

IV. Sea

I. School

The university's year had just begun when she first caught Eli's gaze. She started as not but an apparition, a ghostly figure lingering at the front of class, lost in the shuffle and clamor of bustling adolescence. Eli paid her no attention, instead choosing to fix his mind upon the wonder of the freedom that lay before him.

All those gathered in the aging halls of the university shambled into a sleepwalker's brotherhood. They cared not for the distinctions and divisions that would soon come to demarcate the boundaries of their guilds. They cherished that timeless fog, boys and girls jostling their toes against the shore of adulthood. Eli joined them in their revelry, and soon that sea's waters burnished with the slow, sweeping tendrils of liquor.

Eli found himself sinking at once into his studies. Constellations of unknown complexity bared themselves before him in the night sky of his mind. The threads of history spun between his fingers. The rigid lines and angles of calculus served to set straight the foundation of his knowledge. Most of all, the sermons of the ancients twirled about the knob of his pen, called to animation by the classics into which he dove. He found a new god among them, one woven from the words of Plato and Camus, Vonnegut and Hesse, and the lecture hall was his chapel.

Once, stepping from the hall, the girl's papers collapsed to the floor, hissing from her open arms. Eli bent and took them in hand, held them out to her like an unknowing supplicant. Lithe fingers twined about them. Their eyes met. She smiled, departed, leaving him alone. For the first time in weeks, something shone beyond the haze of manhood, the fog of booze and

merriment and too little sleep. Like a silver lance, her presence dashed through the clouded battlefield of his mind. When it pierced his heart, he knew.

Slowly, Eli emerged from the far reaches of the class, advancing through the rows until he could just barely spy the crest of her head beyond the hair of his peers. He came to recognize her voice as she gave life to the thoughts roiling within her mind. It swept through the hall like the bifurcated crystals of a snowflake, infinitely delicate and brilliant, with an edge that, honed, could draw blood. He studied the slow curve of her shoulder as she raised an arm to signal the professor. Often, he had to shake himself from his musings, rip his attention back to the lecture at hand. He learned her name was Mary.

After a week of idle observation, the seat beside her presented itself to him. He grasped at the opportunity and set himself down into it. She greeted him with a smile that clung to the barest hints of recognition, turned her eyes back to the lectern jutting from the spotlight stage. He did not speak to her. Her presence pulsed at the corner of his sight, tearing his thoughts from *Demian's* grasp.

The class came to a close, and, as she stood to pack her bag, Eli turned to her. "Why do you think Sinclair stole that money from his father?" The words raced from his lips and stumbled across the floor.

She turned to face him, confusion resting briefly upon her gaze. "Oh. I think it has to be the pull of the dark realm. Sinclair can't stop talking about it. Honestly," she said, a smile stretching across her lips, "I think he kind of enjoyed it, wanted it."

"I agree. I'd even go so far as to say that he would've stolen the money with or without Kromer's influence." The boy sitting in the row before them turned in his seat, shifting his dark coat across his shoulders. Gleaming teeth bared beneath a friendly grin.

Barbs twisted through Eli's chest. His brows curled, considering. "I'm not sure about that. I feel like Hesse makes it pretty clear that Sinclair's not interested in the dark realm."

"Oh, quite the contrary," the boy said. "Sinclair's *obsessed* with it. In some way, he *yearns* for it." His cheeks bloomed like cherries in the spring, eyes falling to his lap. "Jesus, look at me. I just stepped right into your conversation. I'm sorry."

"No, it's alright," Mary said. "I think you've got a great point. I mean, Sinclair says he first learns about the dark realm from the servants in his home. They're people he views as inferior."

"Just like Kromer. Kromer's nothing but a menace. He's the son of a lowly tailor. Or at least, lowly to Sinclair. Personally, I'm not quite sure what I'd do without *my* tailor." One corner of his lips rose into a smile.

Mary laughed. "God, I'm not sure I could live without mine."

"What about the blackmail, huh?" Eli said. He tamped down the lump rising in his throat. "Seems like that's all there is to it."

"Sure, the blackmail's important, but I feel like there's something more to it. Why would he go to such crazy lengths otherwise to appeal to Kromer?"

"I think you know there's something else there," the boy added. "After all, you asked her why Sinclair did it. If the answer was as simple as blackmail, I doubt you'd have asked."

