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# EYES OF A STRANGER

by

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—for Valerie—

I watched her across the crowded studio, and I *knew*—I felt it as I never had before. She was the one I'd sought. *The one*. After so very many years.

Heavy bass thumped like muted thunder, as though the room were a beating heart, and all of us in it the blood being pulsed from chamber to chamber, while on stage the artists danced and flung their paints. The fluorescent colors glowed in bright splatters on the white plaster walls and on their naked bodies; the intense black-lights made their skin look as dark as rich brown soil. The show was strange, fearsome and weird and wonderful, the artists beautiful, dazzling specimens of man and woman. But my gaze kept wandering, creeping out among the spectators, finding its way back to *her*.

She didn't have the classical Greek perfection of the splendid creature that cavorted paint-bright and rippling-muscles on the makeshift stage, yet she was equally beautiful—more so. Her body, when I could glimpse it through the shifting silhouettes that separated us, looked slender, narrow waist and long legs flattered by tight and torn blue jeans, slight breasts and long neck accentuated by her high black coat-collar and scoop-necked red halter top. Lush hair, the color of red gold, the texture of fine silk, spun in long, tangled locks well below her fine shoulders. I'd seen more ideally proportioned women—there were a half-dozen or more in the room around me, as well as the undulating beauty on stage. But her face, ah! Her cheeks were full, her chin strong, her forehead high; she wore a scoundrel's smile that was nevertheless terribly alluring, sweet. And—those *eyes*. They sparkled with such energy, such life as I scarcely remembered could exist. Those eyes spoke silently of a heart which knew the full range of human feelings, knew them to their depths and breadths, and could speak them in poems or paintings or perfectly struck piano chords. In those eyes I saw an artist whose beauty eclipsed that of the two naked people whose breathless performance had drawn the crowd to this tall Soho loft.

I leaned against a rough wooden post and watched her, forgetting the exhibition, the bohemian audience surrounding me, eventually even the rattle-window boom of the bass. Though she was all in shadow, lit only by the furtive violet shimmer of the stage lights, I could see her clearly—I could see nothing *else*.

I sensed more than saw that the show was coming to a close; the audience strained to see as the artists twisted their bodies together, thrust hips and flailed limbs and writhed into a single senseless shape. Feeling the moment growing close, tasting it on my expectant

tongue, I moved toward her, sliding between people with an ease I'd long since grown accustomed to, brushing past them cat-like and quiet, all but invisible, unfelt.

The stage lights blinked out, then, with a final crash of percussion, and darkness deep as an ink well poured into the studio, filling it, ceiling to floor. The audience drew a collective breath—as if the room itself had gasped—then sighed it all out again. I was near her, now, in the dark, seeing and unseen, my fingers itching to plumb the depths of her hair, to explore her shoulders, her throat—ah! But slow, and subtle, enjoy the seduction, prolong, savor.

White lights startled the room to illumination once more. Robed now, the man and woman, still dappled with bright colors, bowed slightly, then kissed one another; the bohemians applauded and snapped their fingers and cawed their approval.

The girl, so near now, stiffened, skin going cold all over, feeling me behind her. I smiled a little—how could I not?

"Hello," I whispered, close to her ear—a private sound, all for her.

She turned toward me, as now the crowd around us began to mill and cluster and murmur. One eyebrow bent up, her radiant blue eyes shone like diamond chips, and she favored me with a smile, so slight yet so deep that for an instant it seemed that she was the seducer, the siren whose deadly song wound its way into my soul. I smiled at the thought —*my soul*. How droll. I looked into her face, and felt myself regaining my command of this slippery game. Still—it had been a very long time since I'd known even a flicker of doubt at such a moment.

Thinking of it, I was all the more certain that I'd chosen well. She *was* the one, or all my carefully honed instincts, all my well trusted intuitions, were wrong.

