

SACRAMENT

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Silver leaned his aching body against the bridge's low concrete wall and glanced down at the black waters of the Willamette river. Bright neon reflections shimmered across its surface, and he imagined he saw the hot pink letters of ALL NUDE REVUE dance over the blackness. Maybe he had. Club 69 squatted at the right-hand end of the bridge.

Narrowing his eyes, Silver tried to gauge the distance to the water. He feared the fall wouldn't be enough. He'd heard stories of people who'd tumbled from the Golden Gate in Frisco and survived. Maimed, vegged out, but alive. And this bridge wasn't nearly as high as that one. He touched his jeans pocket, the hard lump of the pocketknife inside reassuring him. Just before he jumped, he would slit his wrists. Then if the fall didn't kill him and he didn't drown, at least he'd bleed to death.

He rubbed sweaty palms back and forth along the mist-sprayed wall, barely feeling the concrete's rough bite. His stomach knotted and he swallowed heavily. Fifteen years old and dying of AIDS. A stupid way to go, it wasn't even noble. His hero, the Silver Surfer, wouldn't have been caught this way. He would've guided his surfboard past the waves of illness

and into the cosmos beyond.

Fifteen years didn't seem like a very long time, yet sometimes, like now, it felt more like forever—sucked dry, hollowed out, but still hurting.

Yeah, like fucking forever.

A breeze drifted up from the river, smelling of fish and decay. Its coolness stole some of the fire from his body. Silver closed his eyes. He wished for a place to lie down and sleep.

Tell me a bedtime story, Daddy.

Silver tried to take a deep breath, but coughed instead, and pain lanced through his chest. Weak and soaked in sweat, he sagged against the wall. Once the spasm passed, he eased onto the wall. Straddled it. Winos and transients shuffled past, paying him no mind, the collars of their long, dirty coats turned up against the late April chill. A few yards ahead stood a dark-haired man wearing a tan windbreaker. He slouched against the wall, his attention on the passing cars.

Satisfied, Silver dug the knife out of his pocket and fumbled it open. He stared at the blade, feeling sick to his stomach, wishing—

What?

That I could go home and that Dad would be like he was before Mom had tossed her things into the old, oil-spitting Dodge and driven off into the sunset?

Silver bit into his lower lip, bit until the taste of blood seeped into his mouth. Now, he thought, holding the knife above his left wrist. He steadied his shaking hand against his knee. Now . . .

A hand seized Silver's right wrist with numbing force. The knife tumbled from his fingers, bounced against the concrete with a sharp *ting*, then slid over the edge into the darkness below.

His throat tightened. “Damn it!” Silver swiveled and swung his other leg over the wall. Gritting his teeth, he shoved free of the bridge.

Fingers continued to crush his wrist.

Silver cried out as pain jolted through his shoulder. He slammed against the side of the bridge, its weathered surface scraping the skin beneath his shirt. As though he weighed no more than an empty bottle of Mad Dog, he was yanked back over the wall and tossed onto the sidewalk.

Dazed, Silver crawled to his knees and cradled his throbbing arm against his stomach. He looked up into intense blue eyes. He recognized the windbreaker, the dark hair. Silver was close enough now to see the gray threading both hair and neatly trimmed mustache. The man bent, grabbed Silver’s upper arm, and hauled him to his feet.

Heart thudding against his ribs, Silver glanced down at his swollen, purple-marked wrist. He wanted to die, yes, but he didn't want to be murdered. He didn't know which frightened him more, the man’s strength or the secrets his strength hinted at. Was he a PCP bone-crusher? A johnny-dogood? A psycho?

“How long have you been ill?” the man asked, voice low and harsh.

Silver stared at him, goose bumps popping up on his arms. How did he know? Then he remembered how he had looked in the mirror that morning. Bluish smudges beneath the eyes, the pallor of his skin. Tired. Remembered his own sour smell.

“How long?” the man repeated.

Silver shrugged, shifting his gaze to the traffic. How long? No way of telling. He’d worked the streets and alleys for the past year, selling himself to men who craved hungry boys in tight jeans. It earned him enough money for a room in a roach-infested hotel, new clothes, food, and comic books.

Sometimes he earned enough to go dancing or to see a movie.

