

# The Exorcist's Acolyte



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For Mindy

*Our path together may fork sometimes  
In the foggy dead wood  
Of these twilit lives of ours  
But I take comfort in knowing  
That, no matter what,  
You will always be  
My very best friend*

## *Prologue: Genesis*

*“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.”*

I've come to learn that people are very similar to the earth when it was first created; the shape of our lives, the way we look at the world around us, how we react to different situations...depends on who – or what – gives us form. Each child starts life as a blank canvas, and, depending on the “artist” in question, that can be either a beautiful or a terrifying sentiment.

The story of my “forming” begins with one of my earliest memories. Along with my childhood friends, Lucas, Magdalena, Esther, and Levi, I was playing in the massive cemetery surrounding the towering castle-like Omnideus United Church of the Righteous. Within the thick, constant fog of icy blue hue, we innocently played, as we had done countless times before. But that particular day, however, everything would change.

It wasn't long after the pastor's sermon had ended when when we found a red snake. Levi wasn't very impressed by it, Esther found it disgusting, and Lucas was afraid of it, calling it a “devil of Genesis”. Magdalena took to drawing it in her little sketchpad, as she did everything she found interest in. I, however, was completely fascinated by its movements as it slithered through the patches of yellowed grass and across the barren earth. Its flicking forked tongue was completely alien to me, its strange, emotionless eyes seemed to be filled with forbidden knowledge.

Smiling, I crouched down before it, and it froze in place. Fearing that I had frightened it, I ignored Lucas' annoying words of warning, and cautiously reached a trembling hand down to the fascinating creature. To my surprise, it lifted its little head to meet me halfway, actually allowing me to pet it. And after a few moments, I cradled it in my arms and lifted it as I stood, proudly presenting it to my friends.

Levi scoffed and shook his head, looking away and gazing mindlessly into the fog as he sat on the headstone before me. To the right of us, Esther looked as if she were sick to her stomach. Next to her, Magdalena sat, focusing intensely on her artwork, flashing concentrated glances at the snake every few moments. Behind and between them, stood Lucas, praying desperately, tears streaming down his closed eyes as he clutched his pretty doll to his chest.

It was then that I saw Pastor Blackburn standing behind him, his pale, gnarled hand tightly gripping the quietly crying boy's shoulder. Towering over all of us, he glared down at me with those dark, sunken-in eyes, full of fiery wrath and judgment. And in his sickly voice, he said to me: "Those creatures are evil. They belong to and in the darkness. And they are only attracted to those weak enough to corrupt."

I was only about four years old when I heard those words. But as young as I was, even then, I thought they rang hollow with untruthfulness, because of the teachings of his very church. "Miss Mary taught us that God created *all* animals.", I protested, picturing the young, kind, beautiful Sunday School teacher in my mind. "And while they may be frightening, that doesn't mean they deserve disrespect."

His thin lips curled up into a frightening smirk as he chuckled. "Is that so?", he asked, pulling his long, stringy, oily, flaxen hair away from his gaunt face. "Well, I'll have to have a word with Miss Mary about what darkness she's been infecting you children with." He then looked around at the rest of my friends as they slowly backed away from him and took their place by my sides. "What else...has she been telling all of you?"

Gulping, I thought of Miss Mary. The scent of her flowery perfume drifted into my nose as I saw her kind smile and heard her infectious laughter within my mind. I could picture the happy, colorful drawings we all made for her covering the walls of her classroom. Of course, Magdalena's were always the most detailed and realistic, but Miss Mary never chose favorites – she found them all to be equally as beautiful.

Pastor Blackburn didn't wait for an answer. Much to my surprise, he had revealed a large ornate

knife in his other hand. Still gripping onto Lucas' shoulder, he reached the cross-shaped blade toward me. "Now, destroy it. Sever the head from the body.", he coldly commanded. "This...*creature* may just be a blessing in disguise – a lesson you can learn."

A chill shot down my spine. Hearing the audible sounds of Esther's disgust, I defiantly stomped my foot into the ground. Before I knew it, I had screamed the word "no!" at the top of my lungs.

Blackburn's grin faded at once as he released his hold on Lucas. His tall, thin hunched-over body slowly approached, casting a huge shadow over me, Esther, Levi, Magdalena, and my new serpent companion. "Joshua, I realize that you are still young, and...*inexperienced*.", he slowly breathed through his clenched, overlapping, yellowed teeth. "But you should know by now exactly what happens to little boys who disobey their elders. God doesn't love insolent children."

I gulped. My fury was suddenly replaced with fear. Images of hellfire dancing around me flashed throughout my mind. I could hear the tormented shrieks of the souls of the damned clawing at my ears, feel my flesh burning and my eyes melting into my skull. And behind all this, was Lucas' desperate prayers, pleading with God to forgive me of my sins.

Seeing the color leave my face as I began to tremble, the pastor was pleased. He stepped forward once again and shot his hand toward mine, grabbing it in the process, and roughly jerking me toward him. This sent the serpent scurrying up my arm and shoulder in fright, but thankfully, it did not bite me.

My friends all scattered into the fog. I didn't blame them. By this point, even at such young ages, we knew all too well the consequences of angering Pastor Blackburn.

In silence, the pastor placed the cold steel blade onto my palm and tightly wrapped my fingers around it. He then began to squeeze my tiny balled fist within his own, forcing my flesh against the edges of the blade. As it began to cut, he told me that this was only a fraction of a fraction of the pain I would endure in damnation. And then, with a wide, mad grin on his terrifying face, he jerked the blade from my grasp, slicing through my skin in a dark moment of pure horror and agony.

Screaming, I collapsed down onto my knees before him. Gazing down at the blood pouring from

my wound, I wept. Pastor Blackburn's loud, maddening cackles filled the air, but my ear was taken by a quiet, subdued whisper – the whisper of the snake between licks of my ear as it lied stretched across my shoulders. “Do not fear him, child.”

Just then, before I had the time to react, Lucas ran up and pushed Pastor Blackburn over. He collapsed onto a grave beside of me as the bloody knife fell to the ground, easily stabbing into the earth below. My crying eyes shot from the pastor to Lucas, who immediately told me to run away.

Gasping, I hopped onto my feet and turned around, carefully cradling the precious animal in my arms. Hearing Blackburn's growing rage behind me as he recuperated, I took off back toward the church. My feet stomped over the graves, sending dry dirt and dying grass flying into the air behind me as I prayed for forgiveness.

As I ran toward the ancient church, I looked up at it. Built with dark, mossy stone, and painted black planks of wood, it truly towered over everything – even the tallest of the ancient trees of the dead wood that surrounded the village. The large silver steeple that sprouted from the bell tower atop the back of the arched roof was so high up that it was usually hidden within the clouds. Along both sides of the massive building were beautiful and exquisitely detailed stained glass windows, depicting the twelve disciples of Jesus. Usually, they were glowing from the light within, illuminating the ever-present fog around the church.

By the time I made it back inside the menacingly tall walls of the church, I was crying uncontrollably. I ran through the massive, open sanctuary, heading down the middle path between the countless pews, heading toward the pulpit, its stone altar, and Pastor Blackburn's wooden podium.

