

Sirens
by
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His pupils dilated until I could only see a thin sea of blue around them. With one pressed against his cheek and the other gripping his shoulder, my hands steadied him as he swayed for a moment. Then the bright blue of his eyes crept back. A shuddering breath rattled his lungs as that now familiar change stole across his features. That light in his eyes retreated. Snuffed out. Extinguished. My hands slacked, and he staggered backwards a step.

His mind was mine now.

“Never do something like that again,” I said to him. “No more drinking, no more drugs.”

“Yes,” he said flatly.

“Be...be a better person.”

“Yes,” he repeated.

“Leave. *Now*,” I snapped.

He turned and walked firmly down the alley. A prick of guilt caught on my conscience. For the first time, a tear escaped my eye as I watched him and heard the steps fading. It had never hurt me before. True, it had scared me, roused apprehension and guilt, but never grief like this.

“He’s different from the rest. Different to me.”

My grandmother used to say it was a gift. Some might say it’s a curse. I believe it’s a calling. For whatever reason, through whatever mystic means, I’d been granted a power, a supernatural thread suspending me somewhere between the world of humans and the world of...of what? Grandmother believed in those strange supernatural stories—people who could see the future, see the dead, control emotion, time, minds. She called them gifts. Grandmothers have strange tendencies. Mine believed in superpowers. And when I discovered mine, I believed her too.

The first time it happened—that I can think back on—was when I was thirteen. We’d adopted a dog—a lab puppy and I’d been wrestling him on the floor, playfully scratching his chin and cheeks. A guest commented on the remarkable obedience of Puppy. He responded flawlessly to, “Sit! Jump! Roll over! Play dead!” Of course, I hadn’t known it then.

I realized what it really was when I was sixteen, the first time I did it to a person. I had left the library late one evening, when someone snatched at my purse. I jerked out of the way, a surprised yelp leaping from my throat, and the stranger grappled for me again. I screamed this

time, clawing at him as he grabbed my shoulders. One of my arms twisted behind me and I lashed out, blindly raking my nails down his cheek.

“Stop it!” I shrieked.

And then nothing. I stumbled backwards, arms reeling to regain my balance. He didn’t move to wipe the blood running down his face from where my nails had torn his skin open. I could see his pupils expanding, growing, eclipsing the green iris, before reverting to normal. His expression twitched.

“The hell?!” I sputtered, moving quickly into a defensive stance. “Go away!”

“Yes.” He pivoted and walked off.

“Wait, what?” I muttered, confused and wary.

He whirled around. “What is your command?”

I stared, seeing this time. His face, which moments ago had twisted itself into a vicious snarl, maintained a blank stare in return. He was playing some sick joke.

“Just... just leave or...or I’m calling the cops!”

“Yes.” He spun back around and resumed his steady pace.

I felt a chill run down my spine. It couldn’t be. Shaking, my voice called out to him.

“Stop!”

He stopped.

“Go left...” I said haltingly.

He turned and began walking in that direction.

“Go right.” I said.

He obeyed. And in that moment, my bones turned to frigid ice as a wave of horror enveloped me in waves, numbing my mind, eclipsing my every thought. It seemed as if my legs buckled and fell for an eternity as I ran home, leaving my assailant standing in the street. Grandmother was sitting in the kitchen when fell through the backdoor, banging the screen open and denting the wall.

“It happened. You were right. I have it. It happened to me. I used it on someone.” I sputtered, clutching my bag to my heart, which was trying to pound out of my ribs.

Puppy barked at me, wagging his stubby tail.

“Sit!” I ordered.

He did obediently, and I stared in horror for a moment. Grandmother looked at me, silent for a long time.

“So, you have a gift. And what do you think it is?” she mused.

“St-stop being—don’t be so calm!” I shouted, trembling so violently I thought I’d fall apart at the seams, “I think...I think I...did something to someone.”

She resumed her knitting. “And what did you do?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know!” I ground out, and then jumbled words spewed from me. “He was grabbing my purse and I said stop and he *did*, and I said go away and he *did*, and I think I called the police and...and...” I stared at her sitting there in silence. “Why aren’t you panicking? *Why aren’t you panicking?*” My voice crested to an uncontrollable shriek.

“So, he obeyed you, is that it?”

“I *controlled* him. I...I can do that...to people.” I glanced down at Puppy. “What...the...hell...”

