

INTRODUCING *DARK SEX*: An Erotic Protest Novel

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Dark Sex is a novel about a coven of sadomasochistic and extremely religious witches who declare war on the United States. The story came flowing out of me during a three-month period of environmental and political turmoil. I wrote the book over the summer of 2006, during one of the most intense heat spells in Los Angeles' history. Soul-sapping heat was punctuated by shocking newspaper headlines predicting an apocalyptic environmental collapse caused by global warming *and* announcing high body counts of the U.S. dead who were being shipped home from Iraq (not to mention the shadowy estimates of Iraqis who were dying at the hands of American forces). Religious conflict seemed everywhere—in the freakishly “End of Days”-like weather, in the rhetoric George W. Bush used to push through The P.A.T.R.I.O.T. Act and torture measures, in the faith of the radical enemy and, moreover, in the domestic battles over gay marriage and “late term” abortion.

Prologue

Born from all of these controversies, the novel is an apocalyptic story about women, war, and God. In *Dark Sex*, the witches who declare war on the United States are religious fundamentalists known as “Perfects” (a name I stole from the doomed, heretical, medieval Christian sect known as the Cathars, who also went by that moniker). The Perfects, led by Queen Uma, have a coven-kingdom hidden in the Sierra Mountains, where they practice holy sadomasochistic rituals. Their belief is that by undergoing these trials (called “the Path”), a faithful female novice may “see God” and earn her admission into the order. Admission has benefits beyond community: the inducted earns

a witch-name from a bible called *The Book of Witch Words*; she also gets a special power, anything from fire- and rain-making to the ability to turn men into salt. Above all, the witches share one talent: an ability to sing in the voices of the Sirens, those irresistible mermaids whose deadly song taunted Odysseus and his men.

Women with such amazing skills, of course, are a threat to the state, and, accordingly, the witches have been persecuted for many years and forbidden from practicing their religion, a faith that encourages not only sadomasochism, prophesy, and abortion, but also witch marriage, which is lesbian as well as magical. As victims of this discrimination, the hags decide to rebel against the United States. Theirs is a religious war.

At the time the novel opens, the United States' Homeland Security is the governmental branch devoted to this fight. The head of Homeland is Commander Maude, a tough soldier with excellent strategic talents. Upon discovering that a drug-addicted and bookishly punk-rock-loving sharpshooter named Simon Fourier is nearly immune to the witches' Siren voices, Maude recruits him to be her Number Two. Simon (named after a famous medieval French inquisitor, the infamous Simon Fourier who destroyed the authentic Cathars), is a son-figure to Maude and the only soldier in Homeland who doesn't have to wear Bose "white noise" earphones to protect himself against their Siren songs. His resistance to the lure of the witches' songs has earned him the name "The Incorruptible" (after Robespierre, of French Revolution fame).

The novel tells of the long, bitter fight between Homeland and the Perfects. It also tells of two unlikely love stories. One is between two witches: Dido, Uma's favorite who is young, Anglo, magical-smelling, and rapaciously violent; and Bird, the winged Afro-witch to whom Dido is married. The other is of Dido

and their archenemy, Simon, a very unlikely lover of Dido, who makes his appearance early in the novel.

In the opening chapters just preceding this excerpt, we have witnessed three witches, known as the “Apostates,” bomb Los Angeles’s Spring Street courthouse with their magical powers. These Apostates—Malinche, Delilah, and Tatiana—had been kicked out of the Perfects because of their past misdeeds. They then attempted to regain favor with the witches’ queen, Uma, by locating and killing Simon. If they had been successful in this assassination, they surely would have been readmitted into the coven. An ancient witch prophecy tells of a “Destroyer,” who bears the “Mark of Horses” and who will someday eradicate the Perfects. The witches have come to believe that the “incorruptible” Simon is this Destroyer and thus will do anything to see him dead.