"You look familiar," she told me, her voice lilting and low, a sound like the music lilacs and velvet might make. "Do you go to a lot of shows?"

"Occasionally," I said, feeling her intense eyes on me, knowing that she felt mine or her. "I've seen you before, as well. You were at one of my openings, I believe. At The Triangle, in Tribeca."

"You're an artist?" she asked, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

"Oils on canvas, mostly. Not as exotic as tonight's exhibition, but rather more...enduring."

"Yes...but it's the impermanence of performance art that makes it powerful—it's *now*, you know? Immediate, in the moment. And then gone. Forever. Just impact and energy that's never static."

I nodded, slightly, acknowledging her point without deferring to it. I held my features marble-placid, but my senses were tingling, singing. I could smell her, almost *taste* her, and despite myself I knew that the urge was uncoiling inside me, reaching out its claws, tongue ticking over eager teeth.

"*The Triangle*, hm?" she said.

Lost as I was in my deepening hunger, it took a moment for my mind to decipher what she meant.

"Yes," I answered, feeling slow. What power this girl held me with—the bewitching magnetism of those brilliant eyes. Had I ever been so distracted, so off-balanced by any woman, by *anyone*, even in my sunlit days? Never that I could recall. How sweet, ah, *how sweet*.

She studied my face, eyes tickling, chilling me; she seemed to believe that my honesty could be measured in the curve of my cheek, the line of my jaw. Perhaps she was right, perhaps her eyes could read me as no others could. Better still.

"You're—Jacob Hart," she said, as though this fact might surprise me. I nodded once again; I often feel that silence is my most beguiling voice.

"Mmm. I remember that show. Your work is—brutal. Dark and brutal."

Now I smiled again. "I paint what I see," I told her, "what I witness and experience."

"Nightmares on canvas," she whispered, "murky windows into obscure corners of Hell."

"You understand my work well," I agreed.

"It's—incredible," she said, "horrid and—wonderful. Vaguely obscene. I looked into those pictures and saw a thousand unvoiced screams, agonies so deep that they wring tears out of our souls. Or, *my* soul, anyway. I lost sleep."

"It spoke to you," I said, "in a familiar voice."

Now *she* nodded, absently thumbing a wayward lock of strawberry-gold hair out of her face. She tilted her head and studied me more closely. It was—sweet torment. The shelf of her jaw, the hollow of her throat, so deep, long, soft, pale, were beautiful, maddeningly alluring. My fingers bent up, curled into knotty claws, all on their own.

"So. You're the man, the artist."

The phrase hung in the air between us like a plume of smoke.

I nodded once more.

We stood a moment, her wondrous eyes taking slow stock of me, mine swallowing her a bit at a time. Around us the chatter ebbed and flowed, champagne glasses plinked and tired floorboards creaked, the sounds fluttered around the empty space under the high ceiling like restless cooing pigeons. The crowd had begun to grow thin, and I shifted foot to foot, eager for the neon-sparkling darkness of the midnight streets.

Her eyebrows drew together slightly, and that scoundrel smile grew sharper, more wicked.

"How would you paint *me*?" she asked.

I blinked. Had I put the idea in her mind? I'd like to have done, but I think it had been born of her own wistful wonderings, without my least suggestion.

I glared down into her blue-diamond eyes, expecting to hold them as I'd held so many strangers' eyes in the past, but found myself grasping, flailing, falling, lost in her gaze as I'd meant for her to be lost in mine. The struggle was brief, no doubt she scarcely sensed it...and then I recovered myself. Now—I had her.

"Come with me," I said, and, turning, started out of the loft.

She followed. She had little choice.

I squeezed a crimson curl of paint onto my pallet, poked at it with a fine brush, looked up.

"Are you ready?" I asked.