“So, you can control his will. You have a gift.”

“A gift? No, this isn’t one of your superhero...super... stories! How can you call it—I can take away will, grandma. I’m a freak! Make it go away!”

“Neither of us can do that. You *do* have a gift so decide how to use it. Abuse it or use it. You choose.”

“Aren’t you...going to help me?” I gulped for air, “I...don’t know what to do with this. I think...I think when I touch their faces, that’s when it happens. It...it makes them obey me. They...they don’t have wills of their own. They’re mindless. They’re not human, grandma, not... people anymore. Dehumanized...they’re dehumanized! Is that what I do to people?”

“If you think it’s wrong, then don’t do it,” she responded.

It had left me shaken for days. I looked at myself in the mirror, half-expecting to see a monster staring back at me through the glass. Something fouler than blood stained my fingers. The revulsion, the pure *unnaturalness* of stripping away another’s mind haunted me. A thread of power had been spun into my being, a thread of stygian blue. I pushed away the strange new force pulsing in my veins. It was a one-time accident. I had been attacked. I acted unknowingly...in self-defense. It wouldn’t happen again. But of course it did.

At the end of the school year, I won a swimming competition. As I left the stadium, someone shoved me against a wall and then knocked me down. Dazed I scrambled to my feet, shaking my head to clear the watery blue staining the edges of my vision. Someone I knew came into focus...recognized rather. A school rival who had been jealous of me for years. She was spitting insults at me, raising her hand to strike again. I surged forward, placing my hands on either side of her face. She went still, and guilt crashed against me as her eyes dilated and her expression shifted. I dropped my hands quickly, taking a step back. She blinked at me and I cleared my throat.

“I’m sorry.” I said.

I'd done it impulsively...but intentionally. Almost without thinking, a reflexive response. Almost but not quite.

"It was in self-defense," I said to no one.

Was it? An uneasy voice whispered back to me from the rolling torrent in my mind.

"She was going to hit me!"

So, you took away her mind? Dehumanized her? That's hardly a fair trade.

"I'm sorry." I repeated, out loud. "Go back home. Don't...don't attack people anymore. And stop cheating off my tests."

I supposed the least I could do with myself, after I'd hijacked someone's will, was repair their integrity to whatever extent I was able. Yes, that would fix it a little, make it a little bit alright. It would be alright. My hands were sticky with sweat and I rubbed them on my jeans. I tried to take a deep breath, ears pounding. Then I pushed my knuckles against my eyes. I wouldn't do it again. That had been last year.

Staring at the retreating figure of the boy now, I thought over why it had been so much worse this time. We had known each other since we were young, had always been friends...and then a bit more. And then I had found drugs in his locker. I'd screamed at him, shoved him, and then suddenly his hands were tightening around my throat. His sea blue eyes bore holes into mine as I choked, gasping, clawing. And then, deliberately, I placed my hand against his cheek, softly.

"Stop." I whispered thinly.

He dropped me instantly.

It was the first time I'd done it to someone I loved. I'd sobbed to my grandmother when I returned home, clinging to Puppy.

She only said: "Remember to have compassion, in everything you do. But I can't hold your hand every day of your life and tell you when to act."

"I was responding to violence." I insisted.

"And I don't disagree."

"What should I have done? What would *you* have done?"

"I don't know what I would have done. I don't have your gift."

"This...dehumanization," I hissed, "is hardly a gift!"

"It always starts out as a gift. But we all have the power to turn it into a curse: a curse on ourselves and everyone else."

I'd never resented anyone as much as her in that moment. I was utterly, completely alone, suspended between humanity and the supernatural, a gun tied to my hand, pointed at the world,

finger taped to the trigger. I stalked from the house into the lashing storm, letting rain crash over me. Puppy barked from the door.

“Stay!” I ordered, whipping my hair out of my face.

It was far too violent a night for me to be running out of the house, mind spinning and tumbling like shells in the pulling tide. I ran down the street towards the convenience store, thunder growling overhead. The road was slick underneath my feet, water splashing up onto my legs. Lightning cracked, ripping the dark blue sky in two. I looked up, watching the storm clouds rupture and splinter in blinding, fiery white, and then covered my ears when thunder exploded out of the sky. This gift...it'd come to me for some reason, and all it'd done was terrify me.

