

EXTRACT FROM *VICTOR IN HEAVEN, HOURGLASS: CHAPTER 1*

Silas led his crowd through mazes of streets and passages. Finally, they reached a no-way street with a single door leading to a basement. He told them to wait. They sat there, rubbing their hands and puffing hot breath for minutes until Jasper stood up.

“This is ridiculous. I don’t care who you have affairs with, Silas, just don’t mock us by trying to get us into the same business.” He turned around when a breeze of icy wind blew in his face. A cloud dispersed up above and revealed the pale, ivory moon. The moon cast a light against a bin and that cast a shadow across the path. Slowly, it became to take form until the silhouette of a man appeared in the distance.

He walked towards them with long effortless strides. His coat almost brushed the floor, and the collar was raised high and the hat worn low over his eyes. His shoes clicked on the pavement as he walked directly to Silas. When he got to him, the stranger gave the man a pat on the back and a dry but passionate kiss on the lips. Finally, he lifted his face to reveal the thin but undeniably striking face of a man in his young thirties. He had high cheekbones and petrifying eyes that required one to look closely into them to determine that they were in fact dark blue and not black. He took off his hat and revealed a set of teeth as white as the moon itself.

The teeth of a rich man.

“Good evening,” he bowed. He dug into his front pocket and produced a silver key, nodding for them to follow. A very faint, red light spread from somewhere behind the door. “After you,” he stood aside and commanded with a gesture of the hand.

They stood there stupidly, their eyes probing Silas whether they could really trust this man that seemed so deliciously cordial.

Silas nodded back, and Bert went first.

The rest followed.

They stood clutched around each other and only then did they realize how much they really stank. Sweat, dirt, the breath of putrefied food, scabs and the smell of puss, piss, and even nail fungus. They heard a door close, and to their horror, a key turn.

“To your left,” said that enchanting voice. Only now it had changed; gone one octave lower.

The crowd turned in different directions but eventually one stumbled the right way and called for the others. They entered a bigger room and spread out.

“My dear, light the candles, will you?” asked the stranger. Silas did as told and soon the chamber’s dimensions were revealed. There were four walls, of course, but there was no furniture. Instead, pillows and rugs loitered the floor; and candles. Loads of candles: big, small, strangely shaped, white, blue, with patters, scented, plain. It almost looked like an Indian-styled living room. “Take a seat; make yourself at home,” said the stranger.

Once they all took a place, he offered them all a small glass filled with a green liquid and inside, and a sugar cube floating about.

“Absinthe; it soothes the mind,” he commented.

Nick looked at his glass with increasing doubt.

Silas leaned over and tapped his shoulder. “It’s quite tasty; he lights it up to enhance the flavor, then pours water over the flame. Once smothered, the drink is sweet like sugar. But don’t drink it yet; we have to toast.”

But the stranger would not toast—yet. First he needed a reason to toast, and he would soon have it.

“I know you are all be eager to know how I came to know this fine young man; you must also be desperate for my name, but most importantly, why I brought you *here* and what I can do to help you. Ah, questions, questions, question.” He dismissed it with the wave of a hand, laughed and sat next to Silas. Henry sat next to him, and next to Henry was Lenora. She, too, was dubious of his charms. “Ah, you see, your friend here has told me of your desperate situation, so I am well informed already. What a shame!” he pulled down his mouth into a childlike frown and pouching his lower lip.

The stranger turned to look at Peter and laughed heartily when he saw his expression of distrust. “Ah, just a joke, lad. Life is full of them, and they are not really hard to find.”

They didn’t flinch.

Bert cleared his throat. “My good sir, pardon my implication but if this whole thing is a joke to you, then we ought to go. We have been made fun of for a long, long time, and since we are soon to be deprived of all we have, we’d rather enjoy our last days in peace.”

The stranger sat up straight and leaned forward. “You are a very negative lad.” He raised an eyebrow and began to rub his thumb against his index finger. “Impatient, too.” He let go of the arm cuddled around Silas’ and made a space in the middle of the circle, briskly moving things around. “Don’t believe I can save you?” he didn’t look up. The corner of his eye connected with Lenora’s gaze and she turned away quickly. There was something off

about him. She had seen this look in her client's faces, the moment before they lost control and hit her.

The stranger noticed this. He smirked and sat straight again. "Get my coat, Silas."

As Silas stood up the stranger stared at the ground and bit his lower lip, deciding whether he had done a good job or not. He cocked his head to Lenora and squinted his eyes. "Do you agree with your friend? Do you think I'm a fraud?"

She swallowed, but vowed never to let another human see her fear again as long as she could hide it. The problem was, she didn't really know if he *was* human. "I... I think it's good to keep options open until the end." She was staring at the empty space in the center of the circle, avoiding him; but she felt him staring.

"Good," he replied. "Options are good. Options are always good."