Eli turned to him. Words burgeoned just beyond his lips, but he found himself unable to provide form or logic to his thoughts. He sighed, nodded. "Yeah. I guess you're right." Unspoken things gathered at the base of his tongue.

"Don't flatter me too much! Only bad things come of that." The boy winked.

Mary laughed. Suddenly, her eyes widened. “Wow. I just realized I don’t even know your name. God, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be so rude.”

The boy waved a hand. “Oh, it’s alright. I tend to forget to introduce myself. I’m Walker.” He extended a hand, first to Mary, then to Eli.

“I’m Mary.”

“Eli,” he added.

“Nice to meet both of you. I really enjoyed that. Anyways, I should probably head out soon, lunch and all.”

“Do both of you wanna eat with me?” Mary asked. “Honestly, I haven’t made super close friends with anyone around here, and I’d love to keep talking to you two.” A sheepish smile crinkled the skin beside her eyes.

“I’d love to,” Eli said, straightening.

“Sounds great to me. Truth be told, I haven’t met very many people either. Probably not my crowd.”

“Thank you, guys. I know about a great little place downtown you both should try. I think it opens around this time, and it gets pretty busy, so we should hurry.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Walker asked.

The city darted around them as they walked, cars and people and the jagged edge of business. Wind ripped past their shoulders, phantoms fluttering among their clothes. Mary gathered her hair into a tail that slithered between her shoulders. Eli pulled his jacket close, eyes lingering across where the sun danced through the light fringes of her locks. Her presence throbbed beside him. Walker strode next to her, oblivious to Eli’s observation. He held his head high, hands thrust

deep into the pockets of his ebony overcoat. It drifted about his feet like the swaying robe of a king. His gaze swept through the street and, for a brief moment, it met Eli's. For all his outer joy, the gleam of Walker's smile did not grace his eyes. Eli glanced away, pinching his tongue between his teeth.

“Why haven't you met many people? You seem like a social type,” Walker said. “If I may ask.”

Mary shook her head, laughed. “Thanks for the compliment. Honestly, though, I'm not great at meeting people. I've just got a hard time latching onto anything, y'know?”

“So you like it by yourself?”

“Sorta. But that doesn't mean I don't want someone in my life.”

Walker nodded. “I understand. It feels like with every day that goes by, fewer and fewer people are interested in the kinds of things I am. I assume you enjoy the same things. It's hard to find a place among people that can't connect with you on the basest of topics. I guess they just don't understand my immense charm.” Ivory teeth flashed.

Thoughts and phrases dashed through Eli's mind; he sought the perfect thing to say, the combination of vowels and syllables that would serve to turn Mary's attention away from the other boy. But all that shone within him was the image of the sun melting through her autumn hair.

“Exactly. I just can't bring myself to care about what my roommates are interested in, and I think that if I brought up Emily Brontë they'd just kick me out.”

“They've got no love for Heathcliff, eh?”

“Less than Catherine does, that's for sure.”

“What’s this place you’re taking us to?” Eli asked. His words crackled through the air, ringing like fallen silverware. He nearly winced at their passage.

Mary turned, recognition flashing in her eyes as if she had forgotten entirely about his presence. “Oh, yeah. It’s just a nice little café. Got some good drinks, and the food’s not crazy expensive. It’s sweet.” She glanced away, speech spilling from her lips, twining among the words of Walker’s reply.

Eli sighed, fists tightening on the hem of his jacket. The zipper’s track bit deep into his palm. Its pain only served to cast the pair further into relief.

“What got you interested in literature?” she asked, setting the empty mug back to the marble countertop.

Walker considered in silence, gaze turned to the bustle of the street beyond their window. The café’s sultry whisper rested a hand upon his shoulder. He released a deep breath, long-held, and replied. “I think it’s the order of it. It’s so elegant. Everything feels like it’s in the proper place, that it has a *meaning*. Isn’t that so refined? I can’t stand modern writing, truth be told. It’s too animalistic. It goes against what makes us human. All this talk of flesh and blood and sex, Christ. It makes me feel dirty, reading something like that.” He shuddered.

“But aren’t we animals?” Eli asked.

Walker raised a brow. “Sure.”

“Then doesn’t that make modern stories more honest?”

