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# An Angel's Promise

Gerald Hilaire Touchette

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**AN ANGEL'S PROMISE**

**By**

**Gerald Hilaire Touchette**

**B.A. Roger Williams College, 1992**

**A THESIS**

**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the**

**Requirements for the Degree of**

**Master of Arts**

**(in English)**

**The Graduate School**

**The University of Maine**

**December, 2001**

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# AN ANGEL'S PROMISE

By Gerald Hilaire Touchette

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Welch Everman

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts  
(in English)  
December, 2001

Castle Deuclet, the protagonist of this work of fiction, has a dream which may or may not set off or be connected to a series of events that happen afterwards.

Castle is thrust into a world of the fantastic where beings calling themselves angels want to help him; where he encounters a unicorn, named Julia, that he knew as a child; where a scarecrow woman reveals herself in his dreams and tells him that she is a doorway he must go through but that first he has to find the key.

Here, Castle must face and accept the dark parts of himself: his shadow-self and child shadow-self. He must confront the Dark Man, a mysterious and evil figure that he is somehow inextricably linked to, and the people in Castle's life that the Dark Man recruits with his evil touch.

Before he faces the Dark Man, Castle is shown his power and the magnitude of his power by his two angels and his unicorn. Castle is taken through a factory by one of his angels revealing many things to Castle. Castle accepts his shadow-selves.

In the final confrontation, Castle defeats the Dark Man but not before receiving a wound in his thigh. Castle, then, realizing how much he had lost in his life--things he cannot remember--leaves on a journey to re-learn all that he can.

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## PREFACE

When I started writing "An Angel's Promise" I intentionally began without a structure or form, with only a bare minimum of plot, and with only a few of the characters defined in any sort of way. I did this hoping to allow the story and characters to unfold in their own way and in their own time. In other words, to let the story of Castle and his angels grow on its own, from my subconscious more than my conscious. I felt by doing this I could give the story a greater depth and texture than if I had worked out its themes and plot point by point. However, I do know that every story needs at least a bare minimum of structure, form and plot. So I decided to choose one form of story and one theme to guide myself by. The story form is the quest story and the theme is the theme of self and shadow self.

### Quest Story

My influences for the quest story, in regards to "An Angel's Promise," are *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Perceval*, *The Odyssey*, and even *Ulysses* by James Joyce. In these stories the heroes are thrust on a journey, most of the time against their will, and learn many things about themselves and the world they live in. Beyond these classic quest stories I also used the form of the more contemporary epic quest starting with J.R.R. Tolkien up to authors such as Robert Jordan, Terry Brooks, Judith Tarr, A.A. Attanasio, and Stephen King.

All works, especially quest stories, are episodic in some degree or another. The episodes are experiences that the heroes, usually young men, always naive in one way or another, encounter on their journeys. They move from one situation, solve it, learn about themselves and the world, and move on to

another situation. I wanted to use these episodic conventions for "An Angel's Promise" but I also wanted to combine this with the more epic conventions of the contemporary high fantasy quest stories.

Some contemporary quest stories, such as Tolkien's *Middle Earth* series, Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series, Terry Brooks' *Shannara* series and the movie *The Beastmaster*, take place on other worlds or hint at a distant past or great future of our world, while other contemporary quest fantasies reinvent our world or our history and legends, such as A.A. Attanasio's retelling of the Arthurian legend in his *The Dragon and the Unicorn* series, Judith Tarr's *The Hound and the Falcon* trilogy, John Boorman's film version of *Le Morte D'Arthur*, *Excalibur*, and even Stephen King's *The Stand*.

With "An Angel's Promise," I attempted a blending of both these forms of contemporary fantasy quests: using a contemporary realistic setting and a fantastical other world which are one and the same and separate, along with using the episodic structure of the classic quest story. One thing I discovered while reading or watching all the stories mentioned above is that they all have the similar conventions.

The first convention is the protagonist: a young male hero, on the edge of manhood (I made Castle older though), who knows little or none of his past or his parents. If he knows one or both of his parents, he is rejected by them. This young man is then thrust into a situation he has no control over, and, at first, does not belong within what is unfolding.

The situation that the hero is thrust into is caused by some "Great Evil": an insane god, a demon, a being from another race, a human corrupted by a great power or magic.



This "Great Evil" is found in a mountain, castle, tree, or tower that the hero must penetrate in order to destroy the "Great Evil" or learn how to destroy him while usually learning something about himself. The side that the hero is on, the side of good, also has castles, cities and towers which are usually attacked by the "Great Evil" through infiltration or actual laying siege. Along with the mountain or tower there is always an opposite realm whether it be tunnels beneath the mountain, castle, or city, or an underground city or tunnel network.

The hero always finds or is found by characters who aid him, guide him or manipulate him for the cause of the good.

Weather does not follow its normal pattern, usually controlled by a powerful force evil or otherwise.

There are always magical items (weapons, stones, orbs) and fantastic beings and creatures legendary and new.

The many worlds, countries, cities, kingdoms and the multitudes of characters are rendered in great detail to create a completely believable, realistic world.

I attempted to use all of these conventions in "An Angel's Promise" while keeping Castle moving from one episode to the next in which he learns more about himself. However, Castle does not come to any profound, all-solving Truth as in most quest stories. Everything is there for him (and the reader) to learn from but he must puzzle it out.

One note before I move onto the major theme throughout "An Angel's Promise": the works that I have noted above can be looked upon as allegorical. Some certainly are; others are not so easily catalogued as such. I had no intention of writing "An Angel's Promise" as an allegory. I am not saying that there

is not good allegorical material within this story, just that writing an allegory was not my intention.

### Self/Shadow-Self

I focused only on this one theme to allow the plot and characters to unfold on their own but also to explore this one theme along many of its loosely woven threads. To explain: the theme of self/shadow-self is the dichotomy of who we know we are with the part of us that we don't recognize as us and is unknown to us. The dichotomy of self/shadow-self goes beyond the obvious dichotomy of good/evil to include natural/magical, life/death, light/dark, knowledge/ignorance, love/hate, pain/pleasure, physical/spiritual.

I worked on this theme by creating dichotomies of the characters:

Castle/Shadow Castle, Castle/Shadow Child Castle, Castle/Dark Man, Strange Angel/Dark Angel, Faith/Marney, the Reel World video store/the natural and magical world, and on and on. The dichotomies overlap and echo.

I first became interested in these sorts of dichotomies, parallels and reflections through horror movies, where, admittedly, these dichotomies are simple and usually unexplored. However, once in a while I would come across a horror film that would deal with its themes in an intelligent, poignant way. The two horror films that influenced me the most with this theme of self/shadow-self are *The Wolf Man* and *Les Yeux Sans Visage (The Eyes Without a Face)*. I first saw *The Wolf Man* at the age of six, long before I understood the implications of Larry Talbot's transformation into the dark side of his nature, but I do remember feeling sorry for him. Years later, in my late teens, I found the beauty and anguish in the eyes behind the smooth featureless mask worn by the faceless Christiane in *Les*

*Yeux Sans Visage*. Christiane's shadow-self was thrust upon her by her father-- first, in causing the accident in which she loses her face and, secondly, in his forcing her to wear the mask and hide herself from the world. Between these two films I found two books that affected me just as strongly with their theme of the divided man: Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelly's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. In these novels this dichotomy of self/shadow-self is laid out and dissected.

In these four works I found the anguish and pain of men struggling with the other half of who they are. This is something I thought of as beautiful and tragic since none of these characters are able to come to any sort of understanding with the other sides of themselves, whether it be the light or dark side. This dichotomy is something I wanted to have in Castle, but I wanted him to accept the dark side of himself. I started my story after Castle had already rejected and forgotten his darker self, hinting that something had occurred before "An Angel's Promise" starts. I started where I thought *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Frankenstein* would have continued had Henry Hyde and Victor Frankenstein survived. What happened before "An Angel's Promise" to Castle is something that he does not remember and must re-learn. I then wanted to end this part of Castle's narrative with the realization that he has learned, that he has something to remember but before he has time to sort through what he remembered. In doing this I realized I was being influenced more by the themes of two auteur filmmakers: David Cronenberg and David Lynch.

In David Cronenberg's films (*They Came from Within*, *The Brood*, *Videodrome*, *The Fly* and *Naked Lunch* are his most influential to me) he takes this shadow side and shows it by, in his words, "making mental things physical."

An example of this: in *The Brood*, a famous psychotherapist, Dr. Raglan, gets his patients to release their psychoses in physical manifestations resulting in a woman giving "birth" to malformed children who commit acts of violence on those people their mother directs her anger and rage towards. Dr. Raglan's book is titled *The Shape of Rage*. I found this is partly what I was attempting to do with *Castle*; his emotions and memories begin to take on a physical life. They intrude on his life as beings.

In David Lynch's films this theme works differently. Lynch's characters run across their shadow-selves in other characters. In *Eraserhead*, Henry, the title character, dreams that he becomes his mutated son; in *Blue Velvet*, Jeffrey realizes that the other side of him is uncomfortably close to the sadistic and insane Frank Booth. In *Lost Highway*, two characters-- Renee and Alice--are played by one actress; and Fred, the protagonist, finds a connection between himself and the Mystery Man who is two places at the same time. Lynch's theme of the two sides of a person goes even further in *Lost Highway*: Fred, a forty-something musician, changes into Pete, a twenty-something mechanic who had disappeared under strange circumstances before his parents and girlfriend.

Unlike Cronenberg, Lynch does not explain this theme of the physical manifestation of the darker self through the use of pseudoscience. In fact, Lynch does not explain what this manifestation of the shadow-self is, how it happens, or why it happens. Lynch is more in the realm of fantasy, while Cronenberg is in the realm of science fiction. For "An Angel's Promise," the work of Lynch's that influenced me the most is *Twin Peaks*.

In Lynch's television soap opera *Twin Peaks*, the theme of the duality of man is taken to greater lengths to include the duality of nature and civilization, of

the ordinary and the extraordinary; revealing shadow-selves that are part of yet separate from the self.

*Twin Peaks* intrigued me because of the dual nature of the town of Twin Peaks--FBI Special agent Dale Cooper calls it "a little slice of heaven," while Sheriff Truman, who had lived all his life in Twin Peaks, tells Cooper that "there is something dark in these woods" of Twin Peaks--and the dual nature of its characters: almost everyone in Twin Peaks has a dark side and everyone has secrets. This is epitomized by the icon of *Twin Peaks*, Laura Palmer, whose death begins the series. Laura has many secrets and a dark side: homecoming queen and prostitute addicted to cocaine. This theme of self/shadow-self has many layers and variations, including some humorous parallels such as the soap opera everyone in Twin Peaks watches, *Invitation to Love*, which reflects what happens in Twin Peaks before or as it happens; some apparently unconnected parallels, such as the two main spirits inhabiting bodies in Twin Peaks (Mike and Bob) being paralleled with two of the high school students, Mike and Bobby; to mystic layers: the white and black lodges that Cooper discovers and where he finds his doppelganger. The duality that I found most intriguing because of its difficulty to understand and accept is the possession of a character by the evil spirit Bob.

Bob possesses Leland Palmer, Laura's father, and forces Leland to sexually abuse and murder Laura. Lynch shows this situation without explaining it, at least in not any direct logical way; and he does not use it as an excuse for what Leland did. The viewer is forced to ask, "Is Bob a metaphor for sexual abuse and violence, or is Bob real and his hosts as much victims as the ones Bob kills through his hosts?" Is *Twin Peaks* reality or fantasy? The answer to these

questions is both. Bob is a metaphor and real; *Twin Peaks* is fantasy and reality. I tried to create this in "An Angel's Promise," to make Castle's world very mundane and fantastical at the same time.

There is no logic in *Twin Peaks*, at least not as we understand logic. As much as the series moves forward in plot it moves doubly so in depth. The plot, while straightforward is but a base for the theme's multiple layers. I attempted this in "An Angel's Promise": a simple plot with many textured layers that move the story more than the plot does.

Having watched *Twin Peaks* again recently, I realized, almost embarrassingly so, how influenced I actually was by this series in "An Angel's Promise": from my room of curtains where Castle learns about himself, to my elliptical explanations given to Castle about what is happening to him, nothing is straightforward in *Twin Peaks* or "An Angel's Promise." The side that shows always has a shadow side that veils and obscures it.

### Style

In "An Angel's Promise," I attempted to make my writing style just as important a factor in the story as the plot or themes. I have made my sentences long and complex partly to slow the reader so the reader can begin to feel the texture I tried to put there, and to have the reader absorb the story more than understand the story. I want the reader to enjoy my sentences as much as my story, to savor them on an aesthetic level. I also tried to make my language and sentences become the fiber of the story and to take on a universal meaning for the reader. I realized what I was attempting to do when I read Walter Pater's *The Renaissance* shortly after having started writing "An Angel's Promise." Through

reading Pater, I realized what I was attempting to do was have my prose evoke feelings more than explain my story, to have my prose press against the external world of the reader more than give the reader a straightforward story to read. I was also influenced by the magic realism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez: not only to have extraordinary things happen in ordinary places and situations, but also to have my sentences give the story a magical quality, a way to bridge and blend the mundane and magical without pages of explication.

These ambitions may be more than my talents and skills allow, but if readers comes away having found some sort of beauty in my work and some sort of connection to their lives outside of the story, my work will have been a success.

Castle Deuclet dreamed:

In the center of a large circle made up of people clenching each other's hands, he stood, his hand holding the hand of a young woman. Castle's eyes were unfocused; he could not have focused them even if he had wanted to. He could not make out the woman's face but he knew that he knew her. Her grip was familiar. He knew her but could not give her a name. He tried to focus further away from him, at the figures holding hands around him; they were not as unfocused, but still not clear. What he did see were faces that should be familiar but were not, or dead faces, their features so slack they did not look human. The sun was high and sent a sticking humid heat and it was hazy, not from the heat or clouds, but from a thin light-grey dust that was hanging in the air. The dust clung to the air in tiny particles, almost imperceptible; it clung to him as well. There was no breeze.

The young woman broke his grasp. He felt his palm--slicked with his and her sweat-- become grimy with grey dust. She looked at him; he could not tell



what her face said, but he thought her eyes did not look at him. She moved to the part of the circle before him where a dead face and a no face unclenched hands with an almost visible effort. She moved outside his circle. Casting his face downwards--in pain, in sadness, or just because it got too heavy, he did not know--to where he saw a white flower with red veins raised through its delicate petals like a bleeding heart but larger, much larger and on a vertical stem, and alone. It was so beautiful he almost cried. It hung there, its bottom opened and curled back for its pink lip with a green ball at the end. His eyes almost focused. A butterfly, dirty browns and greys, found its broken path into the circle. It landed on the soft and cool lip of one of the flower's curled petals. Both flower and butterfly bobbed faintly under the strain of the butterfly's weight. The butterfly leaned in as if wanting to suckle some of the flower's nectar. Before the creature's proboscis touched the fragile pink lip of the flower, a thin, tiny blade shot forth from its maw gleaming like dull iron in the hazy heat. The butterfly began rocking back and forth on its perch, slicing and stabbing deep into the flower's heart and cutting the red veins of the flower. Blood spurted, blood flowed, in such a tiny amount.

The anger flooded Castle; he raised a foot to crush the butterfly. He wanted to cry for the flower, but knew he would not be able to. He lowered his foot. The flower was dead, its stem limp, its head shredded and flat on the emerald grass, a tiny pool of already sticky blood around it. Grey dust began to settle on the flower and its pool. The butterfly moved heavily with its feeding, and crookedly, outside the circle. Castle fell to one knee next to the dead flower, his fists against the ground. He watched the grey dust shroud the corpse. The dust did not cover the grass.

Standing up, he moved to the edge of the circle. The faceless and nameless ones did not break apart for him. He tried at every other person; no one broke for him. He moved back to the center of the circle feeling his eyes unfocus as much as they could. He felt distant, vague, light--empty. Closing his eyes he opened them. The circle was the same. Closing his eyes once again he opened them. The circle was the same. Closing his eyes one more time he opened them. The circle was broken. The nameless and faceless were clutching their faces and screaming. All of their faces, blank or slack, had become a red-brown goo that was dripping and peeling.

Castle moved from the circle.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### A Sacrifice

He was at his desk. No lights were on; they were not needed: an almost full moon--large and low--cast its silver and blue glow through the windows. His left palm rested flat on the desk top; his right hand, with delicate movements and with some skill, was spinning a double-edged razor blade between his fingers. Castle's eyes were bloodshot; he had not slept for three nights and four days before last night and last night's sleep had been so filled with tiring dreams and thoughts that he had woken more tired than he had been before he had fallen asleep.

He felt cold inside, distant and empty. When he looked out the window, at the low moon and its few and faint stars just over the thick trees forming a line on the other side of the road, he really believed that if he were to stretch his hands

towards the night and its sounds he would meet resistance. Something that would give, stretch and thin, but not break: a thin plasticky envelope. Castle was far inside himself, and outside himself, that was the only way he could think to describe it. He felt weak and transparent as he felt strong and heavy. The coldness and lightness blossomed in his chest--the feeling always made him almost panic at first--and quickly spread throughout him, and not just his body.

Laying the razor blade, one edge down, onto the back of his left-hand parallel to two healing long, narrow and deep, neat scars Castle made a third cut. He did not know why he did this. This was not completely true--guilt made him do this. Guilt for what is what he did not know. When he did this, he felt more guilt: guilt and fear and shame, but a peace also. Blood began to well up from the thin and deep slit; the nerves around the cut began to sting. The blood continued, it oozed thick and dark, but the thickness did not slow its flow. The blood continued; Castle had to stop himself from panicking when he felt himself sliding further in, further distant; he thought that must mean he was getting lightheaded. The blood stopped. He did not even have a moment to feel relief before the guilt came. With the guilt came something else: a voice.

*You must help me, Castle. I can't do it by myself. I need you. At the dead and dying buildings within a building. I have been waiting a long time, I think. I'm ready now.*

The voice was in his head but what bothered Castle was that he had also heard it outside his head. He vaguely recalled another voice that had been only in his head but it had stopped years ago. This voice was a female voice like the other voice had been and it had quavered with fear and maybe pain. Castle tightly wrapped a towel around his hand; the pressure on the cut made the

distance shrink until he was back into himself and on the surface of himself, the thin plasticky and clear envelope was no longer before him but neither was his connection to the world behind it, and he suddenly felt even more exhausted.

He would not sleep that night.

\*\*\*\*\*

### An Angel's Birth

Castle, stood, studying the back of the dying mall, his left temple was throbbing. The sun was high overhead, almost at its zenith, and the air was still and heavy weighing on him, sticky against him. The movie theaters were to his right, long abandoned, the blue and white sign weathered and cracked. Castle had grown up going to that theater. It filled him with a sadness to see them that way; he began to feel cold and empty and felt himself falling inside and away. The clear, plasticky envelope brushed against him making him take a step backwards. He turned his head to look at the back of the almost deserted mall; a fire escape led to the two different levels and to the back doors of the different, mostly abandoned stores. There was a loading dock off to his left. He studied these things as if seeing them through someone else's eyes, distant eyes; his body became numb. He felt a strength beneath the numbness, light and taut. Castle's senses sharpened, became more sensitive. He could see the scratches, dents and places where the paint had dripped; he heard the distant trees barely move in a breeze so soft that he had not felt it before. Scents, almost faded, filled his nostrils and within these scents he could separate layers and tell how old they

were. The smell of the asphalt beneath his feet was pleasant, if a little strong but not overpowering the scents of the air. What he smelled and felt, he tasted too.

Castle's attention was drawn to one of the doors on the second level; the back door to what used to be a bookstore--there were no more bookstores in his town he absently realized--the door shimmered as if it gave off a great heat, or a transparent curtain shifted before it. A pale light that he would not have normally been able to see began to seep from the door's cracks. The door opened powerfully, but not violently, and soft light spilled out. A golden glow, dim at first, became increasingly brighter as Castle watched. It became so bright that he should have had to look away with his eyes so sensitive. The blackness behind the doorway was completely swallowed. After a long moment of great intensity the golden light pulled back and dimmed until there was only blackness again.

Not realizing that he had moved, Castle found himself climbing the fire escape and standing before the open door; his temple throbbed so hard his vision throbbed with it. The door had been more than opened, it had been pulled from its hinges and was resting crookedly next to the doorway. Castle touched the door; it was as cool as the sun and humidity would allow it to be. Staring into the blackness behind the doorway he could see nothing, hear nothing, smell nothing, not even with his heightened senses. It was not just a blackness of no light; it was thick and deep, heavy and solid. He reached in, hesitating, to touch the blackness. A hand shot out of the blackness of the doorway. Castle staggered back, surprised, until his hands caught onto the paint chipped and rust flecked railing behind him. He caught the small of his back hard against the faded blue metal railing; he did not feel it from deep inside and far beyond the void within

him, but even through the emptiness and shock he knew he would have a bruise there.