I hid beneath one of the front pews within the massive sanctuary, and released the serpent onto the cold black-painted hardwood floor. It left a winding trail of my own blood in its wake as it slithered away to hide in the shadows. And as I watched as it disappeared, I tried my best to calm myself down.

Within a few moments, I became distracted by the gigantic statue of Jesus on the cross at the end of the room, behind the pulpit. It was illuminated and somewhat silhouetted by the light from yet

another stained glass window behind it – one that depicted a blue, sunlit, cloud-filled sky that represented Heaven. Horrifically detailed with gore and blood, the statue itself hanged over the baptism pool, between the two large alcoves where the choir gathered to sing.

Jesus' crying eyes seemed to look down at me. And I was frozen in fear. That statue of the crucifixion had always haunted my nightmares.

It was then that Miss Mary appeared from the doorway to the right to the pulpit. She gasped, approaching the trail of blood. “Oh, my goodness! Is someone hurt?!”, she queried. Hearing me crying, she knelt down into the floor and looked beneath the pews. Her brows arched in surprise and concern as she saw me. “Joshua. Are you alright?”

Soon, she was cleaning out my wound in her classroom upstairs. She had me sit on the round table in the middle of the room, and she was knelt down in front of me. It hurt almost as much as the blade itself, but she comforted me with her sweet words. And as she did so, I tried to explain to her what happened to me.

“You shouldn't have even been outside alone.”, she said, shaking her head. “Where on earth are your mother and father?!”

“I said I was with my friends.”, I whined. Rolling my eyes, I shrugged my shoulders and looked away. “Mother and Father left right after Pastor Blackburn's sermon.”

She scoffed, obviously angry with my parents, but I could tell that, for my own sake, she was holding back on telling me how she really felt about them. “All of you children are are too young to be out there in the fog – together *or* alone.”, she continued, finally wrapping up my hand with a bandage. “And you know disrespecting the pastor is wrong. He...he's dangerous when he's angry.” She stared downwards and grew quiet, almost as if trying to gather her thoughts.

I grew silent, but nodded. Watching her continue to finish up, I became sad, however. My thoughts had ventured elsewhere. “Miss Mary...?”, I asked.

After placing the medical supplies back onto the table before her, she glanced back at me, arching



her brows. “Yes, Joshua?” Her ocean eyes were glimmering in the light of the flickering candles that filled her classroom.

“I wish *you* were my mother.” With that, I had leaped over the table and dove into her arms. Tears were already streaming down my face as she wrapped herself around me.

She giggled a bit. “But then, who would be your Sunday School Teacher?”, she asked, playfully. It seemed as though she was, again, holding herself back from acknowledging the very real issues at hand. But after a few moments, I realized she was softly crying, as well.

Strangely, I went unpunished for it all, as Blackburn never mentioned it again. I had a sneaking suspicion that Miss Mary had something to do with that. She nevermore mentioned animals in her teachings, however, and a few months later, she vanished for about a year.

That would be the first in many mysterious disappearances for her – ones the adults called “missions”. Miss Mary had become our first – and only – missionary. Which raised a number of unanswered questions for me at the time.

I didn't see Lucas for quite a long time after that, either. Whenever I asked someone about him – including my mother and his parents – they would simply say that his disrespect toward the pastor was nigh unforgivable, and that he needed to atone for his sins. He had been sent somewhere to do that.

My nights were plagued by my wild imagination after that. What sort of horrible place had they sent him to? How was he to atone? Was it painful? I dared not ask.

When he finally returned to Sunday School a few years later, he was completely silent – even when spoken to directly. He had grown eerily thin, as if he had been starving to death, and seemed completely exhausted. Though he looked to be completely clean, a strange, gut-wrenching stench seemed to radiate out of his flesh. His skin was now a ghostly white and unnervingly thin so that bluish-black veins could be seen pulsating just underneath it. These could be seen on every part of him that his little suit did not cover. His once bright brown eyes were now dull and listless, retreating into his skull as they gazed off into nothingness, slowly blinking. And that once bright blond hair was now

flaxen, grayed, and thinning.

The strange thing was, no one mentioned his appearance. No one tried and speak to him like I did – not even Miss Mary. Magdalena was silently drawing him as she ignored our teacher's words, as usual, capturing his eerily dead stare with perfect accuracy. Esther seemed absolutely terrified of him, refusing to even look in his direction with her widened eyes. Though she did give me some questionable looks when I tried to get him to communicate. And Levi tried to act as if nothing was wrong, but that in itself seemed incredibly strange.

During Mary's teachings, I watched Lucas in silence, her words muffled as they hit my ears. He was ignoring Magdalena's current project, but was staring at the drawings on the walls – specifically the newer ones we had made within his absence. His eyes were hollow, devoid of life and light, and it didn't even appear as though he were breathing. In every manner, our Lucas resembled a corpse.

Soon, Pastor Blackburn began his sermon, which sounded just as venomous and full of vitriol as usual. It was about having to fulfill certain duties as God's children. The examples he gave were for women to be subservient to their men, for men and women to be 'fruitful and multiply the Earth', and for children to honor their fathers and mothers. He expounded on that last one to include adults in general, however, saying it was not a child's place to question, but to happily and eagerly obey. And any and all refusal was to disrespect God Himself. "One may as well sign over their soul to Lucifer!", he screeched.

It wasn't uncommon for the pastor's sermons to target certain individuals of the congregation. Usually it wasn't obvious to anyone but the intended, however. This angry rant was clearly about Lucas, as well my friends and I.

That's when Lucas revealed his madness, leaping over peoples' heads and climbing over pews, making his way to the pulpit, growling and foaming at the mouth like some sort of rabid beast. It sounded as if he were screaming words in another language – or, even more frighteningly, speaking backwards. He ignored the uproar behind him – including the desperate pleading of his own parents –

and faced off against the pastor as if no one existed but the two of them.

The dim, fog-filtered light of day that shone through the stained-glass windows seemed to fade. Those countless candles on the massive chandelier above us all died with the unnatural chill that followed. And the air around me grew strangely thick and heavy, making it somewhat hard to breathe. And I was horrified. This was exactly like one of my many nightmares come to life.

Pastor Blackburn's sword was a crucifix, his shield, the Holy Bible as he went to battle with the boy's darkness. His shrieks of the ancient scriptures did little to ease my terrified young heart, however, and so I covered my ears and tried desperately to run out to the light of day.

My mother violently gripped me, however, holding me still on her lap. She kept my blue eyes wide open with her fingers while my father forced my hands to my sides from his seat beside her. Giggling sadistically, they held me there, both determined to make me watch the torture that was about to take place.

“Honor thy Father and Mother” – but my parents had never acted like a father and a mother. Even when I was a child, they ignored me. And when I was horrified of something, like this very moment, they made me witness it until my screams burned my throat and my tears ran dry. And if my cries were heard in public, once I got home, they would take turns beating me with my father's belt until my behind was covered in blue bruises and bleeding gashes. “Spare the rod, spoil the child”, after all.

