

If Sin Dwells Deep

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ONEMILLIONWORDS

Oneironautics, also referred to as dream telepathy, is the purported ability to communicate with another person while dreaming. Parapsychological experiments into the phenomenon have yet to produce replicable results.

“But if you do not do so, then take note, you have sinned against the LORD; and be sure your sin will find you out.”

Numbers 32:23

Prologue

For the Wolf, tracking his prey was almost as thrilling as the kill itself.

False leads. Dead ends. So many places his quarry could hide. Sometimes the trail took him in endless circles or, worse, a straight line that never seemed to decrease the distance between the hunter and the hunted, no matter how far he ran.

But obstacles only heightened his excitement, delaying the exquisite moment that distracted him during the day and consumed him at night.

Her scent suddenly filled his nostrils, and the Wolf picked up speed. The scenery on either side of the path became a blur. All the easier to pretend he was surrounded by trees.

As the smell of vanilla intensified, he remembered how she looked back then. The store-bought blond curls framing a flawless neck. Those smirking lips, so red and shiny. The biggest tits in school, teachers included.

Her passably pretty face, soon to be smeared with blood...

Momentarily lost in his hunger, he felt the trail grow colder. The wind roared in his ears, drowning out his own growl of frustration. Reluctantly, he slowed, forgetting the pleasure ahead and focusing only on his memory of her.

He concentrated. He sniffed. The pull returned—subtle at first, then stronger.

Changing course, he allowed himself a brief grin. He'd enjoy the hunt while it lasted. It would be over all too soon.

He couldn't keep from sprinting, however. His imaginary trees vanished as he plunged headlong into more vivid surroundings. He pushed himself even faster. Only when he heard the sound of applause did he stop to assess his surroundings.

The edge of an enormous room. Warm air instead of the coolness of his false forest. Above, a constellation of big, blinding lights. Ahead, the cheers of a crowd. Her sickeningly sweet perfume.

Squinting against the glare of the stage lights, he cautiously flanked the front row of spectators. He wasn't surprised to see their faces were practically blank. A hint of a mouth. The suggestion of eyes. A bump that would form a nose if he stared at it long enough.

He didn't bother. His prey wasn't among the dummies.

Beyond the studio audience, a semicircle of camera men surrounded an immaculately clean kitchen. All lenses were aimed at a woman behind a waist-high counter, dumping ingredients one by one into a tall, shiny pot.

The moment of discovery always took him back to that fateful hunting trip with Uncle Bob. When the buck had stepped up to the stream to drink, unaware of him and the mortal danger he represented, he'd nearly lost his nerve. But in the end, he did himself—and his uncle—proud. His first kill was clean. The animal never knew what hit it.

Drunk from the power only a predator can know, he watched the woman. His pulse raced. He grew rock hard.

The buck had never seen who killed it, but she would.

As the woman delivered lines about proper measurements to the cameras, he studied her. The years since high school graduation had etched deep lines upon her fleshier face, grooves that even a thick coat of stage makeup couldn't

hide. Hidden beneath a loud floral-print blouse, her once-glorious rack sagged down to a belly made doughy by too much food, too many beers, a bunch of kids, or all of the above.

Seeing the former heartbreaker in such sad shape filled the Wolf with perverse joy. She and her stuck-up friends had laughed in his face when he had finally mustered the courage to ask her to the prom. “Little boy,” she had called him. The next day, Queen Bee and her two drones had filled his locker with shaving cream.

She had thought herself superior to him, but as he watched the pitiful woman stir the pot with a wooden spoon, he promised to prove her wrong.

He’d show her he was the man of her dreams, whether she liked it or not.

Teeth clenched tightly, *painfully* together, he looked back at the audience. With a little concentration, two of the women in the front row started to resemble the woman’s high school friends—the stupid bitches who had latched on-to her like a pair of remoras because they couldn’t achieve popularity on their own. They had laughed on cue whenever their leader insulted other students.

They would die first.

A voice in the back of his mind urged caution, warning him of the dire consequences he’d face if he got caught. The words belonged to a woman, one he hated even more than Queen Bee.

But the Wolf had come too far to turn back. He craved vengeance, hungered for blood.