Someone grabbed my shoulder. “Hey, you!”

I whirled and clapped my hands onto the stranger's face. “Don't touch me!” I shrieked.

He staggered back. My chest was heaving as I snapped my hands to my side in shock, curling my fingers into fists. It had been so easy.

“Get out of here!” I suddenly screamed, “Get out! Go!”

Terrified thoughts came flooding into my mind. *I'm being attacked, they're attacking me, I'm being attacked. What have I done? What have I done?*

I didn't wait to watch him obey me. I sprinted to the store, blood rushing into my ears, contemplating the psychological ease with which I had just dehumanized a man. I stepped into the store, dripping water on the mat. A cashier glanced towards me lazily and then looked away. The light above me flickered and I took a moment to catch my breath and gather my scattered wits.

A balding man in a worn jacket was purchasing a pack of Camels. As he passed me, the stench of alcohol wafted by my nose. I grimaced and slowly turned, watching as he left. His thick fingers fumbled for his keys as he swayed a little, and then he walked towards his car.

My eyes narrowed. Lightning illuminated the pouring rain outside, outlining the falling droplets. They appeared suspended in the air for a moment, crystal clear. The man dropped his keys on the ground and bent unsteadily to retrieve them, trying several times before he managed to pick them up off the rain-slick ground. He resumed his slow stagger for the car. Lightning lit up the parking lot again and something seemed to click in my mind. I strode from the store towards him.

He turned and tried to open his car door, struggling to find the lock. I stood by him for a moment and then, when he turned to look at me, touched his face.

“Sit here until you're sober. Then go home. Stop drinking. Lead a good life.”

He turned and walked back to the store, sitting down heavily on a bench outside. I didn't know why I'd thrown in that last part. I didn't know why I'd done it at all, besides that sudden, resolute need to stop him.

A drunk driver, going home in the rain. You stopped him. You probably saved his life...and the lives of others.

That was three in one night. Impulsive, unchecked responses to the world around me. I hadn't even tried to stop myself—simply reacted, almost involuntarily. Guilt dripped on my forehead again, familiar now. This time I clenched my fist and ground my teeth, pushing back. No, I'd done something good. Three people—an addict, a mugger, and a drunk—now they were better people. Better people with better lives. And they wouldn't hurt anyone else.

I went out again the next night—intending to go to the library. I'd wound up in the mall and dehumanized a girl stealing a pair of earrings. I couldn't stop myself before I found myself stalking up to her and touching her cheek gently. “Stop. Get a job and pay for those yourself. Lead a good life.”

The next night I'd found another shoplifter. Then someone cheating off my test at school. Again, again, again. Time after time, I found myself reaching into the dark blue sea of power, compelling these criminals to yield their minds to my will. Impulsively, I righted wrongs in the world.

Lead a good life. Lead a good life. Lead a good life.

Once I heard that call to fix them, to stop the crimes I saw, I could not with a clean conscience ignore the siren's demand. I found myself looking, seeking out petty offenders, cheaters in school, alcoholics. And when I really looked, they weren't difficult to find. Again, again, again. Each time, it was easier. Each time, I told myself this would be the last time. Each time, I knew it wouldn't be. There was always someone else. Ten people, fifteen, twenty. I'd fixed them. My resolution ebbed and flowed, reinforcing itself before guilt pulled it back.

What have you done to these people? That uneasy voice plagued me constantly.

“I'm making things better. I stopped thieves and alcoholics.” I whispered back, “I'm doing good.”

And I was. I knew I was. This power must have been given to me for a purpose, and I had found it. Grandmother had refused me advice, refused to hand me a set of guidelines to follow. So, I made my own. This—*this* was my gift, this was my purpose. It must be. Yes, this would be my gift to the world. And the world would thank me for it. Not at first, but it would.

And so, I purposely sought out people to dehumanize. A drug addict, someone slapping her child in public, a woman cheating on her husband. I dehumanized them all. Again, and again I yielded to that enchanting siren's song. And why should I have denied it? I had done society

world a service. I had not stripped the world of a human so much as I had altered some defect, some stain in life and set it straight.

Sometimes I went back and checked on them. My swimming rival was now involved in multiple charities. The man who had tried to take my purse was married. My childhood friend graduated and went to college. I was satisfied in my good work, so why did that voice still murmur in the back of my mind? Why did my hands shake and sweat every time I dehumanized some criminal?