Silas came with the coat. The stranger searched the pocket and this time produced a small wooden box.

"If you are longing for a name, then call me Victor. Now," he opened the box and grabbed a fine but sharp knife which he dangled in his hand. Side to side, up, above, down, left, up right, twirling, into a double loop and back to dangling. Child's play. "What I am about to say will probably shock you a little." He gave the others time to digest the words. "And it might make you uncomfortable. I admit it even made *him* cringe, and he is a guy who can usually take a lot."

Silas kept quiet.

"*But*, it is *highly* rewarding."

Bert opened his mouth and Silas shot him a look and shook his head nervously.

The knife was an acrobat in his hands, and Victor new it made them nervous.

"I *will* give you the money— that's set. And I don't want anything in return for that. Take it as... a little gift from me to my new family. But...I am also willing to give you more."

He released the knife and its tip landed with an almost inaudible *click* against the rug. Victor held the handle with a single finger pressing down on the surface.

"What more can you give than money?" chipped Lillian.

"Oh, *darling*," he pleaded. "You have no idea what I'm capable of! In fact, let me tell you a little something. What if I could promise to take you to a place where there is no evil; a place where you will not be judged by animal or man or blamed by any thereof? What if I promised to show you a world where life is much simpler and sweeter than the ones even the richest of the rich live?"

“Like Paradise?” inquired Hettie.

“*Better.*”

Nobody said anything. The idea was tempting, but again, so was death.

“*Prove it.* I won’t believe you until you do.” Lenora clenched her teeth, her fingers tapped the floor. Victor smiled. He liked her. She was dangerously impulsive. He could tell she lost her patience with everyone: the circus, herself, the idea of a better world. And sometimes, that’s the best combination for those in his profession. “Well, are you just going to stare or will you show us your paradise?” she snapped.

He smiled. “*My paradise.* I like that. Yes, let’s call it that. Although it does have a name, you know. *Tantillus.*”

Lenora grunted. “This is ridiculous.” She stood up and Victor seized her arm and yanked her down. Being manhandled was not new for her, but his reaction suddenly made very alert. In some strange way, she found it extraordinarily fascinating. He yanked once more and his face was a few inches away from hers. His breath smelled like alcohol, but not absinthe. She had never tried absinthe, but now she knew that whatever was in their glasses was not it. No alcohol could smell so foul.

From one second to the next, his dark blue irises turned completely black, the pupil becoming lost in that sea of sinister tar and leaving nothing but two grand circles in the midst of a sclera which had begun to turn red. His lips curled back into a snarl and revealed sharp incisors.

All this only she saw, and later, when she was institutionalized at the Royal Sophorian Institute of Mental Health, she would realize why.

“You are a little brat who can’t seem to let go and trust a stranger once in a while,” he whispered, “would you like to see how trustful I can be?” He dug his nails deeper into her arm until droplets of blood coursed down. The arm began to shake, but the Stranger didn’t let go. She opened her mouth to speak, but there was a desert. Her lips were cracked and sore, and she felt the urgent need to drink the absinthe glass completely, foul taste or not. But why didn’t the others jump in to help? Could they not see what he was doing?

Suddenly the Stranger released her hand and drew back his in a dramatic motion. Lenora felt the magnetic sting, but only for a moment. As the Stranger pulled his hand out she seemed to pull back too. For a second she felt like a shadow had left her, but then, just like a metallic coil, the Stranger bounced back and planted a dry, evil kiss on her lips. Her mouth filled up with a coarse liquid that tasted like ash and soil. She gasped, looked up, and the last thing she saw was the world slipping away into a sea of red light.

The sky was blue, and the moon was high up in the heavens, shining like a happy widow. The air was clear, and the grass—the *grass*. She had never felt grass this soft in her life; in fact, she had never felt grass at all. It was like silk; like the softest, finest, most expensive silk in the market. She rolled to her right and saw a field full of this grass. Clandestine odors she could not recognize lingered through the air. She saw a curious little flower about a step away from her. It was tiny, not much bigger than chamomile, yet it had the brightest, most beautiful neon-blue petals and a radiant olive-green stem, and it seemed to be ringing. She stretched her arm and then lost interest.

She was wearing a white dress that was cut up to her shoulders, but most importantly, she saw that her scars were gone.

Vanished.

Lenora pushed herself up and examined both arms. Under the radiant moon light she saw that they were clear—completely clear. She touched her lips and felt the same silkiness. Then she touched her hair and it felt like satin. She got up slowly, effortlessly, and took a deep breath. Oxygen, pure oxygen.

A ringing of water. She spun on her heels and far away saw a multitude of paths. She followed the noise and soon after reached a pond. Water lilies floated around and fireflies illuminated the atmosphere. A small stream ran down the side like a waterfall. She admired her reflection. Her eyes were bright like emeralds and her rouge hair glowed like ember. She smiled, and even her smile made her smile more. Her teeth, all perfect white pearls, glowed.