He dropped to his knees and placed his hands on the smooth cement floor. The transformation was instantaneous and painless. One moment, he was a man, and the next, a fine—if massive—specimen of *canis lupis*.

He crouched, his new muscles trembling with unspent

power beneath a pelt of long black fur. Then he pushed off with his massive paws, leaving gouges in the floor.

A living shadow, he cleared the distance to the studio audience in a single leap. The claws of one foreleg had already sunk deep into his first victim's neck and shoulder before any of the mannequins reacted. Drone Number One's scream was quickly echoed by others. The Wolf reared up on his hind legs and struck again, a brutal blow that reduced her face to bloody strips of skin and cartilage.

As the lifeless body slumped to the ground, chaos filled the studio. Drone Number Two tried to run with the rest of the crowd, but the Wolf pounced. He threw his full weight at her back, sending her sprawling into the aisle. She let out a pained gasp when he landed on top of her.

He considered rolling her over so that he could watch her expression as he eviscerated her, but he had grown bored with killing dummies a long time ago. Tonight's target had to be someone real.

A quick glance over at Queen Bee revealed an expression of pure terror. If he didn't hurry, she might run or wake up, and while he loved a good chase, he couldn't wait another night for satisfaction.

For the Wolf, tracking his prey was almost as thrilling as the kill itself.

Almost.

He broke eye contact with Queen Bee just long enough to clamp his teeth down on her friend's neck. His jagged teeth tore through blood vessels. Bones snapped. As Drone Number Two flailed helplessly beneath him, his mouth filled with a warm, metallic tang. The body went limp as the red puddle widened around them.

He wanted to savor her death, but the sight of the corpse left him feeling empty.

Drowning out the shouts of the panicking crowd, Queen Bee cried out the name of her dead friend. The Wolf grinned.

Blood dripping from his muzzle, he bounded from the row of seats and charged at the woman, who scrambled backwards until she hit a wall of cabinets. He jumped up onto the countertop, knocking the pot off the stove and sending a tide of meat chunks, diced vegetables, and dark brown liquid over the woman's white tennis shoes.

He inhaled the sweet mixture of vanilla and fear.

"Stay back!" She held the wooden spoon out in front of her like a weapon.

His laugh came out as a snarl. If she were a drifter, she might have made the spoon into a butcher's knife or even a gun. But she was ordinary. Helpless.

The Wolf opened his mouth, showing off his wickedly sharp teeth and letting the taste of her terror caress his long tongue. Muscles taut and quivering with anticipation, he forced himself to wait, to delay the kill. She was no mannequin. She had life behind her eyes. If her death was going to mean anything, she had to know he was responsible for it.

When she woke up, her linens drenched with sweat and urine, she'd remember. She'd remember him, and damn the consequences!

"Leave me alone!" Queen Bee cried.

"Don't you mean..." His words sounded like a deep growl at first, but they became clearer as his snout retracted and his teeth shortened. "Don't you mean 'leave me alone, *little boy*'?"

Fully human again, the Wolf rose from his haunches, towering over her from atop the counter. Completely naked. Fully erect.

Disbelief diluted her fearful expression. "You're a werewolf?"

"No!" he spat. "I'm your past coming back to haunt you!"

The woman's mouth moved wordlessly, but there was no recognition in her eyes. He willed his face to change again, becoming the undersized adolescent whose scowl graced their yearbook.

She gasped. "You?"

His face aged a decade in an instant. "I'm not a little boy anymore! I am a hunter, and tonight I'm hunting sluts."

Queen Bee tried to run but lost her footing in the puddle of stew. She slid and landed hard on her side. The spoon clattered against the linoleum. He jumped down from the counter and walked over to her. She tried to kick him as he reached for her, but he caught her foot and gave it a sharp twist. She whimpered in pain when her ankle snapped.

"Shut up, bitch."

The Wolf crouched low, deflected her clumsy attempt to hit him, and grabbed her by the front of her shirt. He pulled. The buttons didn't hold. As she started to fall, he swung his other hand around her waist and yanked her to her feet.

Her blouse half unbuttoned, with one shoulder and part of her bra exposed, she brought a hand up to cover herself. He ripped her shirt open the rest of the way. Buttons skittered across the floor.