In an effort to track down Simon, the Apostates go on the Spring Street murder spree, butchering hundreds of judges, lawyers, and secretaries. They performed this slaughter primarily through the explosive powers of Tatiana, a fire-witch, as Delilah, the snow witch, and Malinche, a powerless hag, watched. Yet, while the Apostates cheered the burning, Simon and his Homeland officers captured them.

Malinche emerges as a diabolical, if curiously altruistic, Mexican American witch. She agrees to help Simon because of her conviction that he is the Destroyer. Having grown disenchanted with hedonistic witch politics and culture, she wants to side with this Titan, since she thinks that he will be able to solve the world’s problems (such as poverty and injustice). After the Spring Street massacre, Malinche is imprisoned by Homeland in one of its terrible Dungeons, and she courts Simon’s favor by telling him the name and address of Queen Uma’s Favorite, Dido (née Violet Ackroyd), who lives in

Venice. Only this woman, Malinche says, will be able to tell Homeland the true identity of Queen Uma (a mysterious figure of whom Homeland has little record) and the precise location of the coven.

In the section presented here, Simon and his men proceed to Venice to kidnap Dido, their efforts complicated by a rescue mission led by Dido's witch-wife, the winged Bird, and a crazy, racist witch named Morrigan, who has the power to turn men into salt, like God did to Lot's wife. After a bitter battle, Simon drags Dido to the Dungeons, where she is interrogated and legally tortured. Little do the Homeland officers know what they are getting into, however, when they prepare to give Dido the lash: for the sadomasochistic Perfects, the experience of erotic pain only intensifies their magical powers, making them even more dangerous to Homeland's soldiers. The battle between Homeland and the Perfects rages.

I will not reveal who wins this war or whether any of our religious characters can obey God's paradoxical order to forget her existence in order to promote peace, but the reasons I use the conventions of erotic fiction to write a protest novel are worth mentioning. They trace back to the first days when I began writing the book in the midst of that heat wave, after reading those ghastly headlines.

Like so many others, I experienced an intense despair when I contemplated this war that the United States conducts in the Middle East. When I added to these concerns my worries over the environment, gay rights, abortion, and atrocities such as those in Darfur, I felt absolutely overwhelmed. My emotions grew so thick that I no longer possessed the energy necessary to do anything to protest these cataclysms. I just wanted to get under the covers and go to sleep.

But then I remembered something: in 1993, when we also found ourselves in dire national straits, I attended a meeting hosted by a short-lived group called

the Women's Action Coalition in San Francisco. This event, wherein feminist activists and artists protested war, anti-abortion measures and sexism in the art world, was one of the most exciting and erotic events in which I'd ever participated. In that downtown art gallery where it took place, an all-female congregation swirled around me, and I saw women laughing, dancing, kissing, swaying, touching, yelling, chanting, and speechifying. Happiness, energy, sex, and political protest were in no way divided. These activists, in fact, were *harnessing* their erotic energy to protest state and art-world malfeasance. It was an energy that I would also experience later in gay pride parades and other feminist events, as well as at some antiracist rallies.

As I lay there distraught on my bed in summer 2006, I knew that this was the route I had to follow. The "erotic," for me, encompasses a wide spectrum of human emotion—sexual pleasure, vibrancy, life-force, laughter, and antic energy. After getting over the worst of my depression, I decided to *get up* and couple my own desire for the erotic with my desire for social justice.

Thus, my erotic protest novel was born.

In this book, I tackle the question of whether religion is dangerous, as well as when, if ever, we should use violence. I imagine utopian feminist communities and a world in which women can marry each other, enjoy the most dangerous kinds of sex, write their own laws, and wield ultimate power. I do this in a wild, somewhat zany manner, because I think there is a joy as well as a utility in the practice of marrying the erotic with serious political discussion.

I hope you enjoy this excerpt from *Dark Sex*.

Welcome to the World of Radical Witchcraft

EXCERPT FROM *DARK SEX*

The house was a small, white clapboard bungalow in a pastel suburb of Venice Beach. Flower boxes on the windows held pink and purple foxgloves. The little overgrown lawn sparkled in shades of pale celadon and dark gold. Lace curtains hung in the windows. The grassy driveway held a holly-green Mini-Cooper that already had been stuffed with a random assortment of books, Evian bottles, beef jerky, and sneakers, and, on the left side of the house, hung an ivy creeper, which shook slightly when disturbed by a soldier skulking beneath the windows.