So when he woke drenched in sweat, the sheets cold and clammy, and not for the first time, he hadn't been surprised. He'd known the risks. But he'd hoped it wouldn't happen to him.

Muscles tight with anger, Silver said, "You've done your good deed for the day, so fuck off." He tried jerking free of the man's hold, but failed.

Fingers brushed through his hair. Silver froze. Even the cars seemed to slow, the red glow of their taillights stretching out like wedding streamers.

"Child of the flock, *tha sibh finn*," the man murmured. "Your hair is silver, like the *ban sidhe*—the pale folk—but your eyes are dark."

"Dyed," Silver said, mouth dry. "I dyed my hair. But that's what people call me. Silver, I mean." He closed his eyes, confused by the gentleness of the man's tone and the strangeness of his words. He wanted to lean into the warmth of the hand stroking his hair, to rub against the fingers like a cat. But a part of him wanted to hit, kick, punch. To scream.

"You are alone," the man said.

The muscles in Silver's throat constricted. He nodded, not trusting his voice. Yeah, even his friends avoided him. They waved when they passed him on the streets, but their faces were scared. His buddy, Alias, had helped him though.

For when it gets bad, Silver, he'd said, handing him a bottle of pills. Silver had taken them all and had gone to bed. He had spent the next two days throwing up. So much for pills.

Tasting salt on his lips, Silver opened his eyes and touched his face. The wetness he felt there surprised him. He wiped his face dry with the back of a hand.

Crying is for babies. Crying is for wimps. Crying solves . . .

The man's fingers trailed the length of Silver's hair, brushed his cheek, then were gone. The hand on his arm relaxed. Silver looked at him, and something sparked within the stranger's blue eyes. Something that coiled, burning, around Silver's spine.

"I am Cian," the man said. "Chieftain of clan Blood. If you want death, child, I can give it to you without pain." He smiled and his lips pulled back from his teeth.

Silver stared at his teeth, especially the long, slender canines. Too long. Too slender. Curved. Too real to have been bought at Woolworth's. Static filled Silver's ears as though he'd tuned between stations.

A vampire in Portland.

Why not? Silver thought. On the streets, anything was possible. Anything at all. From handing over ten percent of his nightly earnings to a couple of cops so they wouldn't bust him to free health clinics for the pets of bums and other street-folk to winos lying bloated and buzzing with flies on the sidewalks.

Anything.

An old man stumbled along the sidewalk, reeking of cheap wine and day-old shit. He stopped beside Silver. His lips twitched into a smile, revealing empty gums. "Hey, pretty," he said. "I can do you real fine. Got no teeth. Only five bucks."

Silver glanced away, nauseated. "No," he said. "No money."

Muttering about punk kids, the old man wandered away. Silver listened to the scrape of his shoes against the pavement.

Yeah, anything is possible here. Anything at all. Anything but life.

"So . . . you're a vampire," Silver said after a moment. "Like in undead? Like in beware of the cross?"

Cian smiled, but this time it was a tight, closed-lip smile. “Vampire is a flock term, *gille finn*. We are the clan. And no, we are not undead.”

The hand around Silver’s arm tugged, and he stumbled forward. Cian’s arms wrapped about him, pulling him into an embrace of heat, hardness, and the faint scent of cinnamon. Cian lifted Silver’s hand to his throat. The slow, steady rhythm of Cian’s heart pulsed beneath his fingertips. His own heart pounding rapidly, Silver stared at the thick, open-ended twist of gold looped around Cian’s neck.

That can’t be real. It’d be worth a fucking fortune.

“Forget everything you have read about us or seen on the television,” Cian whispered, voice intense. “Forget garlic, coffins, and crosses. Especially the cross. You of the flock lack true understanding of it.”

Silver’s muscles knotted, and he lowered his hand to his side. “The flock, huh? Like in sheep?”

Cian shook his head. “Child, I am both hunter and shepherd.”

“Make a meal outta someone else,” Silver yelled, face hot. “Don’t do me any favors!” He shoved hard against Cian, then winced as pain shot from his wrist to his shoulder. “Damn—” his words ended in a lung-cramping cough. His throat clenched shut. Struggling for air, he doubled over.

Steel-muscled arms spun Silver around. A fist hammered between his shoulder blades. But he continued to choke on the phlegm his lungs spat up. Static buzzed in his ears.