She stepped from behind the low muslin screen in the corner of my basement studio, into the bright wash of the footlights, arms loose at her sides, her skin just the color of fresh arterial blood in the glow of the red floodlamps. Seeing her now, I thought that perhaps I'd misjudged her body as I'd watched her earlier. I admired the subtle tones of muscle under skin, the way the light caressed her, turned her nipples into bright black roses, her hair into a cascade of slick plasma around her long, shadowed throat. Ah...the smell of her, the sight—I hungered, I lusted, I wanted and wished. But—*not yet*. First, I had to paint, to preserve her just as she was now, alive and beautiful and vibrant, to make her immortal, if only in my uniquely hideous way—what more fitting tribute? And only appropriate, given my deadly intentions.

"I've never done anything like this," she said, her voice easy, matter-of-fact.

"Are you uncomfortable?" I asked, knowing that she wasn't.

"It's quite liberating," she answered, "How shall I pose?"

"You'll find a gauze sleeve hung on the wall behind you," I said, pointing with my paintbrush, "pull it over your face—make sure that it's taut."

She slipped the translucent material over her face, tugged and twisted it until it took on a vague semblance of her features—brow, chin, cheeks, nose, all cast in subtle smooth curves, dark red pits where her dazzling eyes belonged.

Those eyes, those eyes, they haunted me, tortured me. I couldn't ignore them, as I'd ignored the eyes of countless young models before her. I'd excluded them because the horrors which sprang upon my canvases were to be blind, always and forever blind, no eyes, no gleam of humanity.

But not this time. Her eyes, so vivid and electric with life... To include them would make the final image all the more terrible. No—even that didn't matter, not really. If I was going to douse that sparkle, extinguish it forever, then I would capture it here, once and for all, not for the world, nor for her, but for myself alone.

I approached her, all too aware of her closeness, naked and vulnerable and steaming with the heat of life. With the care of a surgeon, I used my pallet knife to slit open the much-used gauze hood, just enough to reveal those pale diamond eyes. I hesitated, then returned to my easel to examine the image I was creating, to measure and consider it.

"Pull your hair out, over the top," I instructed. She did so, and now she was almost wholly human again, except for her flawless, faceless eyes, now framed by long red-blond locks.

"Yes, good. Now—open your mouth wider," I told her, "Scream—all the countless furies of your life. Silently."

Her mouth gaped horrifically, a shallow red pool in the muslin landscape of her mostly hidden face.

"Head back—further. Yes. Stand as though you've just leapt, as though you were swan-diving into a chasm which might be dark with water, or only jagged black rocks."

Her body tensed, arms swept back, fingers spread, chest out, making her breasts look slight against her ribs, her throat long and awash in ruby-bright hair. She rose up on her toes, and hung there before me, suspended, eyes vivid and wide and brilliant. The affect was—immaculate. Sublime.

My brush began to flick, to fly, no—to dance. It gathered paint, kissed it onto the barren white canvas in a delicate ballet, now a swaying waltz, now a lusty tango. It moved on its own. For hours, I felt, I saw, I knew—*nothing*.

Some time later, conscious awareness crept back over me, awakening my vision. I saw her, naked and exquisite in the bloody glow, and felt my hunger bristle anew—and then, at last, I saw the canvas, and what my nerveless fingers had rendered there.

It was...flawless.

In my daze, my—epiphany, I'd captured every awesome, lovely detail of her, every delicate contour and subtlety of shading, the ruddy pools under the gentle swells of her breasts and in the satiny delta between her smooth, flawless thighs, that magnificent arc of her neck, and the highlights of her silk-spun hair. But what seized my attention were her eyes—never had my brushes, my colors, served me so well, never had the canvas communicated its message with more clarity. It was as if, twitching my fingers just so, I'd captured the very light from the air, the very life from her eyes, and dabbed and dappled it into place, remaking her in thick pigments. The image as a whole was amazing—a beautifully nude girl, caught against a starless black background that was surely the sky of Gehenna, caught in the moment of starting a helpless fall into oblivion, the darkness reaching up to yank her, swallow her. She went to her timeless doom with terror to haunt one's heart, and yet with perfect grace as well. And with eyes wide open, blazing with agonized, defiant life.

