calling out to something inside of her. “The silver for the feather...but only one feather.”

“You said a deal...” She began to shake her head. She had guessed right; the feathers were important to him. He wouldn’t part with them easily.

“And a deal is made.” Michael’s voice again cut her off, its quiet authority cauterizing her protests in her throat. “You made an offer, and he a counteroffer.”

She looked up at the younger man, already scolding herself not to make a mooncalf of herself over him again, and found him much closer than she had expected. Somehow, in the moment’s conversation, he had stepped away from his position near the door and crossed the worn green and brown of the carpet to stand less than two feet away from the edge of the counter. He watched her, his eyes seeming to catch the light from the window where he had stood a moment ago.

“All that remains is your answer. You’ve asked a high price, and John’s agreed to meet it and made a counteroffer.” He leaned forward, his elbow resting on the counter, brown leather pooling around it against the glass.

For a split second, Kass felt absolutely woozy. The grey and blue smells of the man reached across the counter and touched her, setting off a mad bedlam of thoughts and emotions that she usually kept carefully caged away. For a moment, she stood utterly still, staring at the man in front of her, leaning so casually against her counter. Why, a tiny, insistent voice asked her, couldn’t a man like that be interested in her. He was gorgeous, but beyond that, he exuded a strength, a sympathy, a promise of healing that called to her on levels that went far beyond emotional or sexual. He was magical in a real, earthy way that she could not even begin to put into words. He mesmerized her, he fascinated her, and, she admitted to herself silently, he terrified her.

“Okay.” She tore her gaze away from Michael’s casually leaning figure, and returned her attention to John, waiting for her answer. “One feather. I’m a moron for doing this, and I’m probably going to get fired for pulling this shit, but I was the one dumb enough to make the offer, so I’ll have to live with the fallout. One feather, from you to me.”

For a moment, John’s eyes disappeared behind tanned, wrinkled lids, and he dipped his head, murmuring a word in a language she did not know. Reaching a thin, wrinkled hand above his head, he pulled the black quill from the band of his hat, and lowered it carefully.

He stood for a few heartbeats, unmoving, his eyes still closed, the midnight luster of the feather in one hand, and the pure silver of the sphere in the other. Again, time seemed to hold its breath as he whispered, his words snaking through the still air of the shop, raising the hairs on Kass's arms. She did not recognize the language, but she did not have to. The words slid from John's lips with a certainty and rhythm that spoke for themselves; he believed those words had power, and either that authority or his certainty of it hung the sibilant sounds in the dust laden air of the shop, packing it dense with belief and power.

Slowly, John's voice faded below a whisper until all Kass could hear was a rhythm no louder than her own heartbeat, and then, without warning, the pale eyes popped open again, the shoulders slouched, and John's mouth smiled at her without the warmth of the expression coming anywhere near the pale eyes above it.

"So be it." He said quietly. "The deal is made."

Kass stood her ground. Curtly, she nodded, still telling herself to be professional, to not let the customer have the upper hand; if, she told herself, John could be considered a customer. Barter indeed. Her gamble had failed...she had named something she was sure John would not relinquish, and she had lost. He was willing to give up the feather; perhaps it was just a habit, a good luck token, not the important link to his past she had always imagined. Perhaps it was nothing more than an affectation. Hell, she shrugged mentally, he probably got a new feather every few days; she had just thought it was always the same two bristling out of his hatband. She had been suckered into offering a deal by her own stupid mooning over this Michael fellow, and now she was screwed. Mr. Sikorski was going to take this one out of her paycheck.

"All right." She held out her hand. "It's a deal then."

Twirling the silver sphere on his fingertips, John reached inside the uneven seams of cloth that passed as his shirt and secured the orb somewhere in his clothing. Watching him, Kass was suddenly caught with the full weight of his gaze. Lifting her chin, she met it, and was surprised to see a sparkle in John's eyes that spread down through his cheeks and pulled the browned lips into a smile. Reaching out a wrinkled, dark hand, he turned her hand over, palm facing the patterned tiles of the ceiling, and gently placed the dark quill beneath the curve of her fingers.

“Done.” He smiled at her. “And I think you may have gotten off better than you will ever know.”

