

Extract from **Chapter 3 - "Save Yourself"**

Kaleidoscopic light lurched and rotated on an axis, paint-balling the walls with exploding, citrus jewels. Music bled up from the floor, sluiced out of the blue, metal-veined grid-work overhead, and the sound was colossal, a turbine of lashing growler bass, waspish guitar, electro-glitch and feedback. Druid felt off-kilter and, having lost sight of the kid, utterly alone. His black and flame cowboy boots ate into the cigarette butts, glass, spit, grit, and silver foil underfoot. His nostrils flared, spooling in the scent of girl-sweet and man-sour. His hands, tough-fleshed and bloodless, trailed the small of the back of an undulating stranger, steered a plethora of human obstacles aside, and his only option was to flow with it. Flow with the pain. Flow with the insanity.

He felt drawn to stay and dissolve into the maelstrom. If he could twist up the volume, maybe he'd stand a hope in hell of drowning out the inner ghosts. Then he spotted the kid, pogoing at the dance floor's edge, the limp wizard hat performing its own weird ballet over the heads of the crowd. Reality spiralled in. He pressed against the tide of inked chests, nipple-rings and whipping hair and breasts until the glittering mass expelled him in a rush on the far side.

Beyond the mosh pit's crush, the air felt icy. Druid pulled his leather close like a shield. He flinched as the mini-wizard vaulted up alongside, face aglow with sweat and smiles.

"Now *this* is more like it. Check out those torches; silver-plated nickel with real flames! We like those. And I always say you can't go wrong with semi-naked nymphs on a trapeze." IQ's skinny lips pursed in a mock whistle. "Swing-a-ding-ding!"

Druid showed no discernable emotion. His gaze lifted to the striking burlesque. Clad in beaded thongs, ostrich plumes and tasselled nipple pasties, as well as their own pearlescent, ebony and olive skin, the beauties dipped in and out of smoky eruptions of dry ice, their movements guided by a stiff yet gliding repetition. Suddenly he thought of Sophia, her perfection, the stylish technicality of her grief.

He pictured Renegade's queen in the velvet gloom of Rock Cemetery, the dress she had worn (black, knee-length, corseted and crinolined), her hair, spun-sugar blonde pinned up under a pill-box hat and veil, and her face, gorgeous and awful in silk and shadow. He saw the stem of a cardinal rose, how she had distributed petals over the lid of Roses's sarcophagus, like blood-coloured tears, or sighs she had no capacity to utter.

Sophia, an enigma he'd longed to unfold, only to find his flesh etched with paper cuts when he'd tried. If she'd shown herself capable of one trace of raw emotion, it had been spite at the idea of Roses's death—this notion of his murder—and cold hate for the truth of the event, which was that he had died and no one was responsible, Druid mused sullenly. And no one could bring him back.

Long, tapering legs cut through the smog. Druid watched the pretty circus, his mind soured. He was here though, wasn't he, in the sticky, black heart of a world that would rip him to shreds just as soon as it clicked who the hell he was? His gaze dipped to the predatorial underworld, where clubbers moved in packs. Their eyes were flares in the dark, their claws stake-like streaks of red, black, plum and ultraviolet, and their hunger, palpable. He wondered when the burnings would begin.

His complexion took on a harsher, reddish hue. "I'm thirsty," he glowered, applying a single digit to the kid's left shoulder and shunting him in the direction of the relative quiet of the upper level bar.

“Uh?” The green eyes shot wide in nervousness.

Druid recoiled, as if the kid had gone up in flames.

“A shot of the hard stuff! ‘Course man,” perked up his young companion. Hands burrowing in the pockets of low-slung jeans, the kid started to ascend the nearest of two flights of neon-beaded stairs located either side of the main dance floor, leaving Druid to wonder what, if anything, had just happened.

He followed at a distance, his flesh feeling iced and fiery in equal parts. What had he thought, a Drathcor could just retread the boards of Legacy with a fresh haircut and shades, and not a soul would notice? That he could sit, nose to snout, with that inquisitive little rodent (called IQ, for Goth’s sake) and not reveal his origins? Even he wasn’t *that* crazy!