Looking at that work, which she'd done as much to create as had I, I could almost believe that my model knew what I meant to do to her. If there was any capacity left in my own heart for love, it stirred in me then, like a memory long repressed but never wholly forgotten. Such beauty—such *life*.

I stood in silence, wondering at the painting, and its model, overwhelmed...then seemed to wake up all at once. I was suddenly aware of the ceaseless sounds of Greenwich Village traffic beyond my velvet-curtained windows, and of the thick quiet within my studio's brick walls, and my own utter stillness. I settled into myself once more, taking conscious control of my actions again. I jabbed my brush at the canvas's lower corner, and with four slashing strokes applied my signature: *JH*.

So—it was finished.

I looked at her once more, reluctant to release her from her daring-death pose, however well I'd captured it—I knew too well that such moments as these are always more painfully brief than the flicker of a candle, or the beating of a heart.

"Rest, now," I told her.

Her body relaxed out of its stance a little at a time, shoulders falling slowly, her arched feet sinking back to earth, her rigid legs loosening again, arms dropping to her sides, back un-arching, chest slouching ever so slightly. Watching her, I thought of someone waking from a long, deep sleep...or, more—of a cat stretching itself awake.

"It's all done?" she asked, pulling off the hood, letting it fall in a gauze crumple on the paint-spotted cement floor.

"Yes," I said softly.

"May I see it?"

I stepped back from the easel and motioned for her to join me there. She approached, not hurried but lithe, seeming all the more cat-like, all easy motion and instinctual, predatory grace.

She stood beside me and looked long at the creation we'd made together. She tilted her head, now to the left, now to the right, squinted, stepped back.

At last, still gazing at the painting, she said, "Do I really look like that?"

"Yes," I said. I raised an eyebrow. "You don't like it?"

She was silent a moment, and again I resisted the urge to act, to put the deed off no longer. Her eyes were registered in paint, now, eternal...I could dim their light without remorse. She was so close—I could feel her, smell her, the fragrance of her lifeblood was so high that I could taste it in the back of my throat. My hands ached to touch, to grasp that beautiful slender shape, now pale and white under my work lights, to hold her there, and ravage her.

"I *do* like it," she said, "I've never seen anything so... intense. It's brilliant...but...it frightens me." Now she folded an arm over her chest, draped another along the curve of her belly, as if suddenly remembering her nudity. "It's like looking into my own grave—and seeing that it's bottomless. Does that make any sense?"

"Yes," I said, stepping toward her, drifting nearer just as I had a million years ago when the night had still been young and the bohemian crowd had flowed unseeing around us.

Silence deep as a December snow settled over us, the night-sounds from the streets outside seeming a million miles distant. She stood before me, weight gently balanced on one subtle hip, head cocked, hair a silky cascade around her neck and shoulders; I stood behind, stock-still, arms ticklingly ready to grab, hands itching to clutch, tongue almost tasting her. The short hairs on the back of my neck pricked and bristled—the hour was growing late, the time to savor and delay was trickling away with the darkness outside. I'd searched for her through a labyrinth of years, had pursued her through the passage of months, and now I had her within an arm's length. I had to take her now or lose her. But, gently...*gently*. Relish it. And allow her to take her own pleasure from it—whatever pleasure one can take from the slippery descent into damnation. There's more than one might guess.

I raised one brush-nimble hand and ran my long fingers down the supple soft contour of her narrow back. I heard her draw a deep breath, saw her shoulders tighten, her back, her neck go tense, then relax again; her arms slipped loose to her sides. I glided my hand across the slope of her hip, the silky washboard of her ribs, the soft lobe of her breast.

"I've watched you now for weeks," I told her, my voice so low and coarse that even I could scarcely hear it, though I knew that she was attentive to every word. "The first time I saw you I was sure that our destinies were intertwined, that I must make you mine...forever."