As another year rolled by, I slowly perfected my systematic dehumanization of criminals. Though the uneasy voice told me that I'd applied the term rather too loosely. Yet my new mission, my life's purpose began to overrule all. It was a never-ending call for justice, for integrity, for righteousness, for the rejection of wickedness and crime. I held a gun in one hand and a bullet in the other, and the tighter I wrapped my fist around that shot, the more I felt it burn to fire from the gun. I could not have denied its inexorable command to purify and cleanse the world if I wanted. So, I stopped trying.

The flaws that demanded dehumanization became trivial: a child whining too loudly at his mother, a teenage girl with a disrespectful attitude, a man littering in the park. Minor imperfections, but imperfections nonetheless. I had my code and I followed it. The voice often loomed, chiding me for intolerance.

"So?" I retorted, "I'm helping them, aren't I? I gave them an honest, responsible life! I did something good for them and for the rest of society!"

No. You didn't. You robbed them of their will. You're stealing and murdering. Did you give them a second chance before you dehumanized them?

"Dehumanizing them was my way of giving them a second chance!" I kicked back, struggling against the waves of guilt that surged around me, "Should I have let robbers walk free? Potential murderers? Drunk drivers, even? It was a gift!"

Was it? This is your gift. What are you doing with it?

"I'm changing the world for better!" I argued. "They're better people because of this. Who knows where they would have been without me? Look at them now! Look at their lives! I gave them the gift of integrity, of—of perfection!"

Gift? Did you really give them another life? Is it life, if there is no will? What about you now? Are you gifted or cursed?

I did not want to think about myself. I turned my back on that thought, tucking it away to examine perhaps another day, after I had satisfied the siren's song.

Things didn't get too difficult until the year I turned twenty. My father died. My mother, stricken with grief, wept night and day. With three younger siblings and my aging grandmother to take care of, I dropped out of college to stay home to manage our family. It wasn't easy. In almost no time, we ran out of money, and I was helpless. I couldn't get a decent job without a degree and my grandmother was overwhelmed with caring for my younger siblings. It became apparent that my mother was seriously ill and needed to go to a hospital for care. I was in despair. Then one night, an idea floated across my thoughts. An idea I hated myself for, but one that would have to work.

It took some nerve, but I drowned my trepidation and walked straight into the building of a large company. I requested an audience with the manager and presented my problem. And he stared at me like I was insane.

"You want to be an accountant here?" he asked, after several moments of blinking at me in silence.

"Yes, I do. I really need the job. My mom is sick and my dad is dead. I have three younger siblings and my grandma to take care of."

"How old are you again?"

"It doesn't matter. Are you going to give me the job or not?" My desperation and panic left me brusque, rude even.

He looked at me with something like pity, before pinching the bridge of his nose and sighing the sigh businessmen sigh before rejecting an offer. "Look, I'm sorry, but I simply can't just go around hiring random girls who bounce into my office, asking for jobs."

I pursed my lips. "I'm sorry about this, but you leave me no choice." I reached forward, placing my hands against his face. It was like machinery. His pupils widened, expanded, contracted and his face went blank. Something writhed inside me, rejecting my actions, cursing my own broken code. This was the first time I had done it for myself. The first time I had done it to an innocent person.

"You will give me a job here." I said to him, "And you will pay for my mother's care in a hospital."

"Yes."

"Otherwise, you will behave as you have been all along."

"Yes."

And so, mom was taken care of in the hospital. I hired a baby-sitter for the kids. But I didn't tell my grandmother. I had left off telling her things. It didn't help. But *she* asked questions.

"Tell me again, how did you get your job?"

"Grandma," I said, with an almost careless laugh. "I've told you so many times!"

“I know, but old people like me will forget.” She smiled.

I resented that elderly smile, her superficial benevolence and artificial concern. *Where were you when I was alone, crying, begging for guidance and wisdom?* I plastered a smile to my face in return and laughed.

“Alright, alright. I went in and asked him if he needed an accountant. He said that he did, but he didn’t want me, even when I said I had been majoring in accounting. I cried in the middle of his office, I said you and mom were dying, I said we were all dying, I said it would all be his fault. And he folded like a house of cards.”