Forty large-muscled agents in black suits and silver helmets barely made a sound as they swarmed around the house. Their booted feet silently crushed the lawn's flowers and the gold grass. The men pressed past the driveway to the jungle-like backyard, communicating in hand signs that were like the language of a deadly, deaf tribe. Simon crept up the front porch steps, toward the cottage's half-opened, yellow-painted door, and looked up into the sky. There were no signs yet of witches flying toward Venice to retrieve the girl called Violet or Dido, but across the street, just past Homeland's idling armored vans, he could see several families frantically packing up their cars with food and clothes. News of the massacre on Spring Street had already blasted across the airwaves; a panicked exodus of Los Angeles had begun. Here on Ocean Boulevard, children, mothers, and couples froze as they were stuffing sleeping bags and bottled water into the backseats of their Siennas or Odysseys. They stared disbelievingly at the silver-headed killers who soundlessly circled their neighbor's house like angels of death.

Simon pointed three gloved fingers at a short, squat soldier, who nodded. With four other men, the combatant began to walk swiftly across the road to make sure the citizens remained pacified and did not warn the target. A woman and a man began wordlessly to run away from them, still holding cans of preserved fruit and bottled green tea.

Simon turned back to the yellow door. He could hear music playing within the house. Putting his hand to the glass handle, he crept inside as twelve other soldiers prowled in after him. He tiptoed into what appeared to be the living room, darting his eyes back and forth. There were no visible suspects, no weapons, but something about the place unnerved him. The room had an uneven oak floor covered with Turkish rugs. The walls were lined with bookshelves that buckled and bulged with hardcover and paperback novels. A fragrance misted in the air—oranges? Unburned tobacco? Sunlight drifted in through the lacy windows, and a miniature stereo on one of the bookshelves played a song. Simon felt as if he were looking at everything underwater.

He squeezed his eyes shut and then opened them again, focusing. Then he turned to the men.

“Assistant Fourier?” an African American soldier with huge shoulders whispered into his helmet-mike. “What now?”

Simon pressed his finger to his lips. He pointed to the corridor leading to the back room where the rustling noise came from: the girl. From far away, somewhere, he feared he could hear the sound of wings beating.

He raised his right hand and stuck up two fingers, mouthing *Go*.

The soldiers glided into the hallway like smoke.

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In the bedroom was the girl, blond and slim and pierced with tiny silver hoops that ran up the edges of both ears. She wore blue jeans, a teal short-sleeve Ani DiFranco T-shirt with red piping, and, glinting from her right arm, a silver cuff studded with two blue moonstones, the same as Delilah and Tatiana wore. Twenty-six years old, she had six short, bright ponytails sticking out from her head, and on her left shoulder glistened a tattoo of Patti Smith that was so recent her skin was still freckled with red welts. An eyelet-curtained window on the west wall admitted a clear white light that revealed the blue uneven lines of the skin-inked 1970s rocker's face, which was seal-eyed, like Dido's own. Dido was blond, with Slavic cheekbones, and a tilted mouth, and her temple skin drew back as her long hands clutched nervously at the tufts of her ponytails. She stared down at her bed, upon which rested an opened purple suitcase containing the things she'd need for her evacuation from the blast area that was now Los Angeles: three black plastic Glock 17s, a silver Smith & Wesson, a copy of Flannery O'Connor's short stories, a longbow, a hardback of Sylvia Plath's poems, and a grenade. The books had been stolen from the Barnes & Noble where she worked part-time, and the weapons had been allocated to her by her coven.

"Okay—okay—*it's all just got to fit*—" she grunted, snapping down the shell of the suitcase and pressing all her weight to force it shut, just as she heard a noise from outside.

Whap whap whap. It sounded like a heartbeat. No—wings.