As I sobbed, the deacons of the church flooded into the aisles and made their way up to the pulpit. There, they held Lucas in place as he continued to speak backwards, his voice unnaturally deep and rough, spit flying out of his mouth and every direction.

This reminded me of the day that he was Baptized. He was terrified, but they held him under the water much like this. He fought just as much then, splashing about violently with his arms and legs. Somehow I knew, however, this time they were not going to let him up for air.

It was then that Pastor Blackburn revealed a small pearlescent tear-shaped vial of what I would eventually learn was Holy Water. He popped the cork from its mouth before splashing a few droplets

onto Lucas. And the reaction was something I would have never expected.

The boy loudly shrieked in agony, steam rising from his face. It had actually burned through his flesh, leaving sizzling, fleshy holes in his cheeks. It seemed he was no longer Lucas after all.

“In the name of Jesus the Christ, you will *leave* this boy, foul demon!”, Blackburn shrieked, firmly pressing the iron crucifix to Lucas' forehead, eliciting yet another chilling wail of pain. Upon removing it, the pastor revealed that the red shape of a cross had been inexplicably burned into the skin on Lucas' forehead, filling the entire sanctuary with the disgusting stench of burning flesh. “Return to the fires of Hell from whence you crawled forth!”

At that point, Lucas went limp. He collapsed onto the floor between the deacons, between the first sets of pews, and the pastor, standing before the large altar that rested just in front of the pulpit. It was as if all life had been drained from the boy's body, drawn out by that very crucifix. And all was deathly silent and eerily still for a moment or two, as if time itself had frozen.

It was in that very second that I finally noticed the shadow that would haunt my nightmares for years to come. Just behind that gory statue of Jesus hanging on the cross, was a large, black silhouette. Seemingly standing on the water of the baptism pool, it was horned, and looked as if it were kneeling down, hiding, its hand tightly gripping, its claws stabbing into the wood of the bottom of the cross. Glowing red eyes blinked and slowly looked around, taking it all in – and then, they met my confused and curious gaze. The creature seemed surprised, and vanished at once.

The silence was broken by the terrified screams of the other children. They cried and wailed as their parents did their best to calm them. Strangely, I was now completely silent as I continued to watch the events unfold. Seeing this, my parents released me, pleased by my newfound bravery.

Then, the deacons all solemnly lifted Lucas' rag doll body. They held him like pallbearers did a casket at a funeral, raising him to their shoulders, each of them holding a section of one of his extremities as they took him out of the sanctuary. The double doors were shut behind them, and once again, my childhood friend was lost to me – to all of us.

Blackburn returned to the pulpit and continued roaring like a beast, his fiery words reverberating off of the sanctuary walls. His terrifying voice seemed to calm the babies and young children in the audience, as their cries died down at that point. He spoke of demons and angels, saying that they both walked among us, and that our actions were what invited them into our lives. “Lucas invited the devil in!”, he shrieked. “He did so by showing disrespect to God! By dishonoring his Father and Mother! By *disobeying me!* That boy *refused* to make amends! And thus, his condition worsened.”

It was then that I could hear Lucas' mother sobbing from the other side of the sanctuary. I turned to her, seeing her husband try and comfort her. They both seemed to be completely brokenhearted.

“You saw the evil within him! Our beloved Lucas, I'm afraid...is no longer Lucas. Alas, he has been rendered to little more than a mere puppet!”, Blackburn continued from behind his podium. “And who is pulling the strings?! The devil, himself.”

It seemed as though everyone in the audience gasped upon hearing these words – including my own parents. I remained silent, however, and continued to listen.

“And now, he will have to face God's wrath in the form of an exorcism.”, concluded the pastor. And with that, his sermon ended.

The choir behind him on either side, began to sing the praises of Jesus beneath that gigantic and eerie statue of the Christ, eternally bleeding, dying, suffering, suffocating on that cross. In a loud din, their voices filled the entire sanctuary as the bells of the tower began to ring above us. Everyone stood up from their seats, and began to flood into the aisles in order to make their way outside.

I'm not certain how all of this effected the rest of my friends. As we grew up, it was something that none of us ever even dared to mention. We were all far too afraid to bring it up, it seemed. Which, in itself, I suppose, lies the answer – they were each just as scarred from the experience as I was.

Lucas' memory remained within me, as did the hole he left in my heart. The scar Blackburn cut into my hand never faded. These moments were what shaped my young mind like God once did the earth. And this was only the beginning. This was my Genesis.

## *Chapter One: Avarice*

*“God doesn't call the qualified; He qualifies the called.”*

At fifteen, I wasn't the youngest acolyte in the church's history, but sometimes I felt as if I were in over my head. I had spent years lighting candles, memorizing specific prayers, reading my Bible from cover to cover, and studying scriptures both in and out of it. For longer than I realized, I had even spent my free time learning about everything from the imp, to the ifrit, to the incubus, of devils and dybbuks and damnation. And I was still the lowest in my class. Yet, of all people, Father Magnus, the Lead Exorcist, our very teacher, chose me as his underling.

The one with the highest test scores in my class was Levi. Our admittedly already rocky friendship had diminished over the years, and had been slowly replaced with a bit of a rivalry. There was a sort of unspoken race to see who would become an exorcist first, and this turn of events had somewhat embittered Levi, it seemed. While he was also called to be an acolyte by another, less prominent Exorcist, that being Father Isaac, it was Magnus that he had been planning on working with.

Despite this honor, I still felt that I wasn't ready to experience my first exorcism – even if it was just in an observational capacity. Every time I brought up this fear to my superior, however, he would simply say that this was why I had to do it, also quoting that same Bible verse at me, about God qualifying the called. So, as soon as school ended, I took my little notepad and pen in my trembling, rosary-wrapped hand, and did my very best not to panic as I made my way.

Omnideus Convent of Saint Damien was just as intimidating and ominous as the church. There was an impossibly tall black iron gate with large thorny vines intertwined throughout its bars that wrapped around its dry, barren lands. Dead trees dotted the campus, along with a few dried shrubberies, among that same patchy, yellow grass and dead earth. In its center, just beyond the gate, was an old

stone path that led up to and circled around a large broken and empty water fountain which had a tall statue of a praying angel standing in its center. Just behind that was the massive white upside-down-“U”-shaped building that was the convent itself.

The two sides of the horseshoe-shaped building ended on either side of the fountain, about one-hundred feet of a circle of stones separating them from it. Large barred windows were scattered along the outside walls in a seemingly random order that was not at all pleasing to the eye. There were empty balconies on the ends of both of them. In the center, just beyond the broken fountain, was a large staircase that led up to the huge double doors. And here, above the entrance, was a large broken clock tower that reached up to the clouds, ending in a wickedly arched triangular roof.

Inside, everything within it was a stark, harsh white, pristine and monochrome to the point that it was so surreal that it dazed and confused me. Even the flames of the candles and torches that illuminated the building seemed to be devoid of any color. I felt as if I were dreaming.