"No...pl—"

He backhanded her so hard her teeth cut his skin. The sting only aroused him more. He struck again, willing his hand to become a paw. The claws ripped through her bra and the soft flesh beneath, leaving five red lines from collarbone to fear-hardened nipple.

Though the twins had lost some of the spring in their step, he had to admit they were still impressive in terms of size.

"What I would've given to see them in their prime."

"This can't be happening," she moaned, tears spilling down her pink cheeks.

The Wolf slapped her again, and she made a noise resembling any number of wounded animals he'd killed over

the years. He reached for the wounded breast and squeezed. Warm blood trickled through his fingers. With his other hand, he reached for the waistband of her slacks.

“This can’t be real,” she whispered.

No sooner had she said the words than the stage lights flickered wildly. The shadows closed in. Enveloping the empty rows of seats. Surging toward the abandoned cameras. Toward them.

“No! You’re not getting away from me!”

He wrapped the blood-slicked fingers of one hand around her neck and plunged the other hand down her the front of her pants.

“You feel this?” he shouted, clenching both hands. “This is real. The *pain* is real. You are here with me, and you are going to die!”

The lights continued to flash. One bulb exploded in a fury of sparks, then another. The darkness reached for predator and prey alike. She was waking up. The dream was dying.

He had to go deeper...

He pulled her tight against him, her bright blue eyes inches from his suddenly yellow ones. He concentrated so hard he thought his brain would burst.

“This is real!” the Wolf roared.

Queen Bee screamed.

The lights stopped flashing. Slowly, the darkness receded.

“Hey, what’s going on here?”

The Wolf recoiled at the unexpected voice, breaking eye contact. Nausea overwhelmed him. He half threw, half dropped the woman. As he turned to confront the intruder, it was all he could do to keep from falling to the floor next to her.

He clutched the countertop and glared at a rotund silhouette standing in front of a giant spotlight. But as the intruder hurried forward, the Wolf thought he recognized the voice.

For the first time that night, the Wolf felt the stab of fear in his chest.

“This isn’t your dream, is it?” the familiar voice asked. “Are you a drifter?”

The Wolf considered concealing his identity behind the black fur and pointed teeth. He knew it wouldn’t do any good, however, because Baldr inhaled sharply and said, “You!”

Too late to hide.

But not too late to fight.

The Wolf transformed back into a beast. He vaulted the counter and lunged for the other dream drifter. He lashed out with a ferocity he typically reserved for females, knowing that if Baldr overcame his shock at being attacked by a presumed friend and ally, the god might beat him.

Or escape and tell everyone what he had seen.

Claws slashing, teeth ripping, the Wolf knew he’d have to find a way to kill—to *really* kill—in the dreamscape if he wanted to survive the night.

Chapter 1

Allison's fingers picked at what was left of her napkin. As another white flake fell beside the other flurries on the table's scratched surface, she let out a big breath. Her stomach rumbled but only partly out of hunger.

Across the restaurant, a clock bearing an outdated Pepsi logo indicated two minutes had passed since her last glance, confirming the awful truth: he was a full ten minutes late.

What if he doesn't show up?

She pushed the thought away, forced a smile, and took another sip of half-diet, half-regular soda. When she put the drink back down, she noticed a piece of the napkin was stuck to the side of the perspiring cup. She quickly pulled it off and brushed the rest of the scraps onto the floor.

What if he does come?

Ever since moving to Philadelphia a year ago, Guido's had become like a second home. It was more comfortable than her cramped apartment. The less-than-fresh décor and good-but-not-great food appealed to her appetite for a little adventure, while the reasonable prices satisfied her malnourished bank account.

Guido's wasn't a dive, but for the first time, she felt self-conscious about its quaint charm.

It wasn't a blind date, not really, and yet meeting Eben outside of work was an awful lot like introducing herself for the first time. There was so much he didn't know about her. As the seconds ticked by, her doubts continued to multiply.

How did I let him talk me into this?

A fresh gust of garlic from the neighboring table made

her stomach protest the unfairness of inconsiderate men. Yet she couldn't help but smile as she took another sip of cola.

"Inconsiderate" didn't really describe Eben. He had been one of the first to make her feel welcome, and after eight months on the job, she considered him a true friend. No, more than a friend, considering the many weeks of flirting and that first wonderful kiss. He wouldn't stand her up, not after how much he had fought for the lunch date.