With a strange little bow, made half comical by his suddenly hunched stance and tattered clothing, he turned from the counter and sauntered toward the door, the dread locks of his matted hair trailing over his shoulder behind him.

With the soft creak of well worn leather, Michael straightened up beside her, his arm falling from the counter to his side. He looked at her again, finding her eyes, even when Kass tried to lower them to avoid his gaze and avoid making an ass of herself again. She tried to hold his gaze, but found herself, for no reason, fighting back tears. And then, as suddenly as he had arrived, he turned on his heel and was gone, following John’s tattered figure out the door and into the sunlight.

She watched them go, seeing the tattered shirt and the creased bulk of the leather jacket slide past the letters on the window. As the last bit of brown and black moved out of sight, she breathed a deep sigh of relief, leaning back against the display board. Thank God they were gone.

And yet...opening her eyes, she looked down at the feather pinched between her fingers...and yet.

The feather, looking at it in the late afternoon light, was amazing. It was a full ten inches in length, its quill thick as a pencil at its base, and tapering perfectly to needle thinness at its tip. Along the curving length sprouted lustrous barbs, each adding to the lustrous curve of feather which, as she twirled it slowly, caught the light with a dark rainbow of blues, greens, and purples.

For a moment, Kass forgot the throbbing pain in her head and below her breastbone. She forgot about having to go home that night and face Ronny. She forgot about the fact that Mr. Sikorski would be furious about her deal and about the fact that her life appeared to be wandering aimlessly around a dead end street, stubbornly ignoring the signs. She lifted the feather to the light, turning it, dipping it from side to side to catch the light, wondering at the brilliance of color and the size of the quill.

“What kind of bird,” she whispered to the listening guitars and alarm clocks, “would have a feather like this?” She had to have been wrong. John could not have changed feathers every week, finding new feathers when his old ones became ragged. This feather was special.

She stroked its edge along the pad of her finger, feeling the solid-soft tips of the individual barbs slide along her skin.

Shaking her head, she slowly leaned back, resting the back of her aching skull against the letters of the board behind her. The silver sphere was gone, and in its place she had a feather. No matter how beautiful and amazing the feather, the fact remained. She had traded the silver orb to a vagrant for a feather. Stupidly, she giggled, the sound thin and hysterical in her ears against the silence.

“I’ve traded the cow for the magic beans.” She whispered softly. “And if I find the golden harp, Ronny will probably want it anyway.” Only silence answered her weak attempt at humor, and she found that even she herself could not muster a smile. With an effort, she lifted her head away from the wall and looked at the feather one last time, setting it gently on the surface of the counter. “I’m fucked,” she whispered to herself, “but I’m not even sure it matters anymore.”

The feather was still there when she closed the shop hours later. She hadn’t had the heart to move it. Actually, she corrected herself, she hadn’t had the heart to do much of anything. There hadn’t been any more customers between John’s exit and closing time for the store – not an unusual occurrence, but one that could not have happened on a worse day. The long hours had dragged past, each one bearing a new recrimination, a new doubt. Locking the back office, and switching off the lights, she stared at the perfect curve of the spine, the sharp point of the quill meeting an identical point of even deeper blackness as the glass countertop echoed the sleek shape in shadow.

Even in the deep dimness of the shop, the feather caught the glint of the streetlights that pushed its way through the window, wrapping around sagging shelves and uneven armoires to touch the counter with a dim glow. Even in the pale light, it found color, luster, shimmering blue and silver in the light of moon and street lamp. Stepping toward the door, Kass paused, stretching pale fingers to lift the feather from the counter. Lifting it to the faint light from the window, she twirled it between her fingers, watching the play of light and shadow, the illusion of movement outside as the dim street beyond the window winked in and out of view between the breadth and slender depth of the feather. The tiny breath of air

moved by its swirling touched the hair at her temples, moving the pink streaks she'd had put in last week in a moment of punk defiance and longing for the girl she used to be.