Now her hand crept over the landscape of her body, until her fingers fell over mine, and clutched them. Her breathing was so slow it seemed almost to've stopped.

"I know what you are," she whispered. "I knew it as soon as I saw you. That's why I agreed to come here with you."

I looked down at her, she with her back to me, our fingers woven together over her breast, her head bent back toward me so that I could just see her softly closed eyes.

"Indeed?" I asked. My voice was more sharp and sudden than I'd meant it to be.

"Yes," she said. With her free hand she scooped her long lustrous red-gold hair back, revealing her neck completely, exposing it as it hadn't been exposed in all the hours and nights I'd spent watching her.

High up behind her ear, where her jaw met her throat, I could see six marks—four were no more than white knots of fading scar, but two were blood-black with fresh scab.

"I've known others like you," she said, still gripping my hand tightly. "*They* only wanted to use me—just like all the lovers I've had. They teased me and seduced me and took a little of my life, and then vanished into the night..."

I smiled without humor or fondness.

"My children," I said. "They show good taste, at least. How many nights have you spent in their company?"

"A few random encounters with nameless strangers, at first... Then three or four with a quiet boy named Damion...and more than a dozen with a lovely pale girl called Jiang. I thought that I was special to her, that she'd chosen me... Then she stopped coming to me, just as Damion and the others had. I guess I was nothing more than a passing interest to her, like I was to all of them. I knew that they were robbing me, knew it from the very first evening...but I sought them anyway...or let them find me... Their kisses—their kisses were so sweet, so full of desperate thirsty passion! I've never shared my bed with anyone who could..." she searched for words, found them, "who could awaken my nerves the way *they* did. I've waited, and wished, and hoped that one like you would find me, one who wanted more from me than a night's pleasure. One who would choose me, to make me his daughter, his bride.

"And—isn't that what *you* want with me?"

My right hand clenched hers; with my left I stroked her brilliant hair, pulling it aside so that the tempting pale arc of her throat was all mine, all mine.

"Yes," I said, "My daughter, my bride. Yes."

"I've wanted this for so long..." she murmured.

I could have taken her then, could have kept her from turning to look at me, but I failed to do so, and without knowing it, I began to lose her, forever.

She pivoted on one foot, like a ballerina executing a fine pirouette, so that now again we were face to face. She cast her gaze down at my chest as if out of respect or fear or some strange graciousness; but my eyes were caught again in the beauty of her porcelain countenance. There

was a quality of tenderness there, of gentility and—*love*, which shook me. What I meant to do to her would harden all of those softnesses, would sharpen those edges, making them weapons of the hunt.

"You'll make me immortal," she whispered. Her hand still gripped mine, tighter than ever. "You'll teach me of passions that last forever..."

I could feel the life-pounding pulse in her veins, could imagine its bittersweet flavor coursing into my mouth. I pinched my eyes closed as I spoke.

"I'll rob you of your life, and make you a killer," I said.

"Life breeds death," she said, "and death is weaned on life. I've always known that."

"Your skin will turn gray and grow cold. Your heart will never beat again. You will never again know sunshine. Is this what you desire? Hunger which never ends? Yearnings impossible to fulfill for more than a moment?"

Head still bowed, she answered, "I'd rather be pale and cold than grow old and watch myself wither. I'd rather my heart stop all at once than wind down like a tired clock-spring. I'll miss the sun, but I know how to love the moon and the stars."

I struggled to find my voice.

"You are more lovely, more...*perfect* than I'd dared let myself dream. I knew that you had the heart of an artist the moment I first saw you at that Tribeca gallery, so many long nights ago. Yet even then I couldn't have guessed at the depths of your beauty."

She looked up at me then, her eyes meeting mine, and all the life, all the beauty of that instant, struck me as it hadn't in many, many dark years. I felt a kind of cold pitiful longing I'd almost forgotten was in me every waking moment of every long night, a sorrow, a stinging loss.