The hand, dripping with a thick, brown opaque substance, grabbed at the door frame, slipping a few times before getting a good grip. The hand was feminine, slender yet strong. Another hand, the right hand, thrust through the blackness and the doorway and anchored itself on the opposite side of the door frame. A leg appeared, bare and brass-colored, covered by more of the thick opaque liquid. Castle watched as the hands clenched on the door frame and the leg tensed; she was trying to pull herself through. He stared for a few moments before taking hold of her wrists and pulling. The hands spun themselves around in his grasp and grabbed Castle's wrists. He was startled by the strength of their grip.

Castle pulled, straining with all his might; he had to brace his feet on either side of the doorway to keep from being pulled in. Her arms came free. He thought he heard a faint sucking sound. Letting go of her wrists he thrust his arms, up to mid forearms, into the blackness trying not to think about it: he could not see his arms; it was as if they had been cut cleanly off where they met the black but he felt them tingling. He groped and managed to find her shoulders; wrapping his fingers around her upper arms, he pulled with all his strength, pulled until his feet were braced on the dark and stained bricks on either side of the doorway inches from the grey peeling floor. At first the blackness did not give. Suddenly, unexpectedly her head and shoulders pulled free. Castle went sliding backwards unable to keep a grip on the slippery substance. He heard a loud metallic ring as the back of his head cracked against the railing.

He rubbed the back of his head spreading the thick liquid through his thinning hair; it felt good on his scalp. He could feel the bruise even through the coldness. Almost slipping in a pool of the brownish liquid, he managed to leap to the young woman; she was being pulled back into the doorway by the darkness. He grabbed her around her chest linking his fingers together behind her back. Trying not to think of her softness pressing against his chest--the emptiness he was inside and outside of was slipping; he knew this from the black and silver spots he saw before his eyes and the press of her breasts against him--he heaved with all his might. Castle grunted with the strain; she groaned with pain. She pulled free. They both tumbled to the walkway with Castle managing to push himself sideways so they would not hit the railing.

Leaning her gently against the wall Castle grabbed the railing and pulled himself to it by sliding across the liquid. He clung to the distance and emptiness by only a thread now; the throbbing pounded with skull cracking force. Wiping his eyes with the backs of his hands, he took his first real look at her. She leaned against the wall breathing raggedly, her hands flat on either side of her, her knees pulled to her chest. She was looking right at him; the throbbing stopped. She was wearing a summer dress and an expressionless mask. He could not tell the color of her dress or mask; they had been darkened by the opaque brown substance; she was completely covered with the thick liquid, her hair was darkened and plastered to her head by it. Spots still danced before his eyes but he thought hers were golden.

As Castle tried to catch his breath, the young woman painfully and slowly pulled herself up using the wall. She stiffly moved to Castle and brushed his face

with her hand, "Thank you." She turned and grasping the railing walked down the fire escape. Castle could see her muscles visibly loosening with each step.

He could not move. Breathing raggedly, he let his head fall back where it smacked against the railing with a hollow clang. Castle's last thread to the emptiness unwove, the thin plasticky envelope disappeared, and the pain came in ever increasing waves. He grabbed the back of his head.

\*\*\*\*\*

### Reel World

"Do you know who she was..."

"...or why she'd ask for him?"

Castle heard this as he pushed the door open. The two women behind the counter stopped and turned when they heard the scraping of the unbalanced metal door against the metal of its frame. The younger woman with the wavy light brown hair flushed slightly when she saw it was Castle. The slightly older and dark haired woman held no such compunction.

"Castle, Paige and Sally stopped in, asked you to lunch sometime this week. Oh, and some woman just left and was asking about you. She said she would come by another time to see you."

Castle paused in setting down his thermal tea mug. The two women did not notice this; they saw only his usual placid, somehow distant expression.

"Oh?" his voice betrayed a slight curiosity.

Laurel and Linda chuckled, Linda, the older woman, adding, "You're a magnet, Castle?"



"Yeah," Castle said in a mock big man voice, "at least when I'm not considering myself a rock... or an island." The whole time a strange feeling was building in him, urgency if not fear; a hardness formed around him--the thin plasticky envelope, only thicker--leaving him inside the emptiness and outside looking in, distant. His eyes unfocused.

Laurel looked up and into his gold-green eyes. They were bloodshot, "Are you okay, Castle? Your eyes look lost."

"I'm fine." He grabbed a stack of videotapes from the counter. He left to put the movies away.

Castle did not sway as he moved to the islands in the center of the store and began putting the videotapes on the shelf in their proper alphabetical places. He was not having trouble concentrating, not even so deep inside the emptiness. The hardness surrounding the void scared him though; he had never known it to be so hard; it was that, but not only that, that made his throat constrict. What was worse, however, was that the throbbing in his head could slice through the thickness so easily. The young woman from the door the day before flashed through his thoughts--he had somehow almost forgotten about her-- but as more than a thought; as a *presence*. The thickness shattered; the emptiness bled out; he drew in a sharp breath; the movies slipped from his hands and landed on the thin carpet with crashes. Castle crouched, more to keep from falling than to begin picking up the tapes. The crushing in his throat began to loosen.

"I remember you always dropping movies." Castle quickly turned his head towards the voice slightly above him. "You know me, anything to get attention," he said through a faint smile as the voice's source crouched next to him.

"You okay, Castle?" It was Linda's voice calling from the counter.

It was Marney who sprang to her feet with a slight bounce, "He's fine. He was just staring at me and walked into the pole." Her lips curled slightly and the quick look she gave him made him blush. She quickly crouched down and brought her face so close to his that he was pleasantly uncomfortable. "I've always liked that about you, Castle," she whispered low, teasingly, "you blush so easily."

"That's just so like you, Castle," Castle heard Linda as his face became hotter, "always staring at the girls. You magnet you." He knew Linda waited for a response, but for some reason he was having a hard time connecting and gathering his thoughts. He thought it was partly the soft flowers he scented on Marney.

"You look good." Castle said this after a long awkward moment. She had let her usually short cropped, deep black hair grow out and it curled at the nape of her neck, her normally pale skin was lightly tanned. As she stood up, he glimpsed the strip of her stomach that her navy blue blouse did not cover; she had a gold belly button ring. Marney was not very tall but her legs gave the illusion of being longer than they were; he noticed this as his eyes unconsciously followed her legs from the bottom edge of her light blue jean shorts to her beat up old sneakers. When he realized what he was doing he pulled his eyes away and quickly stood. He knew he was in trouble when he saw her hands, balled into fists, on her hips. Her usually soft, smooth oval face had creases on its forehead.

"What do you mean 'You look good?' I didn't look good last time you saw me?"

"That's not...uh, I mean...you are..." Stopping and taking a deep breath Castle stopped most of his fumbling, "I meant that you look as beautiful as I remember you." He was impressed with how smoothly that came out.

She motioned him closer with her finger. He looked into her dark glittering eyes. She lightly placed her hands on the back of his neck and brought her lips to his ear. "I know exactly what you mean," she whispered. He knew that she could feel the heat spreading through his face and neck beneath her hands. He tried to pull back but the tightening of her hands stopped him. "I *really* like how easily you blush," her whisper had taken on a throaty quality. In one fluid motion she slid her hands from his neck and started walking away from him swaying her hips as if she knew he would be watching her.

Castle made it back to the checkout counter in time to see Laurel just finish waiting on Marney. Marney moved to the other side of the counter and picked up the two movies she had rented. "See you guys later." She waited for the responses before adding, "And next time, Castle, think up a better line than 'You look good.' Although you did make up for it this time by looking at me instead of where you were going." She waited until Castle's face was completely flushed again before leaving the store.

Linda and Laurel were giggling. "Staring at Marney, huh?" Linda said through a big smile.

"Not very professional, if you ask me," Laurel said more to Linda than Castle.

"I was not staring at her," Castle broke into an embarrassed grin. "At least not when I dropped the movies."

"Oh ho!" Linda exclaimed. "Didn't I tell you that we had to watch this guy at all times? Next thing you know he'll be trying to pinch our butts or something."

"Did Marney tell you what she's doing now?" Laurel asked.

Castle felt a coldness start to grow in his stomach. He shook his head.

"Go ahead, Laurel, tell him what Marney is up to these days. I want to see Castle blush again."

"Marney works for a company called *Manikins*. She is now an exotic dancer, a stripper." Laurel said this too casually, too matter of factly. Castle blushed again but this time with shame. The coldness grew and shifted until it became the emptiness again, until the thin plasticky envelope separated him from Laurel and Linda.

"She even has a business card," Linda fished through one of the drawers pulling out a white card she handed to him; it had a silhouette of an overly curvaceous woman on the right side. On the left side was *Sapphire* typed in bold, capital letters. Beneath it was *Manikins* in smaller letters with an address and phone number. "Sapphire is her stage name."

"The two of you are playing with me, right?" His voice sounded distant; he barely heard himself. He wondered why Laurel and Linda did not look at him funny or cock their heads slightly trying to hear him. But all Linda said was, "No, this really is what she does now."

Even through the thin plasticky envelope and deep and outside the emptiness Castle felt ashamed. Ashamed, confused and hurt. Anger. The anger only flickered before he buried it.

Castle felt the presence again--the presence of the woman in the doorway. He felt her, not inside himself, but outside and trying to take what he was feeling onto herself.

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### Pieces and Parts

"Hi Castle." He quickly turned and saw Marney sitting on the concrete walk, her back against the front of the building and her arms wrapped around her knees. She lifted her head from her arms, "Are you walking home?"

"Yes." Castle answered as he turned the key in the lock. He heard the tumblers, clear and loud, in the night's blanketing silence and the heavy, layered latch thunked into place. The automatically timed lights went off. Castle saw Marney as a darkly outlined form.

"Mind if I walk with you?" She stood up and as she moved towards him a swath of light from the indoor store lights caught half her face in a dim yellow glow.

"No. Not at all." She stepped closer to him and he found himself staring down into her soft shining face. He quickly aimed his eyes at his feet.

"So they told you, huh?" She asked this but he knew it wasn't a question.

"Well . . . uh . . . you see . . . they . . ." Castle stopped himself, took a deep breath, made his eyes stop roaming everywhere except the space she inhabited. He looked her in the eyes, "Yes, they told me."

"I was hoping it wouldn't matter with you. You were always different." Marney was staring into his eyes as she said this, as if thinking of something else.

"I know I don't know you very well but you always seemed to see below the surface."

"It doesn't matter . . ." he began, then stopped himself. "No, it does matter but it shouldn't matter; I don't want it to matter."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Castle. Sometimes I'm not too proud of what I do and I'd like to forget about it when I'm with friends. Friends who can accept me as I am. Who don't think of me like that." Castle caught a brief look of sadness and regret flash across her face.

"I don't think of you in *those* ways though, Marney!" He felt his eyes grow large.

"Oh, Castle," Marney said through a hand she was using to stifle a giggle, "sometimes you are so wonderfully naive and innocent that I wish I could be like you; of course you think of me in *those* ways. It's human nature." The deep light from the store made half her face glow; the darkness dulled the other half. She looked into his eyes again. "And you know--I never noticed how beautiful your eyes were before--gold and green--like tigers' eye. And they always seem lost, looking for something that's not there." He felt his face heat even more. This time even her hand couldn't stifle the giggle, but her eyes were serious.

She took him by the hand and slung her bag over her shoulder. "Come on, let's walk."

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"I don't know why I do this, Castle." Marney said this as Castle watched the headlights of a passing truck highlight the curves of one breast and hip. "I could say I do it for the money . . . and I guess I wouldn't be lying." She turned to

him--she still held his hand--and looked into his face; it was lit with pale blue from a streetlight. "It is good money."

They walked on silently for a long stretch before Marney spoke again, "Sometimes . . . sometimes I don't like myself much. Sometimes I feel . . ." in her pause Castle could see in her shadowy and light face that she was reaching for a word that fit, ". . . wrong." Marney's face darkened for a moment, her brow drew down and her eyes tightened; then her face lit, the tightness not quite leaving, more as if it had been covered by the lightening. A big smile spread over her face. "Besides, I've always been told 'if you've got it, flaunt it'." Castle's eyes widened in shock, again.

Marney sighed, "Think of it this way, Castle." As she said this, headlights from a turning car moved across her breasts and hips, casting the rest of her into a deeper darkness; Castle could barely make out her outline. "It's like horror movies."

With the headlights past he could see the fuzzy edges of her outline again.

"Horror movies aren't any different from what I do." He stopped. She stopped and turned to face him. "Horror movies always have scenes where the girls take off their clothes, take showers or have their clothes ripped off for them, right?"

"Most, yes." Castle cast his eyes down noticing--not meaning to, but noticing automatically--her legs; they appeared darker, more bronze, in the dark.

"These scenes aren't needed for the plot, are they?"

"No." He agreed. "They are gratuitous, but that's not the same."

"It is the same: young and pretty woman taking off their clothes for, usually, men's pleasure. If it's not the same it's because violence happens to those girls; it's always the girls that take off their clothes or have sex that die violently."

Castle studied his own hands in the dark; their backs looked bronze, and their palms brass. "That's not why I watch horror films, though."

"I'm not saying it is." Marney stopped and took Castle's face with both her hands; she had to stand on her tiptoes to look into his face. "I'm not saying it's wrong either. I'm just trying to show you that things aren't always black and white." She let go of his face and dropped to her feet. As she did this Castle caught a twinkle in her eye. "Why *do* you watch horror movies?" The white of her teeth slashed through the darkness of her face.

Castle paused for a long moment. He had never asked himself that question.

"Castle . . . ?"

The concern in her voice made him look down at her. He brushed her cheek with the back of his fingers, smiled weakly, "I'm not sure." She stood in the night shadows of spruce trees and his hand brushing her cheek disappeared into that darkness.

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## An Angel's Protection

*Something is happening. Something is not right. Something because of you; it is not your fault.*

Castle was stretched out on his bed; he thought he was asleep, but his eyes were open. The young woman was standing in the far corner of the room, amongst his book-lined shelves and books piled onto the floor, and mostly hidden by shadows. He knew she was not the same one that had come from the doorway. This woman had pale skin, almost white, with long almond hair and amber eyes; he could see her hair only as a dark spill on her white clothed shoulder caught in moonlight and her eyes not at all--but he knew their colors. He had never seen her before, yet she was somehow familiar; he could see in his head the pale blue veins beneath her milk-cloudy skin. Something glinted white-blue and silver in a straight line, for more than a foot, above her head in the moon and starlight that barely reached her corner.

*Please do not feel bad.* The young woman shifted on her feet as if being pulled slightly forward, then slightly backwards, her voice grew stronger than weaker, undulating. The silver and shadows where her face was hidden appeared to grimace as if she was struggling with two thoughts that did not go together but somehow did, or struggling to push through a heavy silver-sheer and blue-shadowy curtain with too much material and too many folds. Darkness and light woven before her shifted, almost rippled, making her waver. *It is not your fault even as it is. I can do nothing.* Her voice became hard, then took on the quiet softness again. *I wish I could.* The young woman moved back into the corner where she began to sob. Castle heard a soft scraping and a barely

perceptible thud; he knew without knowing she had slid down the wall onto the floor.

As the sobbing continued Castle tried to move but only his eyes responded and as he made them sweep around his sparsely furnished apartment and stare at the many shadows and shadowed areas both familiar and unfamiliar he realized that he was not afraid--he was not even afraid that he could not wake himself up, if he was asleep, or afraid because he could not move--mostly because the young woman's presence was soothing, comforting even in her crying--especially in her crying. In fact, a calmness and peace washed over him. He wanted to stay in the pale blueness of shadows and moonlight of her presence, of her voice.

"I know you," his voice was a floating hoarse whisper; he did not think he had spoken, "I've seen you before." The sobbing stopped in an abrupt, soft but surprised gasp, *Yes, but not with your eyes, not with those eyes.* He thought how liquid silvery her voice was. *Things are going to become not easy; they have started to become scary and pain-filled.* It was not a question, but hinted at being one. She sounded like a thousand-year-old little girl to him. *You have to let it happen. You have to accept it. You have to open to it . . . . My name is Julia.*

She had barely finished speaking these words when Castle felt his throat constricting and his left temple throb with a sharpness. It ran down the side of his face and down his neck as if something was going to burst inside him. He was about to panic. *Let it happen. You cannot, you must not, fight it. You are too strong. I am here with you.* He only did not panic because of her voice; he focused on her voice until it was almost the only thing he knew. Castle did not panic even when something grew in his chest and stomach, something he could

not hold inside himself but could not allow out. He did not fight it; he just did not let it happen. He wanted to swallow but was afraid he would choke on his saliva; he swallowed with a convulsion. The pain pounded on the left side of his neck and traveled into his temple. The emptiness came.

“Am I dying?” His voice was calm and smooth despite the quickness and shortness of his breath.

*No. You are not dying.* He heard these words as he pulled away into the deepness of the emptiness, and outside its deepness. He felt the thin plastic envelope close around him as he pushed into it. Julia’s voice sounded muffled, as if she were speaking through thick, soft material.

He went to the emptiness.

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She watched as Marney walked down a street, a bag slung over her shoulder, her feet shuffling. As she yawned, she stretched her arms above her head as far back as they could go; she listened as Marney’s vertebrae popped. She watched as Marney stopped dead in her tracks, her eyes locked on her form above and to her left, watched as her eyes widened with surprise. She knew what Marney saw: Within a circle of lamplight and crouching on top of the old-fashioned apartment house was a woman. A woman wearing an off-white featureless mask. The woman looked back at her; she watched as Marney waved to her, confusion on her face. She only glared back at Marney with golden eyes glinting in street lamp light. She could feel the hair prickle on the back of Marney’s neck as Marney turned and got her legs moving stiffly, but stopped after only a few steps when the woman leaped from the two story building. She smiled as Marney’s mouth fell open; all Marney could do was watch her land, in a flurry of skirts, on the opposite

sidewalk with nothing more than a slight bounce. Marney's teeth clicked as she shut her mouth. The woman was wearing a white summer dress and her feet were bare.

She knew what Marney was thinking. As she walked towards her all that filled Marney's mind was how beautiful her hair was--a honey blonde--and her eyes--like burnished gold, almost glowing. Towering over Marney by at least half a foot, she moved with a liveness and a grace that roused a jealousy inside of Marney's fear. She knew Marney could only think of how beautiful this woman was--she knew this even though Marney could not see her face beneath the mask--and how smooth her brass colored skin was. And how flowing and musical her voice was as she told Marney she never wanted her to hurt and confuse him again.

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Castle woke with a start thinking he was choking; his room was empty.

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#### A Castle in Stone: Rain

It was a warm midsummer's rain that fell on the cemetery, making the light colored stones dark and the dark colored stones even darker. The sky, the shade of the light stones before they had been rained on, stretched, a smooth unbroken sheet, as if forever, in every direction. The cemetery stretched with it. The sunlight, almost preternatural, as it filtered through the solid light grey sheet of low clouds that seemed as one cloud. The light, the clouds, the rain, changed the world. Or at least it did for the young man crouched before, but a distance from, a

dark gravestone, his long black coat and bare head opened to the rain. Before a stone so dark the rain could not make it darker, only make it glisten.

Castle was looking towards the gravestone but did not see it. With his eyes unfocused it was as if he could see through it, around it. He did not see his name--*DEUCLET*--carved on it in large flowing letters, or that the letters revealed a lighter dull stone, beneath the black-blue glistening stone, darkened and dulled further by the rain to a darker shade of grey. Castle did not have to see the stone, or his name on the stone, to feel it.

He did not feel the rain, he was not even bothered by it dripping into his face; he felt it, but from deep inside the emptiness, behind the thin plasticky envelope. What he felt of the rain was soft and warm, and it cleaned. A distant flare of brightness caught the edges of his eyes: honey colored and white, and brass. It moved--flitted--from behind a tree to behind a gravestone, soft folds of whiteness trailing behind it. Castle's eyes did not focus. From deep in the absence that was not absence he felt his left temple begin to throb. It throbbed to the rhythm of the flitting--dancing--glow that left a silken afterburn on his retinas of honey and white, and brass smears.

Gravestone to gravestone, gravestone to tree, the fluttering and gliding rhythm of honey and white, and brass; a blank face peeking at him with each stop. The throbbing of his temple changing rhythms with the soft streaks of glimmering brightness against the grey sheen of the sky, with soft white flames licking behind it.

The throbbing kept to the rhythm, Castle stayed crouching, his eyes stayed unfocused well after the honey and white, and brass stopped dancing.

He did not see the dark figure in the far distance, a dark brown stain in the rain greyness.

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### An Angel's Kiss

Castle sleeps as the woman from the doorway moves from the shadows of his night darkened room. She glows cloudily as she moves to his bed. Pale silver-gold moonlight glints off a silver bracelet around her wrist, off silver hoops in her ears. His sleep is shallow and fitful; she treads lightly; he senses her but she gets lost in the jumble of his dream images. There are several of her there already; this one appears with more clarity and sharpness. She touches his forehead with the back of her hand. He moans softly; she shushes him and his fitfulness ends. Sliding on top of him with a lightness that defies her reality, a leg on either side of his hips. Tilting his head, she lowers her face to his, raising her faceless mask enough to expose her mouth, her white teeth and pale full lips. Using the thumb of the hand holding his head she gently opens his mouth, slightly parting her lips as she lowers her face to his. Before she kisses him, an opaque brown viscous liquid begins to dribble over her bottom lip to spill down the corner of Castle's mouth; opening her mouth wider she places it over his. With a sucking noise she breaks from the kiss, strands of the thick sticky liquid stretch and break to spill down the corners of his mouth. Castle chokes and coughs. She places fingers over his mouth in a swift gentle motion and he swallows. His face tightens, he shifts and moans but quickly gives in. Climbing off him, the woman from the doorway treads lightly to the window and leaps from the sill.