Within its impenetrable walls were rooms in which the possessed were kept within. This was after they were surrendered to the church by their terrified families. Some of the doors of these rooms were locked, while others were wide open, depending on the case.

I understood that the Silent Sisters – nuns who were trained in nursing – had some treatments that they gave to the afflicted. But the exorcisms themselves could only be performed by specially trained priests – Exorcists.

As soon as I stepped into the entrance hall, it was almost overwhelming. The stark white, almost glowing surroundings I found myself within was already hurting my eyes and head. Placing my hand to my temple, I closed my eyes and lowered my head, not realizing that Magnus had already begun walking toward the right.

Silent Sisters, pale as ghosts, darted about the candlelit entrance hall, the clacking of their shoes echoing around me, dizzying me even more. None of them spoke to me as they passed me by, but a number of them shot bitter glares my way. As they did, I saw just how black and empty their eyes were.

I knew that I had to ask one of them where it was I needed to go. But the more time that passed, the more terrified I became. Soon, their already gaunt faces began to decay, their eyes rotting away, leaving black, empty sockets. And before I knew it, a number of them had surrounded me, all staring blankly, silently, watching me.

Suddenly, a massive black silhouette appeared before the large stained-glass windows upstairs. It was masculine and muscular, adorned with wicked horns, and a forked tail. And as it stood up straight, huge bat-like wings rose up from behind it. Blood red eyes opened upon its face, glowing through its darkness, staring right down at me, and I froze in place.

In that moment, I was taken from the convent and placed back into a recurring nightmare I'd had since Lucas' incident at the church. I found myself on my bed, surrounded by my childhood toys, laughing and playing innocently. But suddenly, flames burst forth from the floor and consumed the walls entirely. And there at the end of the bed was the devil, his flesh burned red, massive horns sprouting from his bald head, desperately clawing at my feet. The whites of his eyes weren't white at all, but a deathly black, and his irises glowed bright red.

His movements were unnatural, his joints snapped audibly in quick sudden jolts. As he desperately crawled onto the bed, reaching for me, I could hear his voice – deep, inhumanly deep, speaking a language I could not understand. His eerily echoing words, like Lucas' from all those years ago, seemed backwards. He was yelling, but not out of anger. It sounded more like...concern. Even...desperation. I would always awaken as he violently grabbed a hold of me.

I blinked and I was back at the entrance hall of the convent. The demonic silhouette – it was gone. Instead, standing there, was none other than Levi, staring down at me with a look of pure disdain on his otherwise handsome face. “Go home, Joshua!”, he called, his voice echoing in the otherwise silent white space. “You're obviously too scared to do this.” Beside him was his own exorcist, Isaac, and the two of them turned their noses up at me before continuing up the stairs.

A young, rather pretty nun had replaced the circle of Silent Sisters that had surrounded me. Tilting



her head, she arched her brows as she looked me in the eyes, standing before me. Blinking, she batted her long eyelashes, gazing at me concernedly, without saying a word.

Laughing awkwardly, I shook my head, desperately trying to chase the thoughts away. “I-I apologize. I’m here with Exorcist Magnus.”, I explained, smiling. “But I seem to have lost my way. Could you possibly take the time out of your busy day to point me in the right direction?”

She smiled and nodded. But strangely, she still refused to speak. Instead, she motioned for me to follow her, turned around and began to walk toward the right.

Not having much of a choice, I followed. The clacks of our dress shoes became rhythmic and echoed eerily as we made our way down one of the winding corridors. I could hear the strange ramblings of each patient behind their thick iron doors. Some of them were talking of demons, others, of angels. Some of them were screaming as if they were being horrifically tortured.

The nun that was leading me remained perfectly silent. And the longer it lasted, the more strange and unnerving it became. I hadn’t expected the title of “Silent Sister” to be taken so seriously.

Trying my best to ignore it all, I followed her to Ward F. She opened the door to Room Number 66 with a key from a ring of many. As she motioned toward it, I thanked her, and cautiously approached it as she vanished back into the bright whiteness.

I could hear nothing but silence beyond the doorway, and looking through it, I saw a plain candlelit white room with a barred window and a flower vase sitting on the sill. Both the vase and the lilies’ cloth petals were the same frigid color as the rest of that chilling convent, but the green of the plastic leaves and stems were a welcome reprieve.

Stepping inside, I was hit with an unimaginable stench. The entire room reeked of old, stale urine and decaying feces. A multitude of flies were there, searching for some rot to feast upon, but like me, they were seemingly unable to find it. Strangely, despite all this, the entire room *looked* to be completely clean.

It was mostly empty, save for a bed and a dresser – which were both, of course, white. On either

side of the bed stood two people – on the left was Exorcist Magnus, and on the right was a tall, slender nun wrapped in a black habit – a stark contrast to the other nuns' matching theme of white. He was speaking to her in hushed whispers above a young man who lied upon the bed between them, sleeping soundly and peacefully.

As I approached, Magnus smiled towards me. He then introduced me to the nun, calling her Mother Superior, before explaining that she was the who was in charge of the convent. I nodded and smiled toward her, holding my hand out for her to shake, but she simply looked me up and down in judgmental disgust.

Mother Superior's knife-sharp black stare was nothing short of chilling. Her eyes seemed almost devoid of life and she, herself, completely soulless. She shot a bitter glare toward Magnus before turning away from the both of us. She then quietly made her way back out into the hallway, and closed the door behind her.

Exorcist Magnus chuckled at my confusion. “She's just a little jealous because we get to deal with him on a good day.”, he explained. “Apparently, this one is usually quite the handful.”

“Why do none of them speak?”, I asked, tilting my head.

He simply explained that they had taken a vow of silence – hence the name 'Silent Sisters'. “Abstaining from speaking is one of the ways they choose to honor God.” Smiling, he turned his attention back to the sleeping boy between us. “Let's focus on helping *him*, shall we?”

My brows furrowed in intrigue as I turned my attention to the sleeping patient before me. He was deathly pale, and his eyes were incredibly sunken in. Even though his body was covered by a thin white blanket, I could see just how thin he was – his ribs poked through his skin. It appeared as though he hadn't eaten in months.

His wrists and ankles were tightly bound to the bed itself. This was done with a special apparatus consisting of chains and leather straps. Though he looked as if he could be broken if half by a calming breeze in Spring, so I wasn't certain why things were taken to such extremes.

As a fresh wet spot appeared and grew on the thin white blanket that the teenager was tucked within, I realized where the stench had come from. And I remembered from my studies that some possessed individuals took to drinking their own urine, and relieving themselves at random.

It was then that a buzzing fly fluttered over before landing on the boy's paled lips. And, perhaps subconsciously, he licked at it, taking it into his mouth like a frog. I watched in dark surprise as he chewed it, and swallowed it, leaving nothing on his lips but a soft, sated smile.

I was completely unnerved at first. Then, another memory of my studies returned to me. I remembered reading of some possessed people actually taking to eating insects. In fact, in the later stages of possession, they were known to actually refuse normal food. Perhaps that had something to do with why this particular individual was so jarringly thin.