My grandmother only nodded, but I could tell she was thinking about something else. Maybe she could tell I had made that up. She turned to me.

“I just want you to know that I’ll always love you. Whether you use your gift correctly or abuse it, I’ll always care for you and you’ll always be my granddaughter.”

Someone in my mind screamed. I couldn’t decipher the emotion. How could she sit there and judge me, when she had left me on my own to take this gift in my own two hands and change the world? How could she sit there and love me when I had dehumanized dozens of my fellow humans?

I started to question myself again, question my code. Was this...this dehumanization a good thing? Had I shattered the very basic morality of humanity by stripping these people—however flawed—of the one thing that made them *human*? Who was I to set myself up as judge, jury, and executioner over my peers?

But wait. If I hadn’t done it, we’d be starving on the streets. Grandmother would still be breaking her back over the stress of taking care of the kids. Mother might even have been dead. It was probably the best thing to do. If anything, it was a good thing to do. Once again, my gift had helped. I said all this to myself, ignoring the voice. It had begun to fall silent anyway.

I threw myself into my work and into my mission. I had younger siblings to care for, to send to college. They might have been afraid of me, at the time. I didn’t know if they knew about my gift or not. I hadn’t told them. But they were well-behaved, got excellent grades, and their teachers told me they were fantastic students.

And then one day, I was called to school. The oldest of my siblings had been caught with drugs and been suspended. Memories of my childhood friend flooded to the surface of my mind. This was worse. Ten times worse, a thousand times worse. But I had my code.

My brother looked at me, pale, trembling. He knew about the gift. He must have known. I didn’t want to dehumanize him...but the song demanded it. I had made it my mission to purge the world of criminals, and here he was, my family.

So, I dehumanized him. I dehumanized my own brother. It was the first time I had done it to one of my family. All the other times—the first time, the most recent time—they were nothing compared to the arctic agony I felt as all expression faded from his pale face, as he stopped shaking, as he stood up straight, and I felt his will in my hands. I broke down, sobbing so violently that I could not speak for several minutes. He stood silently by like a stone.

“You will behave normally, like you did before the drugs.” I finally managed to say, “You will study hard and get a full scholarship to a university.”

“Yes.” He responded

“Part of behaving normally will include...” I choked, “will include responding with more than just ‘yes’.”

“Yes, sister.”

The words were like knives to my ears. He was not my brother anymore. He was a robot now. My robot. I threw myself on my bed and wept, cursing my gift, cursing my code, cursing this responsibility that had landed on my shoulders alone. Grandmother probably suspected I had dehumanized the boy, but she never said. She had stopped asking about my gift altogether. She had given up on me. I had given up on her as well.

A few days later, I received a message from the hospital that my mother was better and could be taken care of at home. She was still weak, though not ill anymore. But when she came home, she began to cry again. Day in, day out: still mourning for my father. She made the youngest cry incessantly as well. So, I took her back to the hospital and they said she wasn’t ill. Grandmother was frazzled by this time with all the weeping. In desperation, I turned to her, asking for advice.

“Oh honestly,” she said, “I don’t know now. I just don’t know. Do something, do *anything* to make your mother stop crying.”

I don’t believe she meant for me to dehumanize her, but that is what I did. I told her that she was to take up her responsibility as a mother. She needed to discipline the children, cook their meals, and teach them. When I watched her face go blank, I did not weep. It was difficult, but I held back the tears. I had a code. And someone who refused to take up her responsibility must be purged of such an enormous flaw.

Life was easier for the rest of the family after that. My brother was doing excellently in school, taking numerous advanced-placement courses. My mother got a part-time job. With her up and functioning, the children were behaving better. We let the baby-sitter go and Grandmother took over again.

Another year of my life came and passed. I was older, wiser; the count of people I had perfected was now in the hundreds. I felt the driving urge of my mission grow stronger. By now,

I no longer experienced remorse in dehumanizing people. True, I had felt sorrow when I dehumanized a family member, but only because it meant I was losing someone close to me, someone I had loved. The song in my bones became more powerful every day. Life had now one meaning: to cleanse and purify humanity. I was creating an ideal world, a perfect world, no longer plagued by the fallen nature of the human condition. Slowly, yet surely, I was cleansing the universe of imperfection.