The tinny jingle of the bell above the door made her jump. She craned her neck to get a better look at the entrance, half hoping and half fearing it was him. Though she wasn't used to seeing him in civilian clothes, there was no mistaking Eben, especially since he stood at least a head taller than anyone else in the restaurant.

Yes, he was tall and, thanks to a strong chin and flawless cheekbones, very handsome, but unlike the fairytale stereotype, he wasn't at all dark. His short-cropped hair was so blond it was nearly white. And apparently his pale skin and the sun weren't well acquainted. Allison could relate.

For a moment, he just stood in the doorway, and even though she knew she should wave him over, she froze.

This was a mistake.

A waitress walked up to Eben and said something.

We've been so careful not to blur the line between work and our personal lives.

She couldn't make out Eben's reply, but she recognized the low timbre of his voice.

If I run, I could sneak out the back door before he even sees—

Too late. The waitress, a new girl whose name Allison hadn't learned yet, led Eben to her table. She quickly looked down, resisting the ridiculous urge to hide her face behind her menu. When she looked up again, Eben was situating himself in the chair across from her. Her eyes passed over

his black, wooden walking stick and up to his eyes, which were covered with dark glasses despite the overcast day.

What, is he trying to look like a spy?

The waitress took his drink order and disappeared, leaving the two of them alone. Their simultaneous “hello” was followed by a long silence. Allison’s pancreas and liver performed a do-se-do.

“I hope you didn’t get lost or anything,” she said, quickly adding, “not that I care that you’re late. I mean, you’re not even *that* late.”

Eben smiled, and she hated herself a little for how much the gesture made her want to smile too.

“Please accept my apology,” he said in that oh-so proper British accent of his. “I underestimated how long it would take to make the trip.”

More silence.

“I’m surprised you ordered a soda,” she said suddenly. “I expected you to ask for a spot of tea.”

She didn’t know why she said it and immediately regretted the lame joke.

But his smile widened. “Never touch the stuff.”

As silence enveloped them again, Allison realized he hadn’t stopped staring at her since he sat down. It was impossible to read his expression because he still hadn’t removed those silly, secret-agent sunglasses. She felt naked, despite the practically new peasant top and her favorite skinny jeans. She had even scrounged up an old tube of mascara—as if that would make much of a difference!

Allison reached for her napkin only to find it completely shredded.

“OK, you’re obviously too polite to bring it up,” she said, “but you’ve got to be thinking it. I mean, I know I look a lot...different...out here. Maybe I get a little carried away in the...at work, but so what if I exaggerate my height and

cheat a little on my figure? It's just part of the gig. Anyway, I'm pretty sure Guido's has a no-stilettos policy. And even if I wanted to dress like I do at work in my own neighborhood, I probably wouldn't be able to pull it off...not in real life."

She took a deep breath, bracing herself for his reply. Her short, petite stature—not to mention the smattering of freckles on her cheeks and nose—made her look more like a teenager than a twenty-three-year-old. After spending so much time with her sexy alter ego, how could Eben *not* be disappointed by the sight of someone so...ordinary?

Since the napkin hadn't miraculously reassembled itself, she wrapped her fingers around her cup and took a long drink.

For the love of Pete, say something!

Finally, after a few more seconds, Eben said, "When you say 'a no-stilettos policy,' are you referring to shoes or the weapons?"

Allison laughed and then wished she hadn't. The soda stung her throat. She coughed so hard tears came to her eyes. Once she could breathe again, she said, "I'm just saying I hope you're not too...surprised...at how normal I look when I'm off the clock."

He chuckled. "We wouldn't have met in the first place if either of us were normal."

"I guess you're right." She picked up her menu, even though she had it memorized, hoping it would prompt him to do the same, but he just continued to look at her. "You know, if you're going to keep staring at me all creepy-like, the least you could do toss me a compliment. Even if you don't mean it."

For the first time, Eben looked flustered. "You look stunning, I'm sure." He cleared his throat. "But I can't see you."

"'Can't see me' as in coming here was a mistake or 'can't see me' because you won't take off those stupid sunglasses-

es?”

“Allison, I am blind.”

Her menu fell to the table. “What?”