Had the girls been sent to get her?

She glanced up at the window to see if rescue angels were visible outside but saw instead two tall, helmeted men in black holding Remington automatics at her face. Twenty, then thirty more, soldiers followed them through the door, light and quick, right into her bedroom. The men filled the space wall to wall.

“No,” Dido said, in a hoarse, but unafraid voice.

“Away from the suitcase! Get on the floor!” a rangy-built one, Simon, bellowed. He had one of those silver helmets on his head, with the miked ear protectors and a long spike down the nose like an updated face guard of a Neolithic warrior.

She reached for her suitcase and a bullet buzzed past her head. Her bitten fingers waggled in the air around her ears. “No—wait a minute. You’ve got the wrong girl, guys! Slow up!”

Simon waved a huge gloved hand at her, screaming: “Down, get down.” But above them, above the house itself, they could hear some sort of scrambling, a thrashing sound. Simon jerked his head to look out the window.

“What’s that?”

“DIDO, *COME ON!*” Suddenly, a witch swooped down into the window frame—a muscle-rippling black woman with gold-and-silver wings, and a massive glittery Afro. Her breasts were bare and she screamed as she reached out her hand: “Get out of there, Kit-Kat!”

Simon turned and shot through the glass. A huge spurt of blood blasted the shattered window. The witch twisted at the waist with the contortions of a broken Barbie as she screeched, bleeding, up through the air.

Bam—BAM!!

“Jesus, what’s going on!?” The soldiers crouched down wide-legged as the walls of the bedroom began to whack back and forth, the gewgaws on the bureaus and the books on the bed flying against the ceiling. The house shook as if in an earthquake. Outside they heard an air-smashing sound, like a swarm of helicopters.

Dido shrieked so hard two of the men fell down in epileptic seizures. Snatching a Glock from the suitcase, she bent her knees, then twirled up into the air. She landed on the ceiling on her knees and hands, which stuck to the plaster like a gecko’s suckers. “Yea-ha-ha-ha, *DIE*, motherfuckers! Bleed! *Yeah!*”

Dido stuck her pink tongue between her teeth as she aimed the Glock, shooting seventeen accurate slugs down into the unshielded necks and armpits of the soldiers.

Eight men flung their arms into the air and fell down dead, blood spilling like ink from the holes in their bodies. Six more boys clawed at their pierced throats, their legs pumping as if they were riding invisible unicycles, while they smash-danced around the room in agony.

Dido scratched across the ceiling, spider-quick. She leapt to the corridor in one jump and bolted out the door.

Banging against the walls, Simon skidded, his feet kicking hurly-burly, as he chased her through the living room, tumbling after her down the front porch steps. The girl was right in front of him, upside down to his eyes, marigold hair flashing as she dashed away. He grabbed a bare foot and she went stumbling onto the lawn's gold grass. She lifted her howling face to the sky, raising her hands.

As he crushed her to the ground, he screamed to his men: "ATTACK, ATTACK!"

The sky was full of demons.

Simon couldn't hear anything because of the blasting, ecstatic beating of demon wings. There were maybe thirty-five of them; some were like birds and others flew bare backed, like Tatiana and Delilah. They were mostly women and mostly naked, with silver-and-moonstone cuffs around their right arms and their muscled torsos war painted with white stripes, cobalt splashes, lashings of vermilion. One creature had stained her skin blue for battle, like the Celts, with woad. Even as the winged witch with the glittering Afro teetered down from the sky, dripping blood, the blue witch selected her victims by blowing kisses at all the black- and brown-skinned Homeland soldiers. Pale, glinting puffs of mineral wafted from her lips to their faces, transforming them into white, frozen pillars. She floated down to the huge-shouldered African American soldier, who asked Simon for a command.

"Carlos!" Simon shouted at him, still kicking and punching Dido on the ground. "Watch out!"

"Morrigan!" the bleeding witch screamed.

"Do you want to kiss me?" this blue girl sang down to the soldier called Carlos in a magic voice.