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Snow falls on Castle as he walks down the familiar empty street. Weak rings of snow-blued lights circle out from the distant spaced streetlights. Castle stops, the soft crunching of snow beneath his boots stops. The night is quiet, muffled by the falling snow; he hears only his breathing and the snow landing in the frigid still air. The snow-grey and blue sky melds, weaves with the white-blue falling and fallen snow. Behind the night sky glows a blueness, it casts onto the fallen snow and reflects up filtering through the falling snow on its way down and on its bounce back up. Castle's black winter coat is open; the cold cuts into him, gently. Snow falls on his face bouncing before melting and sticking to his cold skin; his ears and face are numb. Smiling is hard through his cold skin; he easily does so.

The snow makes him feel good; it makes him forget things he did not know he remembered. Castle begins to walk again as lightly as he can, making as soft a crunch as he can beneath his boots. The street is not long and slopes down gently but he cannot see the end, only partly from the snow falling. Before long, through his snow comfort, he can see a darkness at the end of the street. He stops and crouches in the ankle deep snow, the tails of his coat brushing over the loose pack, his gloved fingers interlocked. He knows he must go to the end of the street; Castle wants to go to the end of the street, he is excited to get there, but he does not often have the chance to walk and be in the falling snow, especially at night, and he wants to enjoy this for as long as he can. Soon the chill will pass the threshold of pleasure-pain to pain-pleasure. When this happens he will go to the end of the street. For now he lifts his face to the sky, letting small dense snowflakes pelt his face gently, and listens to the quiet.

After long moments of peaceful bliss a soft sound reaches him: a sighing. At first Castle thinks it is a wind. Soon he realizes it is coming from the end of the street. It happens only once and ends abruptly as if someone does not want to disturb the silence of the snowfall. The sigh is so soft but Castle feels pain in it. The threshold being crossed, he straightens and continues to the end of the street.

He finds a young woman naked and nailed to a pole and crossbeam. She has long black hair and icy blue eyes. A slight moan escapes her as strength leaves her limbs and she slumps, pulling and ripping the flesh around the spikes through her palms and wrists. Castle runs to her, his breath harsh at this sight and his belief that he hears the flesh of her hands ripping. Having to stretch his arms above him he grabs her by the waist and lifts her to relieve the pressure tearing at her hands. She is too light. Castle realizes that she has been made, her skin is a thin slippery cloth, and when he adjusts his hands on her waist he hears a rustling and feels a prickliness through his gloves and her synthetic skin.

"Thank you." Her voice a rustling sweetness. "I am okay now, you can let me go." Castle gently releases her, making sure her arms tense before he lets her go. As he steps back, he notices a crookedly sewn tear across her stomach; the edges of the tear are rust colored. He removes his coat and wraps it around her as best he can, tying the arms around her neck and buttoning it up around her hips and over her breasts, his coat is so long on her that it drapes well over her feet nailed flat against the pole.

"I am Lacey Mae. Thank you for your help." Castle tilts his head up to her face; a nimbus of white-blue snow light surrounds her. "I am a doorway," a rustling soothing, "your doorway. One of your doorways. You must first find the key."



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## A Castle in Stone: Spaces and Cracks

Clear deep reaching cerulean and white brightnesses stretched as far as the eye could see. The stones appeared to stretch just as far. The sunlight glinted off some of the stones, the dark polished ones. A young man crouched before, but away from a darker, sparkling one. Atop this stone perched a shining brass skinned woman; sunlight became caught and sparkled in her honey-blond hair. Her white skirts were tucked between her legs and her hands rested on her bare knees. Sunlight became tangled within, but was not reflected from, her off-white featureless mask; her eyes shone as burnished gold behind it.

"I see stars in your eyes, falling." Her voice was deepened and hollowed by the mask. She paused. Castle's eyes did not focus. She cocked her head as if listening, or feeling. "I feel such sadness in you. Do *you* feel it?" A long pause.

"I don't know what I feel." His eyes still did not focus.

"I can taste the flavors of your sadness . . . of your emotions. It is from the stone I'm up on?"

"You cannot taste emotions." His eyes sharpened slightly. He saw three silver hoops glimmering with sunlight in her left ear lobe and one high in her right ear, and the sparkle of silver bands on each finger of her right hand.

"No?" She twisted the silver bracelet on her wrist. "Then why can I taste yours?" Castle only shrugged. "I don't understand . . ." her voice was hesitant, almost afraid, "but I see things. Things . . . things that . . ." she took in a shuddery breath and let it out quickly. "You were . . ." she paused, her eyes searching the skies for the words, "opened to things. These things blossom like a

flower in you." She stared at him until he lifted his eyes to her face, his eyes slightly more focused. "You must let go or these blossoms will consume you."

She leaped from the gravestone to stand between Castle and it. His eyes came into sharp focus. "I see snow, falling, in your eyes." She crouched before him her head cocking from side to side as she studied his eyes. "I will help you, I promise."

Strange Angel's soft scent--powder and vanilla--filled his nostrils. "The dream? The dreams?"

"I am sorry. I can't help you in that way. I don't know anything except that I want . . . . I'm here to protect you."

"The other night, the girl? Did you . . . ?" He felt weak and dizzy, almost as if he would fall out of his body if he let go of himself. He realized that his left temple had been throbbing for a while.

Castle's Strange Angel sat before him, crossing her legs beneath her skirts. She touched his knees with her hands and he fell from his crouch to sit as she was; she rested her knees against his. "Do you want to know? Do you not already know? Some things are necessary, I think." She touched her fingers to his eyes, gently closing his lids. Already feeling distant, Castle pulled deeper into the emptiness than he ever had before.

Opening his eyes, Castle felt a throbbing soft and deep, far away and deep inside him. He watched as his Angel removed the off-white featureless mask.

"Do you know what this is?" she asked him. She motioned to the mask as she rested it on one of her knees. He did not answer; he was captivated by her face, clear with a spread of light freckles over the bridge of her nose and onto her cheeks. She kept on as if he had answered her, "I have been trying to learn what

it is since you helped give birth to me. I have no knowledge, no memories." She sounded frustrated with this. "I was hoping you would know since it is yours."

"Mine?" His voice seemed to float far away from him, way beyond the thin plasticky envelope, far deep inside it. "I thought you said you had no knowledge."

"I don't, but I know this is yours." She lifted the mask raising it to his eye level, revealing its inside. He saw that the inside was a mirror, but not smooth and unblemished; it was made up of pieces of mirror, assembled like a puzzle, only none of the pieces fit right. There were spaces and cracks. Castle saw himself multiplied, small; distorted. "When it is time, I will give it to you."

The woman from the doorway stood and leaped onto the black gravestone, twirling to face him. "It is not your name that is on this stone, is it?" The Strange Angel placed the mask back onto her face and, spinning, leaped from the gravestone to land on another, leaping from stone to stone until Castle could not see her anymore.

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### Angel Speak

Castle poured the steaming tea from the stainless steel pot into the two porcelain cups, filling one only half way, and was breathing in the tea scent from his half-filled cup when Paige returned from the buffet. She plopped herself onto the stuffed red vinyl bench across from him.

"You remember Marney, right?" Paige asked, lowering her filled plate onto the table.

"Yes. Saw her the other day." He heard the words echo inside his cup; he lowered the cup, placing it gently, purposefully on the corner of his paper place mat.

"Did you hear what happened to her a couple nights ago?" Paige had started stirring sugar into her tea, scraping and clinking the spoon on the sides of the cup.

Castle only shook his head, filled his tea cup and, taking it up again, breathed in the pungent steam.

"She was attacked."

"Is she alright?" Castle felt himself wanting to fall into the emptiness, to hear and feel and learn about Marney from far away.

"She was supposedly beaten, only superficial wounds, but I guess she's going to have some permanent scars, including one on her face."

"Did they catch who did it?" He felt cold inside but kept himself from the emptiness.

"You okay, Castle? You look pale." He put down his cup, looked at Paige, nodded. "It's a horrible thing to think of." Paige paused before continuing, "they don't know who did it. I guess Marney's not talking about it. They say she's not in shock, though. Weird."

"Did you see her?"

"No. I stopped by the store to drop some stuff off from my store and Linda and Laurel told me. I guess it happened a few streets over from there, right off Main street."

"Did they see her?"

"No. She's still in the hospital." Paige put down her fork. "You know, Castle, you should go see her. I think she really likes you. You might do her some good."

"We'll see. I'll wait a few days, at least." It seemed as if the emptiness were reaching for him. He felt dirty.

Moments passed in silence; they ate, Castle mechanically. Marney moved farther and farther away in his head.

"Do you believe in angels, Paige?" Castle poked at his vegetables.

"Huh?"

"You know, like guardian angels?" He took a deep sip from his tea cup then quickly stuffed his mouth with some of his broccoli in garlic sauce.

"Seeing angels now, Castle. What does he look like?" Her round lightly browned face was lit with mirth; her brown eyes sparkled with much the same color as the light became when it twined into her strawberry-blonde hair, a reddish-brown.

Castle smiled. Paige's good humor almost always infected him. "You mean *her*. Did you ever think I'd see anything but pretty girl angels?"

"I guess not... 'prevert!' Just kidding." They both laughed.

"I'd almost forgotten how good it felt."

"Being made fun of?"

Castle did not answer, only felt his eyes unfocus more.

Paige paused uncomfortably, long enough to bring a piece of chicken into her mouth. "But seriously," Paige said around her mouthful of chicken, "you want to know if I believe in angels?"

"Yes."

"Why?" Castle lowered his eyes from her gaze to his plate where he found himself pushing vegetables around, making tiny wakes in the sauce.

"I've just been thinking about that a lot lately."

"My mother believes in angels. You've seen her angel collection."

"I don't mean that kind of angel. More like the angels in the Bible: Beings who carry out God's commands. Or, even just beings of light. You know, that kind of thing."

"Sometimes, Castle, you are just way out there." Paige said this with a hint of humor and much warmth in her voice. Castle only smiled and cast his eyes down. "Okay, I don't know if I can say I believe in angels, but my mother has said on several occasions that her guardian angel has protected her. You remember the story she told about slipping on the wet dock and falling into the shallow rocky water and how Sally's mother swore that there was no way she could have missed hitting her head and back on the rocks?"

"Yes, but that could have only been luck."

"Maybe that's what angels are: just good luck. What about Marney. . . . I guess I don't believe in angels."

Paige broke the recall of Marney with a giggle.

"What?" Castle looked at her, his eyes narrowed and focused, perplexed.

"I shouldn't be laughing, but . . . . I thought of Sally. I'm pretty sure you have Sally believing in angels . . . or demons, anyway. What happened that night?"

Castle shrugged. "I don't know. She didn't say."

"But she says you told her what was going to happen."

"I was joking. It was mostly about something I made up. None of you believed me, anyway." Castle's eyes took on their distant look, then came back, "You know how easy she is to tease. Almost as easy as you."

"Hah, hah. Well, she believes you now. She keeps mentioning cats and shadows, and now she's feeding all the strays around her house. She goes white every time I mention that night, and her eyes grow big. It's kind of funny . . . and kind of creepy. You seem to affect everyone you come in contact with in one weird way or another."

Castle only shrugged, looking off at nothing over Paige's shoulder. After a moment he answered her, "Sometimes things happen we can't understand."

Paige dropped the conversation with a shake of her head. "How come almost every time I talk to you I get the feeling you know really profound things. Did I help you out at all with this angel thing?"

"Not really," Castle said deadpan, his eyes refocusing from over Paige's shoulder to her before him, "but then I'm beyond help."

"That's what I'm always telling you." Paige headed for the buffet line again; Castle ate more of his vegetables and rice.

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### Tea and Alicorns

The morning had come hazy, the clouds too heavy and large to stay high. When the clouds fell to the tree tops, the branches rent and filtered them as if they had gotten caught in patches on the trees while the remainders of the clouds,

thin and light, sifted to the ground hanging like scrim curtains, casting the world in an unfamiliarity and a gloom.

Castle had wandered that morning, not sure what to do, but he had felt a pulling, a restlessness; he had started walking. Now he was lost. Cutting his way through a mist that parted and clung to him like spiders' silk, he almost laughed with frustration and the absurdity of his situation. He had found himself by the bird sanctuary he so often went to and started climbing the path up the steep slope to where the wooded area evened out. The sanctuary was small with one wide, worn and clearly marked path. One minute he was on the path, the next he was not. He did not think he had day dreamed himself lost. Besides, everywhere he looked he could see nothing but forest; he no longer heard the sound of cars. The sanctuary was surrounded on all four sides by roads, three of them main roads; he had never lost the sounds of cars before. Castle knew he should also have been on flat ground by now as well.

The birds were still there chirping, screeching and crying. In fact the sounds of birds were more dense than he remembered. Feeling the edges of panic set in, and--strangely enough--an excitement, he started pulling into and beyond the emptiness. A sudden gleam of whiteness at the edges of his eyes and the soft sound of pine needles rustling pulled him from the emptiness. A figure, fuzzy through the screening haze, stepped from behind a tree far above him on the gently sloping uphill. The soothing tranquility that entered him as a coolness told him who the figure was as clearly as the long slender protrusion above her head.

It was Julia. He thought this, before she answered back in his head.



Yes. She turned and with a sleek, somehow equine gait, moved up the hill.

Castle followed her as quickly as he could but, though she moved at an easy going stride she began to out pace him. By the time the land began to level off he had lost sight of her. When he found the clearing of moss, grass and dead leaves, he saw her squatting before a stone encircled fire. There was a battered silver kettle hanging over the fire from a thick forked branch stuck at an angle deep into the dark earth. The smell of the damp rich earth mingled with a nutty smell coming from the fire.

He studied her as she dropped twigs and leaves and flowers into the kettle. She was slender and bounced slightly, gracefully, easily on the balls of her pale grey soft booted feet. She wore tight white pants and a loose, long-sleeved white blouse that shimmered with silver and pale blue. Her auburn tresses hung loose and disheveled to below her shoulder blades. From the middle of her skull and slightly forward jutted a straight, gleaming horn. It appeared to be made from two pieces twinned together; a thin silver filament followed the twist from the wider bottom, lost in her tangle of hair, to the narrow end tipped in a needle-sharp point.

"Please join me, Castle," she spoke without turning, still busy by the fire. "I'm so glad you came." Sunlight had burned through the thin mist and a long shaft passed through her to the ground at her feet, dust motes and mist swatches danced around her.

Castle moved quietly and as softly as he could, stepping over or around leaves, not wanting to make noise. He crouched next to her by the fire; she was

cracking heated acorns with a smooth stone that fit her hand; his stomach rumbled softly. "I know you from when I was little."

"Yes, we found each other when we were children." The peace in him grew with the liquid silver smoothness of her voice. "I was alone and sad; you were alone and frightened."

"Why was I frightened?" Castle knew this to be true but could not remember why.

"You should not have been able to see me. What allowed you to see me is what made you alone and scared." Julia handed Castle a large green maple leaf filled with smoking husked acorns. The touch of the back of her hand against his palm sent a wave of glimmer through him; the hairs on his arm stood with the charge of the soft glow; the glow reached into his head. He saw the blossoms his Strange Angel had told him about distant, not quite distinct, but was too caught up in the rapture of Julia's touch. Castle forgot everything but Julia; the throb of tension in his head, which he had not known was there, was washed by the flushing presence of the peace.

With the radiance of forgetfulness came some long forgotten knowledge. "There are no more Unicorns--you are the last."

"We can--all of us--be Unicorns." Julia smiled sadly at Castle, her almond-colored eyes hazy, and touched her hand to his cheek causing the soft blue blaze in his head to spread evenly throughout his body. He did not think his body could take much more of the painfully wonderful bliss she gave him. She handed him a steaming wooden mug of tea she had just poured. The spicy, pungent aroma of the tea filled his head making him even more lightheaded. "You wrote something for me years ago. Do you remember it?"

"I keep it with me." He removed his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans and pulled a folded, browning piece of paper. He unfolded the soft parchment delicately, but did not look at it when he spoke: "The Unicorn in Darkness is a world without light. The Unicorn in light is a world without Unicorns." He looked at her, his face open, untroubled, yet puzzled, "I'm not sure what it means."

Julia's eyes looked into his abashedly. "Neither am I." Castle started chuckling. Julia giggled and quickly covered her mouth with a milky, blue-veined hand muffling her giggles. Suddenly she snorted. They both fell silent, Castle's eyes wide, Julia's hand still covering her mouth, her eyes wide as well. They both started laughing harder than before, Castle falling over spilling some of the hot tea on his hand but holding onto the maple leaf of acorns, Julia wiping tears from the corners of her eyes.

When the laughter finally subsided to short subdued outbreaks, Julia hugged Castle tightly; the feeling of comfort that washed through him almost rendered him unconscious. "I've missed you so much, Castle."

"I'm sorry I forgot you." Julia's musky, coppery scent filled him.

"Don't be, you needed to forget me. You needed to grow in your own life. Besides I've always been there deep inside you, and in your dreams."

"But still, Julia . . ." Castle did not know what he wanted to say.

"Oh, Castle." She squeezed him tight; he saw blue and white spots before his eyes but did not want her to stop. She let go of him and looked into his face; he saw her face glowing. "Now eat your acorns, you haven't eaten all day."

He ate the warm acorns and drank the spicy, smokey and sweet tea in silence while Julia drank tea and watched.

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Castle and Julia lay side by side on a quilt of white squares bordered in blue. In each square was a silver circle with a silver triangle within the circle. They watched the pale blue sky with its thin, smokey clouds. Castle, with his hands behind his head, absorbed the environment of Julia's serenity, barely holding on to who he was. After a long placid stretch, Julia turned on her side to face Castle, propping her head on her hand.

"I found one other like me after we separated. A sister." Her voice was a silver whisper.

Castle woke from his half doze. "I thought you were the last?" Castle turned towards her propping himself on his elbow.

"I was. I am. She was dying." A note of sadness had entered her voice. Castle felt tears, tears swiftly pushed away by the momentary touch of the thin plasticky envelope.

"Her name was Abby. Abby. She has a gift for you." Julia turned her head to the far end of the clearing before them. The body of a Unicorn lay there, white against the deep greens of the mosses and grasses except for the crimson pool that had formed around her neck and chest. The air before the Unicorn shimmered as if it were a curtain being blown by a gentle breeze. "She has waited for me to find you." Julia stood. "Come." She extended her hand to Castle; he grasped it and stood, the serenity flowing through him. He had grasped Julia's hand with his tea burned hand and had not realized that it had hurt until the pain disappeared, replaced by a tingle.

Julia took him to and through the thin, shimmering curtain. When he passed through the curtain, it felt as if the air became heavier. Then he was on

the other side. Everything seemed clearer, brighter and cleaner on this side of the thin plasticky envelope.

"I have found him, Abby." Julia had knelt by the Unicorn's head when she whispered this and stroked her silver peppered white mane. The Unicorn lifted her head.

"She's still alive!" Castle whispered this and fell to his knees.

"Yes," Julia answered, sorrow quivering her voice. "She wanted to see you."

Castle looked down into the Unicorn's face; pain, sadness, filled his eyes, washed over the blue serenity that filled him. "I am not worth this suffering."

"She thinks you are." Julia took his wrist and gently prodded his hand towards Abby's neck. "Touch her, stroke her." Castle did. Her coat was thick and shaggy, tinged with a dirty yellow. He felt the weak pulse of her blood traveling through pale blue veins. The blue peace filled him but it was tainted with exhaustion and searing, very old pain.

"Who did this to her?" Castle felt himself falling into the emptiness.

"Men. It doesn't really matter." Julia placed a hand on his neck; it warned him back from the emptiness. "The emptiness is a part of you but you must control it, not it you." She took his hand from Abby's neck, "She wants you to have her alicorn." She started guiding his hand towards Abby's long, straight, white and silver gleaming twisting horn. Castle resisted.

He answered Julia's puzzled look, "I can't take this. I haven't done anything to deserve it."

"When you take it she will finally be at peace. The pain she has held onto for your sake will end."

"I will kill her!" Castle's voice was filled with shock, horror.

"No. She is already dead. You will set her free."

Castle slowly, reluctantly reached for the alicorn. As soon as he gripped the slippery smoothness of it he knew he had done the right thing. The alicorn gently came free with a soft, wet cracking sound and he held the long shaft in his hand with a bone rootball, three or four inches in diameter, at its thick end. It felt light and heavy at the same time and more fragile than porcelain and harder than steel. The peace and serenity came, flowed through it and into Castle's arm as a soft hum. Soon the hum was filling him. The Unicorn rested her head, and died. His arm became numb with the blue humming and he couldn't move it. Julia gently opened his hand and removed the alicorn.