Don't need a river to drown, he thought, vision graying. Then the sidewalk yawned open beneath his feet and swallowed him.

* * *

Silver awoke to the rumble of traffic, but the sound of it was wrong. It echoed. He breathed in the odor of mud and dead green things, his chest

aching so badly he wondered if Dad had broken a rib this time. He realized he was being held, cradled like a baby.

Then he remembered the bridge.

Opening his eyes, Silver struggled to sit up, but a hand pushed gently against his chest.

“Lie still, *gille*.”

Anger flared, hot and blinding. Slapping aside Cian’s hands, Silver tumbled free of the loose embrace. Pain stabbed his lungs. He knelt, then sat back on his heels, fighting the urge to cough. Mud oozed beneath his knees, cold and wet even through his jeans.

Silver stared straight ahead. He tried to think of anything but the tickling sensation deep in his chest. The river flowed a few yards away, its sluggish waters slapping against the shore. The moon’s pale reflection smudged the water. Another silver surfer, he thought with a sudden pang. Glancing up, Silver saw the dark curve of the bridge.

“Why are we under the bridge?” he asked. Cian didn’t answer and Silver shivered, suddenly cold despite fever. He swiveled to face the man—*vampire*. “Damn you!” he yelled. “My choice. *My goddamned choice!* You’ve got no right to take it from me.”

Cian looked at him from where he sat cross-legged in the grass. His blue gaze was steady and, Silver thought, tired. “I haven’t taken anything from you. Death is your choice.”

“But not like this,” Silver said, hugging himself. “I wanted . . . I thought . . .” The words withered in his throat.

Thought what? That by killing myself I would be doing the brave and noble thing—that the Dark Knight, the Silver Surfer, and the Green Lantern would gather in some dark alley and speak of me in hushed tones. Nodding

their heads and gazing at the stars.

A man of honor, the Green Lantern said.

He fought long and hard, the Silver Surfer said.

But they got him. Whirling, the Dark Knight walked from the alley, his cape billowing behind him.

Silver dropped his gaze to the ground, throat tight. Heat rushed to his cheeks. Yeah, right. So stupid. He knew there would be no gathering of heroes, no never-never land of play all day, of eat candy all night. No place where parents held hands, and there were no black eyes or broken ribs or shattered hearts. His stomach twisted. All it amounted to was jumping off a bridge like an idiot or dying alone beside a dumpster, garbage for the rats to chew on. Or . . . letting a vampire in jeans and windbreaker suck him dry.

His heart hammered so hard against his ribs that he feared Cian would see it. It leaped within his chest like some demented alien trying to burst free. He drew in several slow, shallow breaths, longing to breathe more deeply but afraid to. After a few minutes, he felt calm enough to speak. “If I choose, will I become a vampire too?” *Will I be well* was the unspoken thought.

“I don't know,” Cian replied, his voice dropping to a near whisper. “I haven't witnessed a birth in nearly fifty years.”

Silver glanced up at him. Fifty years? Cian looked to be in his late forties. Just how old was he? “But I thought . . .” he stammered. “I mean, in the movies—”

“I told you to forget all that.” Cian stood, crossed the short distance between them, and knelt before Silver. “You have a hard head, *gille*,” he said. He tugged at the edge of Silver's hair. “Despite what you believe, I sense strength within you and a warrior's instinct for survival—one not

limited to just this plane.”

Silver stared at him, trying to make sense of his words. “Does that mean yes?” he asked.

“Only the clan priests can answer that,” Cian replied with a shrug. “It is still a mystery.”

A horn blared overhead, instantly followed by the screech of brakes. Silver glanced at the bridge. *Must have missed each other*, he thought when he didn’t hear the crunch of impact.

“And if the choice was life?” Cian asked, the intensity of his voice yanking back Silver’s gaze. “What then? What would you do?”

Silver chewed on his lower lip, not sure he understood. Cold twisted his guts. “Do?” he repeated a moment later. Cian nodded, eyes glittering. Silver glanced away, mouth dry. Cian’s expression had been too much like that of a wolf’s he’d seen in a zoo long ago: a hungry, restless stare. Penetrating. Only this time no concrete wall separated them. Silver’s muscles coiled. He focused his thoughts, searching for an answer.