Walker’s head whipped back and forth like a crocodile with its jaws clamped around the neck of some great beast. “No, no, no. Just because we’re animals doesn’t mean we have to act like it. We’re able to get a glimpse of something beyond our bodies, a little crumb of the beauty

that's really out there. *That's* what true art shows us. You see this?" He brandished his glass, raised it high into the air. "An animal just sees a cup. It's good for drinking, maybe it's got some nice patterns on it, but that's about all there is to it. To an artist, there's an infinite number of possibilities. They don't confine themselves to the boundaries of what's physically there. They choose to look beyond."

Mary nodded, considering. "I can see that. What's your favorite book then?"

"*Moby Dick*."

"I've never read it."

"Good choice," Eli said. "It's fantastic."

Walker's eyes widened. "You've read it?"

"In three sittings. Hardly slept between them. It just swept me up and wouldn't let go."

He laughed. "I understand completely. I'd lie awake at night thinking about it, and when I couldn't take it anymore I'd turn the lights back on and start reading again. It's perfect. That's the ecstasy you get when you know you've struck gold."

"I haven't read it in so long. Maybe I should get back into it. Honestly, I hardly remember anything about it."

"Just that sense of love?"

"Yeah."

Walker nodded, said no more.

"Damn. Guess I really gotta read it now," Mary said, brow curling.

"I think you'd have some interesting things to say about it," Walker replied.

"What about you, Eli? What's your favorite?"

He met her eye, warmth rising beneath the flesh of his cheeks. He could not bear to hold her gaze. He glanced about, darting first to the window, then his drink, then to her collarbone peering from the neck of her sweater. “Recently, I’ve been really into *The Sirens of Titan*. Y’know, the book by Vonnegut?” For the first time, he caught sight of the small silver crucifix hanging from her neck.

Her eyes crinkled about the edges. “Oh, I tried reading that one a while ago. I just couldn’t get into it. He’s so obsessed with sex, and... I don’t know. It just feels like he’s watching me. Like he’s seeing things I don’t want him to see.”

“I don’t understand how he got so popular,” Walker said.

“I just hate reading about that sort of thing.” Her fingers curled gently around the cross. “It feels wrong to watch something like that.”

“Sex is an important part of life. It’d be wrong not to mention it at some point.”

“The death of art, I tell you. The death of art.”

They parted ways at the door of the café; all waved their gleeful goodbyes, reclining against the warm hearth of companionship. Walker retired with a wink directed at no one in particular, a grin curling his smooth, boyish lips. Again, his eyes seemed fashioned of cool wax. He drifted off down the street with purpose, dark coat coiled about his feet.

Eli and Mary exchanged a quick farewell, a promise to meet again the following day. A crimson silence passing between them, she turned and left. His gaze fell to her aging-pumpkin hair, the sun dancing through autumnal locks. Eli’s eyes drifted down, down, traced the lines and angles of her retreating form, and shivered. His tongue pulsed against the prison of his teeth. He watched her until she turned the corner, fading from view.

When he returned to his dorm, he collapsed to the bed, darkness rising to catch him. He awoke upon the shore of Titan.

Great clouds of burnished bronze drifted through the sky, the distant light of the sun casting a dim glow upon the sea. Eli raised himself to his feet, brushing the copper sand from his pants, and glanced over his shoulder. Behind him rose a marble villa, statues carved from polished stone, and, beyond that, a noble line of mountains pierced the horizon. He turned again to the ochre waves.

A woman stood a distance away, the surf lapping at her bare waist. The dusk played across bronze flesh. Her hands cupped her soaking hair; even from his place on the shore, Eli watched as the falling droplets caught the evening gleam. The woman's back lay to him. He stepped towards the sea.

Eli realized he was naked. With knowledge of his exposure came a strange tugging sensation, as if his flesh hung too tight upon his frame. Desperately, it burgeoned against his skin, pressed and pressed and cried for relief. His hands worked at his sides. His lips drew apart, saliva pooling in the valleys behind his teeth.

Mary.

His foot met the waves, and with the shock of its chill embrace, the dream departed.

II. Party

A few weeks passed, and the three continued to cling to each other against the racing tide of maturity. Walker and Mary's bond strengthened with each trembling day; every interaction seemed to tie another knot between them, links that resisted the subtle blades that Eli brought to bear against them. He grew close to the others, shared in their humor and wisdom, but they failed

to shed the vestiges of formality. Solitary moments shared between him and Mary bathed in deep silence, punctured only by the gangly words of a brief exchange. He greeted the thought of her with mixed excitement and dread, their shared classes a tumor festering at the back of his mind. He knew not which he hated more: her eyes upon him, or the emptiness of their absence.