Feeling a bemused smile tug at her lips, she reached up to touch the hot pink tresses, rubbing them between her fingers. She couldn't help longing for a past she wasn't even sure had ever existed. She dreamed of youth, of freedom, of being free from the thousand responsibilities that piled on her shoulders from the moment she rolled out of bed in the morning until the moment she finally slipped into the dark arms of sleep, or, if she could afford it, alcohol. And instead...she closed her eyes and breathed deeply of the air stirred by the feather, imagining that she could smell the sea and the warm, avian smell of the bird from which it had come...instead she was an aging punk wanna-be. She longed for her freedom and her rebellion, but life and necessity had somehow pressed her into a place of responsibility that she hated as much as she took pride in it.

"There has to be a way out," she whispered to the sliver of blue-black silver twisting between her fingers in the dim light. "There has to be a way. Why," she smiled without humor, "why can't you be a magic feather and let me fly away?" Shaking her head, she felt the tips of her hair brush her cheeks, and she dropped the feather to her side. Twisting her smile into a crooked, wry line, she snorted. "Magic feather, my ass. More like Dumbo's magic feather - a promise with no magic attached. Damn." She breathed deeply again, leaning back her head to take in the familiar smells of the shop. "I'm tired. Time to go home and be the perky little wife. Shit."

She pushed the handle of the door and opened it, letting in the fresh, cool air of the night outside, and stepped out, turning her key in the lock behind her and tugging vigorously on the handle behind her, just to make sure that the door was securely locked. She'd lost Mr. Sikorski enough profit for one day. She shook her head again, irritated with herself for a thousand different reasons, but mostly for her own stupidity. People were always telling her she wasn't confident enough, that she should trust her instincts; they didn't understand what happened when she did. It was enough to remind her she was an idiot.

Shrugging her jacket closer around her shoulders, she started walking. She could have cut down Elm and turned onto Magnolia and Columbine; it was the shortest way home, but somehow she found her footsteps taking her down the dim lights of Main, taking the long way home, the way that didn't involve going by the brightly lit restaurants and the pounding

rhythms and muted songs of bands playing in bars. She didn't think she could take that tonight. Every night she dragged her steps past the siren's call of the music, longing to push her way through the doors, toss off her cover charge from a confident roll of money, and drown herself in the beauty of the music and the purity of the young singers who stood night after night on those stages, singing from their hearts and dreaming of stardom, of being discovered.

Ronny had been one of those young artists, a long time ago, and she had been captivated by him, led into his world by the siren's song. They had found a dream in the music and followed it; she had believed in his dreams, believed in the art...hell, she still did believe in it. Sometimes she thought she believed in it more than he did these days – it was part of her responsibility now; she carried the dreams, nourished them, kept the hope alive for both of them.

She shoved her right hand deep into her pocket, still mindlessly twirling the feather beside her with her left. Those innocuous bars reminded her of things she didn't want to think about, didn't want to deal with – not tonight. A flicker tugged at the edge of her vision, and she squinted upward, toward the dim expanse of sky past the city lights. The streetlights were fewer and further between here on the south end of Main, another one of the reasons she liked taking the long way home. Here, as in so few places, she could catch a glimpse of the sky, a flutter of a wing, a shaft of moonlight. The flicker caught her eye again, and she saw its source. Beyond the edge of town, a massive bank of clouds had marshaled, piling one atop the other until they towered, their grey forms solidifying into an uneven wall, and between the mighty peaks flickered tongues of lightning, the promise of a storm.

Kass felt her heart surge. She loved storms; they spoke to her in ways that few other things did. Their fury, their glory was the only thing that filled the ache in her soul, that truly echoed the chaos and frustration that she sometimes felt would tear her apart. Unbidden, her feet shuffled to a halt as she watched the play of brilliant light leaping from cloud to cloud, casting the twisting wall of cloud into sharp relief, painting its edges with the finger of brilliance and colors so intense that they remained behind her eyelids a second after the lightning was gone. She ached for the storm, for its wild abandon, for the relief it promised, the extension of her own turmoil. Nature could tear out its conflicts and resolve them with a force she never could, never could allow herself, never could find the means to

express. She wanted the storm to roll toward her, breaking over the city, wrapping her in its arms, drenching her, giving her a moment of madness, of freedom, before she had to go home and face Ronny and his day at work. Kass raised her eyes to the clouds again, blinking away unexpected tears and whispered a single word, its sound loud on the strangely silent street.