What *would* he do? Emotions surged through him, too many and too entangled to name. He knew he wouldn’t go home. The hurt would be too much. Closing his eyes, Silver remembered his last night at home. Home? Bad word for something so damned empty, he thought. Like Mom had yanked the soul from it when she split. His father slept sprawled on the sofa, mouth open. His worn brown belt lay like a snake on the floor beside him, the buckle’s prong a single sharp fang.

Silver watched him from the kitchen. The pungent reek of rum stung his nostrils. His stomach lurched, queasy with pain and swallowed blood. He eased down along the wall to the floor, avoiding the shattered remains of the Ron Rico bottle. As pain pulsed through him, he wished he’d never snatched

it from his father's hand. Wished he'd left well enough alone. He glanced at his father. Thought of digging a knife out of the drawer and crawling to the sofa. Thought of curling beside him and crying, "Daddy!" Even thought of searching out his mother and using the knife on her. *I can understand why you left him, Mom. But why me? Why the hell did you leave me with him?* Words echoed through Silver, words his father had spat before laying into him with fists and belt.

You make me do this, boy. You're just not happy until I've knocked the crap out of you. Damn you.

Silver's eyes flew open. His body clenched tight as a fist. He struggled for breath. Something tore loose inside and, before he could stop it, spilled from his lips and into the night. "No!" he screamed. "That's a lie! I never wanted that. Goddamn you to fucking hell, I never wanted that!"

Cian's arms wrapped about him and Silver fought the embrace. Kicking and swinging his fists wildly, he continued to scream long after he'd run out of words. He knuckled blow after blow into Cian's body. But the man's hold never loosened. Finally, coughing and gasping for breath, Silver sagged against Cian. He felt drained. Limp.

Cradled once again upon Cian's lap, Silver listened as the chieftain murmured words in a language he didn't recognize. The smooth sound of his voice soothed like a lullaby. Silver watched the sky, hoping to see the fiery streak of a falling star. The sky remained still. He blinked away sudden tears. There are no superheroes, he thought. Only survivors.

"If I had a second chance," Silver said, voice hoarse, "I'd learn to fight back. To live." He swallowed heavily. "Surviving ain't enough." Glancing up, he met Cian's gaze.

A warm smile curved Cian's lips. Intensity flared within his blue eyes,

then vanished. “Well answered,” he said.

Realizing how sleepy he was, Silver rested his head against Cian’s chest. The slow thud of Cian’s heart lulled him, and he wished he could stay within the circle of his arms forever.

Tell me a bedtime story, Daddy.

“What did you mean on the bridge?” he asked. “About the cross?”

Cian sighed and shifted, his jacket rustling beneath Silver’s cheek. Again, Silver smelled cinnamon. “Ah, *gille*, so many questions. Is it so important?”

“Yes,” Silver whispered. He didn’t want to sleep yet. Just a few more minutes.

Cian’s fingers trailed over Silver’s throat, tickling. Heat rushed to Silver’s face. Bewildered, he closed his eyes.

“All right, then,” Cian murmured. “Nearly two thousand years ago, *gille*—long before my time, but during the time of my clan mother—a young man devout in the faith of his people went into the wilderness outside Judea seeking wisdom. He found it in the form of clan Manna and was reborn. He dwelt in the desert for years learning clan ways and delving into the mysteries of self and god.

“Several things became clear to him. The history of the clans was as long and violent as that of their prey. If any were to survive, the clan feuds had to stop. Control needed to be taught to clans bound by the tides of sun and moon. The flock needed to be cared for and cultivated. Compassion and control, even during the hunger of the Hunt. So in order to bridge the gap between shepherd and hunter, he gave us the Sacrament of Bonding.

“This is my blood, drink,” Cian whispered. “This is my body, taste.”

Silver stared at Cian, stunned.

“You know what eventually happened,” Cian said. “Many of the clans refused to give up the old ways. They believed it would make them less. Weak. The flock misinterpreted everything. Between the two he was betrayed and crucified.”

“But . . . that can't be,” Silver said, mouth dry once again. “He came back. He rose from the dead.”

Cian smiled. “The near-dead, you mean. Since the spear hadn't pierced a vital organ and hadn't remained in his body, he healed himself. Regenerated. But it took three days. Once his strength returned, he left to spread the word among the clans dwelling among other nations. His teachings took root with time.”