Carlos stood still at the sound, dropping his gun from his limp hand as her bewitching music pierced his headgear. Morrigan descended lower. He raised his face, allowing her to slip the silver helmet from his head.

The air beat, and beat, with sonic pulses. Many of the neighbors who had been packing their cars to escape lay dead in the street already, their chests ripped open. Carlos brought his trembling hand up to his lips.

"I used to love my wife," he whispered. He began weeping. "I don't anymore."

Six of the unenchanted soldiers now assumed crouching positions and shot their guns at Morrigan, but she slipped and slithered through the air, evading the bullets.

"I understand my darling, my little love. But, do you want to kiss me?"

"Yes."

Morrigan floated down to her prey, her breastbone glowing red and gold. She lowered her azure lips to Carlos' face and kissed him.

Quickly, quickly, his chocolate skin turned white around the mouth, the paleness spreading. It crystallized. His smooth, dark head took on the appearance of marble. While his face relaxed into rapture, it froze into an iridescent mask. She had turned him into a pillar of salt.

Now the gunfire polluted the air as the still-witted soldiers shot rapid fire,

nearly killing Simon with stray bullets as he continued to hold Dido down on the lawn. She bit his throat, his crotch; she tried to stab out his eyes. Pressing her against the ground with his knees, he punched her face until she bled from the neck and the left eye. She shot her hand up and scratched at his face until he nearly broke her arm.

“Bird, Bird!” she screamed.

Soldiers were running in circles, yelping, tripping over one another. One of their bullets hit Carlos, who exploded in a white cloud. Far above Simon, a wingless witch shimmering with mauve snake scales hurled down bolts of fire that struck men into ash, and a girl with cats’ fangs breathed down a plague that infected a young soldier with boils. Simon jerked up his head to see one of the armored vans idling sixty feet ahead. Gonzales—the freckled soldier—was still standing.

“Gonzales!” he shouted.

Dido’s neck snapped back when Simon yanked her up from the armpits, but she kicked him with her bare feet, sending him back to the ground with her strength. Gonzales barreled over with his head down and slammed Dido in the face with the butt of his gun.

“Van!” Simon grabbed Dido around the waist, hurling her toward the vehicle—but from the corner of his vision he saw the bleeding black angel swoop down from the air.

Dido reached up an arm. “Bird!”

“I got you, Kit-Kat!”

The winged witch's fingertips reached, trembling, toward Dido's upstretched hand. As Simon watched in horror, the two women grasped index fingers, Dido quickly climbing up her rescuer's arm like an alpinist.

Simon ripped Dido from the winged witch and raced with her across the street, shrieking:

"Go, go, go, go, go! Back to the Dungeons!"

Gonzales bodily lifted Dido and the two men ran to the van, flung open the door, and threw her in the back. Simon leapt in after her; Gonzales made for the wheel. The veins stuck out from Dido's throat; her body whipped in a frenzy, as if devil-possessed. Simon covered her with his body and rammed her arms around her back, flipping back his helmet, bringing down his mouth to bite her shoulder.

When he did that, she seemed to calm down.

"Do that again," she laughed. "Oh—you bastard—do it again!"

Gonzales slammed onto the gas pedal. The van steamed down Ocean Boulevard, crashing into a car and sending it spinning as they banked around the corner.

A storm of witches burned through the air as they pursued the van.

Gonzales careened through the airy atmosphere of Santa Monica at a satanic speed, still hearing the infernal beating sound of the fast-traveling sorceresses. Sweat smeared his eyes and his mouth was open as he panted in terror; he looked like a frightened golden retriever. Above: crazy bitches. Ahead of him:

traffic from the early exodus—sedans and SUVs already clogging the roads as Angelenos tried to flee the witch-bombed city. Gonzales curled his body over the steering wheel and hurtled the wheels over street corners, knocking over mailboxes, crushing VW bugs, and hitting at least two citizens—men—and one green-haired witch who landed in his path and tried to stop the car with her bare hands. He rolled over her flailing limbs as he blasted out of the Westside.