His breathing was heavy and labored. Phlegm rattled in his throat as he roughly inhaled. It seemed that simply existing was a difficult task for him at this point.

What struck me as eerily familiar, however, were the few scars on his face, resembling a splash of water droplets. Upon his forehead was an old, red burn, in the shape of a cross. Dark memories began to rush back to me at that point.

Looking back up at his face, I looked beyond the age and the blond peach fuzz growing on his chin, and realized the truth. "Lucas.", I whispered. I was now facing the very reason why I had decided to become an exorcist.

His tired brown eyes fluttered open, and a soft smile spread across his sickly face. "Joshua.", he said, in a rough, tired voice. "Have you finally come to get me out of this place?"

I shot a concerned glance toward the Exorcist, who simply smiled and tilted his head. "I've come to help you get better so that you can come home.", I clarified, turning back to Lucas. "How long have you been ill?"

Lucas seemed confused. His dry lips parted, but no words escaped his mouth. Flashing his eyes toward Magnus, he shook his head, and tried to sit up, only to realize that he was still strapped down.

“N-no. Please! Not again!” He was terrified. “You’re one of them! You’ve become one of them!”

“Lucas, it’s alright.”, I said, calmly, heading toward the right side of the bed. I reached over and touched my hands to his shoulders so that he would look at me. “I’m here with you. We’re friends, remember? I’m your friend, and I’m here to help you.”

Tears began to stream down his strained face and he began to tremble. Blinking, he motioned his head toward the exorcist, only giving him a small, hateful glance. “He hurts me. Don’t let him hurt me.” His voice was deeper now, but still just as rough. Glaring at me, he bared his gritted, rotting teeth and grayed, receding gums and began to growl like an animal. “He burns me! He burns my skin with acid, with his white-hot cross!” Suddenly, he was much more irate than frightened.

Chills danced down my spine as I backed away. Raising a single brow, I looked to Magnus through widened eyes, who was smirking at me as if I had just learned an important lesson. Nodding, I retrieved my notepad and pen from my pocket and watched as he revealed his crucifix and Holy Bible.

“Lucas, have you been experiencing certain...*urges*?”, Magnus asked. His voice was calm and calming. “Urges to...*hurt* others? To cause them pain? Mother Superior says you’ve been lashing out, trying to bite some of the sisters here.”

Lucas did not answer. Instead, he began to scream and cry. He looked at me, his eyes round with sorrow and fear, as if he were asking for help. As Father Magnus continued asking questions, the boy raised his voice, making strange noises like a petulant child that didn’t want to hear his mother’s scoldings. All the while, he was squirming wildly and jerking his arms and legs about in a desperate attempt at escape. He did this with strength that his shriveled frame didn’t appear to have.

I scribbled my notes, watching intently as the horrific scene unfolded. After a few moments, however, the candles’ flames died and an unnatural chill swept over the room. Suddenly, Lucas shot an irate glare toward me, his neck loudly cracking in its movement. His brown eyes suddenly seemed black, like unfathomably deep abysses, within the shadowy room. And in a vile, demonic voice that was not his own, he roared at me, accusing me of betraying him. “These beasts have tortured me every

day for years, and you're helping them! If it weren't for you and that God damned snake, none of this would have ever happened!"

Father Magnus stopped asking questions. At that point, he began to quote the scriptures – not *to* Lucas, but *at* him. The Word was a weapon.

At that point, Lucas began to gag uncontrollably, as if he were about to vomit. And after a few seconds, he did, thick, black bile that filled the entire room with a sick, unnatural stench. However, among it, that same red snake that came slithering out of his mouth. It slowly made its way over his severely thinned body, heading toward me. This ended in it striking and biting my writing hand, sinking its bloody fangs deep into my soft, tender flesh.

As I jerked away from it, dropping my notepad and pen, I realized that it had bitten my scar. The two puncture wounds were perfectly centered between two of the beaded rosary strings. Gazing down at the wound, I watched the venom burn and sizzle into the flesh, as it slowly, painfully ate away at the scar tissue. Slowly, that old wound opened again, revealing red, raw flesh within. Instead of bleeding, however, it darkened and grew necrotic, sending black crack-like lines jolting out from its center.

I seethed through clenched teeth and gripped at my wounded hand with my other. Trying to wipe away the rot, I began to panic. Within just a few seconds, my entire hand had decayed, and it was unimaginably agonizing.

Lucas began to laugh at me. Ignoring Magnus' loudly, wrathfully quoting of scriptures, the possessed boy kept his dark glare locked onto my wide, crying eyes. "You think you were hurt, too?", he slowly asked, tilting his head. His smirk faded into a disgusted scowl. "I promise you, your little cut is *nothing* compared to the agony, the misery I have felt every day in here. Hell itself would be nothing short of a reprieve!"

It was then that I became distracted by the red snake once more. Before me, on the edge of the bed, just an inch away from Lucas' tensed feet, it raised its head up to me. Its eyes seemed to glow with that same blood red of my horned shadow's glare. "Seek the truth.", it whispered, its voice echoing

throughout the air.

In that very moment, the exorcist placed his crucifix into poor Lucas' forehead, silencing the boy's erratic screaming forever. Again, the flesh sizzled and smoke arose from it as the light of God burned away the demon. My childhood friend collapsed lifelessly, and even from my distance, I could tell that he was no longer breathing. My Lucas was gone.

The serpent had vanished. That chill faded and light returned to the room from the barred window. My hand had completely turned to normal, but I suddenly felt as though I were drained entirely of energy. Lowering my trembling hands to my sides, I let my rosary slowly untangle as it spiraled around below my hand. Soon, it fell to the cold, hard floor alongside my pen and notepad as everything around me began to fade to black.

Countless different prayers echoed throughout my mind at that point. Some of them were in my voice, others in Pastor Blackburn's, some in Miss Mary's, some in my friends', and even more in Father Magnus'. The Hail Mary, the Lord's Prayer, and the little nursery rhyme prayer we'd been taught by Miss Mary as children, all filled my ears. They eerily overlapped and repeated. And through them, I remembered the day I'd decided to pursue a career in exorcism.

It wasn't long after Lucas' breakdown in the sanctuary. I had begun to ask the first of many, many questions. Pastor Blackburn was just that – a pastor, a whole rank beneath the nuns and priests, and thus, he was not actually meant to perform such rites. The actual priests that had been trained in exorcism were so shocked by the whole thing that they couldn't help but sit back and watch. This was, after all, the first time that anything of this nature had occurred within the church itself. It was also apparently one of the most dramatic cases that had occurred in quite some time.

I learned of demonic possession from my father. Over time, I began to express more interest in it. He explained that it was the highest paying role a man could take in the church, but that it would be an arduous task. The promise of money wasn't what interested me, however, despite the fact that we lived less than modestly, in a broken down shack on the outward edge of the village.

In hopes of one day finding and healing my dear friend of his ailment, as a child, I had vowed to become an exorcist. I'd spent years upon years just studying and struggling and trying and committing things to memory in my many, many classes. Every second of my free time had consisted of me reading scriptures, going over my notes, or praying to God, or sitting in the confessional, confessing my self-doubt and fear to one of the priests.