She held the alicorn before her, tip towards the sky, dividing her face in two. "It will lose some power now that she is not connected to it but it will still be strong . . . . And dangerous. You must not hold it, or use it unless you absolutely have to."

"I will never use it!" Castle said quietly but vehemently.

Julia smiled and chuckled sadly. "That is what she said you would say. That is why she has given it to you. You will use it when you need to." She lifted her quilt they had lain on and shook it once to free the clinging leaves. "You can hold it safely as long as it is wrapped in this." She wrapped the quilt deftly around the long shaft, tying it with silver string, and handed it to Castle. "You must go now. It's almost time for remembering."

Julia placed her hands on Castle's shoulders; the top of her head did not quite brush his chin, and she rested her alicorn on his forehead. The ecstasy of the touch made him gasp and his eyes dim. He heard her mumble "forgive me"

grasped Julia's hand with his tea burned hand and had not realized that it had hurt until the pain disappeared, replaced by a tingle.

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swimming brain, a long, dark shadow on a hill ahead and to the right of him caught his attention. Castle had a vision of strange, faded blossoms in his head. He let the emptiness surround him, he pulled outside the emptiness. His senses sharpened. He was outside and inside himself and the coldness, but this time it was snowing in the emptiness. The shadow focused until it had edges. It was a pole with a crossbeam and a figure hanging from it.

Standing up and stepping backwards to keep his balance, Castle threaded his way to the shape. With his void enhanced eyes using every glimmer of available silver-gold starshine the darkness became as dusk to Castle. The figure hanging on the pole and crossbeam was a scarecrow surrounded by a pale blue nimbus.

The scarecrow was dressed in a worn blue jean jacket buttoned up to her neck, and fraying blue jeans. Her limp body was held to the pole and crossbeam by nails and wire. Too many nails and too much wire. Moving closer to her and tilting his head back, Castle ran his eyes over her. He saw three nails in her gloved left hand, a spike through her wrist, barbed wire wrapped tightly around her elbow, and a large spike through each of her shoulders; tightly wrapped wire around her right elbow, a spike in her right wrist, and wire wrapped around what remained of her right hand. There were three nails in the wood where her gloved hand would have been, shreds of leather dangled from them. Her knees were bent so the soles of her sneakers lay flat against the pole and each had a large spike through it; her knees were lashed together by more of the wire, and her waist was lashed to the post in the same way. Wire around her forehead held her head tight against the splintery pole. Cloth was pulled tight against her face; her face looked human, only blank and lifeless.



Recalling the dream, Castle reached out and touched the scarecrow's stomach; he felt the long crookedly sewn gash. As soon as he touched the gash the scarecrow shuddered. Her hard, blue glinting eyes looked down at Castle.

"I see you have been touched by your animal," her voice a rustling softness. Castle's hand moved unconsciously to his left eye. "Just remember, I am a doorway. You will have to open me."

Before he could say anything, the scarecrow moaned and her body became limp as before. As this happened, his Strange Angel landed softly on top of the pole--honey-gold hair shining, bronzed limbs glowing--one foot on either side of the crossbeam, with a faint creak. She said nothing, only stared down at Castle through the mask, her burnished gold eyes hard and glinting. Finally, she leaped down, landing gracefully before him, pulled off the mask and dropped it to the ground; she grabbed him roughly by the front of his shirt, pulling his head down and lifting herself onto her toes. She kissed him, violently, squirting the thick red-brown liquid into his mouth. Castle fought against her at first but quickly gave in; she was stronger than he, and the liquid tasted good: sweet and smokey.

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### Angel Sleep

Castle woke to the sound of pounding, a shaft of moonlight across his face. He was in his own bed. The pounding continued. It was out of sync to the pounding of his temple. Rolling over, he tensed with the expectation of a soreness that never materialized. The stars appeared to be where he last remembered them. Castle pulled himself from his bed; he could not remember

going to sleep. He knew something was wrong; the stars should have moved. Finding himself naked, Castle took his robe from its rumpled place on the Canadian rocker; his eyes, unfocused, could not pull together all the disparate objects that they saw.

“Castle? Open the door, are you all right?” It was Paige’s voice. More pounding. “You’re scaring me.”

With his hand on the door knob, ready to turn it, he paused. Behind him, in the corner, and hunched down by boxes of books, was his Strange Angel. She glowed whitely as if overexposed by what little faint starshine reached her. She waved to him sheepishly, a look of contrition on her face; the mask glowed palely white on the bureau next to his bed.

“I’m going to call the police, Castle.” Paige’s voice had taken on a higher register, the start of panic.

“I’m alright,” Castle said, his voice thick, his mouth dry and sticky; he pulled open the door. The glare he received from Paige made him step back.

“If you ever scare me like this again, Castle, I will kill you.” Paige walked towards Castle, a finger held out before her and a hand on her hip. Castle saw in her eyes that she really was angry, frightened.

Paige went silent for a moment. He could see her shaking. “I wish you’d call if something is wrong, if not for a replacement at work, at least to your friends so we wouldn’t worry.”

“I’m sorry about that, but it’s been only one day.” Castle sat hard on one of the kitchen table’s chairs and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands; they still had not focused everything into one vision.

"One day! You mean today, yesterday, and the day before. *Three days!* I've been trying to call you for the past two days." Paige said this angrily but was gently touching the back of her hand to his forehead.

"Three days!" He gave a quick glance to the dark corner where Strange Angel was.

"No one has seen or heard from you in over three days, Castle. Linda and Laurel were concerned. You have done things like this before, so I wasn't too concerned, that is until I stopped by the store and Linda asked if I had seen you. Now missing work is something I've never known you to do."

"I'm sorry, I guess I was worse off than I thought." Castle slipped into the emptiness--it was snowing there--he felt far away from the Paige and himself when he added, "next time I'll make sure I call."

"Someone did call the first day," Paige looked at him perplexed, "she said that you had asked her to call for you and that you weren't feeling very well and that you'd call them the next day."

Looking at his Strange Angel from the corner of his eye, Castle saw her push herself deeper into the shadows.

"Who called for you, Castle?" Paige was staring him in the face.

"Um." Castle's stomach growled pulling him from the void.

"You haven't eaten anything!" Paige stated. "You forget to eat when you're acting normal." Paige's brown eyes twinkled, she wasn't as angry anymore. "Or as normal as you ever do get."

"I think all I did was sleep."

"So, who did call for you?" Paige stood over him, hands on hips. "Tell me, then I'll feed you."

"You don't have to. I'll feed myself--"

"I called." Strange Angel stepped from the darkness and moved to stand behind Castle, hands on the back of his chair.

"Hi." Paige had to tilt her head back to look Strange Angel in the face. Castle watched as Paige studied Strange Angel's too perfect features, childlike expression, and nimbus of silver moonlight causing her bronze skin to glow.

"Don't tell me, you're his guardian angel."

"I'm Castle's friend." She extended a hand to Paige, "So you're Paige. Castle has told me so much about you."

"I don't believe he has told me anything about you--I don't think I'd forget hearing about anyone looking like you." Paige took Strange Angel's hand; she could not stop staring.

"Let's get Castle some food. You're right, Paige, he hasn't eaten anything. I made some vegetable soup for him. All we have to do is heat it. There's also some fresh bread." Strange Angel rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet, hands behind her back, skirts swinging like a bell. "Why don't you heat the soup. I'll make him some tea." She moved to the kitchen. Paige followed, after giving Castle a questioning glance. The emptiness pulled from him; he knew it would not come back. He only sighed and rested his head in his hands.

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"Go right back to bed when I leave." Paige had stopped halfway out the door and stuck her head back inside.

"But I've just slept for over seventy hours." Paige only glared coolly at him. "Alright, I'll go back to bed."

"I'll make sure he does," Strange Angel said as she peeked over Castle's shoulder, resting her chin there for a moment before moving back into the apartment.

"Good." Paige watched Strange Angel move away. "You know, Castle, I think she may be your guardian angel," she said joking. "I never got her name."

Castle swayed backwards clutching the door. "You know, I'm feeling very weak. You're right, I'm going straight back to bed. I'll call you tomorrow." He gently, but quickly, closed the door on Paige.

"Make sure all she does *is* guard you." Paige's chuckle was muffled through the door.

After shutting the door, Castle whirled towards Strange Angel; she squatted on the sill of the window across the room. The emptiness sucked at him until he felt lightheaded and deep and far from himself. Strange Angel meekly, as meekly as she could, reached a hand outside the window, readying herself to jump, a breeze playing with wisps of her honey-gold hair. "I'm sorry, I should have called where you work again. I forget things like that."

"Get over here." He pointed to the floor next to him. "What did you do to me?" His voice sounded too calm, too steady from the distance that he heard it.

She jumped off the sill, moved to him, her skirt making a soft sound. Stopping before him, she looked up into his face and was looking at him with a very winsome look of helplessness. Despite himself, Castle found himself wanting to smile; he felt himself getting giddy: her scent of powder and vanilla reached him even in the emptiness. "I am sorry," she had her hands clasped behind her back and was standing on the balls of her feet. She cast her eyes

down, "I had to make you forget, but I used too much. You were only supposed to sleep for one night."

Castle almost remembered a smokey sweet taste. "What do you mean forget? Forget what?"

"I told you. I'm here to protect you and watch over you. I don't want you to get hurt but you keep seeing things, and trying to remember things, and trying to learn things that will hurt you." Her voice took on a frustrated tone that was emphasized by the crossing of her arms beneath her breasts. She gave a sharp "humph" and rocked back on her heels with a slight thump, a lock of honey-blonde hair fell across her eyes. She stood back on the balls of her feet.

"You don't want me to remember the scarecrow?" Castle asked. Strange Angel's burnished gold eyes, glittering in the lights, grew wide and she had to step onto her heels to keep from losing her balance.

"You remember the scarecrow? How . . . ? Don't you smile at me like that!" Castle had not even realized he had been smiling. She stepped forward and had his head locked between her hands before he could do anything. Getting on her tiptoes, she kissed him; he tasted a thick, syrupy squirt of smokey sweetness; his head became heavy, his vision dimmed. He thought that he watched himself grab Strange Angel and press her against himself; he thought he heard her giggle and saw her press herself against him, and, as he passed out, he believed that she whispered something in his ear.

*The stars in your eyes are so sad.*

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## Faith Vale

Castle was trying hard to find the emptiness inside and outside him. He wanted to be behind the thin plasticky envelope, to have it between himself and her. It was not working. He tried harder knowing it was futile. He kept walking through the park.

She had come into the video store that morning. He had been alone. Linda had just left for the bank. It was almost as if she had been waiting for him to be alone. Castle had heard the metal grate against metal from the sticking door and the little bell jingle. He turned and saw her. That is when he had first tried to fall into the emptiness, and failed. Instead he heard the thump of blood in his ears. She had walked to the front of the counter and had stared up at him with her light brown eyes. Her hair now hung below the nape of her neck. Things stirred in him, stirring up an urgency and fear; he had never wanted the emptiness so desperately.

Castle stopped as soon as he saw her sitting on the park bench. She was facing away from him but turned, as if she knew he was behind her. She smiled at him, her eyes looking sad. The emptiness did not come but a heaviness did. He did not think he would be able to move, yet he somehow found himself sitting next to her.

"Hello," Faith said. Her voice sounded only weak to him now, not soft or gentle.

"Hello," Castle's voice cracked a little. "What do you want?"

"I just wanted to get in touch with you." Faith's eyes never looked at his; she picked up his hand in both of hers and rubbed it between them. "I've been

thinking a lot about you lately." She sighed, it was a sad sigh. "I don't know . . . being around all those sick and dying people made me think about you." She looked up at him her eyes wide and sad, "I guess I miss you."

"It was you, not me."

"I know."

"So, what do you want?"

"I think . . ." Faith let go his hand and stroked his cheek. "I want us to be together again."

The things inside him started again; the things felt dirty. "You're just going to use me again." His voice came out soft, but firmer than he thought he could make it.

She cast her eyes down and placed a hand over his as he braced his arm on the bench seat; her hand was cool and dry. "No, not this time. I want to get better."

"You said that before." Castle wished his voice sounded distant, wished the hot and stirrings in him would also be distant.

"I know but I mean it this time." Castle did not say anything, just sat, his eyes unfocused. "It will be different this time, I promise."

"I don't know." Faith leaned in and kissed him, dry and cool. The things in him stirred until they flared.

She broke the kiss and rested her forehead against his forehead. Castle saw her smile of ecstasy, triumph, for a brief moment. She then gave her little whispery giggle.

Standing up, she brushed his cheek one more time, weakly. "I'll talk to you later. He looked up at her to see a smile he knew too well. She walked away.



Castle sat there for a long time; he tried to think of nothing. He could not do it. His left temple started pounding.

“Are you stupid?”

Castle looked up to where the voice came from. He found his Strange Angel perched on a thick and stretching oak tree branch. Her hands were linked and between her legs, her skirt tucked between them revealing her brass colored knees and thighs. She wasn't wearing the mask.

“I've been thinking about you a lot lately. I guess it's those sick and dying people,” she mimicked in a weak nasally voice. “She's using you, Castle.” He looked back down.

“Castle!” He heard the soft creak of the branch as she leaped from it and the soft thud of her bare feet on the grass in front of him. “Castle, she's trying to pull you into something.” He felt her getting closer; he could smell her vanilla powder scent; it did not fill his head. “Castle!” Her voice was filled with desperate anger. “She wants to destroy you. She almost destroyed you then.”

“Leave me alone.” His voice quiet, soft.

“Castle!” His Strange Angel grabbed his chin with her hand and lifted his face to hers. Her grip made his eyes sting with salt.

“Leave me alone!” Castle did not quite shout this, a deep and pain-filled anger pushed against him, trying to get out. He fought it back down; he grabbed Strange Angel by her wrists, roughly pulling her hand from his chin. Strange Angel stared at him, her eyes wide, her arms being held out to her side by him, there was no fear in her eyes, not quite. He knew she could break his grip; he also knew she couldn't. He pushed her roughly and she fell hard on the grass.

"Castle?" Tears thickened her voice and her burnished gold eyes glistened. Castle only raised his fisted hands above his head as if he wanted to howl or scream; he only dropped his arms, and, turning his back to her, he walked away. If he had turned back to her, he would have seen her brushing her skirts. And smiling. Real tears in her eyes.

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### Faith Lost, Memories Recaptured

Lying on his bed in the darkness, Castle had his eyes towards the window where the quarter moon was glowing low and soft. A cool cross breeze eddying over him was the only thing he was aware of. His hands were tucked behind his head squeezing the back of his skull; the throbbing in his temple had not stopped since it had started that afternoon.

The throbbing intensified.

He pushed himself up on his elbows and saw Strange Angel perched on the window opposite the moon. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Don't be." She leaped silently to the bare hardwood floor. "*I'm* sorry." She moved to the side of his bed and knelt, resting her head next to his. Castle could see that her eyes were red and swollen from crying. She reached a hand gently to his left eye; it was no longer swollen and black but it stung as she gently prodded it. He could not remember how he had gotten a black eye. "I will take care of everything." Castle felt her breath against his ear, almost tickling. "I will make everything right."

She raised her head and brought her lips to his; he felt their warmth and wetness and then a thick smoky sweetness pass between them into his mouth. He did not swallow right away, savoring the taste. When he did, it was as if he had pulled outside of himself, the weakness and dizziness intoxicating.

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He dreamed he was attached to Strange Angel by a thin silver strand.

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Perched on the edge of the three story building, she scanned up and down the empty street. The buildings were tall and close together, little moonlight reached between. The only light came in pale yellow pools cast by the street lamps on the wide, cobblestone sidewalks. Sometimes she knew things but did not know how she knew. Like now. She did not know how she knew but the woman who was trying to trap Castle again would be where she was very soon. Strange Angel's face appeared to glow in the moonlight. Mud was drying brown-grey on her face in three long stripes. She had found some mud in the park on the other side of the building she waited on and had painted her face with it. She had put one vertical stripe on each cheek and a long stripe from her forehead over the bridge of her nose and over her lips onto her chin. A cool breeze blew; it washed over her face and bare legs; it made the edges of her skirts flap softly.

She did not remember anything. She knew nothing until she needed to know. Strange Angel thought back to the first thing she remembered: a thick, liquid blackness. Even that she did not know until the rectangle of light had appeared far ahead of her. The faint, dust-filled light barely reached her through the dense blackness. This is when she had experienced her first emotions. Fear came first, then, with the thin silver strand that bored through the blackness and

latched deep inside the flesh between her breasts, a love, desire. Strange Angel brought her hand to her heart; she could not see, or touch the silver strand, but it was still there; she could feel it. She then had felt thoughts, emotions; confusion. These were Castle's. Strange Angel knew why she was without knowing why she was. She had then moved herself towards the rectangle of light, only then realizing that she was wearing the mask.

She did not have the mask now; she did not know where it was, but she knew she would find it, when it was needed. The mask belonged to Castle but was hers for now. Strange Angel felt chips of mud fleck off her face; she unwrinkled her nose.

Strange Angel waited patiently; she knew it would not be long.

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Castle sat under a tree; it was blooming white flowers and small red-blue fruit. Moonlight filtered through the snow-grey sky to bounce pale blue off the white snow blanketing everything. He heard the silent fall of the snow; he tilted his face to the sky, squinting in the snowlight, feeling snowflakes on his face, melting, making his skin numb. He leaned back against the smooth and papery bark of the tree, its hardness on the back of his head. The back of his head was still tender; he had had two bruises there, he thought, but could not be sure. The whispering silence of the snow seemed to get louder, the blue whiteness to get darker. The snow quiet was disrupted by soft, harsh laughter and voices; the shadows of trees, ringed the clearing Castle was in, cast twelve darknesses into the circle. He heard hoof beats, muffled by the snow, getting louder, closer. The whispery laughter changed, became coherent. He heard it over the hoof beats.

*Here she comes.*

*She will taste good.*

*The warmth of her magic is ours.*

A Unicorn broke into the clearing chased by twelve shadowy horsemen and behind them came one large formless dark shape ten times larger than the other black-brown horse and rider shapes; its mass almost solid, it tainted everything it touched with a corroding brownness. The snow beneath it--did not melt--seemed to rot, decay. The Unicorn whinnied with fear; Castle saw evil wounds bleeding darkly, thickly, on the Unicorn's flank and rear leg. She stumbled, falling into the clearing. Struggling to get up, the Unicorn only thrashed in the snow, in fear and pain, as the twelve dark horsemen moved towards her, excited, circling her; incoherent sounds of glee escaping them. The gigantic dark shape stayed outside the clearing, laughing, loud, frightening, started to spread, started to surround the clearing.

Through the fear that had paralyzed him, Castle felt an anger; an anger that bored through the fear. The anger consumed him. Standing he shouted, a wordless growl coming from deep in his throat. The shadow horsemen stopped and shifted towards him; for a moment they did not move; the giant one, slowly ringing the clearing, also stopped, giving a deep harsh grunt, as if surprised. The brown stains stopped, for only a moment; that was all Castle needed. He could hear the snow landing.

He felt himself fill with a warming coolness. It began to snow inside his head. The anger fled. Inside himself, deep inside the emptiness, and far outside it, he saw, and felt a cool and warm silver-blue light. It grew and grew but was never blinding, never hot or freezing. The light took on a thickness; it wove itself into his fibers, his spirit. The liquid light filled him; it did not stop flowing through

him, into him, but it never overwhelmed him. Quietly, smoothly the liquid silver-blue light escaped from him forming into twelve silver shafts, long and narrow, making a sound that reminded Castle of ice scraped across an edge of metal, only softer.

The twelve horsemen shadows disappeared, as if absorbed by the liquid light.

Castle turned to the largest mass of thinning darkness which almost completely ringed the clearing. It howled with frustration, anger, before Castle released more of the silver liquid light. The huge dark brown stain melted in a scream to a vague man shape, then disappeared.

The silver-blue light inside of Castle faded. He felt weak and lightheaded but more alive than he ever had before; the imprint of the liquid light still hung before his eyes, and inside his head a liquid silver star glowed, flickering. Moving to the Unicorn, he fell to his knees next to her; she was breathing raggedly, painfully. Using some of the fresh snow he cleaned her wounds as best he could, and melting some in his hands he gave her some to drink. The weakness turned to weariness and he fell asleep stretched over her side with his head cradled in the pocket of her front leg.

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Down the empty street, on the wide cobblestone sidewalk Faith walked, clutching books and notebooks to her chest; from her perch Strange Angel watched. When Faith was almost to her, Strange Angel leaped from the building's roof, landing delicately, gracefully onto the asphalt a few yards before her, straightening and turning herself towards the surprised woman in a fluid motion, her skirts making a soft snapping sound.

"Who are you?" Faith asked as she stepped back, her eyes large with fear.

"Why do you want to hurt him?" Strange Angel's burnished gold eyes squinted in confusion. "I don't understand." She stepped towards Faith; Faith held her books out in front of her.

"Please don't hurt me." Faith backed up more, turning sideways.

Strange Angel stopped. "Why?"

"Please don't kill me." Faith turned around and started running, dropping her books. Strange Angel leaped from where she was to land before her. Faith ran into her and would have fallen if Strange Angel had not grabbed her upper arms.

"Why do you want to destroy him?" Strange Angel asked calmly.