In the back of the van, Dido had grown strangely docile. She lay beneath Simon with her eye bleeding, her shoulder gashed from his teeth, laughing and laughing.

Simon clung onto her body for the twenty long and brutal minutes of the escape to Culver City. He pressed his head against her throat and curled his arms and legs all around her. He would have murdered her, but as he wrapped himself around her torso, he strangely looked like a boy hanging onto his mother.

“Bite me again,” she crooned. “Something’s happening to me.”

But nothing was—she just bled. The danger came from above, as the metal of the van battered down, crunching and buckling. Witches were hitting the car and kicking at it with their feet. The only reason they didn’t bomb the van was to avoid killing the girl in Simon’s arms.

“Orange Street coming!” Gonzales shouted. This was the street that hid the Dungeons beneath its black asphalt. Into his helmet’s headset Gonzales shouted a password: “*Taming of the Shrew.*”

“You’d better move it, Gonzales,” Simon shrilled as the side of the van burst in, as if a giant had punched it.

Gonzales bombed the van onto Orange Street. A large, secret trapdoor opened in the street, as part of the asphalt declined for the van. This secret passage led down to the Dungeons, which were hidden beneath the road.

“What’s that?”

Both men yelled when they heard a bad noise—a crackling—a tearing, like fabric.

No, like *metal*: the roof of the van rolled away from the car like the top of a can.

The winged witch called Bird ripped the steel back with her cut and blood-soaked hands and flung it away so it crashed onto a car far behind. Her wild natural hair blew around her face, and her breasts were beautiful enough to make anyone but Simon cry.

“Going to get you for what you’ve done,” she bellowed. “Heretic! Asshole! No heathen lays a hand on my lady, baby—” Slamming her hand through the car, Bird gripped Simon on the back of the neck, shaking him as Dido dug her savage little thumbs into his throat.

Dido tried to break his jaw, to rip his neck open. “Kill him!”

Gonzales turned around, leaving the wheel, and shot Bird twice.

With a sound like sizzling, the flesh of Bird’s outstretched palm burst open. Her blood flew onto the van’s walls.

“Bird, my girl!” Dido cried.

The angel clutched her limp arm to her stomach and stretched open her mouth in a silent, agonized O before flinging herself back up into the air.

Gonzales fell down, scrambling on the floor as the van rocked violently. He tried to pull his way back to the wheel while the vehicle now raced uncontrolled down the trapdoor, which swallowed it and closed fast as an eye.

The van flipped over on its side. Safe now from witches but not the laws of gravity, the vehicle went skidding, shedding sparks, as it crashed into the Dungeons in a deadly explosion of crumpled glass and metal.

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Clouds of smoke and debris floated up like spirits into the Dungeon's dark-walled entranceway. Guards barreled out from behind the protective glass barriers of the checkpoint stations toward the crushed car, yelling into their headsets, "Get the Commander—medic—we've got three down—"

Gonzales was dead. Blood painted his skinned head like a Francis Bacon monstrosity, and his body extended half in, half out, of the smashed windshield. Simon and Dido lay in crumpled red heaps around the part of the van that used to contain the driver's seat but now was a shredded, melted mess of upholstery and plastic. Simon had curled his body into a circle, like a dying badger, and Dido lay face up, bent at the waist, with her eyes wide open and her arms flung to her sides.

Simon was the first to stir. Blinking through the blood covering his face, he opened his mouth, shouting: "Commander! Maude!"

Dido moaned, "Bird."

Simon awoke to full consciousness. His skin was wet. For a second he thought that his limbs were burned like pieces of paper before remembering those had been the bodies of the men and women on Spring Street. His eyes cleared to see the slagged pieces of the vehicle's metal extending over his body like an intricate lattice. He was in the van, there had been the crash. The girl. Twisting his body quick and hard, he grabbed Dido around the shoulders.

"Let's go—let's go—"

"Are we at the City?" She didn't know who she was talking to.

"What City?"