"Get dressed," I told her. "It's time you left."

She stared at me, face tight, wounded.

"Why?" she asked, her voice a sublime cord of hurt.

It was the one question I dared not answer, not even to myself, just then. I stepped back away from her.

"Get out," I hissed.

"But—"

"*Out.*"

With an easy flick of my arm I sent her flopping backward; she landed in a naked tangle a few feet from where she'd stood as I'd painted her.

Her eyes were wide with pain and fury, and again they shone like expertly cut diamonds. At the sight of that splendid gleam, I felt a smile creep over my lips, a smile which I knew would ignite in her a blazing hatred for me.

So be it.

"You said I was beautiful," she seethed—it was an accusation and a question and a wonder, all built into five words.

I glared down at her and said nothing.

For a moment, we were locked into that horrible, wonderful contest—her naked on the floor, damning me with her eyes; I towering above her, mocking her with mine. If she'd known the torture behind my gaze, her poet's heart might've broken for me.

At last she gathered herself to her feet, snatched her clothes up from where she'd left them, and dragged them back over herself with quick, angry tugs.

She walked quickly to the studio door, grabbed the handle—and paused. She looked at me and fell back against the door, eyes closed, head thrown back. She spread open the tall collar of her leather jacket and swept her hair back from her throat, then stood there, hands behind her head, twisting her long beautiful locks into an impromptu ponytail, making a final offer of herself.

"Please," she whispered, "This is what I want, what I've *always* wanted... *Please*..."

Every muscle in my body was rigid with the urge for her, my throat clenched, my teeth ached with cruel hunger. I stood my ground by force of will.

"Out," I said one more time, one *last* time.

She dropped her arms, letting her hair fall loose, then looked at me. Her eyes were hard and harsh—yet that seemed to ignite them with new brilliance.

"You'll never find anyone else like me," she promised, voice thick and certain. She pulled the door open—"I hope you'll be alone forever,"—and slammed it closed behind her.

I gazed at it a moment, as though I might stare through it and watch as she disappeared into the last of the morning's dark. When she'd been gone for some seconds or minutes, I turned away, and looked again at the painting I'd blindly created.

I could never have told her that, much as I wanted her to share the years of darkness before me, I couldn't make her my own without killing what made me long for her. She was right...I *would* be alone, forever—with or without her. For in making her like me I would make her less herself, as I was less myself since I'd been brought into this dark kinship, and always fighting to keep what

little of me remained. How could she possibly understand that my turning her away was all in the twinkling of her eyes, and my own pathetic inability to let myself smother the flame?

I thought of what she'd said as we stood in the Soho loft with the long evening all ahead of us, about the beauty of impermanence. She'd said it all without knowing that she was talking about her own beauty above all others.

I looked at the painting...her eyes, rendered there, so vivid and exquisite, but frozen, deathless, unchanging. I knew that it would be torture to live with, a reminder for all time of what I'd been unable to keep, except as an image, a reminder that the nature of my existence is loneliness, profound and eternal, impenetrable.

I lifted a brush, dipped it in a smear of bright red paint at the edge of my pallet. One swipe would obliterate those eyes, erase them, chase away the spirit that would otherwise haunt me for immeasurable time to come. I had to do it, for the sake of my tenuous sanity, my fading humanity.

The painting—I titled it *Abaddon*—hangs now against the rough brick wall in the corner of my studio where I sleep through the daylight hours. It is the one work I shall never sell, nor exhibit, the one which I shall keep for myself alone. My subject's eyes shine as brightly as they did on the night I cast her in oils, torment and possess me as I knew they would, yet I could no more destroy them on canvas than I could darken them in my precious, lost model. They gaze out at me, unblinking, a silent monument to all the beauty that I've destroyed down the passage of years, and to that which I couldn't.

—The End—

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