"Please . . . . I don't want to hurt anyone."

"Liar." Strange Angel's voice became hard with anger.

". . . don't . . . kill . . . me . . . ."

"I am not going to kill you. I don't want to kill you. You deserve something else." Strange Angel lifted Faith from the ground; something in Strange Angel's eyes made Faith shriek.

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Castle woke slowly, evenly, as if he was coming up through water; his eyes opening, and a smile stretching his lips before he was fully conscious, and he knew this. Throwing aside his blankets he leaped from his bed feeling strong, his insides light; he could still see, feel the cooling warm silver-blue liquid star; his skin tingled. Grabbing his robe, he headed to his kitchen and started heating water. As he filled the wire mesh holder with green tea, he realized something: he remembered things. Feelings, glimpses of thoughts, of memories filtered through

his head; memories, feelings, thoughts, so long hidden, so deeply buried that they were new for him. Castle smiled, an excitement catching in him, flowering in his head and chest and spreading through the farthest recesses of his body, his spirit.

His left eye started throbbing; he rubbed it thinking of the Unicorn from his dream. It was Julia; he had not thought of that before but there was no doubt in his mind; it had been Julia. His eye throbbed beneath his fingers; he remembered his day with Julia; she had pierced his eye, she had given him back his memories. The water started giving steam, he poured it over the tightly rolled tea leaves releasing the smokey, soothing scent.

Castle breathed in the warm, moist flavor, reaching for the emptiness, wanting the thin plasticky envelope; it came easily, gently; he found himself inside and outside the emptiness; it was snowing there. A faint figure stood in the distance, a weak brown stain against the snow.

Reaching into the jar where he kept the used tea leaves, Castle made three stripes down his face.

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### Angel on a Bridge

Castle stopped, his head tilted up, his hands deep in his jean's pockets; he had not been able to sleep, so he had walked. He had walked below the dark blue sky and twinkling pale gold stars; had walked in the night's noisy silence. The horizon began to grow an edge of color--reds, oranges, pinks and their blends--so he had stopped to watch the sun rise. He was not looking at the sunrise, not any longer. Castle had stopped before the small, green painted steel-



girdered bridge connecting the two towns; the sunrise had just caught the bridge's horizontal edges. Atop the bridge, wearing an off-white summer dress, and crouching on bare feet, was a woman. She had a rolled bundle next to her. Castle's right temple started throbbing.

"You're not supposed to see me yet." Her voice was sharp, velvety. Castle thought of diamonds under silk. "By you seeing me I'm breaking the rules." The young woman had straight medium length dark hair, dark clear eyes and tanned skin; the lines of her face were sharp, too perfect, an alien, an inhuman beauty. "I am your Dark Angel." Her voice was low but carried through the silent early morning air.

Castle could only look up at her.

She stood, her skirts swishing backwards and forwards before balancing. "I'm here to help you see Truths, only it's too early. You're moving very fast." She was playing with something round, small and flat, twirling it between her fingers; it reflected the day's first light.

"You're going to reveal Truths?" Castle asked.

"No. I'll help you see Truths. There's a big difference." Castle stood there looking up at her. "I have some things for you." She picked up the rolled bundle next to her, "You forgot this the other day." Dark Angel tossed it to him underhand.

Castle remembered what it was, remembered the day with Julia and how she had rolled her sister's alicorn into the quilt and tied it off with a silver cord. He was remembering that and other things when he caught the quilt and alicorn. The flat of his left hand caught the front of the quilt; the alicorn slipped from its nest in the layers of cloth and its tip pierced his palm. Wincing, Castle pulled his hand

away quickly, grabbing the quilt with his other hand. In the center of his palm blood was welling from a small, round cut.

"Careful!" His Dark Angel had crouched again, her hands flat against the girder she was on, and looking at him with concern furrowing her brow, a impish smile on her lips.

"Thanks, I will be," Castle said without raising his eyes to look at her, his voice dry. Without thinking he pulled the tip of the alicorn out farther from the folds of cloth and touched it to the wound it had just made. The cooling blue feeling webbed through his hand. He wiped the blood onto his jeans and looked at his palm: the wound was gone. The throbbing in his right temple crackled with static with each throb.

"Catch!" Castle looked up to see Dark Angel flick the silver disc at him; it spun like a blade making a soft whistling sound. With reflex action, Castle caught it flat between his palms; it burned into his flesh. He gasped with pain and surprise, dropped it; the disc rang as it landed on the asphalt, spinning until losing its momentum.

Palms out before him, Castle saw identical burn marks: a circle with a triangle inside it, one angle pointing straight up at his fingers. Looking up at the Dark Angel with exasperation in his eyes, he found himself pulling the alicorn from the quilt--using only his fingers; he could not close his hands--and touched the point to his right palm; it pierced through and out the back of his hand without any more effort than it would take to push it through water. With a scream Castle pulled it from his palm, the wound closed but did not heal; the burn was still there.

"Oh, don't give me that hurt look. I did this for your own good." Dark Angel leaped from the bridge and landed, daintily, before him with a slight bounce. "Besides, it's your fault for seeing me too early."

"My fault?" The throbbing pain from his hands and the pounding in his temple let him slide easily into the emptiness and outside the emptiness; the snow had slowed to a flurry. He could feel the silver liquid star; he knew he could touch it, see it if he wanted to. It was tempting, but he didn't. He just let its cool heat wash through him. The silver liquid light blended with the snow, casting a soft blue light.

Castle held the alicorn, an end in each hand. The hum grew louder; a numbness shot up his arms. The rootball came off in his hand with a wet snap. His eyes went wide and he looked at Dark Angel.

"Its okay," she spoke, soothing, "keep the rootball." She bent down and pick up the silver disc. "But give me the alicorn back, and I'll hold it and the disc for you until you need it."

Castle, half listening to her, was peering into the wide end of the alicorn. It was hollow. He stretched out his arm with the alicorn towards her. Dark Angel danced a few steps backwards.

"Put it back in the quilt first, please." Her words came quick and soft, as if she were out of breath. He felt the humming intensify until the numbness in his arm became painful. He slid the alicorn into the still rolled quilt and handed it to her. She took it by the silver string, barely touching the quilt.

"I want you to meet me." Dark Angel reached out and cupped his face with a hand, her touch was warming; her touch pushed the liquid light deep inside him.

"When?"

She slid her hand from his face, "You'll--"

"I'll know when. I know." Dark Angel laughed softly, quick, breathy before leaping back to her perch on the bridge. The throbbing in his temple slowly stopped as she disappeared over the other side of the bridge.

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### Triangles and Crosses

Castle stood, his left hand held up before him, palm spread; left of his palm was the large simple gold cross adorning the steeple of a church behind and above the red brick school building. The sun shone clear and clean above the steeple making the cross glitter and sparkle. He had to squint to look at it. From the strip of green lawn above the school yard, the cross appeared beautiful, slim, straight and tall--regal. To Castle, as deep in and as far outside the emptiness that he was, the cross was not so beautiful: he could see the weathered metal and flaking gilt, the faded and smoothed pole that connected the cross to the steeple.

He felt a hand rest lightly on his shoulder, and the pure feeling of blueness and soothing gently rolled through him pulling him from the emptiness.

"There is no longer only emptiness," Julia stated, almost asked.

"No, there's snow now."

Standing on her toes and resting her chin on his shoulder, Julia looked from his palm to the cross. "I don't see much different between the two. One has

three points representing three, the other four points representing three. Only difference is that one is enclosed on itself and is not proud.”

“I don’t know who I am.” Castle breathed in Julia’s musky, coppery scent, her blue hum in his head.

Julia moved to face him and took his wrists turning his palms so she could see them. “You do and you don’t. You have been forced to hide yourself as you hid me.” She turned her back to him, snuggling against his chest and wrapping his arms around her waist; they faced the church and school. “Things do happen for a reason, Castle, even though we sometimes never learn why. Thank you for saving me.” She slid his hand down her left side; Castle felt the wounds from his dream. He was not surprised. “You have not slept for five nights?”

“Yes.” The day was clear and bright, clean and quiet. He closed his eyes and let himself feel the warmth on his skin as Julia gently brought his palms to her lips; he did not know that his hands were still aching until her kisses took the ache from them. Castle heard the soft rustle of her silken clothes as she moved; he felt something soft but heavy rhythmically slapping his calf. He opened his eyes.

“A tail?” It was like a lion’s tail, only white, with a light grey tuft at its end.

She turned, facing him, her amber eyes clear and glinting; Castle could see deep into them, “I wanted to see surprise on your face; you never seem surprised.”

Castle closed his eyes once more and felt Julia lean the back of her head against his chin; he heard and felt a humming in her alicorn, soft and smooth. He felt himself being lulled by the murmur; it sounded like hundreds of conversing voices, voices he could not make out. He rested his forehead against the alicorn, it felt like porcelain, or a sea shell. Julia took his hand in hers and started tracing

the brand on his palm; the hum of her alicorn changed, shifted, to the sound and feel of falling snow. Julia's cool touch on his burn lulled him deeper towards sleep. "What do you remember? What do you feel?"

He answered her, but his voice sounded, felt, detached, "A loss. Loss of time. Time and . . . something . . . taken from me. I remember things I did not know I knew. Pieces, feelings, all vague. It's as if I'm watching myself. As if I'm more than one person." Castle felt her soft smooth fingertips gently circle his eye; the swelling and blackness had been gone for days, but it still felt tender even beneath Julia's touch.

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### Lock and Key

The factory stood next to the three shallow, partly man-made, partly natural waterfalls--they were not falling now--separated by a thin down sloping strip of patched, tangled grass that melded with an empty parking lot. The factory stood four stories tall, the worn and boarded up tower another two stories. The red brick was soot black in places: corners, under eaves, drippings below window sills spreading from wider and thicker to thinner. The panes of the many, small, deep and thick windows were broken, a jagged, yellowed piece jutting down or thrusting up before the stain of darkness deep inside. Large green peeling wooden doors rotted on their hinges, hidden behind a leaning garage to the right. A scraped and dented dark stained metal door stood in front of him; barring the door, nailed to the crumbling brick, spread-eagled, was Lacey Mae dressed in her jeans and jean jacket; her head lolled on her straw-stuffed neck, hard glassy blue

eyes wide. He touched her, feeling the jaggedly sewn gash on her stomach, the straw beneath it.

The sun cut the ground and building into bright, sparkling areas, and dark, shadowed areas; the lines between the light and shadow were drawn precisely. Castle crouched before the door and gently touched a dandelion sprouting through the asphalt, its yellow face open to the shadow encompassing it.

"You're here." Castle looked up towards the diamond silken voice. Dark Angel was perched on the crumbling concrete wall four stories up. She was looking down at him; her straight dark hair spilled around her face. She leaped from the wall, skirts wafting around her hips, landing gracefully before Castle. He stood up; she tilted her head up to look into his face. Dark Angel's angular features glinted sharply in sunlight on one side, softened edges in shadow on the other side; she smiled, white teeth slicing through the tan of her face. She bounced on the balls of her feet and clapped her hands. "Ready."

"For what?" Castle couldn't help but smile as he watched her.

"Time to remember!"

Dark Angel handed him the rolled quilt with the alicorn inside. He took it, not thinking. She looked at him, her pupils narrowing, "To unlock the doorway." She pointed at Lacey Mae. "Unlock her." Castle turned and stared at the scarecrow; she hung limp, empty, her tangled raven black coarse hair draped down, partially obscuring her face. A muted blue soothing hummed through his arm; Castle was holding the alicorn by its cupped end, its tip pointed at his Dark Angel. As he swung to look at the Angel rocking on her feet, hands clasped behind her back, the humming changed: it grew stronger, started pulsing. Quickly

turning to where he held it, Castle saw it was pointed directly at Lacey Mae; he thought he saw her shudder.

With a fluid movement Dark Angel moved to stand next to Lacey Mae. She opened the scarecrow's jacket and tattered blouse beneath, exposing a tiny slit between the scarecrow's cloth and straw breasts. "The keyhole."

Moving slowly, his eyes unable to focus, he found himself lifting the alicorn's needle sharp tip towards the neat edged slash. Tensed and wincing, Castle slid the alicorn into the slit, the humming increased but the soothing dissipated, replaced by a fear. The scarecrow shuddered; the alicorn slid down her body as if cutting through water; a smooth ripping noise accompanied the alicorn's humming. As she split in two, Castle heard the scarecrow's rustling whisper: *Tears*. Castle jumped back, bringing his arms up. The alicorn cut the scarecrow's head in two. She came apart. Wet straw fell in thick and sticky clumps to the broken, sandy asphalt at his feet, with a squishing noise.

"The doorway is open." Dark Angel pushed open the dark colored, scratched and dented metal door with both her hands, stepping in the straw grue with bare feet.

Castle could only stare at Lacey Mae and the reddish-brown stained alicorn. He wiped it clean on his shirt before following Dark Angel through the doorway.

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## Through a Doorway

Inside the factory, light from high, broken windows showed a sparse forest of tall, thick, filthy white columns stretching down a long, wide, and tall hallway in two even rows. Dark Angel walked between the columns, leaving trailing footprints in the deep dust; her feet silently kicking up clouds. Watching dancing motes in weak slashes of light, Castle followed, his footsteps echoing hollow and deep, bouncing off the high cathedral ceiling, disappearing into the darkness of corners and shadows only to reappear moments later, the same but somehow changed.

The far end of the hallway--nothing more than a deeper darkness where no windows gave light--blended into a nothingness; the dust became deeper at Castle's feet, the echos weaker, muffled. The darkness swallowed him, became almost palpable; he felt it pushing against him, rushing past him. He breathed it. The fear he had felt as he opened Lacey Mae began to grow stronger; threatened to overtake him. Castle's throat began to constrict; he was afraid to swallow. Before the fear could overtake him, a burning sensation lit his hands; looking down he saw the alicorn, which he gripped in sweat slicked palms, glow softly; it did not break the darkness.

Picking up his pace, Castle tried to overtake Dark Angel. Before he could, a loud wood and metal clang shook the heavy darkness; the screech of rusted metal let in a weak light. Ahead of him, not more than a few hundred paces, he saw Dark Angel standing in an arched doorway, hands on her hips, a weak nimbus of dust motes surrounding her.

Castle moved to Dark Angel. "What am I to learn?" He flinched; his quiet words echoing loud, gaining volume with each echo.

"Things you already know." Dark Angel's voice barely echoed. She stepped aside, inviting him through the archway.

The room beyond glowed weak and evenly; deep, rich hard wood gleamed beneath Castle's feet. The vaulted room extending only a few paces above him--he could have touched it with an outstretched arm--and stretched on fewer than fifty paces before him. The room was hot, a dry hot. Dark Angel walked in behind him, fingers from her outstretched arms making a muffled rasping on the walls on either side of her; she stopped before Castle and lifted her face to the vaulted ceiling. Brushing perspiration from his eyes with his fingers, Castle raised his face.

Gilded, intricate, carved molding in the shapes of twining strands and clusters of snowflakes framed figures and scenes. Having to crouch, Castle viewed painted scenes of angels. An angel with a halo, hand raised over children; an angel with a gleaming spear, raised in the start of a crushing blow, above a creature's head; two angels, on either side of a gate, flaming swords held out before them; a score of angels, wings out like blades, swooping from the skies.

"How come none look like me?" Dark Angel had crouched next to Castle, rested her hand on his knee. "Or my sister? They're all male." She chuckled, leaned her face in close to Castle's; he noticed her skin was dry. "Maybe I'm not an angel."

"No. You're an angel. Just not this kind of angel." Castle turned to look at her, his throat dry. "That's Truth."

"You're learning. Very good." Dark Angel wiped her fingers over Castle's eyes. She rubbed his sweat between her fingers. "Let's get you out of here." Dark Angel took him to the other side of the small, low vault-ceilinged room to a small and narrow door. It took her several pulls to get the door open. Even then it scraped tight on the floor, scuffing the hard wood. "What you see from here on will be frightening; learn from it." She hunched down and squeezed herself through the tight opening.

Taking a deep breath, his knees feeling weak, Castle hunched over and slid into the doorway sideways; for one brief, panic-stricken moment, he did not think he would fit.

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### Maps and Curtains

"Where are we? I . . . think . . . feel . . . ." Castle felt light-headed and clutched his forehead in a hard grip; his eyes grew dim. His knees let go but before he could fall, he felt Dark Angel's grip on his arm. Her grip was gentle, powerful.

"You have been here before. You do know where you are. You just don't know that you know." She shifted her grip until she had him around the waist; she leaned him against a wall. "I should have done this sooner." Dark Angel said this as she stood on her tiptoes and brought his face down to hers. She kissed him. Castle felt a thick warm liquid push into his mouth; the liquid was bitter and he almost choked on it, but it finally slid down his throat. His head cleared; his senses sharpened.

The room was immense. The ceiling stretched high above Castle, giving the impression of stretching on forever in every direction. This impression was enhanced by the maps of stars and constellations depicted on its blue-black seemingly depthless surface. Ahead through a wide, red-brown carpeted path the length of the room blended with, then disappeared into the same blue-blackness. Castle could not judge the width of the room: hanging, apparently suspended in mid-air, were tall, wide and thick curtains. Curtains of all different materials, colors, textures and designs. Some a complex weaving, some solid, some of such subtle colors and blending of colors that Castle could not tell where one color started and another ended, some colors he could not identify as colors. Castle's stomach roiled.

Touching the curtains closest to him he felt rough hemp, the softness of velour, the wet-dryness of silk, a texture he could not describe: his fingers sunk into it no matter how lightly he touched, but left no impression on the material. Castle's stomach twisted; he doubled over clutching his abdomen. Dark Angel took his shoulders as he fell to his knees.

Her cool hands on the back of his flushed neck, "just let it happen." Castle started dry heaving. "I know it's frightening, but it's good. It's right."

Castle threw up. Twice. The first time was quick, short; he vomited up a gooey sticky, inky brown globe. It made his throat raw; the ball landed with a wet squish on the red-brown carpet. The second time was more painful and Castle thought he was going to choke; it also was an inky brown globe, but much larger than the first; he found himself using his hands to pull it from his mouth. It was rubbery solid and slippery but he managed to pull it free. It landed with a thud and a slurp next to the other one; they both melted into the curtains.

As Castle crouched, breathing hard, Dark Angel crouched before him and brushed her lips over his forehead. They were cool, dry. "We must go on." Castle noticed that the floor beneath the curtains and beneath the carpet was the same blue-black as the ceiling but, instead of stars, it was mapped with intricate patterns of silver strands floating in the floor as if in amber.

Castle found rhythm to the patterns, order in the apparent chaos. He studied these patterns of silver strands until Dark Angel placed a hand on his shoulder.

"You must pick the one."

A deep fear gripped Castle; he fell deep inside and outside the emptiness where it was no longer empty, where it was snowing. He felt the fear even through the emptiness, through the snow. "I don't know if I want to pick one."

"Yes you do." Dark Angel lifted his hands--he was gripping the alicorn tightly--to his forehead. "Feel through the fear. You want to learn." The alicorn touched his forehead; the snow started to hum.

Castle nodded. "I can't live like this anymore," a soft, firm whisper. He stood and, placing the alicorn back into its quilt sheath, placed it by the door. Taking the rootball from his pocket, he gripped it tightly.

Walking down and up both sides of the carpeted path, Castle searched for the curtain. Between many of the curtains were gaps which led deep into the room to smaller paths, to hundreds of other curtains. Castle walked by all of them. Dark Angel walked behind him, silently, patiently; she did not touch him or go close to him. He forgot she was there. Losing consciousness of time, Castle wandered the curtains. At one point, deep inside one of the curtain mazes, he found a beautiful, softly shimmering royal blue curtain woven with glimmering

silver teardrops. He moved forward, knowing it was not the right curtain but wanting to touch it, wanting to know what it felt like. He wanted to get closer to the feeling it gave him, a feeling he could not make out, not understand. Dark Angel quickly stepped forward and stopped him with hands on his shoulders. She shook her head and pointed down. Staring at the floor, Castle's eyes, even in their heightened state, could barely discern that the blackness beneath his feet was different than the blackness before him: it was depthless space before the curtain. Only then did he notice what he should have noticed right away: "No silver strands."

"Yes. No silver strands. This is a curtain for another time, with someone else." Dark Angel's face became sad for a brief moment, her unnatural features softening. "Your curtains with me are not so beautiful." She did not remove her hands from his shoulders until he stepped away from the black emptiness.

Every curtain gave him a feeling, most curtains a feeling so weak that he barely registered it. Castle looked on for a timeless stretch.

He let out a gasp and leaped backwards. The fear flared back stronger than when he had first felt it; on top of the fear, as if coating it with a thick, slimy shell, was pain. Pain that he had never felt, but knew that he had lived through. Pain that threatened to consume him. Castle almost collapsed onto the carpet; the pain tried to drain his strength, his life. The pain wanted to take who he was from him. Falling to his knees, under the weight of the fear and pain, Castle almost wept. He stood up. He looked at the curtain: a roiling crimson coiled with an oily black. He took a heavy step forward and raised his palm to its surface. After a long moment, his arm tensed, muscles twitching, Castle touched the curtain. It felt diseased, something in the hemp-like cloth made his palm itch.