One day, passing through the vernal spring of the university's main court, Eli spied Walker sitting at a bench across the way, a boy at his side. He came to stand behind a tree, gaze fixed upon their exchange.

So distant were they that only the barest whispers of their conversation reached Eli's ears. Walker said something, and the boy laughed in reply. He rested a hand on Walker's shoulder, fingers hovering lightly against his coat. They drifted away like leaves on a summer wind. Walker stared off across the courtyard, cheeks flushed. The boy turned his eyes to his lap and spoke again. Walker nodded soberly. Their gazes rose, met, and the boy hugged him. Walker returned the gesture, his arms coiling slowly around the boy's chest. His hands hovered just above his companion's coat, as if he were a stranger observing the odd customs of some wicked, foreign land. Eli leaned out from behind the tree, and, for the briefest of moments, met Walker's eye. The smile plastered across his face crumbled away, leaving only the same old dull, iron darkness behind his shining emerald stare.

Eli hurried off, books clasped in the crook of his arm, and tried to forget the awful visions that unspooled themselves from the memory of Walker's gaze.

A girl in Eli's dorm informed him of the party scheduled for that Friday. He told her he would go, and that he would be accompanied by two others.

Walker found the function to be a wretched idea.

“I can’t think of anything worse,” Walker said, “than getting crushed in the middle of that drunken cabal.” He had not spoken of that meeting with the strange boy, nor his notice of Eli’s presence, but evidence of his knowledge clung to the lingering stares he directed towards his silent friend.

Mary, however, proved far more receptive to the idea.

“I think that sounds nice, just... I won’t stay long.” Her eyes darted about as she spoke, but Eli’s attention had already turned to the fantasy of the night ahead.

The dorm-house basement pulsed with the beat of a strobing, sensual heart. Thin hairs of violet light pierced the walls like needles, a pleasant pain. The bass drumming of the music throbbed just beneath Eli’s ears. He smiled. The place stank of booze and sweat and the promise of midnight passion. Mary stood just behind him, and he nearly reached out and took her into his arms, almost brought his lips to hers right then and there.

Eli turned to her. “Isn’t this great?” His throat battered with useless fists against the cacophony.

A red solo cup lay perched between her fingertips, the hazel sea of beer bobbing within. She held it far out from her chest, gaze turned to it as if it were a serpent. “Yeah. It’s a bit loud though, don’t you think?”

“Just lose yourself!” he called. He took her gentle fingers between his own and yanked her onwards.

They writhed on the dancefloor for a moment that defied the slow shamble of time. Many moons may have passed, or it might only have been an hour. They danced until the room seemed to sway, as if their feet rested upon the surface of some great wave. Their companions jostled

them about, pulled them to and fro like the passage of the tides, but no hatred lingered among them. Even as boys and girls broke off from the group to meet fist with fist, claw with claw, the proceedings carried with them no hint of true animosity. Eli watched, and laughed. *If Walker were here, he'd say something like "animals can't feel hate."*

For a time, Mary did not join him in his revelry. She pretended to play along, contributed nothing more than the meager sway of the shoulders. But, as if a river had battered its skull against the dam again and again, cracks began to show. Drink after drink passed down her throat. At some point, her ponytail came undone, her hair drifting through the air about her like a drowned specter. She leapt and screamed and danced alongside them. Eli grinned. He turned an admiring gaze to her personal festival, wonder mingling with lewd fear.

They broke off from the crowd, went to stand beyond the throng's purview. Mary leaned against the wall, sweat sliding from her crimson face. Eli shot her a grin, and realized that the old weight no longer pressed upon his shoulders. The words came naturally, as easily as fate.

"I really like you," he said.

She turned to him, panting. "Oh?"

"You're great. I wish we talked more."

She nodded wordlessly.

"We could spend some more time together tonight, if you want?"

"This party's great, don't you think?"

"Maybe we could go someplace a bit quieter. What about my room?"

"I mean, look at all these people. Wow. Incredible."

"Would you like that, Mary?"

"Like what?"

His lips pursed. “To go back to my room.”

“Why would we do that when everyone’s down here?”

His eyelid twitched. “To talk.”

“What are we doing right now then, silly?” She laughed. Its tendrils did not reach her glazed-glass eyes.