And yet, there in the convent, as a teenager, I stood as a failure, having helplessly watched Lucas die directly in front of me. All my studying and praying, my ultimate goal, my entire life had amounted to nothing. It was all for naught. He'd slipped through my fingers just as easily as my rosary beads.

As I slowly lost consciousness, my legs collapsed beneath me. I could see Exorcist Magnus rushing toward me as the darkness enveloped everything. I felt myself falling, but I never hit the floor. It was as if I were plummeting through an endless void – the blackness of Lucas' glare – spiraling endlessly, falling forever, headfirst into the unknown. I found myself reaching up, reaching out for help that would never come, desperately calling out to a God that had never once answered me. And still, all I would hear in response, was silence.

## *Chapter Two: Wrath*

*“Now I will shortly pour out my fury upon thee, and accomplish mine anger upon thee. And I will judge thee according to thy ways, and I will recompense thee for all thine abominations.”*

I awoke in a pristine white cell of my own. Exhausted and starving, I tried to sit up, only to realize that I was bound to the bed by those thick, leather straps. A panic like a dark tide immediately rose within me and I began to struggle with what little energy I had left. It was only then that I realized I was completely naked, above the sheet so that all of me was exposed. And my body was eerily thin; I was extremely malnourished. My stomach's growling pained me, and even so much as moving caused my bones to ache.

How long had I been there? How long had I gone without food? Without water? My mind was hazy. But through the pain and agony, my body remembered. My body remembered all too well.

Suddenly, Mother Superior appeared at the end of the room. Her back was to me, and her body seemed to flicker in and out of existence like a candle's flame in a cool breeze. Unnervingly, she seemed to be praying as she faced the wall in complete, unbroken silence.

I was terrified. But I was growing desperate, and she was the only one there with me. “Please!”, I cried. “M-Mother Superior! There's been a mistake! I am not possessed; I am a child of God!”

She remained deathly quiet, and eerily still for a moment or two. Finally, she slowly began to turn around, revealing two gigantic black holes for eyes. Like Lucas, her thin skin was incredibly pale to the point where her darkened veins could be seen beneath it.

In a flash, she had darted over to me impossibly fast, causing me to shriek out in fright. She was then beside the bed, gazing down at me. With her so near, I could see that her mouth was actually sewn shut, bleeding from the fresh holes that had been stabbed through the skin just above and below her



thin, bluish lips.

It was then that she revealed a bloody knife – the cross-shaped blade – and began to cut away at the sutures. Once her mouth was free, she tilted her head and smiled, revealing thousands of sharp, bloody, needle-like teeth. And she began to unhinge her jaw, causing the bones within her head to crack and pop unnervingly.

Slowly, she eased down, and I could smell the bits of rotting flesh that remained between her long, sharp, bloodstained teeth. Beyond that was an endless, empty darkness, the depths of which I could not fathom. Despite my struggles, she wrapped her gigantic, gaping mouth around my skull, and clamped her countless needle-like teeth into my neck.

The loud, unnerving singing of “There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood”, one of my mother's favorite hymns, shattered me from this nightmare. It was indeed coming from my mother, as she strained her already unpleasant voice to attempt to sing. “There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel's veins. And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains.” The din violently broke through the thin walls of the house, sounding as if it were coming from the kitchen.

I was in my bed, in my room, surrounded by my old childhood toys. The relief I felt to realize that it had only been a dream was like a drink of ice-cold water after wandering a scorching desert. It was time to get ready for school.

“Joshua, breakfast is ready!”, my mother called.

Finally, the sweet relief of silence filled the dark room. And I found myself wondering how Father Magnus was going to react to me today in class. Out of eleven other talented boys – including Levi – he had chosen me as his protege. And I fainted in the middle of my first exorcism.

As I prepared to depart, my thoughts turned to Lucas. From my studies, I had learned that sometimes exorcisms ended in death. But they also taught me that even death during an exorcism meant that the victim's soul was saved. They were taken by God into Heaven. And so, I tried to be happy, telling myself that his suffering was finally over. *At least I got to see him one last time, I*

thought. But my heart was broken.

As we ate breakfast, my father told me that it was Father Magnus that had brought me home. “He carried you in his arms and laid you down to sleep in your bed. Even stayed with you for most of the night just to make sure you were unharmed. Very admirable, I think.”

I remained silent, staring at the grayish-brown sludge on my plate, poking at it with my fork every few moments. Soon, it was flooded with my tears. My head was filled with replaying memories of all the horror I had seen, my heart with the guilt that I felt. And whatever else I tried to focus on, my thoughts would always revert back to that.

“And don't worry about failing, buddy.”, my father continued, silently reading his Bible at the table. “A lot of acolytes do. It's quite tough. The money would have been great for us, but I'm not certain that you're strong and brave enough for such a career in the church. You could always become a deacon like me. Or join the choir, or...” His voice faded into the background as he continued speaking.

Again, I walked through the dilapidated remains of our fog-strangled village as I made my way to school. I passed by countless broken down homes, seeing and hearing my neighbors arguing through their broken windows as I passed, retracing the steps as I had taken countless times before.

That day at Bloody Cross Omnideus School was nothing short of overwhelming. In every class, from Scripture Studies to Religious Science, my peers kept asking me how my trip to the convent went. One guy told me that his cousin was there because “he confessed to Headmistress Rebecca that he thought he was a girl”. A girl told me that her little sister was accused of witchcraft by the school's headmistress, and was “dragged out of the school by her hair”. Another boy told me that he heard that two “secret sodomites were caught in the act” by Headmistress Rebecca and were taken away a few years ago. None of them had been seen or heard from since.

As they laughed and carried on, I couldn't help but see evil in their demented grins. These students' words terrified me, but their soulless eyes haunted me far beyond that day. And I had never missed my childhood friends as much as I did in those moments.

By the time I finally got to my demonology class, I was exhausted to say the very least. Much to my surprise, however, Magnus didn't mention the exorcism to the class at all, instead he gave a full lecture on the demonic possession of inanimate objects, using a creepy porcelain doll as an example. "It starts as an eerie energy, a negative emotional aura radiating from the item. I'm sure you all can sense it.", he began, to which there was a mumbling of agreement from the class. "I borrowed this lovely lady from Pastor Blackburn. He has a, uh...*collection* of them."

Everyone laughed at this as if it were a joke. The look in Magnus' eyes was strange, however. He seemed almost...frightened of the very idea. I assumed this was because the pastor wasn't properly trained to handle such things.

But the class went on as usual. No one brought up my exorcism at all. Even Levi acted as if nothing had happened. And I was relieved...until the bell rang, and Father Magnus asked me to stay for a moment.

As the other students all scattered out into the hallway, I nervously walked over, gripping the strap of my backpack as it hung around my shoulder. My body began to sweat and tremble as the anticipation grew. Fully expecting him to tell me that I didn't have what it takes, albeit in the nicest way humanly possible, my mind began to reel with the dark possibilities.