Looking at his palm, he saw dozens of tiny pinpricks welling with blood drops.

None were inside the burn of circle and triangle.

Castle turned and looked at Dark Angel; Dark Angel's eyes glinted hard, her lips curved up into a combination of a feral smile and a smirk. "Remember, Castle, I am here to let you see Truths. I am hard, unflinching."

Castle wanted to cry.

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### Through a Curtain

He stepped forward and, placing both hands flat against it, pushed the curtain; the curtain was so heavy, so voluminous that he became tangled in it. Feeling tiny pinpricks over his face, breathing in particles that bit painfully into his throat and lungs, Castle became angry; the curtain became lighter, its folds bunching together. Castle stepped through the curtain.

Dark Angel was waiting for him on the other side. She stood facing him; behind her was another large room, but only a fraction of the size of the curtain room. The floor was concrete, the walls were wood or concrete blocks; metal girders criss-crossed wooden ceiling beams. Showdowed, rusted machines hid in dust and darkness. The room was cast in a dim, sickly light from two sets of lamps with beaten, rusted reflectors hanging from the high, rotting ceiling beams. The dull grey paint over the concrete floor was chipped and faded, the painted yellow path lines grimey and broken. Something thick, oily and noxious coated all the metal girders and dripped down parts of the wooden walls. The concrete

blocks were discolored; all the exposed wood was rotting, some dry, some bloated.

“Truth is not given to you. You must take it.” Dark Angel pointed to the corner closest to Castle. Turning he saw the two inky brown balls; they were latched to where the wall and floor joined, vein-like tendrils had erupted from each, some attached to the wall and floor, some to the other warped globe. The ones between the two orbs throbbed, pulsed. Both globes shuddered as if there was a great pressure inside; they made a broken, humming noise. The orbs appeared less solid, more shadowy.

“This way.” Castle’s gaze held the orbs for a moment but there was a power in Dark Angel’s voice; he turned and followed her.

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### Parts and Pieces

The room frightened Castle. He did not know why. It was dark, decaying; the room made him feel lonely. Castle’s fear increased for a moment: there was movement in the room; something was coming towards him, a dusty pale smudge. A soft scraping noise caught his attention. Castle clutched the alicorn’s rootball tightly in his fist; he felt his heart skip, blood where the rootball’s tendrils pierced his skin.

The smudge began to take shape, form. A figure of a young woman was pulling herself towards Castle, fear set in her eyes and pain etched onto her face. She made no sound, no noise; Castle saw that her legs were broken and bleeding as she dragged them behind her, dust and ragged strips of her once white skirt



sticking to her wounds. She left a thick, slick blood trail behind her; her blood looked almost black in the sickly dim light of the room.

When the woman reached Castle, she stretched out her hand to him, her eyes pleading and pain-filled. He felt the emptiness, the thin plasticky envelope; it pulled him in deeper than ever before and thrust him outside himself so hard it was physically painful. Through this distance Castle saw his nose bleeding.

There was no snow.

Dark Angel used her foot to push the woman with broken, bleeding legs away from Castle. He was horrified, and relieved and horrified that he was relieved. "There is your way out," Dark Angel pointed to a door discernible only by being a darker shadow against shadows at the other end of the room. Castle turned to look at his Dark Angel, but she was not there.

Castle did not want to move but the woman with broken, bleeding legs had pulled herself to him and was moaning in pain and touching his feet. With a gasp, Castle moved forward feeling a sickening mix of revulsion, fear and guilt. Dust swirled at his feet as he walked through darkness.

Beyond this darkness, beside a rusting, large factory machine, sat another young woman, Indian style, her white skirts pulled tight over her legs. She was scraping a straight-edged razor up and down her bare arms with almost the sound of something hard being pulled across stretched silk; blood was dripping to the floor causing tiny eruptions of dust. When she saw Castle staring at her, she smiled at him. She stretched her arms, palms up, out to him; thin, wide ribbons of pale, wet, dust-coated skin slipped from her arms connected only at her wrists.

Castle stepped back and whispered thick-voiced, "I'm sorry."

She giggled. She continued giggling, causing Castle to stir the dust up swirling around his knees as he moved forward, towards the dark shadow of doorway.

Behind the next darkness came a wet creaking, clicking noise. Castle stopped, not wanting to learn what was causing the noise. The rootball became slippery in his hand; he began to lose sensation in his fingers. But the sound continued: a clicking sound, something wet snapping, followed by a creaking sound, something being forced to move. Castle's throat went dry; he was afraid to swallow.

Castle was so far outside himself that he could not feel himself walking towards and into the darkness. The blackness enveloped him; the clicking and wet snapping sounds became clearer, more distinct. The darkness gradually began to be forcibly dissipated by a weak, pale light. The light came from a high, hooded lightbulb that bounced its sickly beam to a space in the middle of the darkness, making the blackness around it seem a thick liquid. The figure at the end of the narrow beam appeared to be floating on an ocean of dark.

The figure had the delicate features of a young woman, but its body was neither male nor female. A very pretty and unblemished face smiled sweetly up at Castle from its kneeling position. Suddenly Castle heard the clicking sound and the pretty face's full-lipped mouth with straight pearly teeth twisted into a grimace of pain and its eyes pleaded for Castle's help. Before he could do anything, Castle saw the head start turning. The head did not stop where it should have. The wet snapping sounds started. The pretty face registered intense pain but made no sound; all that could be heard in the sound damping dark were tiny wet snaps as the head twisted around to reveal another face.

The second face was just as sexless as the first but that is all they had in common. An ugly, scarred, tumorous face glared up at Castle with scaly, slitted eyes. An ugly gash for a mouth revealed saliva coated, long, rotting sharp teeth. In the cloudy pupils and yellowed whites of this face's eyes Castle saw a deep pain and sorrow. It was somehow beautiful. This horrified Castle. He ran by the being into the darkness.

Castle ran, not knowing where he was going, not stumbling, oblivious to the fact that he was moving towards the still distant door; he was so far inside and outside himself that the cold and emptiness threatened to consume him. Something made him stop. Breathing hard, he listened. A moan, soft, carried through the muffling darkness; he could not tell if it was a moan of great ecstasy or a moan of great agony.

Castle moved to it, willingly, wanting to, for a reason he couldn't understand. His enhanced hearing picked the sound's direction as, ahead of him, his enhanced eyes registered a slight glow far ahead. He moved forward as quietly as he could.

At the edge where dark met light in razor sharpness, Castle stood, staring. A beautiful, deep golden light with dancing, sparkling dust motes lit a soft shallow hill of golden-white sand. On this bed of glowing, glittering sand, lay a beautiful, perfect young woman. It was as if she had been chiseled from pale unblemished marble. Her naked, well oiled flesh gleamed delicately.

Castle could do nothing but stop and stare. He watched her as her back suddenly arched, her hands tightend on the sand beneath them, and a moan convulsed through her body, rippling like a softly breaking wave. Castle felt his

mouth go dry; he leaned forward until his face passed the razor sharp line, into the light.

The woman, still caught in the physicality of the moan, turned her face to Castle, her eyes glittering with pain and weariness, her face strained. "Please--" She muttered this breathlessly; her plea was cut off sharply by another body racking moan.

Castle backed out of the light, shame and guilt washing over him. He crouched to the floor--it felt warm beneath his palms--and felt everything draining from him. The thin plasticky envelope pulled at him; Castle let himself be pulled. He fell deep, far.

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It was dusk behind the snow, the snow grey-white deepening with blues. He stood, ankle deep in snow, feeling the unmoving cold, hearing the snowflakes landing silently, watching what thin moonlight made it through the low ceiling, and filter through the snow clouds to bounce blueely off the snow only to be bounced back off the clouds. Castle was alone, peacefully alone. Alone in a world of snow. The snow covered the world around him: trees, fields, streets, so that everything, earth and sky, roads and fields blended together. The snow covered Castle.

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Castle stood from his crouch and circled around the ring of golden light and its figure. He could see the doorway--it was not more than three hundred paces away--but before the doorway, blocking the door, were three large, unpainted and splintering boxes, twice as long as they were wide and deep.

Brown shadows were cast around them from the dim lights. Dark Angel knelt before them, her back to Castle. She was fishing inside the center box.

"Come on over, Castle," Dark Angel spoke without turning, her voice picking up echoes inside the deep box. She leaned far into the box, her feet leaving the ground, and balanced herself on her stomach. She tossed something over her shoulder as if discarding it; it landed at Castle's feet. He lifted it before looking at it only to quickly drop it. A female pubic symphysis hit the ground and bounced as if it were made of hollowed plastic.

"Come over here, Castle, and help me build your image of woman." When Castle did not move, Dark Angel pulled herself from the box and turned towards him. He was backing away, an expression of horror clouding his face. "Oh, come on, Castle," her voice edged with impatience, "she is your only way out."

"I don't understand. I don't want to." He moved towards Dark Angel. "What does this have to do with the Truth, anyway?" He stopped before her and looked down into her face. "This is wrong, it feels ugly."

"The Truth isn't always pretty, Castle." Dark Angel's voice was patronizing, almost mocking.

Castle felt anger; he suppressed it. "But Truth is not . . . dirty." His voice wavered.

"I know you don't believe that." She walked around him, a grace that was delicate, strong. She stopped behind him and, placing her hands on his shoulders, pulled herself up to whisper in his ear. Dark Angel's breath was warm and tickling, her diamond silk voice making his flesh tighten. "Look deep down, Castle. *Feel* deep down." Castle pulled farther behind the thin plastic envelope, deeper inside himself, into the snow. "You don't do anything wrong

here, Castle. The wrong has already been done. By understanding it, by learning of it, you maybe can undo it. Or, at least stop it.”

Feeling his body numb with lightlessness, Castle moved to the three boxes.

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“There.” Dark Angel snapped the left hand into place, then stood up next to Castle; he stared at his creation.

The puzzle woman lay inside one of the box covers, naked. Despite the seams and spaces where the pieces did not fit flush, Castle’s creation was beautiful, unblemished. Tall and broad in stature yet lithe, her muscles well defined but feminine. Dark brown hair to her shoulders contrasted dazzlingly to deep grey eyes, open and unstarling.

Castle rummaged through one of the boxes, pulling out a blanket; he covered her.

“Now you must name her,” Dark Angel said as he finished with the blanket.

Castle stood up, but did not turn towards Dark Angel. “I already have. Her name is Miranda. Like Jupiter’s moon.” Castle heard a click and turned to see the shadowy door in the dark wall swing open.

“What does she mean to you , Castle?” Dark Angel stood in the doorway, her too perfect, alien form outlined by streaming sunlight.

Castle could not answer.

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## Dark Castle

There was sunlight on the other side of the doorway but it came through the windowed ceiling of the room beyond. Castle's chest grew cold as he forced himself from behind the thin plasticky envelope and out from deep inside himself and far outside himself; and from the snow.

Dark Angel moved past him in a flurry of skirts, "I promise you, this is the last room." Her dark tanned skin and angular features glittered in the sunlight; her shadow but a circle at her feet. She pointed to his left.

Turning, Castle saw the mucousy dark sacs he had thrown up. They looked different, more insubstantial, more shadow-like. When he turned back, Dark Angel was no longer before him; she had been replaced by a vague man shape whose inky-wet form seemed to bend the sunlight away from it; it did not cast a shadow.

Castle felt fear before he was pulled deep behind the thin plasticky envelope, and felt his body go light, as if he were no longer inside himself; he did not allow himself to go into the snow; he knew this shadowy figure would taint it.

"Do you know who I am?" The Dark Man spoke with a sweet, soft voice but something was not right with it.

"I dreamed of you: you hurt Julia." Even behind the envelope, fear made his voice shake.

"Yes. Do you know what else I am?"

"Why do you want to hurt Julia?"

"Not just your animal. Everyone standing between you and me." The sweetness of his voice had disappeared, only rot remained; the rot and something

taut, something like tension but different. "Your golden angel, your alien angel; you took care of your scarecrow for me." The Dark Man lifted his arms, which had been hidden in the oily brown shadows of his form; each hand held a half of Lacy Mae. He dropped her to the ground; she made a wet, smacking sound. "I even killed your animal's sister."

Castle felt Abby's rootball, tendrils digging into his palm. He realized something: the undercurrent of tension he heard in the Dark Man's voice was anxiety, fear. Castle felt a smile beginning to spread across his lips despite the fear he felt, "She did not die right away." Castle held up the rootball, clenched tightly in his fist.

The Dark Man swayed backwards.

"Use it. Stop him with it." The voice was followed by a wet tearing sound; Castle knew that the larger of the shadow sacs had torn open. He knew someone had stepped out of it; he felt the presence of the being step silently next to him. "Use it against him. He fears it. He fears you. He fears us." Castle turned his head--not taking his eyes off the Dark Man--to look at the figure next to him. It was also dark, shadowy, but not inky brown and oily, a dry, deep blue-black darkness.

Castle turned his attention back to the Dark Man; he started losing what little human form he had and melted into the corner. "You have not won. You do not know what I am yet." The Dark Man's voice, edged with an insanity, vanished as his shadow substance did.

"He fears us, you must use that to stop him," the shadow of himself said as he bent over the smaller globe; it now appeared to have the texture of fabric.

"You are me," Castle spoke as he turned to face his shadow-self.



"Yes I am." The deep blue-black figure ripped open the smaller orb and removed a small shadowy figure. "Only by embracing me, and him," the shadow-self held a small child in his arms, "will you be able to defeat the Dark Man. He held out the small child shadow to Castle. Like the shadow-self of Castle, the shadow-boy had no features, detail.

"I don't understand." Castle did not reach for the boy.

Castle's shadow-self sighed with impatience. "Yes. Yes, you do understand. You are not letting yourself see this." He moved to the doorway, pushed it open with his foot, more bright sunshine rushed in. Castle had to squint; the edges of his shadow-self and the shadow-boy blurred, melted slightly. "You will face him one day, but before you can do that, and win, you'll have to face us . . . to accept us. You have little time, you've lost so much." The shadow-self passed through the threshold, the shadow-boy still in his arms. The sunlight seemed to melt them. Castle felt the rootball's tendrils digging into his palm.

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### Blind

Castle could not see when he stepped through the doorway out of the factory. Shading his eyes, waiting for their readjustment to daylight and their sensitivity to retreat, he tried to make his bearings. Slowly he realized that he was back in front of the factory and that a dark figure stood on the edge of the factory wall, dark blurred skirt swinging.

"So much has been taken from me." Castle addressed the figure on the wall.

"Yes." Strange Angel's golden voice answered him. "Yes, so much . . . . You cannot get it back." She leaped from the wall to land before Castle, quietly with only the swish of cloth. Castle's eyes readjusted. "So much has just been given to you, too."

"What? Knowledge of loss? Of pain? Knowledge that something has been hidden from me, by me? Knowledge of so much time lost?"

"Wow. Impressive. You learned all that from the nonsense my sister showed you?" Strange Angel had her hands clasped behind her back and had an expression of innocence on her face, an expression she knew Castle found beautiful.

"Don't mock me, even though I probably deserve it." He found himself smiling. "She only helped me to see what I already knew."

"Who was that dark man?"

Castle's smile faded. "I don't know."

"What did he do to you?"

"I don't know." Castle's voice sounded distant, small to him. He fell deep inside and far outside himself; he pushed through the thin plastic envelope.

"Is realizing all the lost time really the worst part for you?"

"Yes." Castle felt the snow falling, felt the liquid silver star pulsing in his head. "I lost so much time. What I now know only reveals more of what I don't know."

"I will somehow make this better. I promise." Strange Angel stepped to him and reached for his lips with hers, her hands on either side of his head. Her scent of vanilla and powder filled his head; her lips touched his, warm and soft.

"No." Castle said this gently, pulled himself from her gently. "No. No more."

"Strange Angel only shrugged her shoulders and leaped to the top of the factory. "I will take care of you, Castle Deuclet, this I promise."

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### Dark-Stained

The night was dark and humid, still; the air hung like a wet curtain over the houses and street. The stars shone bright; the moon, waning, was a sliver less than full; it soft cast its blue-silver light, bathing everything in a soothing, almost eerie glow. The street was empty, silent.

Strange Angel watched from one of the rooftops.

Marney was sitting on the front steps of her apartment building, rubbing the scar under her left eye. The stitches had come out days ago and the scar had faded to a white against the light tan of her skin. Marney reached under her tee-shirt and unconsciously fingered the only scar that would not fade; Strange Angel remembered finding and tearing the gold hoop from her bellybutton. Strange Angel shuddered.

Marney started crying. "Why hasn't Castle come to see me?" A whisper.

"Castle has not come to see you because he is responsible for what happened to you." The voice was soft, smooth.

Strange Angel stood from her crouch, surprised.

"What are you talking about?" Marney wiped her eyes with her fingertips. "I saw who did this to me. It wasn't Castle." Strange Angel could see who had

spoken to her; he stood at the left of the stairs, shadowed by tall bushes. A dark hand reached out to take the railing; the shadows on his hand did not change.

"I know that, my dear." There was something disconcerting in the way he spoke those two words, as if they were coated with something slippery. "But he sent that golden woman."

The skin on the back of Strange Angel's neck prickled.

"I don't believe you." She stood up and began to turn towards the building's door. The man stepped from the shadows; Marney froze: the man was shadows. He moved up one of the steps. Strange Angel saw that he was less shadow than he was stain, oily dark-brown stain, no features or details; she could not make out his eyes except that the stain was darker where they should be. As he moved up the stairs the oily stain bled from him, coated the stairs. The scent of burnt oil wafted through the summer night.

As he moved to the step below Marney, Strange Angel could see that the stain was not only dark-brown, but she saw rings of putrid color shifting, floating on his surface. He reached out a hand towards Marney. "You will believe me," he said in his slick, thick voice as his hand reached under her shirt to touch her bare stomach.

Marney screamed as the Dark Man laughed.

Strange Angel flinched.

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Strange Angel saw the moonlight catch Faith's eyes, her face pocked with deep shadows and weak moonlight. She smiled at the man who had stepped from the shadows. "He's stronger than I thought. Can I destroy him?" Her eyes were empty, shining with insanity.

"When you are together, yes." The Dark Man answered her with his smooth slick voice. "The brass and gold one, the one that hurt you: she is to blame. She is controlling him. She is using him."

"You can destroy her?" Faith asked, her vacuous eyes filling with anger and fear--and hope.

"No. I cannot destroy her. I cannot harm her." The Dark Man's smooth slick voice took on an acid edge as he said this. "Only *he* can destroy her. Or she can destroy herself." Strange Angel could feel Faith's hope sink and her heart become heavy and dark in her chest as her eyes emptied. "Except for one way." His smooth voice slid like oil across water; the darkness where his mouth was lightened as he smiled.

"How?" Faith's eyes filled once more. She clasped her hands before her. "I'll do anything."

"We must break *him*. Break him before we destroy *him*." The Dark Man's voice filled with venom on the last word.

"Break him?" The Dark Man said nothing; he stared at her with shadow sunken eyes. "As long as he is mine, afterwards."

"He will be all yours," he answered Faith. "What is left will be yours. A plaything." Strange Angel could feel as the Dark Man's wet-filthy laugh touched the dark areas of Faith's mind, soul. Touched where Strange Angel had touched, and beyond.

Strange Angel flinched at the Dark Man's touch. The silver strand between Castle and herself tarnished for a brief moment.

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## Gathering Knoll

The sky was deep blue, light blue; the sun blending the sky's blue with its own golden light. The square-cropped grass a burnished--almost translucent--emerald felt cool beneath Castle's bare skin; he felt the grass warming and drying against his arms and legs, the side of his face. The shallow rise was clear, apart from a small gathering of wild-edged shrubs. Castle's hand felt the cool moistness of the shrub cluster's shadow as he held an acorn out to the squirrel; the squirrel stood on its hind legs, front paws held before him, watching Castle, its head moving quizzically, its dark eyes shining. It took the nut; Castle felt its tiny claws gently scratch his fingertips. Castle slowly and smoothly rolled onto his back.

Castle stared into the deep, pale blueness feeling the sun--almost above him--warming his face making him drowse. Something tickled his arm. Before he could turn, the squirrel deftly scrambled onto his chest. He scratched its head.

"You have a way with animals." The cool blueness filled Castle. The squirrel leaped from his chest and climbed onto Julia's shoulder; she scratched behind its ears.

"So do you."

Julia laughed. It reached Castle as a silver splashing. "Castle, I *am* one of them." Julia gently removed the squirrel from her shoulder and lowered it to the grass; Castle watched it scamper down the rise and shoot up a tree, acorn gripped tightly in its jaws. The soothing blueness entered him as Julia lowered herself next to him and grew until he could almost no longer contain it--he felt his very particles vibrating. The blue soothing suddenly became tangible to him; he

could almost physically touch it, feel it with his head, and heart, and what he could only understand as his spirit: It was merging with his very being, intertwining, becoming tangled. Yet it did not take over but allowed him to control it, phase it into himself. He could unleash its full power or focus it down to a thin trickle--a silver-blue thread.