“I have to apologize,” he said with a sigh. “I really ought to have told you ahead of time. Only, I didn’t want you to treat me any differently, and, well, these things are never easy, are they?”

“I suppose I assumed you would have worked it out straight off, and so I was waiting for you to say something, gauging your reaction. I thought you were merely being polite by not mentioning it.”

The dark glasses, the walking stick, his unwavering stare—how could she not have put it all together?

I’m an idiot! This whole situation is just too weird. We’re like fish out of water here, but I can’t back out now, or he’ll think it’s because he’s—

Allison covered her mouth with her hands, but she was too slow to stifle the sudden laugh.

He raised an eyebrow. “Yes?”

“I’m...I’m sorry.” A couple more giggles escaped. “It’s just...this really *is* a blind date, isn’t it?”

Eben’s lopsided grin returned. “I’ve never heard that one before.”

“I’m sorry,” she said again, but then a new wave of laughter burst out of her.

“Now what?”

“No...no, it’s nothing.”

“Come on. Out with it,” he insisted.

“I just realized that you, our official watchman, can’t actually see anything.”

He allowed a soft chuckle, a sound she had found annoying at first until she realized it was the closest Eben, with his dry sense of humor, would ever get to a belly laugh.

“The irony is not lost on me,” he said.

“How—?”

Before she could finish asking how he was able to do the job with his disability, the waitress returned with Eben’s drink and asked if they were ready to order. Eben asked what she, Allison, recommended. She suggested the chicken Alfredo and then ordered the same. For a moment, it was a normal date.

After the waitress walked away, he took a drink—an act he accomplished without any trouble, she noted. “You were about to ask how I lost my sight?”

“Oh, right,” she said, even though that wasn’t the question she had had in mind. But considering how little she knew about his past, she wasn’t about to correct him.

“When I was seventeen, I was...attacked. I put up a good fight, mind you, but I took a blow to the temple, and the back of my head hit the ground quite hard. In a matter of days, my vision was completely gone.” Eben shrugged. “I’ve had ten years to get used to it, and I think I manage rather well, all things considered.”

He’s twenty-seven...a four-year difference. That’s not so much. I wonder how old he thinks I am.

“Were you mugged?” she asked. “Did this happen here in America?”

“No, back home,” he replied.

“That’s awful, Eben.” She pressed her luck. “When did you move here?”

An unidentifiable emotion flitted across his face. “About three years ago, but it’s a dull story. Besides, I should rather learn more about you.”

She started to blush but didn’t care. It’s not like he would know. “I don’t think your past could be any more boring than mine. I was born upstate and spent most of my life in a small community with more pigs than people. Nothing exciting ever happened there, which is why I moved *here* after

graduating from college.

“But even after moving to the Big City, the only interesting thing that’s ever happened to me is I almost died when my appendix burst. That was only a month after I moved here. Guess you could say I was dying to get away from home.”

She feigned a laugh at her own joke.

“You think appendicitis is the most interesting thing that’s ever happened to you?” he prompted, his smile growing.

Allison rolled her eyes and then realized nonverbal communication wasn’t at all useful. “I meant *before* I discovered my abilities, which, as you know, wasn’t that long ago. When did you first know that you could—?”

The muffled chime of his phone sounded at the exact moment hers began to buzz against the tabletop. She reached for her phone, even as Eben pulled his out of his pocket. He pressed a button.

An electronic voice announced, “12:48 p.m. Saturday, July 21st. Message from Odin: ‘Come to Valhalla immediately.’ End of message.”

Allison picked up her cell and pulled open her email. An identical message was waiting for her in an inbox that was almost always empty. She couldn’t decide which was stranger, being contacted by their boss through email or getting summoned on the weekend.

“This can’t be good,” she muttered.

“I suppose lunch will have to wait.”

Allison called the waitress over. A few minutes later, they were standing outside Guido’s, doggy bags in hand. She took another look at his walking stick—his *cane*—and shook her head at her own stupidity.

Eben cleared his throat. “This is awkward, and I’m sorry if I’m being presumptuous, but—”

“You want to crash at my place,” she finished for him.
“Sure, no problem. I live a couple of blocks away. Here...”