I turned twenty-two and my sister was preparing for university. Despite the steady job I held, I could not afford to send her to college without scholarship. She knew it—all my siblings knew it—but she was struggling in her studies. I tried to help her at first, and then I became impatient.

“You can’t keep slacking and expecting me to pay your way through college.” I snapped at her one day.

“I’m trying my best!” She retorted, “But that’s not enough for you! No one else my age needs a full ride!”

“We don’t have the luxury of doing anything otherwise. Mom and I barely make enough to keep us all going.” I hissed at her, “So try harder.”

She stomped her foot now, petulant in her discouraged anger. “No.”

Coldly, calmly, I reached out and cupped her cheek. “Yes. You will.”

I turned away then, retreating to my room. For a moment, I considered if I had broken my code. No, I dehumanized many a teenager for disrespectful attitudes towards their mothers.

The uneasy voice spoke for the first time in months. *You were impatient, selfish. You could have taken the time to talk to her and figure out why she was struggling in her studies.*

“I don’t need to do all that, when I can fix it all so easily.” I replied sharply to myself, “I made her perfect. Do you hear me? I made her *perfect!*”

The voice went silent and my mission song swelled.

I took a walk later that day. Finding criminals and changing them for the better usually brought me the peaceful satisfaction I craved. Though lately, it seemed for every man I dehumanized and transformed into the ideal human being, three more imperfect creatures crawled forward to take his place.

I heard a loud commotion in an alley and stalked towards it, feeling calm, collected, in control of whatever situation might happen next. I looked around a corner and saw two men brawling on the ground. A small child stood by, shrieking. One of the men pulled away. With shock, I realized he was my childhood friend, the third person I had dehumanized.

“Leave her alone!” He was shouting, shoving the child behind him, “Don’t touch her!”

The next moments flashed by so quickly I didn't even have time to scream. The other man whipped a gun from his jacket. A single shot rang out through the air and his victim fell to the ground. I immediately rushed up behind him and clapped my hands to either side of his face.

"Stop! No more shooting, no more murdering! Turn yourself in to the police! Lead a good life!" I gasped.

Without waiting, I whirled to the man lying on the ground. Dark blood pooled around him as he struggled for breath. I collapsed on my knees beside him. He looked so much older than when I had last seen him, some five years ago.

"I'm sorry." I gasped, "I'm sorry I didn't react faster. This is my fault."

"No, no, thank you." He stuttered. "Thank you for all you have done for me."

I paused. "What?"

"Thank you for giving me a better life. Thank you for letting me die with honor."

This shocked me. I had always thought the people I dehumanized couldn't feel anything. They weren't supposed to have emotions, thoughts of their own. How could he have rationalized honor and integrity in life and death? Maybe my dehumanized criminals could feel such things. Maybe they understood justice, righteousness. Maybe they could understand my need for an ideal, perfect world. And they had embraced the gift I had given to them.

The thought floated me into a state of satisfied contemplation which further drowned the now dormant voice in my mind. I shouldn't even name my gift "dehumanization." They were still human. They could rationalize and value such virtues as honor and courage. And they were grateful that I had given them the gift of perfection.

It occurred to me around midnight, that perhaps, my desire for justification in my mission had prompted the man to thank me. That uneasy voice woke, looming its ugly head into my consciousness.

He was still under your control at the time. You control their will. You willed his gratitude into existence.

"How do you know that's true? He really was grateful. He died with dignity."

Or perhaps, if you hadn't stolen the very essence of his humanity, he would be alive right now, not lying cold in a morgue.

"He saved a little girl's life today. And that credit is due to me."

Murderer.

"I did *not* murder," I replied. "I did not."

And to prove it to that restless, uneasy voice, I rose from my bed and went out. It was raining, but that could not hinder me from my mission. In no time, I had found three men to dehumanize. They were drunk, trying to climb onto their motorcycles when I stopped them.

Satisfied, I turned to go home for the night. That was when a barfight broke out. Exhaustion wrapped around every muscle in my body, but I entered the bar anyway, rolling my shoulders back. Several patrons were brawling, smashing bottles and plates. In the corner, I saw someone hand a teenage boy a cigarette. A man I was quite sure was married had a waitress on his lap. A pregnant woman was drinking. The sheer amount of irresponsibility, of disregard for dignity, of *imperfection* nearly overwhelmed me for a moment. I started with the woman.