“Please.”

“Miss Kass.”

The voice was not loud; it was pitched soft and its tone was gentle, but Kass felt as though she had left the pavement several feet behind her. For a moment, she was confused, her mind still longing for the touch of the storm on her skin, still dreading the shape of home, and then panic welled up dark along the edges of her mind and blocked out her other thoughts. The south end of Main was not one of the nicest neighborhoods in the city although she always reassured Ronny that it was safe. That was part of the thrill of it; it was a chance. She had never had a problem; no one had ever accosted her.

But, she reminded herself, there was always a first time. And it had already been a hell of a day.

Looking around, she saw him, a darker shape on the dark street, a single figure, waiting for her at the mouth of an alley that cut behind one of the buildings. Kass felt her heart skip a beat, her mind already filled with images of men waiting in the alley, of her battered body being found. Her feet seemed frozen to the pavement beneath them, and for a moment, she felt as though she were trapped in a bizarre dream, unable to flee, unable to speak, unable to do anything at all except stand and wait for the inevitable.

”What....” She forced her throat to respond, forced her voice to come out, thin and wavering in the dark air, “what do you want?”

“To make a deal of my own.” The dark figure shrugged itself away from the wall behind it, the rasp of leather against brick loud on the quiet street. “You bargained pretty well earlier, but I don’t think you have any notion what you took from John, and it’s my duty as his friend to get it back, and perhaps,” the man stepped forward again, his shadow still trailing dimly behind him, clinging to the wall, “give you something you will treasure in return.”

Relief poured into Kass, drowning out her panic and numbing her prickling fingers. She gulped in a deep breath of the exhaust-laden night air and blinked, the world expanding

again from the dark figure and the darker mouth of the alley behind him to again include the street and the flickering sky above it.

“Michael.” She breathed, her shoulders slumping and her fingers unclenching from the spine of the quill in her hand.

“Michael,” he echoed, moving across the pavement toward her, his face slowly emerging as planes of light and shadow in the dimness, his eyes a presence she could feel even though she could not see them. “And I haven’t come to rob you or to frighten you, just to bargain.”

Kass watched the play of shadows across the man’s face as he moved toward her, watched the way his broad shoulders shifted in the expanse of jacket, watched the way his jeans creased at his groin and his knees as he moved, watched the confident way he moved across the cracked pavement – easy, sure, silent. He stopped a few feet away, respecting, she realized, her space. He waited, a stillness wrapped around him that had nothing to do with a lack of physical movement. Kass swallowed, the sound loud in her ears, looking at the man standing, waiting. If she closed her eyes, she could feel his warmth across the space between them like an electrical current, feel the heat of his eyes on her, feel the clenched knot of his soul. She looked at him, squinting as she tried to see better in the dim light. There was something in the way that he held himself, something in his eyes that she could almost see, something beyond the beautiful face and poise, something she recognized. Pain. Vulnerability...Her weight shifted as she moved to take a step toward him, and then stopped herself. She knew nothing about this man; surely, he had swept her away with his presence, and now she thought she saw part of her own struggle reflected in him, but when it came down to reality, she knew nothing. She settled herself in her worn shoes and met his eyes. The spine of the quill pulsed between her fingers as she turned it.

“What kind of deal? I figure you want John’s feather back,” she raised it slightly, “but what are you going to give for it?”

The shadows shifted on Michael’s face as a smile lifted his mouth and traced spider line shadows of wrinkles at the edges of his eyes.

“A story.” The voice was warm, soft, the way she remembered it from earlier in the day, “And, perhaps, a bit of insight.”

“A story?” Kass’s eyebrows lifted, creasing her forehead into the wrinkles she so hated. “Look, I know that I made an ass of myself earlier trading that silver for a feather, but I’m not *that* much of an idiot. Trading the feather for a story? What kind of messed up fairy tale do you think this is?”