“Don’t you want this? Don’t you like me?”

“Of course I like you. C’mon, let’s go back out there.”

“You’re beautiful. Don’t you know that?”

“The party’s gonna be over soon, Eli.” She turned, made her way back towards the dancefloor.

Eli lurched out, taking hold of her arm. His fingers called crimson welts to her skin. “God damn it, Mary, I don’t wanna go back out there!”

She whipped around, eyes bulging in their sockets. She ripped her arm from his grasp. Her fingers massaged across the flesh, now bloodied, where his nails had lingered. Their gazes met for a moment. Then, she turned and left.

Eli glowered at the edge of the party for an hour, trying to catch sight of her bobbing among the others. Unable to catch her eye, he headed back up the stairs and out into the sultry night. He stopped beside the wall and sighed, breath lurching from his lips.

Footsteps from behind. The quick clatter of heels. “Girl troubles?”

He turned. There stood a stranger, a small, thin girl in a gleaming red dress. She smiled up at him.

“What’s your problem?”

“Nothing. Just saw you arguing with your friend back there.”

“That’s not your business.”

“I recognize her, y’know. I know lots of things about her.”

He sat silent, considering. “How?”

“Went to high school with her old boyfriend. Boy, was he an asshole.”

“What’d he do?”

The girl’s eyes gleamed. “I heard he got her hooked on all kinds of stuff. Did you see that crucifix she’s got around her neck? Total bullshit. Little Miss Chastity.”

He gazed off into the trembling night, thoughts churning through his head. His tongue ran between his teeth.

“You didn’t lose much, is my point.”

“Doesn’t make it feel much better,” he muttered.

She shrugged. “Nobody wants to be alone. I’m guessing the same goes for you?”

“No.”

“You don’t have to be.” Her fingers hovered just above his arm.

He turned his eyes to hers, but his mind lingered upon the small silver crucifix hanging from Mary’s neck. *What right does she have to deny me?* He smiled. “No. I guess I don’t.”

III. Museum

The next morning, Eli received a call from Walker.

“Can you talk today?”

“Sure. When?”

“Meet me in my room in thirty minutes.”

Eli trudged across campus, the memories of the night before clinging close behind. He had not spoken to Mary.

Walker answered the door before Eli finished knocking. Silently, he gestured Eli into a chair set in the far corner of the room, easing the door shut behind him. He came to rest upon his bed, gaze turned to his feet. He placed a hand upon the cover of an aging copy of *Moby Dick* leaning against his bedside lamp. The smile that once languished across his face had vanished. Now, in its sorrow, his visage finally seemed in accordance with his eyes.

“Is this about that boy?” Eli asked.

“What do you remember about *Moby Dick*?”

Eli shrugged. “Like I said, not much. Just that I liked it.”

“What did the White Whale mean to you?”

“Infinite evil. Meaningless struggle.”

“Yes. Yes. Exactly.”

“Why?”

“I think we all have our own personal White Whales. They take a variety of forms and appear in a variety of places, but they’re always there. They’re the lingering thoughts in the back of your head, the ones you can’t quite banish. They stick with you, no matter what you say or do or where you choose to go.”

“Sure. What’s your point?”

“There is always a moment that personifies that endless struggle. Ahab and his leg, I suppose.”

“Walker, while I enjoy the philosophy, I—”

“That boy is my White Whale, Eli. Do you understand?” His voice cut the air like a dagger.

“I don’t think people are gonna care much about you being gay, if that’s what you mean.”

Walker scoffed. “I’m not afraid of coming out. I’m afraid of what this sort of thing does to people.”

“What do you mean?”

“Before I met him, I could hide it. But now he’s gone and cut off my damn leg.”

“Could you just speak clearly?”

“It’s sex, Eli! It’s a wretched, abysmal thing. It’s art’s one true enemy. I take back what I said. That boy isn’t my White Whale, it’s... this.” His eyes fell to the crotch of his pants. He laughed, a sickly proclamation. “Christ. I sound like an idiot. All this talk of infinite evil.”

Walker sighed. “But it’s true. No horror on this earth matches that of sex. If I had a single wish, it would be to reach my hand right down into the chest of every person on the planet and tear that drive right out of their hearts! I’d crush it in my hand like a bug! If only I could pierce beyond the mask,” he sobbed.