Silver stared at the river. A campfire glowed orange and yellow on the other side of the night-blackened waters. He thought of the people huddled around it to warm their bodies before sleeping. The cold, hard ground would suck it away. And more. Silver glanced away, remembering his first night in the city.

“Is he still alive?” he asked. He felt Cian shrug.

“It's been said he died two centuries ago,” Cian said. “In Venezuela, perhaps Brazil.” His fingers sifted through the hair at Silver's temple.

“Cian, is it always this way with you?” Silver asked through lips gone cold. “The way you've been with me, talking and all that?”

“No,” Cian murmured. “No, *gille*. This is . . . different.”

“Why?” Silver looked at him. Something close to anguish lined the chieftain's face. Silver's chest tightened.

“I wish to be shepherd, once,” he said.

“Will my blood make you sick?”

“No.”

“What happens if I survive?”

“Then you will be welcomed into the clan as my son.”

As his son. Silver found he could breathe again. He looked into Cian’s eyes and his doubts slid away. One chance. One last chance. “I think I want to sleep now,” he said.

“So be it,” Cian said, voice husky. He leaned forward and traced a cross on Silver’s forehead. “Close your eyes, *gille*.”

Silver closed his eyes and tilted his head back. His body rocked with each pulse of his heart. Cian’s warm breath touched his throat, a wet flick of his tongue, then a sting as teeth pierced his skin.

Within minutes, Silver drowsed. He listened to the quiet sound of Cian swallowing and wondered if being sick made his blood taste different. Dizziness whirled into him, then left. Only the cold remained. He knew he needed to do something—anything—to help bring about the mystery Cian had spoken of, but didn’t know what. He was too tired, too comfortable to focus his thoughts. He drifted away from his numbed body.

Death is like hiding under a bed, he thought. Full of cold and dark and waiting.

What is heaven like? Memory flickered, traced backward, and Silver heard himself asking the same question of his mother, his voice too low and anxious for eight year old.

It’s a place where it is sunny all day and there’s no bedtime, she murmured, voice husky from cigarettes. And you can do whatever you want. Fly. Laugh. No one to tell you that you can’t.

Fly? Like Superman?

Yeah, hon, like Superman. In heaven there are no clogged drains, no whiskey. Her eyes took on the flat, distant look that told Silver she no longer

saw him. His stomach knotted. He wished he could cup heaven in his hands and give it to her. Maybe then she would see him.

There are no mirrors in heaven, she said. Nothing to reflect the bitterness of a child grown old.

Mama? Mama, where is heaven? He curled his fingers around hers and squeezed. The distance remained in her gaze.

Why, it's just across the horizon, honey. At the end of I-5.

Silver clutched at the blackness surrounding him, trying to tug it over him like a blanket. Instead, his fingers tore through it. Light shafted over him.

SILVER.

Cian's cinnamon scent whirled about him. *And if the choice was life?* The words vibrated through Silver's chest, the voice coming from within, yet not his own. *What then?*

Then I'd live! he cried soundlessly. His gut-twisting plunge stopped. Eyes squeezed shut, he waited for pain or the nothingness of complete death. Neither occurred. He opened his eyes. He stood balanced upon a silver surfboard. Beneath him, a white-frothed green sea tumbled against the face of a rock-strewn cliff. Rain slanted across the horizon, a thin gray veil at the world's edge.

Moving carefully, Silver knelt upon the wide surfboard and ran his hands over its smooth, solid surface. He smiled. Real, he thought. Butterflies swirled through his stomach. Real.

SILVER.

The voice sounded garbled, as though the speaker were underwater. Silver glanced down at the churning waves. His scattered thoughts gathered, narrowed into one. He knew what he had to do. Silver stood. The surfboard

dipped briefly but otherwise remained steady. Wind gusted cold against him. Shivering, he regarded the long drop to the sea. He clamped his lips together. All he had to do was step forward. And pray that somewhere beneath the heaving green waves Cian would catch him.

I said I'd learn to fight back. But I might need some help at the start.

He paused at the edge of the hovering board and breathed deeply. The smells of salt, rain, and wet rock filled his lungs.

SILVER, COME FORTH.