She forced out: "Is this—the Sierras? Bird? We there yet?" Then Dido understood where she was, and yelled, "*No.*"

As he dragged her away from the gnarled van—with guards lifting her legs, and her naked feet stained the color of rubies from Simon's blood—the Commander came tearing up through the checkpoint with a panic-yellowed face and her silver hair close and flat against her head.

"Fourier, Fourier!"

"All's well, Commander."

The Commander gave him a once-over. Fourier was alive. Okay. "Did she talk?"

"They turned one of the men into salt," Simon yelled as he ran past the raw head of Gonzales.

“Did she talk?”

Dido felt men’s hands levitating her through the cool air and had a quick, insane feeling that a priest was tenderly carrying her into the soft waters to baptize her. She was completely conscious now, and she said, “You must want me really bad. Well, you’re going to get me. You’re going to get me now.”

“No,” Simon said to the Commander. “She said something about the Sierras—”

“She’s conscious. Is she dying?” his superior hollered to one of the guards.

“I don’t know—I don’t know whose blood this is.”

“Agh—*perfect*—Fourier, you almost killed her. Get her to the Chamber before she passes out.”

Dido wailed as man-arms whisked her through the dark-and-pale recesses of the Dungeons. The faint green light spilling from the electric torches sifted past her eyes in a mist. There were the sounds of feet running. She couldn’t hear any magic women flying down to save her.

“Help!” she yelled.

“Throw her in there. And get your goddamned headphones on!” bawled the Commander, who wasn’t wearing any herself.

The men banged through doors into a cold room. Simon had been running so maniacally fast on his damaged legs that he fell, hands outstretched, onto this theater’s marble floor, which was all black but for the red star embedded in the center and the metal whipping post that flashed whitely in the center

of the room. The metal pillar stood about eleven feet tall and from it on two sides hung chained manacles: it was a “maiden” that Homeland had built from the model of those used in nineteenth-century Delaware. On one of its arms had been tied a cat-o’-nine-tails, a long, fringed leather rope fitted with sharp lead stubs. Dido recognized the whipping post on sight—she had read of the recent executive order legalizing witch torture, using old, supposedly successful methods. Yet even without this sign of the room’s purpose, the red five-pointed hex sign painted on its floor would have told her clearly enough where she’d been brought. This was the reinvented and secret Star Chamber, where bloody interviews of witches were conducted beyond the discernments of journalists, civil rights lawyers, and protestors.

Simon scrambled to his feet as the Commander belted, “She’s got to talk—we need info *now*—”

Dido struggled against the gripping of her shoulders, arms, legs and neck with hard hands. They were big, strong boys, and she glared up at one, the huge brute they called Mulligan, who had a shaved head and sharp Irish cheekbones.

“Look at you; you’re hurting me,” she wheezed at him in a panicked mortal voice. “Look at what you’re doing—what you did—you shot Bird—”

Mulligan didn’t look at her or acknowledge her, but just held on to her hard enough so she couldn’t get away. He was a good soldier, and so he didn’t make any threats. Inside, though, he wanted to kill her because of Spring Street.

“What do we know about her?” Simon shot at the Commander.

“Not much. Violet Ackroyd. Born in Chicago. Parents dead. Ran away from

foster care. No record after that—”

“Grab her!”

“Jesus!”

Dido kicked at the men who held on to her little feet, and they all went flying at terrific speed, lopsidedly, clumsily, slamming their necks and heads against the walls. She dropped down lightly, touching the floor with the tips of her fingers before springing back up.

“Let me out of here.” Dido began to pace wildly back and forth before the whipping post. She threw her arms up uncontrollably, as if still trying to catch hold of Bird’s hands. The guards she’d tossed across the room lifted themselves from the ground, hunching their shoulders down, their eyes wide, and their brains baffled and unsure of what they were doing. Mulligan shook his head from side to side. Everything was happening so fast; neither he nor the others had put on their earphones to protect against Dido’s Siren voice—and they could smell something beautiful: fresh oranges and unburned tobacco.

“Helmets,” Simon blared.