"Joshua, I was very pleased to see you in class today. I want you to understand that everyone's first exorcism is hard.", he began, tilting his head. He was sitting on his desk as I stood before him. "Mine was, too. I don't want this to discourage you from pursuing your dreams."

My eyes were locked onto those of the porcelain doll, standing next to him on his desk. Her face was covered in spiderweb-like cracks. She was dressed in what looked like a pilgrim's dress, with her long brunette hair in thick curls. But what frightened me the most was her massive, crying blue eyes, which seemed to stare into my very soul. And within them, somehow, I saw Lucas.

"N-no, it won't.", I said, turning my attention back to my master. "I was afraid you were going to dismiss me as your protege. I-I *fainted*, of all things. But of course I'm remaining in the program."

He grinned widely, seemingly just as relieved as I was. “That is great to hear.”, he said, standing up. “Moving forward, I'd like to leave you with one piece of advice: never listen to the demons – *especially* when they're talking through someone you love. You can't trust what you see or hear during an exorcism. Remember that.”

In his mid-twenties, Magnus had an energy about him that was positive and comforting. Neatly trimmed scruff perfectly framed his full lips and his thick brows were always arching as he smiled at me. That ginger-red hair was always perfectly coiffed and behind his black-rimmed glasses, his sparkling green eyes were full of wisdom.

Despite the unnerving glare of his porcelain companion, my master's words had somehow filled me with the determination I needed to continue. This would be a skill of his that would increasingly aid me in my most darkest times to come.

Unfortunately, Levi sought to undo all of that. As soon as I left the room that day, he began to outright bully me. Apparently he had eavesdropped on my previous conversation, because he called me a coward, and then asked if I were going to faint because of it in a whiny, mocking tone. His new male friends all laughed behind him, struggling to seem as masculine and stoic as humanly possible.

Other than being the best in class, he was mostly known for stealing wine from the church and getting drunk with his those jackasses in the cemetery. That, and making jokes out of the other students. And each prank he pulled was more hurtful than the last. It seemed as though he thought himself untouchable because his mother was the headmistress. “Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”

However, on the way out of school that day, I was stopped by her. She had apparently been eavesdropping during my conversation with her spoiled son, as she asked me how I had felt about it. “Well, honestly, it offended me.”, I admitted, knowing this was exactly what she wanted.

She chuckled to herself. “Well, if you don't want to be called a coward...”, she began, strutting around me. “Perhaps you shouldn't be so cowardly. Or, you know, find a more...*suitable* career path.”

Her dark eyes then lit up as she smiled. “There's always an opening in the church kitchens, I hear.”

I shook my head. “No, thank you, Headmistress.”, I stated, already walking away from her. “I want to become an exorcist.”

She scoffed behind me. “Joshua! Don't walk away when you're being spoken to!”, she shrieked, watching me walk out of the front doors of the school.

I could hear her running to catch up with me. She stopped the door from closing between us and reached out. Roughly grabbing my hand, she jerked me back toward her. And when I turned back to face her, I saw the face of a madwoman. “H-Headmistress Rebecca, I-I really have to get home...”

The headmistress cackled as I continuously tried to pull away from her. “I can assure you Joshua, that not a single ounce of me *cares.*”, she growled. “Over the years, you've been written up and sent to my office for daydreaming, outright ignoring your teachers, and not paying attention – in *multiple classes*, mind you. I'm certain that it wouldn't take much more for me to convince the council to *evaluate* you. Do you want to experience a stay in the convent yourself?”

This terrified me. I stopped struggling. “I-I'm sorry, Headmistress.”, I apologized. “I just have to get home and make dinner for my parents. That's all.” This wasn't a lie; I'd been doing all the cooking and cleaning around the house for years at that point.

She released her witch's talon grip on my arm, but her wicked glare remained burning into my very soul. She was absolutely seething. “Do *not* anger me again. This will be your only warning.”, she growled through clenched teeth. “In the meantime, I'll pray for you to overcome this desire to disrespect your betters. Now, do me a favor, and get out of my sight.”

I did as she demanded. And I did so in a hurry.

Sometimes I'd find myself wondering why Levi had changed so much from when we were children. We had always played a bit rough, but he was never *mean* to me before. What had I done to make him hate me so? And then I would have to suffer through a conversation with his wicked mother, and I would remember; *I* had done nothing at all. He had simply learned his behavior from her.

Lucas' funeral was held soon after that. It was open casket, despite the fact that he looked so ill and broken. The fake flowers surrounding the pulpit did little to brighten the day. I tried my best to keep the image in mind of him as a child, laughing and playing, but it didn't seem to be helping. He didn't even seem peaceful as he lied there, pale as a ghost.

As I gazed upon him, tears filled my eyes. I was so lost in my childhood memories that I didn't realize my old friends had gathered around. Esther, Magdalena, and Levi, were all quietly mourning alongside me. Soon, despite the fact that we had not spoken to one another in years, the girls both put their arms around me, and rested their heads on my shoulders. Levi was not as empathetic, however.

"You didn't tell me it was *Lucas*," he growled through clenched teeth. He then turned to me. "You *fainted* during *Lucas*' exorcism? Instead of helping him?!"

I scoffed. "Levi, it was my first real experience with the demonic, and seeing him like that, it..." I looked away for a moment. "It scarred me."

He smirked and crossed his toned arms. "All the more reason you shouldn't be an exorcist," he snarled, walking toward me. Pressing a firm finger to my chest, he continued. "How many more people are going to die because of you?!"

Hearing these words, I gasped. Tears filled my eyes as I looked up into his irate brown eyes. But somehow, even then, I knew it wasn't really me he was angry with.

"Levi, leave it alone," Esther demanded, stepping between us. It was then that I noticed the wedding ring on her finger. "We *all* lost Lucas. Don't take your pain out on Joshua."

Hearing this, Levi was even more enraged. "It was *his* responsibility to make sure Lucas came home safely!", he shouted. His dark eyes shot over to me once again. "You were supposed to *heal* him. Not kill him."

In that moment, Esther stepped before me to face off against him. Her brows were furrowed and in her eyes, there raged flames of righteous fury.

Before she had time to continue taking up for me, however, an elderly man appeared from the

small number of attendees. He placed his hand on her shoulder and gripped it tightly, not unlike how Blackburn had done to Lucas all those years ago. “Come sit down, my darling.”, he said, his voice strained by age. “I grow weary of watching you argue with your...*friends*.”

She gulped. Keeping her eyes locked onto me, she nodded. “Y-yes, my love.” With that, she turned around and made her way back to the pews.

“She’s...*married*?” I asked, confusedly.

Levi scoffed and shook his head. “You’d know that if you hadn’t *abandoned* us all.”, he grumbled, walking away.

I watched him return to the sparse group of people in the pews. Turning my attention to Magdalena, I arched my brows and tilted my head. “I...*abandoned* you?” I asked, trying to remember why it was I stopped spending time with them. The only answer that made sense to me was that I had prioritized my studying over maintaining my friendships – which was true.