Julia laid her head on Castle's chest, her fragile seeming, porcelain alicorn brushing his cheek. He allowed the blue soothing to encompass him. He felt protected, strong, yet vulnerable, weak; the blueness was the opposite of the thin plasticky envelope--it was not boundary. Castle let himself feel the blueness around him, in him. For the first time he could remember, Castle felt without fear, completely, openly. By giving in to it Castle found that he could use it, shape it--that it not only allowed itself to be manipulated by him, it willingly gave itself to him to manipulate. He knew that even if he wanted to manipulate it into non-existence the blue soothing would gladly allow him to destroy it. It had a sentience. A sentience he could not understand but it was a sentient creature that had chosen to join with him and change itself and him.

Castle thought of the snow. And it was there. Falling through the blueness, its quiet fall becoming part of the blue soothing's humming. Changing. Shifting. Joining. He remembered when the snow first moved inside him. The moment was before him, with him, behind him. The snow fell, the blueness fell, he fell on the snow covered streets, houses, trees.

Castle's temples began to throb. The blueness and snow focused down to a thin, razor-sharp silver-blue thread.

"You dreamed of *him* with the two who hurt you." Strange Angel landed before him.

"Yes." Castle raised himself onto his elbows; Julia moved into a kneeling position next to him.

"You are the one so much a part of his dreams." Strange Angel stared at Julia. This was the first time Castle had ever heard her sound surprised.

"She is the one sister. The one so much a part of Castle and so much separate from him . . . and us." Dark Angel landed behind Castle. She threw the quilt wrapped alicorn to land and roll softly before Julia. "We can't be together--you, my sister and I--but we must." Dark Angel had turned towards Julia.

Julia nodded; she had removed her sister's alicorn from the roll of quilt and held it before her, tip downwards, cup upturned to the deep, clear blue sky and clouds. Castle could see the sky and clouds reflected in the slightly darker off-white of the inside lip of the cup. The blue soothing's humming had increased, broadened its band as if it wanted to expel outward and merge with the sky; he could barely contain it. He did not want to contain it. The throbbing of his temples increased; he felt his senses heightening until Julia's coppery, ozone scent, Strange Angel's powdery vanilla scent, and Dark Angel's cold, voidless scent almost overtook him. The chirpings of the birds almost a pounding in his head; the touch of each delicate blade of grass almost cut into his exposed flesh; his clothes constricted him even as his throat closed. The silver liquid star filled his head and began to absorb the blue soothing and snow, not growing larger but denser, becoming no less fluid. The thin plasticky envelope pushed against him--and shattered. He let go of the snow and blueness; it left him with a physical force that pushed him off of his elbows back onto the grass. He stood, his head reeling, his body staggering; he felt sick yet better than he ever had before in his life. Castle's vision turned dark, a deep dark, then silvered narrowly. He felt



snow--but where he clung to his disoriented mind he knew it couldn't really be snowing--the cooling calmness of snow. When his vision returned to him, he found Julia standing ten paces before him, Strange Angel standing ten paces behind him and to his right, Dark Angel standing ten paces behind him and to his left. He brushed something from his face, cold, clinging and wet.

It was snowing.

"Do you remember when the snow moved inside you?" Castle now realized what Dark Angel's scent was--it was the scent of snow; snow that had never fallen.

"I first felt it after Julia."

"Yes. But that isn't when it first moved inside you."

"It has always moved inside me." A memory caught inside his still reeling mind. The memory tried to shatter him but it was as if the snow and blueness was so tight against him that it held him together. "Even before the Dark Man touched me." His voice was raspy, dry in his own ears and head; as soon as the words were out the liquid silver star expanded inside his head; he fell to his knees, grasping his head. As soon as he thought he could no longer take the pressure, that his skull had to crack and let the thick silver light out, it moved downwards and outwards to his body; the snow and blueness sheathing the silver liquid light inside itself took the same form as Castle's body. The pain stopped, changed. Castle had become the silver liquid star, the blue soothing of Julia, the falling snow. He saw everything around him not as it seemed but as it was: momentary impressions, particles with lifespans so short as to render them everlasting; he felt these particles, heard these particles, saw these particles, smelled these particles, tasted these particles. He saw how they were woven together but

stayed separate; how they grew and changed but were static. He could feel the world, the universe--everything in the world and universe.

The silver liquid star, inside the snow blueness, stretched and narrowed as its snow-blue sheath did, becoming a sliver-blue, glinting, sharp strand that stretched deep into the darkness--the darkness that was no longer darkness--inside Castle.

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### Spirals and Circles

Julia stood, holding her sister's white and silver glinting alicorn, before Castle. The silver-blue strand pulled in from the darkness and widened.

"Everything moves in circles--the world, nature, the universe. Why don't we?"

"Your kind has chosen to ignore the circularities of life." Julia smiled at him. He saw her form move towards him through the silken-milky scrim of falling snow, her white and grey blue clothes sometimes disappearing; her auburn hair and almond eyes wafting in the snow. She lowered herself to one knee a few paces before him. "You are different. You are outside the circles but have been accepted by them through your acceptance of them." Julia raised her sister's alicorn, tip upwards, between herself and Castle. "A circle is timeless but unchanging." She traced the spirals of Abby's alicorn with a finger. "A spiral may or may not be timeless but it is changing: It moves forward, backward, expands, shrinks. If you look at the wide end of a spiral face on, it appears as a circle."

Julia laid her head in Castle's lap. Castle stroked her hair and watched the falling snow.

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### Navel Gazing

The snow had fallen over the entire two cities; it accumulated over an inch. It had lasted over night, but by the second hour of sunrise the snow was gone; the fog, created by the melting snow, had vanished by mid-morning. The sun, a bright globe barely on the farside of its peak, beat down with steady waves of heat. The air was humid. A soft, cooling breeze blew.

Castle was crouched on the far side of the small man-made pond. His left hand flat against the cropped, cooling wet grass. He was watching a young woman on the other side of the pond. He watched her doing something with her fingers, making elaborate movements as she listened to another young woman who was jingling a keyring nervously. Castle, watching the keys, was struck by a vague feeling of familiarity. She left; he watched the young woman and her finger motions.

She was angled so he could see most of her back and a small sliver of her front. Her tank top hung over her breasts and fell short of covering the last inch or so of her flat white stomach. The light caught and sparkled in her deep firey red and orange hair; it covered and uncovered her bare shoulders as she turned her head.

Before her the sunlight glinted off the still, murky water of the pond, circles and diamonds of light winking and wavering and moving around her. He felt his body weakening, the plasticky envelope before him pulling him away from himself.

Castle felt a cooling breeze move over his body and face; he watched it gently billow the young woman's tank top and blow wisps of her hair.

His right temple started to throb. Unconsciously bringing a hand to his temple, he caught silver flashes from her fingers and neck.

"Beautiful, isn't she?"

"Yes."

Dark Angel crouched next to him, her dark clear eyes looking at him. The sunlight caught her angular features, making her look more beautiful, more inhuman. She plucked a branch of bleeding hearts from a bush next to her and spun it between thumb and forefinger.

With his senses heightened, Castle saw that the young woman was weaving long and wide pieces of grass. The liquid silver star was softly pulsing in his head.

"You're thinking about her stomach, her navel. Her belly button."

Castle turned to look at Dark Angel; he pulled back into himself; the thin plasticky envelope moved away. He felt his face heat up.

"You want to see her blemished belly. The center of her body." There was an undisguised mirth behind the flowing liquid and diamond hardness of Dark Angel's voice; her eyes shone with it.

Dark Angel stood, untucked her blouse from her skirt as she pulled her skirt down exposing her stomach. She showed Castle her smooth, dark unblemished stomach. "My stomach is unblemished."

Dark Angel tucked her blouse back into her skirt and crouched back down next to Castle. Castle felt a shifting, almost heard an audible clicking. Within himself, or outside himself he could not tell.

Dark Angel turned to him, her eyes clouded. "The strand is shifting."

Closing his eyes Castle looked into the weaving of the silver strands within the darkness. He saw changes but could not follow them.

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### Seduction and Healing

"It's your fault , Castle. It's all your fault."

The night was still and hot. Through the open windows no breeze stirred; the sounds of crickets and frogs were faint. The stars pricked the deep blue-black of the night; a few transparent and still clouds broke the clarity of the sky. The trees stretched their black, reaching shadows.

Castle, pressed against a wall of his bedroom, his body stiff, his hands tucked behind the small of his back, could feel the fear pushing against the thinness of the plasticky envelope. Fear that reached deep into his being, that cut him off from the silver-blue liquid star in his head. From the weak strength that he felt through himself.

A hand brushed his cheek, stirring the fear into a throb. Marney leaned closer, anger, pain, confusion blurring her eyes with tears, her lips pressing gently against his ear.

"You didn't do this to me, but it's your fault."

She moved her hands down his chest, lightly, probing.

"Who is she, Castle? What is she?" Marney brushed her lips from his ear to his lips. "She's a part of you, isn't she?" Marney stopped; Castle saw understanding dawn on her face.

"She is you, Castle. That's it, isn't it. She is you. She is part of your being. You're a part of her being." Marney looked into Castle's eyes. He saw horror fill her eyes, then revulsion. She pulled her face away from his face. Marney's face, her eyes, went blank. Lighting up a moment later with excitement edged with hysteria.

"I want to be a part of you, too, Castle. And you to be a part of me." A dark oily shadow passed over her face. She pressed herself against Castle, her hands touching him all over.

The thin plasticky envelope, shivered, blurred; Castle felt it give.

Castle's temples began to throb. He heard a soft thud next to him. He saw Marney look up, fear rush into her face, widen her eyes.

Strange Angel was perched on the window sill, her skirts tucked between her knees. A smile cut a white slash through the bronze of her skin.

With a stifled cry, Marney ran past Dark Angel, out the door. Castle started to follow; Strange Angel moved to stop him; Dark Angel stopped Strange Angel with a shake of her head, her dark hair sawing her neck.

"No, sister, let him go. He needs to see this. You need to protect him, but protection is not sheltering."

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The trees, still-moving, behind him; the smell of wet grass, damp earth beneath him, the sound of crickets and frogs distant around him, the cold pin-prick heat of stars above him. Before him, in the center of the field, by the dying tree

with the three boulders leaning against it, stood Marney. Castle's heightened senses pulled the image closer: tree, boulders, shell of sky with star pricks, tiny frail woman facing away from him. He watched her hug herself, shiver, fall to her knees on the damp earth around the tree.

Julia broke from the far line of pines, softly glowing in the dark blues and greens of the night; Castle felt the hum of her alicorn, discordant, pulsing.

As a woman she approached Marney, clothed in blue-dark and shimmering silver. With a smile to ease pain she gently lifted Marney from the wet earth, brushed her cheek with her fingertips. The hum of Julia's alicorn gained intensity; the pulsing becoming steady. The blue whiteness washed through Castle, mingling with his liquid silver star. She touched Marney on the stomach, her wound and the Dark Man's touch; the hum of the alicorn dimmed.

"You have been touched by a darkness," Julia said with her blue soothing voice as she knelt before Marney. "You have both light and dark in you. I cannot heal you completely. I can give you choice and control."

Julia, dipping her head, touched Marney's stomach with her alicorn; the blue-silver liquid star inside of Castle reached out and twined with the hum of the alicorn. Castle felt the dark brown, oily stain left by the touch of the Dark Man, and the pain it carried; Castle also felt the pain caused by Strange Angel's attack on Marney; it sent a shudder through him.

Castle, falling on his knees with a sob, pushed the liquid light of the star out from him into the alicorn's hum and, the twined powers, into the belly wound of Marney. Spent, he would have fallen forward if Dark Angel and Strange Angel had not placed a hand on each of his shoulders.

Mamey started crying; Julia lifted Mamey to her feet. Castle, wanting to cry, could not, the plasticky envelope separating and distancing him.

Through blurred eyes, Castle watched as Julia cradled and led Mamey away towards the far line of pine trees.

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Castle sat against the dying tree, leaning against the cool, flat side of one of the boulders, eyes towards the sky and stars. The air was quiet. A branch in the dying tree creaked as Dark Angel landed and perched on it. The thick wet grass rustled as Julia, clothed in her pants and tunic of white with silver threads, moved from the dark to lay her head on Castle's lap. Strange Angel's skirts fluttered as she landed next to Castle, crouched next to him and put her arm around his shoulders.

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### Steady and Moving

Before him and to his right were the lines and groupings of the tiny lights of one small city; before him and to his left were the lines and groupings of the other small city. Hundreds of lights breaking the night, barring the sky from the towns. Yet too weak and too small to perforate the heavy blue darkness that pushed down on the brown-shadowed figure sitting upon a tumble of rocks on the hill, separating him from everything below.

Castle felt a peace weaving through him as he watched the lights: some twinkling, some steady, some moving; and felt the separation of the night between him and the cities.



He sighed, breathing the cool night air deep into him. His left temple began to throb.

With the stirring of the air and the rustle of delicate cloth, Strange Angel landed next to him, tucking her skirts between her knees and crouching in one liquid movement.

"Don't you sometimes wish you could fly?" Strange Angel's gold eyes stared unfocused down into the pin-prick lights. "To be like a feather carried by the winds, or a bird using the winds."

"You fly." Castle stared down at the lights, felt the soft breeze cool his cheeks.

Strange Angel let out a soft half-laugh. "What my sister and I do is not quite what you'd consider flying." She unscrewed the thermos she had pulled from the darkness and poured two cups. "I don't quite understand what it is that my sister and I do." She handed him a cup of steaming fragrant, spiced tea. "I guess we just--leap."

Castle chuckled as he took the cup from her smooth, long-fingered, bronze hand.

Blowing into her cup and taking a tentative sip, she leaned back on a rock and looked towards the sky. "It's nice to look at the stars: bits of silver and white metals."

They sat in silence drinking tea, occasionally eating a wedge of the blood orange Strange Angel had unwrapped from a cloth and looking at the stars and lights.

After the tea was gone she turned to him, "I am part of you, Castle. I protect us. Something is shifting. I know you've felt it. So I won't be able to

soon." She clasped her hand over his as it lay on the smooth, cool stone. "I can help make your feeling of loss not matter so much and give you time to understand. This I can promise you." Castle turned to look in her unsettling, beautiful face. Her brow was furrowed, her eyes wide. "I'm scared, Castle."

She moved into a crouch, took his face in her hands. "I can see snow falling, falling behind your eyes." Without taking her eyes from his, she removed a silver band from one of her fingers and placed it on his right little finger.

She leaped into the air, above the sheer, rock-jagged drop off before them.

Castle watched the cities' lights, twinkling, steady, and moving.

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### Dreams of Curtains

Castle Deuclet slept. The shadows of the room cut a sharp angle over his bed, his sleeping figure. The silver moonlight filtered through the room's window; the sliver of moon outlined caught his profile casting most of his face in blue shadow. The night was still, and silent. A breeze, soft and cooling broke the night's stillness, seldom, faintly carrying night scents, dark perfumes: earth, cool humidity.

As Castle breathed these scents, cooling his body, loosening his mind, he dreamed.

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Tall, wide, and thick Curtains, hanging apparently in mid-air, stretched in every direction as far as he could see. Above him, the ceiling stretched high and seemed to go on with no ending; maps of stars and constellations etched on its

deep blue-blackness made the surface appear to be depthless. Paths of red-brown narrow carpeting moved off in hundreds of directions. On the floor, beneath and between the curtains, the deep blue-black polished floor was mapped with intricate patterns of silver strands. The strands were not on the floor but floating in it, as if in amber.

Closing his eyes, Castle saw the same patterns in his head, silver strands moving in every direction, only he was with them in the blue-blackness, not above them. Opening his eyes, looking at some of the familiar patterns on the floor, he saw strands move; some quivered, some shifted, almost imperceptibly.

He started walking down one of the carpeted paths, knowing where he had to go.

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Castle was fully awake; he put on his robe as he headed to the window; a cool breeze washed over him. A fear moved through him, but an excitement as well; the silver liquid star pulsed with his heart. The thin plasticky envelope moved between him and the reality, protected him but did not separate him.

The sliver of silver-blue moon clouded over; he saw two stars, close together, large in the night sky. One glittered silver, the other shone white. He watched the two stars pulse in rythmn with the silver-blue star in his head.

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### Map of Silver

He stood before the large scraped and dented dark stained metal door; the holes that had held that nails that had held Lacey Mae were still there, dark stains

encircling the small holes. The day was overcast, the clouds low and dingy grey streaked with browns; the scent of rain hung heavy over the factory.

Crouched before the door, cowering and sobbing, was a young woman. In her limp hand she held a ring of keys. Castle looked at her. Her back was small and quivered with her sobbing; her hair was brown and did not quite cover the back of her neck. She was wearing a green sweatshirt, jeans, and white sneakers.

He crouched, and placed a light hand on her back. She turned her head up to his, surprise on her face. Her face was plain, beautiful in its simplicity; Castle saw hard, blue eyes stare into his before they became a warm brown.

The young woman held the keyring and keys before her.

"I-I'm supposed to tell you that the door's unlocked." Her breath hitched. "You're supposed to follow the silver map."

She clutched the keys to her chest, stood up and pushed by Castle starting to run. She stopped and turned towards him, her entire body heaving. "I don't know what's happening to me. Some . . . *thing* is inside me. I think it's good--a good thing, but I don't want it there. I feel full but light." She turned and ran away, her footfalls echoing, subdued but clear in the silence beneath the lowering clouds.

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### Silver Path

Inside the factory, past the room of pillars, beyond the room of angels, Castle stood on the inside of the small and narrow door with the maps of stars above

him, and silver strands below him. Narrow red-brown carpeted paths stretched on in all directions and curtains hung from the darkness.

Before the curtains, standing naked, was Miranda; the soft light emanating from the strands and stars catching the lines where her parts joined. Her eyes were open and a dark grey; her long chocolate colored hair tumbled over her shoulders, its ends brushing the dark tanned skin at the small of her back. She moved towards Castle, the well toned muscles of her body flexing; her moves graceful, strong.

"I feel broken inside. I think I was in pieces; you put me together. It hurts but I feel glad. You did a good job but I don't think all the pieces fit."

"I'm sorry."

"No." She smiled, a white flash; put two finger tips to his lips. "You did your best; I'm in your debt."

Miranda took his hand, it felt hard and smooth in his. "Let me come with you."

He gripped her hand tightly in one hand and the rootball in the other. He followed the path he saw in his head; the carpet was the same rust color as all the other paths but it glowed silver inside his head. The fear and excitement pulsed through him. His temples weren't throbbing. This made him uneasy.

\*\*\*

He stood before the curtain of roiling crimson coiled with an oily black. Miranda held his hand in hers; he felt the triangle within circle cool and separate between their palms. Castle felt Miranda's hand tighten around his for a brief moment; he raised his right hand and barely laid it against the curtain. The

curtain disappeared in the smell of heat and a momentary and blinding flash. All that remained of it were singed fibers at his feet and the scent of scorched oil.

Castle moved through the huge, dark room, past the shadowed figures, through the doorway and out into the window-ceilinged room. The sunlight was bright as it flooded through the ceiling and the doorway to the outside. Miranda had let go of his hand and was standing by the doorway leading back into the dark room.

Before him, between himself and the doorway out, stood two shapes--a tall one and a little one--holding hands.

"Have you come to terms with yourself--us?" The tall shadow shape spoke in darker inflections of Castle's voice. The edges of his shape blurred in the sunlight; the small figure whose hand he held was sobbing softly.

Castle turned to look at Miranda, who stood with her eyes down in shyness and deference to the scene before her. Her nudity shone with a beauty and vitality; he studied the seams where her parts connected to one another.

He moved to her and kissed her on the forehead; the silver light from the liquid silver-blue star shone behind his eyes. He turned back to the two dark figures of himself.

Castle said nothing, only lifted the small dark figure into his arms.

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### Swords, Shadow and Snow

Castle stepped out from the doorway but not into the emptied, deserted back lot of the factory, but into the field across from his apartment. Before him

stood the dying tree with the three boulders leaning against it. He blinked in the bright but fading sunlight of dusk as the thin plasticky envelope moved into place and his senses heightened; the scents and sounds of the field--the chirping of birds and insects, the earthy smell of the field, the sweet scents of the breeze--were strong to him but subtle to the world, permeating and weaving into its fabric. He smelled everything, heard everything, saw everything, felt everything all at the same time. He should have been overwhelmed. He was not.

"Everything exists at once. Seems almost more than you can handle." It was the Dark Man's calm and insane oily voice.

"He can handle it." Two voices in unison. Both of Castle's temples began to throb. He heard the soft rustle of fabric from behind him.

"And much more too." Strange Angel's golden smooth voice was rough with hatred and anger.

"Ah, your impotent Angels. What can they do now?" The Dark Man's voice came from before Castle. He turned to see him standing several hundred yards ahead of him, before the tree. "What can you do for him now? NOTHING!" The Dark Man's oily voice broke into a laugh rippling with anger and madness.

Faith Vale ran out from behind the Dark Man and lunged at Castle screeching and holding a curved, filthy brown-bladed dagger. As she ran towards him, Castle could see that the dark brown wire-wrapped handle was swelling and turning her hand black-brown with its poison. Before he could react, Faith slashed the blade into his right thigh, cutting him from inner thigh to knee. Castle clutched his thigh in the pain that felt more filthy than hurt.