I had nearly gotten to them all when my concentration was interrupted by the blaring screech of tires and a sickening crash. I whirled and saw a horrific collision on the street out front. And that was my mother's car, totaled. Cold gripped me for a moment. My song stopped. What was my mother doing out in the night?

"Call the police!" I screamed at a newly dehumanized man, before running out into the rain.

My mother was alright, and so was my grandmother. The other driver was drunk. I stormed to his car and ripped the door open. He blinked, dazed. I slapped him across the face violently.

"No more drinking! No more drunk driving!" I shouted above the roar of thunder and pouring rain, "Lead a better life!" My chorus.

I returned to my family as I heard sirens drawing closer. The rain whipped us in torrents. I wiped my face as I grabbed my mother.

"What are you doing out here?" I yelled. "Why are you here? Who told you to come out?"

"Your grandmother saw you leave the house. She was worried about you and asked me to come get you. We brought your sister because she was afraid of the storm." She said calmly. Too calmly.

I turned to look at the wreckage and my grandmother was sobbing. It was a high keening wail, piercing through the watery night. My youngest sister, the baby of the family, was dead. When the impact of the other car had hit, she had been thrown with such force against the car door that her neck was broken.

My grandmother wept, and then mother did too. But her tears were only an impulse from me, reaching out to bend her will to express my sorrow. I knew she did not feel it. The police took them home. I was left standing by the wreckage in the rain, my wet hair plastered against my face. Another fight had broken out and I stood watching it.

So many. There were so many flawed, fallen human beings in this world. Too many. It did not matter how many I had found, had perfected. I had hunted them down in the night, had stalked them through the streets when I could have been asleep—when I *should* have been asleep. I had systematically dehumanized man, woman, and child. Yet there were still more. The human condition persisted, and I had been powerless to stop it. And this time it had taken my last sibling. Her death...her blood coated *my* fingers, stained me. I had not stopped the drunk driver.

It was on me—*it was on me*. I had failed so spectacularly in the mission that had consumed my life, and I had still failed to perfect humankind and make them better. I could not hold the weight of the world in my own two hands and expect to change it by myself.

I hated it, hated it so much I could have screamed for the whole world to hear. I wished, so desperately wished, to free myself from the song, the inexorable demand for more, more, more!

Dark water ran in rivulets down my face, down where tears should have flowed. But I did not weep. I had work to do. And even if I could never alter the fallen state of mankind, even if I could never fix them all, perfect them all, I must still try. It was the song, my song, the urge which I could not ignore. My mission, my quest, my calling in life. I still must try. I must give my gift to the world, must *try* to perfect them. I must obey that never-ending cry for justice, for integrity, for righteousness, for the rejection of the human condition, of imperfection, even if it killed me.

I am thirty-five today. I have dehumanized nearly one thousand people. I answer the call for perfection alone. It occupies my waking hours and keeps me up from sleep. It haunts my footsteps and gives me no peace. It is my patron and my tormentor, my saving grace and my damnation, my muse and my siren.

I have learned to ignore the call of mercy or pity. Joy and love are foreign. The world owes so much to me now. A few weeks ago, they reported that the crime rate has dropped in my city. I know it is because of me, but I feel no joy. I have only done what I must, obeyed the song, and yet it urges me still.

All my siblings are successful lawyers or doctors. My mother is a prominent figure in the city. I am the only one of them that is not known to the world. It is because of me that they stand where they are now, but no one knows. Yesterday, I dehumanized my grandmother. She was too old and too frail. She was a burden to the world. She could only take from it now, not give. I could not accept her condition—old, weak, fallen so far from the perfection of youth. So, I dehumanized her, put her in a nursing home, and told her to lead a good life. The final nail in the coffin that used to be my family.

And I am glad they do not know it was me. I am glad they do not know how I accomplished it, or for what reasons. I am glad they cannot see the dark sea that lives inside me or my dead conscience floating on its still waters. I am glad they do not hear the song, that perpetual song that drives me on and on and on, that strips me of feeling, of happiness, of interest in anything besides the mission. Yes, my mission for perfection. I have no choice now, no say in the matter, no will of my own that could let me live my life as a human being. I can only obey. I can only obey the song.

They cannot comprehend the curse that rests on my stone heart. They do not know me and they never will. I am empty of feeling. I am empty of life.

I am dehumanized.