Something plopped from the water. A fish, perhaps. She snapped out of her trance and brushed the water. The tip of her finger felt a sensational purr of happiness. She brought her finger to her mouth and licked it lightly. Suddenly she felt the sweetness—no, sweetness was not the right word. Even the most expensive champagne would seem like swamp water compared to this. She submerged her hand and licked each finger ardently, then cupped her hand and gulped it down. She did it again, this time pouring it into her mouth and letting it drip down her chin. Without missing a beat, she drank another handful, then another, and another, and another. She decided that she wanted to bathe in that water—bathe right there and then, under the moonlight.

She walked into it and her dress spread around her like a blooming rose. There she floated, her arms barely moving but the pond doing all the work.

She gasped. Something brushed against her back. But it wasn't something slimy or sickening; it was a comforting stroke, a loving touch. Another thing, something like warm silk, grazed her shoulders and a warm feeling embraced her. She knew it hadn't been a fish or

a magical anything; it was the water's energy. It knew what she wanted, what she really longed for, and it was more than willing to give it to her.

She didn't want the feeling to go away; she wanted to swim deeper, to be drowned in the water. She was willing to drown for the water was much more luscious than air. Something inside her told her to do it. The need to die was so irresistible she pushed her head underwater and used a plant stem to pull herself towards the bottom. As she disappeared the bottom was no closer. The pond was much deeper than she expected. Darkness engulfed her until the moon rays were no longer visible. And there she stop, weightless in the abyss. But the euphoric feeling had started to disappear. Lenora looked up; the surface was too far away to make it back in time.

Slowly, the need to breathe came to her. She held as long as she could. Bubbles escaped her mouth and nose, and then water leaked in slowly. She closed her eyes. Nothing could break her. Then, slowly, she began to feel a tickle of panic. They sometimes found bodies in the river, bloated corpses that kids loved to poke with sticks before the coroner arrived.

Bloated... she thought. *Bloated....* surely she could swim up quicker than she had swam down? If she started now, she might get there on time. Might breathe-

But something pulled her down. She tried to push with her feet but the ground was nowhere to be found. Somehow, she had drifted to the deepest end of the pond (had *she* drifted or did something drift *her?*). More water filled her nostrils and although it was still sweet she no longer cared for the taste. She wanted out; NOW. The thing pulled her down against, much more aggressively. How deep could a pond be?

She would soon find out.

She started waving her arms, yanking at whatever it was when the thing suddenly opened her mouth. It pulled at her face like opening an oyster and Lenora started to shake. She lost control of her body and was losing consciousness.

Her head snapped up and suddenly her body was jerked upwards so fast her stomach cringed. The white moonlight was suddenly visible. In seconds, she saw the break of water and before she knew it she was washed ashore. She threw up, barely able to keep her hands steady enough to hold herself up.

The air tasted a hundred million times purer than any water in the world. She couldn't understand how she had missed it, how she had chosen that liquid over the saccharine oxygen. It was almost virginal, as if she was the first one to ever taste it.

A warm breeze blew into her left ear; a moist, luke-warm murmur that seemed to ask her if she wanted to see more.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Oh, yes, oh God, show me it all again and a million times more— *never stop.*”

Again?

“*Yes! Again, again, I need more!*” Suddenly she wanted the water to pull her down again, to make her suffer just so she could taste the air once more. She would do anything to have it back, follow any orders, anything! This world, whatever it was, it knew what she wanted, it could comply to her emotions like a servant. The other world, that was the suffering without the reward, but here, here the pain enhanced the outcome in unexplainable ways.

Then, let me give it to you.

She felt the silk wrap between her legs and a pull until—

Lenora woke up with sweat on her brow. The others were gathered around her, all looking down at her as if she were a revived corpse. She stood up too fast, and had to blink strongly to adjust her eyes. Far in the other side of the room, Victor sat amidst the shadows with his back turned towards them. He was smoking a pipe and looking at thin air, completely uninterested.

“What happened? What did you see?” Hettie asked. She looked concerned.

“Lenora, for God’s sake, what happened? Your pulse was gone; we thought you were dead!” Bert touched her arm, but Lenora pushed it off. Nick tried to make her lie down again but she pushed him away even harder.

She walked to the Stanger, ignoring everybody’s concerns. She reached out when Victor turned around. His eyes were back to normal, and his smile revealing perfectly normal teeth.

“So, what do you think?”

She stared at him intently. He knew, and he knew well.

“I believe you,” she nodded. “I believe you and I want to go back. How much do you want?”

He laughed, flicked his pipe and shrugged. “Money is irrelevant to me.”

“*Then what is it you demand?!*” she was getting irritated. That place was like a drug; an opium that no opium could replace.

He cocked his head, raised an eyebrow and looked around to the rest with a perilous smile. “Sit down, and let’s make a deal.”