Strange Angel screamed with rage but before she could react Dark Angel was on top of Faith. She grabbed Faith's head in her hands and stared into

Faith's light brown eyes with her dark, clear and hard, alien eyes. After a few moments of struggling against Dark Angel's unbreakable grip, Faith let out a strangled gasp and her body started convulsing. Dark Angel, releasing Faith, let her drop to the ground, where she crawled as far away as her body and mind would let her, balled herself up, and started whimpering.

The Dark Man's laughter stopped abruptly.

"I showed her the Truth about herself, Dark One. I cannot do that to you, but you will soon see yourself for what you truly are."

With a scream of rage, the Dark Man threw oily darkness at Dark Angel. "You destroyed a valuable weapon of mine!"

The oily darkness encompassed Dark Angel. Dark Angel laughed, the diamond silk laugh cutting through the middle of the thick, dark cloud. She thrust her hand out from the oily brown-black. "Did you really think you could destroy me with the substance that helps to make up what I am?" The darkness dispersed. "You're a bigger idiot than I thought." She leaped back to stand behind Castle, next to her sister. "No more tricks, Dark One. Fight the battle you fear more than you fear yourself."

Dark Angel threw the blanket-wrapped alicorn to Castle; he removed it and placed its tip against his thigh wound. The alicorn could not heal it but removed the poison; half of its length became oily brown with it. The blue humming of the alicorn increased as it worked to unmake the poison within it.

"I have something of yours, Castle." The Dark Man untied the end of a black-brown, thin cord he had attached at his waist. He tugged it roughly; Julia was pulled from behind him to fall to her knees before him, the other end of the cord tethered around her neck. Her white silver-threaded clothes were torn, and



filthy with the Dark Man's oily brown. Castle's heightened eyes examined the brown-blue blotches and welts on her face and exposed flesh; he searched her pain-filled, frightened eyes and saw that her alicorn had turned filthy brown almost to its base.

"It was easy to take her. She had weakened herself by helping that friend of yours I had try to seduce and destroy you."

The Dark Man reached behind him with his left hand and held a filthy, oil-dripping, brown-metal sword, its three foot blade curving upwards before him.

Castle's hand tightened around the rootball in his pocket as his eyes studied the sword. The inside of the curve was ridged like a saw; its outside edge, the sharpened edge, was flecked with rust and pitted with the corrosive oily-brown of the Dark Man. The tarnished gold guard extended for three inches in both directions and ended in a rusting coil. The sword was meant to frighten him. All that coursed through him was anger and hatred. He held them back. The thin-plasticky envelope swelled forward with this strain.

The Dark Man stuck his sword point down into the earth; Castle could hear and feel the grass pull away from it.

"Come and get her," his oily, dark voice taunted. He pulled Julia close with one hand and touched her stomach with the other. Julia's clothes burned away until his hand touched the flesh of her stomach and singed deep into her.

Julia screamed.

He pulled his hand away to reveal a fresh brown-blue mark oozing with a yellowish-brown pus.

Castle fell to his hands and knees with the strain of containing his anger, hatred and pain. The thin plasticky envelope swelled forward even more and the

silver-blue liquid star grew and shone and burned its cool heat until he could no longer contain it. They merged--envelope and star.

Castle screamed.

He pushed himself up onto his feet, hands clenched at his sides, one gripping the alicorn, the other the rootball. The liquid silver light moved through him, from him as wide and long as his body, as a solid beam with the singing sound of silk against metal, to hit the Dark Man; it blew him backwards away from Julia; the beam severing the tether.

Julia collapsed. Castle fell to his knees.

A tear formed at the corner of Castle's eye only to fall and hit gently on the earth and grass beneath him.

It started snowing.

The world became hushed, contained by the falling snow. Castle heard both Angels behind him gasp softly and their skirts rustle as they settled into crouches.

After a few moments, after the snow had covered everything and everyone in a soft, delicate layer, a spot in the low, grey-blue snow clouds opened up revealing two stars in the time between dusk and twilight--one silver, one white. The stars were falling.

Two angels, identical except for their color, landed before Castle, one silver, one white; both wore flowing gowns and had flowing hair of their same color.

They spoke as one. "An instrument for you. They held their arms out before Castle, gripped loosely in their hands were shafts of star--one silver, one white. The two angels merged into each other, melded, became one. The shafts

joining, shifting, changing became a sword. As this was happening Castle almost did not notice that Dark Angel spun the silver disc into the merging shafts. The angels, as one, laid the sword before Castle in the powdery snow, its length running parallel to him.

The one angel of shining white and silver separated into two, one of silver and one of white. They turned as one to Strange Angel and Dark Angel. "Sisters." Spoken as one. They moved over to stand next to their dark and strange sisters.

Castle stared at the sword by his knees, at its gleaming straight silver blade over three feet in length. He reached to touch it. The silver metal was cool and warm at the same time against his fingertips, smooth, felt more like porcelain than metal; one edge was dull, the blade tapered to the thinner, sharpened edge. The blade hummed, but not as the alicorn hummed. It was not a hum of a living thing, but the hum of a perfectly yet delicately balanced thing. The silver disc with the triangle within it had become the guard; it had changed, grown and thickened until it fit the sword. The hilt was over a foot long and a smooth white and circular. Castle gripped it with one hand; it fit his grip. Lifting it, Castle felt its weight both light and heavy.

"Castle!" It was Strange Angel's voice. But she did not have to voice her warning; Castle had felt her fear and urgency shiver the silver strand that connected her to him a heartbeat before he had heard her voice.

Castle did not move as the Dark Man charged at him; the tip of his sword rested in the grass beneath the snow cutting into the soft earth, the hilt loose in his hand.

He felt, in his mind, behind and within the thin plasticky envelope--in the deep blackness with the mapping of silver strands--the rusting, oily strand that connected him to the Dark Man. He ran his fingers lightly over the brown-red rusting silver; it bit deep into his fingertips.

*It's so easy.* He thought.

"So easy." Out loud.

Castle snapped the almost forgotten thread.

"No!"

The Dark Man collapsed screaming in pain and fury.

Castle, dropping his sword, ran to Julia, cradled her in his arms; he could feel her pain in the silver strand that connected her to him and in the of heat of her body.

Castle heard the swish of cloth. "Here."

Castle turned to see Strange Angel holding Julia's sister's alicorn loosely in both her hands. She was grimacing. She dropped it before Castle. "I think it's taken care of the poison from your wound." She turned to go, but Castle grabbed one of her hands; where the alicorn had touched her he saw that her skin had turned pale, almost transparent. Strange Angel shrugged and put her palms side by side; a strip as wide as the alicorn stretched across both palms. "We told you we two cannot exist together."

"Thank you." Castle touched her injured palms lightly, then took up the alicorn.

Strange Angel shrugged again. "I felt so helpless." She leaped into the air in the sound of her skirts and the feel of the wind.

Castle lifted the alicorn, feeling the porcelain smoothness of its twists; his touch was light but no less sure. He looked into Julia's face, her half-lidded, open-pupiled eyes, her even more pale--almost transparent--skin, the map of blue veins closer to the surface than they had ever been. He shifted her body to lay her flat; he was frightened by her lightness. The falling snow began to gently cover her, trying to hide her dark-poisoned wounds. Abby's alicorn, held over Julia's body by Castle's hands, began to hum; the hum increased until Castle's arm went numb with its vibration; the liquid silver star in Castle's head began to pulse, in rhythm to the pulsing of the alicorn; the snow fell in swathes to the pulsing rhythm of the alicorn and the liquid silver star. Castle touched the alicorn to the spot just beneath where her rib cage met. The alicorn's tip rested lightly on the skin over her heart.

Julia's almost still chest began to stir; she gasped, coughed thickly. The humming of the alicorn increased; Castle had trouble keeping it still. Julia breathed in a long, deep, painful breath. The alicorn plunged itself into Julia's chest; Julia's back arched, her limbs tightened, muscles pulling tight, fingers digging into the earth beneath the shroud of snow. Julia screamed. Castle reflexively tried to pull the alicorn from out of Julia. He could not move his arms. The pulsing in his head, in his arms, and falling around him began to hurt in his head, in his muscles, in the very fiber of his being. He wanted to scream; he didn't. Tears fell from his eyes, falling on Julia. The brown-blue splotches on Julia broke open more, oozed black pus; the falling snow landed, stuck to the pus, covered the pus.

The alicorn's hum stopped. The silver-blue star's pulsing slowed and faded to its usual pulsing; the snow began to fall as it had been before, as it

always did. Castle tumbled backwards as the alicorn released itself from Julia's flesh; he lay there, muscles locked, his fibers coiled tight, unable to move. He lay there, feeling the snow covering his face, eyes open to the white, grey-blue darkening sky, letting the snow fall on the thin film of his eyes. He lay there until his breathing became regular.

Someone touched his face, a cool trembling hand; the cool blueness filled him; Julia's auburn locks brushed his face, tickling her face, pale as the snow falling around it, hovered over his, bright, deep almond eyes sparkling.

"Thank you." Julia knelt next to him. Castle sat up. Julia had stripped, her milk-white skin unblemished by the cruel wounds that had been there only moments before. "I have to go." Her voice with its blue-smoothness, was very weak. "I have to sleep. I will be back."

"When?" Castle's voice sounded distant and weak in his own head. The thin plasticky envelope had pushed back close against him.

"I don't think time will matter." Julia brushed her lips against his forehead before standing and walked towards the far line of trees, limping. She stopped turned back to Castle. "I'm now a Unicorn in both darkness and light." She turned and continued on. As the snow began to obscure her he saw her change into her Unicorn form, whiter than the snow and graceful as light. Where she kissed him the blue soothing of her being radiated gently but steadily. He did not know where she was, but he could feel the silver strand between him and her pulling, lengthening, winding deep into the darkness. He knew he could follow it to her if he wanted; he chose not to. She was not lost, only away.

Shadows fell over Castle, one tall, one short, their deep blueness blending with the snow's white-blueness and the early night's black blueness.

"We must finish him." The dark shadow of himself stood over Castle, shadow hand holding the tiny shadow hand of the child shadow Castle. "We must be rid of him."

Castle stood up and stared into the blackness where his shadow self's eyes would be.

"I will do it. I'm that side of you." He waited for Castle's response.

After moments of feeling his own eyes searching inward, pushing through the thin plasticky envelope, into himself, Castle nodded. Nodded in understanding: he understood he could be whole, he understood that he had always known who the Dark Man really was; he began to understand the edges of his power.

"Yes. You do it. You're both parts of me that I've been hiding and afraid of." Castle paused, turned towards the fallen body of the Dark Man. He walked over to his dropped sword, picked it up, held the hilt out towards his shadow self.

"Yes. Destroy our . . . my . . . . Get him out of my world."

Castle's shadow self and shadow child walked to him, leaving no indentations in the snow, only foot sized shadows. Castle exchanged his shadow child for the gleaming silver and white sword. He saw the sword darken, cloaked in spreading shadow.

Castle watched as his shadow self stood over the Dark Man and, double-handed, raised the sword over his head. Castle watched as the Dark Man groaned, seemed to whimper, his body twitching. Castle watched as his shadow self swung the sword in a wide downward arc, as the sword cleaved through the Dark Man's neck severing his head from his body. Castle watched this as the thin plasticky envelope pushed from him and surrounded him making him empty and

distant, voiding him of the emotions he knew were there somewhere far behind him.

The Shadow Castle then picked up the Dark Man's cruel curved and edged sword and stuck it blade down before the now headless body.

Castle watched as the Dark Man's sword, his body, and his head were eaten by the snow falling to cover them; they dissolved, melted until there was nothing left but brown-dark stains quickly hidden by the snowfall.

The Shadow Castle returned the sword to Castle's hand--the shadows fled it--and retrieved the shadow child from Castle's arms.

"We are one--again." Shadow Castle and child Shadow Castle turned, walked from him, melted into the deepening shadows of the night.

"Castle." It was dark Angel's voice. Only his right temple throbbed now. "Your sword."

The thin plasticky envelope had begun to retreat; Castle felt everything surging back into him: emotions, memories, shadows, light.

He walked to his three angels with a smile on his face. He held the sword before him, hilt up, blade down. He realized he was limping and that his thigh hurt.

"Give them the sword."

Castle turned to the two star angels. They merged, melded into one. Two voices as one. "We will hold it until you need it."

He handed it to her. The angels became two; the sword shifted, became two shimmering shafts of star, one silver, one white. He held the silver disc--triangle within circle--within his palm. The angels floated into the sky through a break in the clouds, revealing a dark blue filled with silver, white and gold stars.



As they floated to where they came from, Castle heard their voices in his head. "You did well."

"Yes, Castle. You did well." Dark Angel touched her palm to his cheek. "I can hold that for you." She held her hand out; Castle put the silver disc flat on her palm. She tucked it someplace within her skirts.

Dark Angel placed her hands on Castle's shoulders, looked into his eyes, smiled. The smile, a brilliant white against her tan skin, made her look more beautiful, less human. With a quick kiss to his cheek she leaped into the falling snow. The throbbing in Castle's temple stopped abruptly.

Castle stood in the blue darkness of a summer night's snowfall.

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### Tea and Immortality

Castle and Strange Angel sit crosslegged and facing each other on the floor in Castle's bedroom. Moonlight, starshine, move through the open windows cutting straight lines down shadows, dividing into dark and light. Nothing moves, the air is still, the curtains hang limp and heavy with the night's humidity. Strange Angel is all in moonlight except for a shadow swath covering her hands braced against the floor; Castle is all in shadow except for a narrow, silver strip from a top edge of his face down to his scarred thigh beneath his jeans.

The snow from the night before has melted with the rising of the sun, leaving only a thick, steamy humidity to mark its existence.

Before Strange Angel, and caught in a shaft of white moonlight, is Castle's teapot; the strong, earthy scent of brewing green tea filling the air between them.

"You shed tears last night." Strange Angel lifts the small lid and removes the infuser from the teapot.

Castle nods. The strip of moonlight appears to move across his face.

"How did it feel?" Strange Angel raises the teapot to her lips; she breathes the scent in deeply; she releases a small amount of the opaque, brown liquid into the pot.

Castle shrugs. "It hurt." His voice a soft whisper weaving in the moonlight and shadows.

Strange Angel fills the bottom of a tea bowl. "Drink." She hands him the bowl cupped in both her hands. He drinks; the strong, almost bitter taste of the tea hides the sweet and smokey taste of Strange Angel's liquid.

"You did well last night." She takes the bowl and fills the bottom once again, handing it to him. "I wish I could have helped more."

"You hurt yourself for Julia's sake." Castle drinks.

"No, I hurt myself for your sake. You love your animal of earth and energy. I love you. I am a part of you." She takes the tea bowl, fills it, gives it back to him.

Castle smiles, moonlight glinting off his teeth. "You are a contradiction." He drinks.

"No." Strange Angel takes the tea bowl from his hands. "You're the contradiction, creating contrary beings." She fills the bowl again, hands it to him.

"I created you?"

"Quiet. Drink." Castle drinks.

"I'm here to keep my promise to you." She takes the bowl from him, fills it, hands it to him. Castle lifts it to his lips, feeling dizzy, exhausted. He drinks the tea.

Strange Angel takes the tea bowl from him, fills it with the remainder of the tea, puts the bowl to his lips and makes him drink.

Castle feels the room reeling, almost spinning. Strange Angel holds her palms out towards him, the pale strip through her bronze skin joined into one. "I promised to give you time, to take away your pain." She stands, takes his hands and helps him to his feet. "I give you time so you can take your pain away."

Strange Angel reaches into a shadowed corner and takes up the quilt-wrapped alicorn and off-white mask. Castle hears the alicorn humming but it is discordant. The tea has made Castle distant, in this distance, behind the thin, plasticky envelope; Castle follows the silver strand twining up the white alicorn; it is tarnished with brass. He looks into Strange Angel's eyes to see a pain dulling their gold and a creeping terror narrowing her pupils. Her movements betray no signs of this pain or terror as she leads him to his bed and lays him on his back.

"You must be closed before you can be fully opened." She leans in and kisses him on his lips, her tangle of honey gold hair brushing his forehead .

Placing the rolled and cord tied quilt next to his head, the broken mirror mask on the other side of his head, she climbs on top of him, her bare knees on either side of his hips. Strange Angel unties the silver cords with one hand and unrolls the quilt revealing the full length of the alicorn. The blue soothing hum is replaced by blue-brass discordant humming, harsh, sad, beautiful. A deep sadness overcomes Castle; he cannot say what the sadness is for, only that it brings with it a feeling of futility, of regret, of loss.

Strange Angel lifts the alicorn; the discordant humming increases. She gasps as she moves it over Castle and places the needle-tipped point against his chest. The alicorn's tip cuts through the fabric of his shirt exposing the place where his heart beats beneath. She places the tip onto the skin; Castle feels the tip slice his skin. He feels the pain the alicorn is causing Strange Angel as it travels through their silver strand, making it quiver.

"You have cried. I couldn't until now. You die so you can live." She steadies her hands around the alicorn; the discordant humming turns into a vibrating.

Strange Angel cries out in pain and anguish, her golden smooth voice almost a howl. She begins to cry. Castle feels her tears falling on his exposed skin.

She pushes the alicorn into his chest; it slides through bone--with a wet cracking sound--as if the bone were paper.

Castle feels himself dying; his eyes begin to dim. He is scared.

"I die with you, Castle. I see tears in your eyes, falling."

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Castle Deuclet dreamed:

He was in the field, the circle of dead faces and no faces was gone. The girl was gone. He crouched, his hands hidden by the dust accumulating on the grass. He waved a hand to move the dust away from where the flower and butterfly had been. The flower was there, wilted, slashed into strips, thin and raised lines of congealed blood along the incisions. Next to the flower was the butterfly, its abdomen swollen, proboscis burned, eaten away. Fragile wings crumbling.

He picked up the flower, limp in his hand. Touched it with a fingertip, stroked it gently. Its cuts mended, veins filled; the flower bloomed. He placed it where he had plucked it from; it took root.

Castle stood, walked from the field.

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Darkness.

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### Quests and Journeys

Castle sat beneath the tree in the middle of the field leaning against one of the three boulders. He felt exhausted, unable, unwilling to move; his limbs heavy, empty. He watched Paige and Marney start to climb the outside stairway to his apartment.

"Over here." Castle raised his voice, but not much, as he called to them.

Marney and Paige walked across the field to him. "We were worried about you." Paige stopped a few feet before him.

"I was afraid something bad had happened to you the other night." Marney was hesitant, her dark eyes wide. She had not told Paige everything about the other night; Castle could see that in Paige's perplexed and slightly irritated expression.

"I'm fine." Quiet, soothing voice.

Marney approached him as if seeing something new, or different, on Castle's face. She crouched before him, her dark eyes trying to read his gold-green eyes. Her voice soft. "What did happen the other night?"

Marney reached out a hand towards his face. He caught it firmly but gently in one of his. "I'm sorry . . . about . . . about what happened to you." He let go her hand.

She finished moving her hand to his cheek. "I want to thank you. The healing was worth the hurt." She lifted her shirt to show him her stomach. There was no trace of a wound.

Marney stared into his eyes until Castle had to look away.

"The same old Castle."

Castle took up the rootball from where it lay next to him, placed it in Marney's hand. "Hold this for me, please."

"I can't, Castle."

He closed her fingers over it. "Until I get back." He smiled at her.

Castle could feel the silver strands connecting Paige and Marney to him, thin, stretching.

"I'm glad you two stopped by. I'm leaving." He stood and lifted a shoulder bag that had been partly hidden by one of the boulders. The off-white featureless mask tied to it.

"Where are you going?" Paige asked.

Castle shrugged. "I'm not sure." He lifted a rolled quilt, white bordered with blue and a silver design within the squares.

"Castle!" Paige used a hand to direct his face to hers. She started to say something but stopped short, seeing something in his eyes. "Please be careful."

He touched her cheek with three of his fingers; lifted Marney from her crouch and touched her cheek the same way.

He walked towards the road, limping, the sun warming his face, the breeze cooling his skin; the cat leaped after him slowing when he had reached Castle's heels. A smile broke across his face as he breathed in the warmed scents and listened to the signs of life. He hitched his bag and quilt farther onto his shoulder and walked down the asphalt, stopping only to pluck a branch of white, blue and pink bleeding hearts.

Sunlight glinted off the inside of the mask, revealing three cracks in the mirror.

## BIOGRAPHY

Gerald Hilaire Touchette was born in Lewiston, Maine on December 1, 1969. He was raised in Lewiston and graduated from Saint Dominics Regional High School in 1988. He attended Roger Williams College in Bristol, Rhode Island, and graduated in 1992 *cum laude* with a degree in English Literature. He returned to Maine and spent several years deciding what he wanted to do next while keeping up his English studies. In the fall of 1995, he entered the University of Maine in Orono with the hope of obtaining a Master's degree with a concentration in Creative Writing.

After receiving his degree, Gerald will continue his creative writing while finding work within his studies. Gerald is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in English from the University of Maine in December, 2001