May heaven stay forever across the horizon, Silver thought, stepping forward. Pain lashed around his ankle as he did, and yanked him backward. The surfboard tilted crazily beneath him. Falling, Silver grabbed its gleaming edge with his hands. Cold sliced into his palms. Blood, warm and thick, trickled down his wrists and along his forearms. He stared, feeling more betrayed than hurt.

Silver threw a glance over his shoulder. His father stood at the cliff's edge, a long brown whip clenched in his hand. The whip stretched beyond the cliff and out . . .

Silver looked at his ankle. Coils of worn leather were wrapped around it. The scratched buckle with its single, sharp prong bit into the skin just above his sock. Silver choked back a scream. Sweat popped out on his forehead as his blood-slickened fingers slipped. He couldn't plunge into the sea dragging his father behind him like an anchor. He would never find the surface again. Would never find Cian's mystery.

Silver hauled himself onto the surfboard and lay there, trembling with more than just cold and strain. His stomach churned. The bitter taste of bile burned the back of his throat. Swallowing heavily, he struggled against the sickness writhing within him. And lost.

I hate you, you son of a bitch, Silver screamed. He felt the cords in his neck tighten and bulge. *I hate you! Hate you!*

The coils constricted about his ankle until all feeling had fled his foot. His breath rattled in and out of his lungs. A sick heat raged through him. Tugging at the belt-whip, his father reeled him in like some big, dazed fish.

Silver clutched at the sides of the surfboard as it jerked backward. He knew that the moment he reached the cliff he would be dead. No more dreams. No more hiding under the bed. No more chances. Just dead. He stared at the dull gleam of the board, tears blurring his vision. *So much for fighting back,* he thought. *I didn't do so hot, huh?* Blood smeared the board's surface. He glanced at his hands. The bleeding had nearly stopped.

This is my blood—

From beneath the green waves Cian called to him again, but this time his voice sounded flat and desperate.

IN THE NAME OF THE SHEPHERD, SILVER COME FORTH!

This is my blood, Silver thought, resting his forehead against cool metal. *Drink. And thanks anyway.*

The surfboard jerked backward.

You make me do this, his father said (thought? dreamed?), the words gusting against Silver like the wind. *I don't want to, but damn it, boy, you just won't be happy until I've—*

—knocked the crap out of me, I know, Silver finished for him.

If only you'd stayed little. If only you still needed bedtime stories.

But I did! I do. But you weren't listening anymore. Or telling. Silver glanced over his shoulder. The expression on his father's guilt-and-rum-ravaged face squeezed his heart. Silver looked away, his fingers white-knuckled and bent like claws at the board's edge. He'd seen that expression

before—countless times. He'd seen it on his own face in the bathroom mirror beneath the purplish bruises and split lips. The expression was one of hurt, anger, and bewilderment.

And fear.

I'm the only thing he has left to punish himself with, he thought with sudden clarity. He also realized there were more ways to fight back than just fists and harsh words.

If only you hadn't crossed the horizon, his father sighed.

That was Mom. She sacrificed us both. Silver's throat ached. For heaven. Daddy, I forgive you. Okay? I do. Please, Daddy, please read me a bedtime story.

The belt-whip slithered away from his ankle. Without looking, Silver knew his father was no longer on the cliff. He forced his fingers loose from the surfboard and tumbled off and into the sea.

Water surged over him. His body tingled as green splashed through his veins, cooling the ache in his joints, soothing the tightness from his chest.

Sinking . . .

Silver became aware that he no longer hurt, that he could breathe easily . . . breathe? He no longer felt sick, the rancid taste gone from his tongue. Gone with the past. Gone with his father.

Silver.

“Silver?”

Forcing his eyes open, Silver winced at the brightness that flooded them. He blinked in confusion. It was still night! Yet as he saw as clearly as if it were day. Above him, traffic rumbled over the bridge. He looked at Cian. Wetness glistened on the chieftain's cheeks.

“Cian?” Silver whispered. He tried to wipe the tears from Cian’s face, but his hand was too heavy.

Cian hugged him close, burying his face in Silver’s hair. After several minutes, he stood, Silver cradled against his chest. The windbreaker’s zipper scratched Silver’s cheek, but Silver was too sleepy to care.

“To the clan, *gille*.”

As his son, Silver thought as sleep claimed him. God, so much to learn . . . to unlearn . . .

He dreamed that under the dark curve of a bridge three superheroes gathered to share word of a battle won.

THE END