Back and forth Dido continued to march before the Commander and the weirdly unmoving men, mesmerizing them with her white, bloodstained arms. Her beautiful face was streaked with red and brown. She had green eyes, a straight nose. Her large lips were drained of blood. She spat: “You’re persecuting me because I believe in *God!*”

“Tell us who heads up your cell.” The Commander stayed on her hind legs, dry-eyed despite the wicked way her blood began to beat through her body.

She would not succumb to the witch's overpowering scent of citrus and Gauloise cigarettes mixed with honey. Much later, when she was an old woman and read about religion obsessively, she would identify the cologne now flooding the room as the *odor of sanctity* that marks the flesh of saints.

"Cell. You mean coven."

"We've already got the other girls, Violet."

"Dido!"

"Tatiana, I think, is one of their names. And—what, Malinche? Something like that. And De-lilah, sweet little thing *she* is. And if you want to get any kind of deal, you'll tell us something before they do—"

"You have the Apostates?"

"We have the three felons in custody who committed an act of terrorism on home soil, Violet. And, one way or the other, all of you are going to talk."

Dido turned toward Simon and met his eyes.

"Three thousand people died today," he said.

Dido didn't answer. She didn't yet know the identity of the Spring Street assassins. For all she knew, the bombing was an act of war initiated by Uma herself. And even if it were an illegal massacre committed by the Apostates, that was a crime that would be dealt with by the Perfects, not these savages.

"I saw it happen," Simon pressed.

Still nothing.

“You know, I *do* believe in God, you guys,” she finally said. “I do. I believe in God. But I’m like anybody else. I don’t want to be tested.”

If the soldiers surrounding her had not already been bewitched, they would have thought it was strange that she didn’t try to escape. Dido mustered her courage and closed her eyes to say a few words of prayer. Her knees bent down onto the floor; she whispered “Come on, God! Give me strength!” into her clasped hands.

Furrowing her brows, she seemed chagrined at the lack of a response from the deity to whom she called. She muttered vigorously for several more seconds before shaking her head, blurting: “Fine!”

She jumped back to her feet. Quickly, she slipped off her shirt to reveal her naked breasts. She tugged the rubber bands from her hair; she tore off her pants and her underwear.

Then she floated to her feet and walked with long, fast strides toward the whipping post. She raised her hands toward the manacles.

“Help me,” she said, in a low, queer, charming voice.

“What’s she doing?” Simon asked.

The Commander ignored him, buckling a little under the enchantment. “Mulligan.”

The big boy came running up. Mulligan leaned forward and caught the

scent of Dido's hyacinth armpits as he snapped her into the cuffs. He untied the cat-o'-nine-tails.

Simon blurted, "Let me give her a plain interrogation first. What's in the Sierras, Dido? You said something about them after the crash. What's in the mountains?"

She stiffened, but did not answer, or even look at him.

He yelled, "Seriously, Commander, let me have a crack at her without this circus first."

"Torture's legal, son," the Commander said. She blinked her eyes hard; she looked drowsy.

"Yeah, but it doesn't always work—remember when I did those girls after Fort Worth? Whipping them? They're S and M freaks, Commander! They liked it! They kept lying to me to keep the whipping going—" That Simon had also felt disgusted and completely horrified at his own behavior during that torture was something he kept to himself, and also labored hard to forget; his reason for objecting to today's vivisection was purely pragmatic. He yelled out: "Sometimes, when you smack them, things don't go quite the way you want them to—"

But no one was listening to him. Dido pressed her belly and breasts against the metal length of the whipping post. They all could see her ribs beneath her skin and her small, pale bottom. Her thin arms rose above her head and dangled from the steel cuffs

“Violet Ackroyd, do you know information about the whereabouts of the Perfects?” the Commander asked.

“Yes.”

“Will you give us this information?”

“No.”

“Fine. You want it to be this way, so it’ll be like this. But you’ll talk.”

Dido turned her head, staring at them over her shoulder, and smiled. This girl was so powerful that she could actually consent to her own domination.

“Go ahead.”