Michael laughed, a warm, sweet sound, made sweeter by a thread of bitterness woven somewhere deep inside it. “Not a fairy tale, Kass. Hardly the place for it.” He paused, shoving his hands deeper inside his pockets. “Here is the deal I propose,” he lifted his head, the dark shadows of his eyes reaching out to meet hers, “I’ll tell the story I have to give, and if, at the end, you think it is worth the sacrifice, a worthy bargain, you give me John’s feather. If not, you walk away the richer by one tale.”

Kass hesitated. She should get home. Ronny would want dinner, would wonder where she had wandered off to, would probably worry. She was his strength, he had told her that. She should get home to him, should be there for him. But... Her eyes strayed back to the towering wall of cloud rolling slowly closer to the edge of the city, its flickering beauty whispering promises of *might have been* and *could be* to her soul. What the hell. She no longer felt as though she were in any danger. Michael might be weird, but he was beautiful, and there was something in the way he looked at her, something in the way he spoke, that awakened an ache inside her that longed to be comforted. Silently, she nodded. What the hell. A story couldn’t take that long; it wouldn’t make that much difference. She would play it out to the end.

“All right.” She settled herself, squaring her shoulders, and waited.

A smile again crossed Michael’s face, etching with its dark fingers across his handsome features. Pulling a hand from his pocket, he ran his fingers through his dark hair, pushing it back from his face, and, breathing deeply of the stale, tense air, he began, his voice low, soft,

“Long before the edges of memory became sharp, and scientific accuracy and psychotherapy took the throne of God. Long before the hum of motors filled the air, long before detail and precision were the most important things in telling a story, crows were creatures honored and treated with respect. They were clever, some said wise, and their beautiful white feathers were admired by everyone, marking them as birds of not only wit but beauty as well.”

“But...”

Michael raised a dark hand, his head tilted back as the words flowed like honey through the dark air.

“In the way of the stories of memory, part of the tale is lost. Those few who remember the days in which the seeds of story were born say that the best stories have a hole in the middle, and in filling in that hole, each listener finds himself. For whatever reason, the crows displeased one of the powers in their ancient world, whether through trickery or through defending what was right, no one can quite recall, but they were bound to a task because of their actions. They were bound as guides to those dying, bound to lead them to realization, to a final place of peace or torment as their choices deserved. For years the crows served, guiding one soul after another, and as the years passed, and day after day they flew through the smoke of battlefields and wept with mothers over their lost children and children over their lost mothers, the sorrow of their duty crept into their hearts and into their souls. And since the outside form is the mirror of the soul, that sorrow crept out from the inside of those crows and seeped into their wings, into their eyes, into every last feather, and no longer were they beautiful white birds of wit and wisdom. They were black winged creatures of intellect and of sorrow, the harbingers of death. They kept to the task set them, living on death, doing what they could, guiding wisely and giving comfort where they could. Here and there they even tricked death, helping the living remain with those they loved a little longer. But every day the sorrow scored their souls deeper, and their wings became so black that they shimmered with the colors of tears, a rainbow of beautiful sorrow, forever echoed in their plumage.

“One day, one of the crows, remembering the task set them, as he had been taught by his ancestors, but forgetting its cause, just as we have, asked one of his fellows when the task would be done, when they would finally be free of their duty as guides, when they could return to the freedom they all mourned. The other crow stopped, amazed at the question. They had passed the legend down among themselves, binding themselves to their duty of tears, but they had never dared hope for an end to the task. The questioning crow, amazed that no other had dared to ask such a simple, and to him obvious, question, went in search of an answer. He flew to the house of the power that had set his ancestors to the task so long ago, and asked when the task would be done.

The hole in the story was complete, for the power could not remember the cause for the task either, and he shook his head, telling the crow that the task of his people had been fulfilled æons ago. They were a free people; they had been a free people. But none of them had dared to lift their eyes, dared to look inside themselves for the power and the knowledge they carried with them. Being free required a sacrifice they never expected – it required that they leave the sorrow that had become so completely a part of them, leave the fields of battle and the deathbeds, and find the power hidden in their own hearts.