She took his box of leftovers, balanced it on hers, and reached for his free hand. They walked at a comfortable pace. A blanket of dark clouds smothered the Philadelphia skyline, threatening to drench the bustling city, but with her fingers entwined with Eben’s, she couldn’t remember a more beautiful day.

Allison smiled to herself.

Who would have thought we’d end up sleeping together on the first date?

Chapter 2

Allison held the door for Eben, and he stepped into what her landlord called the lobby but what was actually a narrow hallway where she and the other renters bottlenecked while coming, going, and getting their mail.

She did her best to maneuver past him without tripping over his cane. When she reached the elevator, she pushed the number three and prayed the temperamental machine would defy its habit of impersonating a turtle. The disconcerting duet of rumbling motor and screeching cables told her the elevator was on its way, slow as ever.

They hadn't said a word to each other since leaving the restaurant. She looked up at his face, not bothering to be sneaky about it. His expression was grim, maybe even worried.

"The elevator always takes forever," she said.

He just smiled politely.

She supposed she ought to be more concerned about the circumstances that prompted Odin's urgent message, but all she could think about was how Eben was seconds away from entering her home. His invitation to meet for lunch had caught her off guard, and although she had pretended it was no big deal at the time, some anxiety had haunted her ever since.

The elevator door opened and the two of them wedged themselves into the glorified shoebox. She was again surprised by how much she had come to trust the man.

Risking a rendezvous at Guido's was one thing. Welcoming someone from Project Valhalla into the space where she slept and watched TV and became plain, old Allison Elizabeth Greene? Well, that crossed another line altogether.

The elevator gave an exasperated shudder, and the door opened in a series of jerks. Several steps later, she removed the keys from her purse, hoping Eben would dismiss the excessive jingling as the consequence of her rushing, not the result of nervous hands.

"Home sweet home," she announced and led him far enough into the combined living room and kitchenette so that she could close and bolt the door behind him. Her stomach made an audible protest as she deposited their doggy bags in the refrigerator.

"It's charming, I'm sure," he said.

It wasn't. Only a small wooden cross interrupted the otherwise blank, cream-colored walls. The brown corduroy couch and reddish end table dated back to her parents' wedding more than thirty years ago. The green shag carpet probably came from that same era. Thrift stores and Ikea were responsible for the rest of her furniture.

Further supplementing the dated décor was the contents of her entertainment area: a small cube of a television and a stack of old-school Christian rock CDs.

Not that she needed to be embarrassed for owning music by Keith Green, Amy Grant, and Petra—or any of her hand-me-downs, for that matter. Eben couldn't see any of it.

"Can I get you—?" She turned to find Eben opening an unmarked bottle of pills. "What are those for?"

"For emergencies," he replied. "They're tranquilizers that quickly induce sleep without inhibiting REM. I thought Odin made them available to all of the drifters. Why, what do you use to fall asleep?"

“Nothing, usually,” she said. “But if I think I might be late for work, I drink Sleepy Time tea.”

Eben grinned. “Like I said earlier, I don’t drink tea, and given the tenor of Odin’s email, I think we had both better partake. They’re fast-acting pills, though, so I recommend being in bed before you swallow one.”

She reluctantly accepted the tiny, white pill. “In bed...”

Oh God, he doesn’t think we’re going to share my bed, does he?

“But before you go, could you direct me to a couch or a chair?” he asked.

“Oh, absolutely!”

A moment later, she watched Eben lower himself onto the couch, set his cane against one of the arms, remove his shoes, and pop a pill into his mouth. Finally, he removed his sunglasses. Other than the faraway look, his deep brown eyes were exactly how they looked in the dreamscape.

What would he do if I leaned down and kissed him?

“Sweet dreams...and see you soon, love,” he said, closing his eyes.

“You too,” she replied, hoping he couldn’t hear her hammering heartbeat.

Pill clenched in her palm, she reluctantly left Eben and went to her bed. It wasn’t like her to take someone else’s prescription or any unfamiliar drug, for that matter. That was one of the reasons she had never taken Odin up on his offer to send her free tranquilizers.

But she trusted Eben.

Before she could lose her nerve, she put the tablet on her tongue and swallowed.