Although...he peered left, then right...here he was swimming in a savage sea of rockabillies, punks, skaters, velvet goths, cyber goths, gothic Lolitas, metallers, greebos, glammies—the whole strawberry switchblade assortment—and not one batted a sequin-encrusted eyelid. Were they really too blinded by a life on the dark side to notice a mentor in their midst? No, that was too convenient, he mused, screwing up his fists so the claws bit into his palms.

But if Renegade was just an elaborate dream, and all its citizens just reflections of that fancy, then might he not be too? In other words, in the eyes of the inhabitants of Legacy as well as the city beyond, he was just a wannabe, or to use the technical term for Origin’s die-hard devotees, a Drathy.

He hunched, his shaded eyes eating into the shadows. He’d forgotten about the Drathy, or Origin’s personal doppelgangers; fans, in other words, who mapped their flesh to match his own, wore exact copies of his old stage ensembles, and mimicked

his every quirk and mannerism. His lips twisted. He existed in self-parody then, and was most likely a hell of a lot less convincing in the part than his imitators.

He eased his claws over the blue chrome handrail. At the top of the neon-beaded staircase, his disguised gaze fell upon the bar. Yes, the counter was the same wet-look metal strip as it was all those years ago, a surface you could lick a spilt pint of beer off, and once upon a time he would have. But that was before, and in other ways, the club was not the same. Alongside being given a new name, its dark edges had been buffered, soaped and slicked afresh. The arches of catacomb-like alcoves were set with bundled fibre optics, like night-lit diamonds. In place of wooden benches, he saw semi-circular sofas, upholstered in silver swirls and midnight purple skulls. Where the walls had boasted a haphazard mural of garish street graffiti, now a sensual manga arose in pinks, smoky purple, and flesh tones. And, underfoot, no longer the glue of melted-tar rubber but a rink of pure, black glass. He stepped awkwardly across it, troubled by its lustre.

“Oooh, shiny,” the boy enthused, feeding his wiry, little arse onto a barstool. “Shinier,” he murmured appreciatively as a PVC cat-suited coven shimmered by.

To the rear of the group, a pretty, buck-toothed witch shook her wand in their direction. Scarlet pollen escaped the tip. Druid sneezed. Giggling, the girl captured a kiss in her palm and cast it out. Looping an arm around the waist of a tiny blonde, she skipped away.

“Minx.” The boy grinned lopsidedly, his mouth faintly stupid. “You’ve gotta agree this place attracts a better breed of feline,” he remarked as a waitress in silver hot pants and a red, latex halter lined up their drinks. “Come on now. All this bountiful beauty. Would it hurt to crack a smile?”

Tripping off his stool, the kid disappeared behind Druid, who stiffened as a dirt-flavoured finger slid either side of his mouth and tried to stretch the lips.

They observed each other in the mirror behind the bar optics.

“It’ll be a cold day in hell.”

“The coldest.”

The kid let his hands drop. He returned to his barstool and concentrated sulkily on a half pint of Guinness while Druid dared to edge his shades down a millimetre and linger on the mirror or specifically, his reflection.

Time had loved him like a prodigal child. The lines and signs of aging were subtle. In fact, he’d occupied that same spot in the past and not looked so dissimilar. The mirror had been tarnished then, rather than the pool of blue mercury he gazed on now, but, for the greater part, his image was unaltered, sallow at the jaw, strongly shaded at each cheekbone, hollow Saturn-ring eyes and irises of too pale blue; and it was *only an image*, since he was a very different man inside. A younger face had tilted to meet the heat of fame. Now his chin was tucked in and guarded. The eyes, once arrogant and self-annihilating, were tapered and shifty, ever watchful.

He took his glass in hand, swirled the amber. Once upon a time, he’d drunk the bright blood of strangers aside a bottomless shot of whisky, known every which way to kick and punch and bite at life. Grunting, he threw back the liquor. There was no rage in the beast he had become, only emptiness...