“The crows were astonished when the young one returned with the news. Some of them refused to believe, moving on the bed of the next dying man. Some chose to stay with the life they had known, believing that the guidance they could give, and the good they could do was more powerful than any freedom they could find elsewhere, and some of them became great and wise in their own way. And a few brave souls dared to leave their task, to find the power within them to be free, and they still fly, sometimes in the places you least expect to see them and the forms you fail to recognize. They seek the power for freedom within, the pain of sacrifice, and with every time they stretch their wings, their feathers fade, one more shade back toward the brilliant white on the other side of the hole in their story.”

Michael paused, the dim rumble of thunder filling the silence with a different voice, the only sound on the street the movement of the air, the rumble of distant traffic, and the hiss of their breathing. Kass swallowed, embarrassed to realize that her cheeks were wet with tears. Her heart ached, not the heart in her chest, but a soul-ache that twisted between her chest and her stomach, longing for things she could not name, could not have.

“Here.” She lifted her hand, the feather catching the dim light of the street and shimmering into blue and silver, the colors, she thought to herself, of tears. “It’s not worth much to me, I guess. And your story was worth the bargain. Not worth much money, I guess, but it speaks to...” she bit her lip, suddenly uncomfortable, “it speaks to something inside me that I can’t put into words. And tonight...tonight that’s worth more to me than the money. That’s lost already.”

Quietly, Michael reached out and lifted the arcing quill from her fingers, his own wrapping confidently around the thick shaft. For a moment he stood, unmoving, staring down at the feather in his hand as if he had never seen it before, as if thinking of something far away, something only he knew. Then, with a quick, certain motion, he stepped toward

her. Kass stepped back, instinctively backing away, only to discover that she had not moved. She was less than a foot away from this man, his warm scent reaching across to her, filling her world, the dim wonder of his eyes clearly visible as they shared the same shadow. She opened her mouth, and then shut it again. There were no words. Her heart hammered in her chest, and the rumble of thunder grew louder as the wind picked up, kicking trash and dust around them in a mad scurry of detritus before the storm.

“You have that power within you.” His voice was so quiet that it seemed almost a deep tone of the wind hissing by them. “You have the power to be free, if you are willing to make the sacrifice. You can fly free...if you can find the power, and if you can find the courage.”

His hand rose between them, and he touched her, firm, warm fingers resting against her breastbone, and suddenly the tears and the anger and the frustration rose in her throat like the fury of the coming storm, and the sobs broke from her. He gathered her into his arms as if she were a child, holding her, rocking her gently, their shadows mingled on the dark street as the skittering McDonald’s wrappers and beer cans rolled by, their passing loud in the rustle of the wind and the rumble of the storm.

And then, as suddenly as he had stepped forward, Michael moved away from her, his step strangely uneven, his shoulders hunched as though protecting himself from the fury of a storm that she could not see. He turned, his face lost in the shadows of the street, and with two staggering steps, was gone, swallowed by the darkness of the alley, his footsteps blending in with the rustle of the city.

His warmth and his smell were still on her clothing, the tears on her cheeks still smeared by the pressure of his jacket. Slowly, she crossed her arms across her chest and closed her eyes against the insistent flicker of the storm. She felt hollow, empty, almost light. Half-consciously, her feet moved a few uneven steps toward home, and then stopped. She couldn’t go home. Swallowing hard, she turned her tear-streaked cheeks to the flickering clouds and whispered

“Freedom”

The wind tore the word from her lips, tossing it away with the loose refuse of the street, but something rose in her throat that she had not felt in so long that she had almost forgotten its name. She lifted her face further, stretching her neck against the wind, feeling

it take her hair and stream it behind her, its ends whipping against her cheeks. This, some part of her mind told her, is what they meant by a crossroads. She had to make a choice, and whatever choice she made meant blood, cutting off part of who she was, giving up one part of her pain....

“Freedom”

A laugh welled up in her throat, her face peaceful, her decision made, and as the mighty black wings sprouted from her back, she reached upward toward the arcing lightening, the aching pain in her soul receding for the first time she could remember since...a dim pain touched her lips...since the hole in her story.

“Freedom” she whispered to the world around her, the dark plumes testing the night air.

“Freedom.” The storm whispered back, its wind blowing away all the trash accumulated in the corners of the warren of life.