Sitting on her comforter, she grimaced at the lingering taste of metal, but any discomfort was quickly eclipsed by a sudden heaviness in her head. Or was it lightness? Before she could consider it further, her head hit the

pillow, and she left the apartment, her unexpected guest, and Allison Greene far behind.

When she was a child, she used to expel her breath in a steady stream of bubbles and gently sink to the lake's sandy floor. Enveloped by the silence of that murky void, she imagined she was floating in outer space. Or she would pretend she was experiencing a new state of being, freed from her body and the burden of physics.

Stepping out of her dreams reminded her of that same sensation.

She closed her eyes to shut out the scenery her subconscious provided and concentrated on the cool emptiness of a lake. The dream, which had felt as substantial as anything on Earth, melted away. But the cocoon of tranquil isolation embraced her for only a second before it was violently ripped away.

She held her breath, though she knew she wouldn't drown—*couldn't* drown—since she no longer had a mouth or lungs. The idea of holding her breath was just a mental trick, an imaginary action that simulated what she would have done if any of it were real.

The first time she had found the space between dreams, she had fought the current. She had thrashed and gasped and struggled until finally realizing there wasn't any danger. That was when she learned she could steer her formless self through the rush of not-water by thought alone.

Those first few weeks, she had eagerly plunged into the nearest pocket of reality in order to escape the minimalistic state of gray. Because somehow she had understood, even in the throes of panic, that the blurry, bubble-like shapes pouring past her were other dreams.

She didn't start to suspect they were also *other* people's

dreams until she penetrated the flimsy skin that separated them from the storming emptiness and spent time wandering unfamiliar landscapes populated by strangers.

Back then, it had taken all of her focus to find her destination.

Not anymore.

No sooner did she picture the Great Hall than the current pulled her in a new direction. Seconds later, she breached a bubble that wasn't a bubble. Thick darkness replaced the dusk-gray flow. Solid ground greeted her feet, and a sudden draft brought goosebumps to her freshly formed skin. A faint light ahead confirmed there was still plenty of distance between her and the gathering of drifters.

Safe in the shadows, she took a deep breath and willed herself to transform.

She wondered, as she walked toward the light, if the perimeter of Valhalla's Great Hall was shrouded so that everyone could get into character before coming face to face with one another. Then again, she doubted anyone else went to as much trouble as she did. A change in wardrobe, yes, but not the complete overhaul Allison performed every time she arrived.

They probably think it's all out of vanity...

She let the thought float away as she concentrated on the final aspects of her appearance. The pressure between her temples flared and then subsided as the dream succumbed to her will.

When Syn stepped out of the darkness and into the flickering candlelight, she was a full twelve inches taller than the number printed on Allison's driver's license. Some of the added height came from the very stilettos Eben had mentioned at the restaurant. In addition to the heels, her legs and torso had grown longer and slimmer.

The skin that her outfit revealed—far more flesh than Allison ever would have shown in the real world—was now tan and freckle-free.

From shrimp to supermodel in sixty seconds.

Her arrival drew more than a few stares, thanks to the sleeveless, skin-tight bodysuit that accentuated her perfect curves. As she approached a long table constructed from unpolished planks, she thought she heard the word “bimbo” from a certain whispering goddess. Another conversation stopped entirely as she walked past a group of winged warriors, all of them male.

Her bold red lips curled into a smirk, she took one of the few empty seats, a spot next to the head of the table and far away from the man currently sleeping in her living room. She was tempted to send him a conspiratorial wink, but he wasn't even looking in her direction.

Heimdall gazed straight ahead into the darkness, seemingly oblivious to the nervous chatter around him.

She twirled a finger through her long wavy hair, wondering what the man would have made of the stark visual contrast between Allison and Syn. She had brightened her brown locks to platinum blond, and her eyes, which had been light blue during their lunch date, had darkened to a hue somewhere between sapphire and violet, blazing fiercely from within the coal-black makeup framing them.

If he could have seen me out there, he would've laughed in my plain little face. I must have been crazy to agree to meet him in the real world!

She started to imagine the horrified reaction of a non-blind Eben but immediately pushed the thought away. There would be time to sort out her relationship with Eben later. Right now, she had other things to worry about.

As far as Syn knew, this was the first emergency meeting of the gods.