“Have you ever considered the fact that maybe you don’t have to worry about this? Maybe it’s not such a big deal?”

Walker lashed his head left and right. “Impossible. No, you don’t understand. Sex makes an animal of a human. If art is beauty, then sex is its antithesis. How is an animal meant to comprehend beauty? It can’t. Sex removes the very thing that makes humans special.”

“So, what? Are you just gonna deny yourself sex and love for the rest of your life?”

“God, how I hate this conflation of sex and love! You can only love something that you find beautiful, so how are you supposed to muster that sort of feeling when sex calls forth the animal within you?”

“Do you love that boy?”

Walker bit his lip. “I don’t know.”

“Do you wanna have sex with him?”

Walker did not reply.

“Then just do it. There’s nothing more to it than that.”

“Of course you would say that. Of course you’d think it’s that simple.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Walker’s brows lowered. “Vonnegut? *The Sirens of Titan*? What do you expect me to think?”

The two boys locked eyes for a time, neither speaking. From beyond, the distant call of a joyous crowd. A ball soaring through the air, planting itself firmly in the palm of some ignorant, happy soul. The phantom whistle of the wind between the billowing curtains.

“It’s not just about Vonnegut.” Eli’s voice daggered through the dawn’s reverie.

Walker breathed deeply. “No. It’s not.”

“You know how I feel about her.”

“Yes.” He chuckled, a grim, wheezing exhalation. “You aren’t very subtle about it.”

“Don’t laugh at me.”

“How could I not? You’re a smart guy, Eli. It’s funny, watching you stumble around after her like that. Like watching the winner of the Nobel Prize play with a children’s toy.”

Eli lurched forward, unsure as to his path or pursuit.

“Forgive me for not taking your advice too seriously.”

Eli’s palm lashed across Walker’s cheek, carried his face to the side. Five bright red marks glared out from his pale flesh. Gently, Walker brought his quivering fingertips to the wound. He laughed.

“Did you really think *that* would make me listen? You are such an animal. More than I even realized.”

“Herman Melville was in love with Nathaniel Hawthorne. You know that, right?”

“What?”

“Yep. *Moby Dick*’s dedicated to him. Figured you’d know that, it being your favorite book and all.” Eli’s words coiled like serpents among the hedges of the spring’s silence.

Walker scoffed. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’ve got the book right there. Check it.”

“You’re insane.”

“Check.”

Walker swallowed. Taking the book into his palm, he flipped open the cover with a reverent hand. The light rustle of paper. It crinkled. His fingers went rigid, eyes bulging.

Eli smiled. “You see it?”

“So what? Plenty of authors admire their peers.”

“I’m guessing you haven’t read his letters?”

“What letters?” His voice growled like the passage of stone.

“He loved Hawthorne. He thought that man was the most beautiful thing in the world. That all his life came from him.”

“Stop it.”

“I think he said Hawthorne’s lips were like the ‘flagon of life’ or something.”

“Shut your God damn mouth.”

“Why? You two aren’t so different. Maybe now you’ll appreciate that book even more.”

Walker shot up to his feet, fists trembling at his sides. His teeth, those that once caught the sun in an ivory embrace, now lay bared, froth bubbling. A wild thing ate away at the darkness in his eyes.

“I think you should leave.” His voice a whisper.

“I think so too.” Eli stood, shuffled his way to the door. Hand on the knob, he turned, a grin curling his lips. The presence of Walker’s hateful gaze pressed between his shoulders. Eli shrugged, and departed.

The three stood gathered before the painting, the silence of the museum shifting like molasses through a thick tube. Dali’s dream of *The Great Masturbator* unspooled itself on the canvas before them, a great, writhing, squelching mass that bubbled like a poorly-filled balloon. Eli’s skin grew tight against his bones. His gaze turned to the figures at the painting’s base, caught in some furtive act of animal love.

Walker greeted it with a disgusted eye. “Horrid.”

“Is it?” Eli asked.

“I don’t wanna see something like that,” Mary said. Darkness clung to the edges of her eyes. Her breath stank of beer.

“So you just wanna hide it behind a mask?” Eli asked.

“Better than this.” She pressed a weak hand to the crucifix.

His gaze fell again to the twisted pair. *I don't have to hate myself for this. I don't. I'm no animal.*

“Do you really think this is art, Eli?” Walker asked.

“I don't really see what difference it'd make. It's paint on a canvas. Nothing else to it.”