A glance down the table reminded her that not only were the naturals in attendance, but also the full host of valkyries. In fact, the table seemed to have stretched to nearly double its usual length to accommodate everyone. Most of the gods, including Heimdall, sat at the other end. Meanwhile, she was surrounded by a flock of soldiers.

Covered in dark brown, leather-like armor from head to toe, their physiques as muscular as any athletes, the valkyries were practically indistinguishable from one other. Heimdall had once pointed out that in Norse mythology, every valkyrie was female. It was as if the non-naturals' uniforms were designed to defy gender itself in an attempt to skirt the issue entirely, though supposedly their ranks were split equally between men and women.

Headpieces that were equal parts riot helmet and bestial mask hid the valkyries' faces. The strange gear made them look like winged foxes or wolves. Syn looked for her two valkyries among the two rows of clones—the twin beauty marks on Sváva's chin, Thrúd's pointy nose—but all she could say for certain was the valkyrie to her right was neither of the women, if only because he had an Adam's apple.

She leaned back in her chair and propped her feet up on the table, nudging a brass candelabrum out of her way with the pointy toe of her shoe. For the first time, she noticed the lack of silver chalices, which could contain any beverage the gods cared to conjure up. Their absence made the ancient table—and the shadow-ringed Great Hall itself—look even sparser than usual.

“No refreshments? What kind of party is this?” she asked, addressing the male valkyrie beside her. When he didn't react, she added, “Any idea what this is all about?”

The valkyrie shifted in his seat to face her, a gesture made awkward by a pair of big black wings. After a quick

frown at her stilettos on the table next to him, he said, “Are you kidding? Brynhildr doesn’t tell us anything. But considering we’re all here with our thumbs up our asses, waiting for the Odin and the Ice Queen to show up, I’m guessing it’s something big.”

“Really? That’s all you’ve got? I expected more from you CIA types.”

The man stared at her in silence, most of his expression lost behind an opaque visor, but she had no trouble interpreting his frown.

And I thought Sváva and Thrúd were killjoys. Maybe being humorless is a prerequisite for valkyrie recruitment.

“Sorry, pal. Didn’t mean to ruffle your feathers,” she muttered.

The soft buzz of voices dissipated. Syn turned to find Brynhildr crossing the dimly lit hall. Simultaneously, Odin made his entrance on the other side of the vast chamber, and the two leaders took their places at opposite ends of the table.

As Brynhildr sat down next to her, Syn tucked her legs under the table and pulled her chair closer to the table.

Beside her, Brynhildr sat as straight as the spear strapped to her back. The valkyrie commander’s uniform was a tricked-out version of the typical valkyrie getup. The small embellishments—golden epaulettes, a medallion bearing some rune Syn didn’t know—made her ensemble look a little less modern than her subordinates’ gear.

The most obvious differences, however, were her silvery white wings and the shiny breastplate she wore over the dark leather.

Thanks to the pair of silver cups and the long blond braid draped over one shoulder, there could be no mistaking Brynhildr’s gender.

At the other end of the table, Odin cleared his throat and

said, "Thank you all for coming on such short notice and at such an unconventional hour."

"Better be worth it," Syn shot back before she could stop herself.

Her comment earned a half-hearted chuckle from Vidar and a glare from stuffy Sága. The valkyries, under the piercing stare of their commanding officer, remained silent. Heimdall didn't react either, and she hoped in vain he hadn't heard her.

But Odin had. His steely gaze landed on her. His jaw stiffened. Syn glared back. She wondered if he was going to make the mistake of scolding her in front of everyone. Not that she'd be embarrassed by it. She was more concerned by what verbal barbs she'd end up firing back at the chief god.

Odin always brought out the worst in her. She hadn't needed Heimdall to point that out to her, and she hadn't had a good answer when he asked her why. There was just something about him that rubbed her the wrong way. Maybe it was his arrogance. Maybe it was how often he had challenged Milton's leadership before eventually taking his place.

Or maybe it was just the constant reminder of her friend's absence.

After several long seconds, Odin's unnerving, green-gray eyes ended the staring contest. He looked up and down the row of dream drifters, hands folded before him. He cleared his throat again before addressing them all.

"It is with great sadness that I must report the death of one of our own."

If Syn's legs had still been up on the table, she would have fallen out of her chair.