“Of course.”

Eli turned to Mary. “You wanna see something?”

Her pleading eye met his own. Wordlessly, she blinked.

Eli unscrewed the cap on his water and, with a sudden flourish, tossed its contents onto the painting. Colors gathered and swept together within the beaded blue bulbs, joined like beasts in a prairie. He planted his fist through the canvas, relished the feel of its ruin against his knuckles. His smile a wicked thing.

Walker sighed.

Not once did Eli tear his gaze from Mary's eyes.

IV. Sea

“Meet us at Mary's dorm,” Walker said.

Eli agreed, hanging up the phone.

The darkness of the sky clung to the roofs and cornices of the university, the first stars peering out from the night's veil. Eli bore no notice to it all.

Walker answered the door on the third knock. His fist met Eli's nose before the boy could react. The tearing of cartilage, the shatter of bone. Walker dragged him through the open door and into the shaded hall beyond.

On the shore of Titan, Eli approached the woman once more. The sea lapped at her supple waist; his fingers twitched, yearning for its touch. The water shifted against the sand, back and forth, back and forth, licking at the tips of his toes.

He stepped into its embrace.

Stars blossomed behind his eyes as Walker threw him to the floor. On hands and knees, he turned his gaze to Mary, sitting still, imperious, at the corner of the couch. He made to rise to his feet. Walker planted his boot into Eli's stomach. He collapsed again.

Walker knelt beside him. "This is what you've dreamed of, isn't it? Being here with her? Smile."

Eli spat blood to the carpet.

Walker brushed at it with his thumb. He scoffed. "I can't believe you're made of the same stuff we are. You couldn't be more different. You sicken me."

"You're... a liar."

Another kick.

The water's frost shocked awareness back into his flesh. He took in a jagged breath, fought his way through the salt-ridden surf regardless. His mind lingered upon it, upon its pain, upon its thousand-needle kiss. His mouth grew wet as it called crimson to his skin. Numbness lingered at the fringes of the sting, fraying threads dangling off into oblivion. He continued ever onward, preparing to greet the void.

Mary's fingers played across the sickly silver cross. "Does this make you happy?"

“Does what?”

She shook her head, did not answer.

“Of course you’re not happy. Not really. Nothing that lacks the ability to create, to comprehend beauty, can truly be happy. You’ve stripped yourself of that right, drowned it in booze and sex.”

“You can’t stand... that he was in love, can you?”

Silence.

“How’s that boy doing, hm? Decided what to do yet?”

Walker rose, the flame in his eye igniting the room. Mary rested a hand against his arm, called him to stillness.

Eli laughed, a dry, hyena cackle. “It’s not my fault.”

Mary reached into the pocket of her coat, drew forth a copy of *Demian*. She tossed it to the floor by his hands. He picked it up, held it to the dim moonlight spilling in from the window.

“What do you want from me?”

“To see the real you,” she replied. “Now eat it.”

“What?”

“Eat the book.”

Walker stood, a silent menace.

Eli tore free a page, and began to chew.

When he reached her at last, his beastly flesh dull and dumb, his eyes widened. The sun no longer played across her silken skin. He reached out, and his hand met only stone. A statue. An idol. His lips drew apart, and he kissed it, but it did not reply.

He began to drown.

Sinclair, Kromer, Demian, the worlds of light and dark. All passed down his gullet and into the abyss beyond.

“That’s... enough,” he whispered.

The Sirens of Titan landed on the floor beside him.

“Eat.”

Beneath the surface of the sea, the party raged on, lances of light piercing to the heavens just beyond the burnished faces of the waves. Eli sank forever, tendrils of shadow reaching to catch his fall.

The memory of the stone sirens departed with the last bite of the book. Tears seeped from his eyes. “Please... no more.”

When he heard the third and final *thump*, he knew what would greet him when he turned. *Moby Dick* lay beside him, the whale’s wretched gaze meeting his wet, solemn eye. “Please,” he whispered.

“Eat the damn book.” Walker’s voice caught in his throat.

Never had a meal satisfied him more. He tore into the pages with wild abandon, words and phrases carved from quintessence gnashing between his teeth. He sobbed, but could not bring himself to stop. Walker wept alongside him. Mary remained still. Ahab’s final fury upon his tongue. *Then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.* For a time, none spoke. Then, a single word pierced the silence.

“Disgusting.”