Magdalena offered a kind smile and shrugged her shoulders. She had been born mute, and usually used her talent of drawing to communicate. It was easier than writing things out for her.

Even that day at Lucas’ funeral, she had her pen and sketchpad in hand. Instead of trying to draw something for me as an explanation, however, she simply touched my arm and motioned toward the pews with her head before taking her leave. Taking note of the detailed drawing of a dybbuk in her grasp, I followed, and the funeral began shortly thereafter.

Unsurprisingly, Pastor Blackburn used it as an excuse to preach about honoring God, insinuating that what happened to Lucas was simply the consequences of his own actions. I sat with my parents, squirming uncomfortably, his words hitting my ears like a child violently banging on piano keys. Doing my best to ignore it, I looked down at my copy of the pamphlet the deacons had given out. On its cover was a beautifully detailed portrait of Lucas as I remembered him, signed by Magdalena herself. This made me smile, and so, I tried to focus on my happy memories of him.

I thought of the time we played hide and seek in the church. He hid in the confessional, which was

the last place we all thought to look. And when we all had a drawing contest, with Magdalena as the judge, he won with a drawing all of us holding hands. Recalling the time we were playing “good guys versus bad guys” made me chuckle, as he tried to scare us by jumping out from behind the angel statue, roaring like a dragon. And I remembered when his parents took his favorite doll away, Esther made him a new one out of her mom's scrap cloth, and Magdalena drew it a pretty face.

He loved that little rainbow doll, and carried it around everywhere. It was present in most, if not all of the most joyful memories I had of him – as well as our childhood drawings in Miss Mary's classroom. Though he had to hide it from his parents, as they thought it sinful, for some reason, for a boy to play with a traditional girl's toy. But I hadn't seen it since he disappeared as a child. I found myself wondering what had become of it.

Soon, I became distracted, however. As Blackburn continued to preach, his face slowly began to sort of melt off of his skull. His eyes glowed a brilliant yellow and he began to transform, his bones snapping within his body as his back dramatically curved and his fingers grew eerily thin and long. The spiky bones of his spine stabbed through his robes, revealing his naked, mangled form.

Flames burst up from the floor around him, silhouetting him completely. He then turned directly to me and spoke in a deep, guttural, inhuman tone: “Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, 'Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.'”

And suddenly, in the blink of an eye, everything was normal again. Looking around, I saw that no one had reacted to the horrific scene at all. It was as if I were the only one that could see it. Feeling a dark panic rising within me, I made my departure from the funeral.

Despite my horned shadow, it wasn't the devil that was speaking through Blackburn, I thought. It was God. His wrath was apparent. He knew of the thorn in my side, my secret temptations, and was warning me of the consequences should I give in. So, I promised myself that no matter what, I wouldn't so much as entertain such thoughts.

By the time the next exorcism came around, I was more than ready. I had my rosary around my



neck, and my notepad and pen in hand. And as Magnus and I made our way through that dizzying, unnerving convent, I bravely smiled at every Silent Sister we passed by. My courage didn't appear to be enough, however, as with every case, it, along with my optimism, depleted more and more.

Each exorcism I witnessed was sadder than the last. From a black man who was taught he'd become white in heaven, to a woman who was raped by a priest and called “Jezebel” for tempting him, I faced the heartbreaking stories of many possessed individuals. All of them were sickly, malnourished, and seemingly out of their minds. Some of them were even missing limbs, the explanation for which was always the same; there was an infection, and amputation was the only option. I did my best to comfort them until Magnus deemed them released of the devil's grasp – that was, *if* they survived.

It became a habit of mine to seek out Miss Mary after particularly grueling exorcisms. Magnus was good at giving advice, but it was she that had always comforted me when I was afraid as a child. And when I could find her, she did so during my training as well, in between showing off the beautiful Bible story illustrations she had recently commissioned from Magdalena. Unlike my parents, she supported and uplifted me – something that I so desperately needed at the time.

Since the incident with the snake, however, sometimes she'd go missing for months to a year at a time. The explanation of that was always the same: Miss Mary was out in the world, spreading the word of God and aiding those less fortunate. After fighting and surviving her way through the dead wood, she was out there, preaching to the depraved masses and feeding the homeless, giving them an option, a second chance at life. And the souls she saved were to return with her into the loving, welcoming church, born again, with new names, their sinful histories wiped clean so that they would not be viewed any differently than the rest of us.

When I could not find her, I still stayed in the shadows of her classroom – the very same one I'd spent countless days of my youth, learning all the classic Bible stories from Adam and Eve, to Noah and the flood, to Moses rescuing his people. It still smelled of her flowery perfume, and I could almost hear an echo of her infectious laughter. And when reminiscing didn't ease my sorrows, I'd pray to God,

asking him to watch over her wherever she was.

Thinking of her inspired me to do more to help those in need. This was why I began sneaking food and water into the convent to give to the possessed. Even cleaning them up was something I was more than happy to do.

At first, Father Magnus did not approve, but after a while, he began to see just how much of an improvement they were making because of it. It was literally bringing them back to life. And so, he began to help me in secret, but warned me not to let anyone know, as it wasn't our place as exorcists to provide such services.

It was, supposedly, the Silent Sisters that handled all of that. But instead of simply feeding and bathing them, I had a feeling the pale nuns were focusing more on the secret treatments they were known for. Some of the possessed even had bleeding, oozing bedsores, which Magnus would yell at Mother Superior about. Her silent glares were the only answers we ever received, however.

That horned shadow continued to haunt me. I would see it out of the corners of my eyes within the convent, within the church, within the school – even in my parents' house. I could see its silhouette in the ever-present fog outside, its blood-red glare following me wherever I went, like a snake ready to strike.

But nothing else dramatic occurred. Other than the ragged, deep voices of the possessed and the vulgarity they'd sometimes spew when stressed and frightened, each exorcism was simple – and most of them survived. Eventually, I had gone from observing exorcisms, to assisting in them. And between each case, I was slowly growing from a boy into a man.

On one particular night, I found myself making my way through the fog as I headed to the church. My plan was to spend some time with Miss Mary, and talk to her about my upcoming graduation. I never made it inside, however.

Levi was sitting on the stairs, drinking from a jug of wine. His dress shirt was unbuttoned and stained burgundy from his sloppy drinking. Beside him, his jacket was strewn over the stairs and his tie

was missing entirely.

Shaking my head, I approached. “Levi, that wine is for communion.”, I stated in monotone, already annoyed by his very presence.

His glare, like a dagger, stabbed through my heart. “It was supposed to be me.”, he growled. “*I* was supposed to become an exorcist!”

Furrowing my brows, I shook my head. “You still can.”, I said, studying him through a squint.

“No! I can't. I won't!”, he shouted. “I left the program entirely. And now, I'm leaving the church itself. And do you know why?”

I switched my gaze between his dark eyes, realizing that they were glistening with tears. “Levi.”, I said, shaking my head. “This is just the devil whispering to you in the shadows, trying to lure you in. He tries to get to me, sometimes, too. But as long as you stay within God's light...”

He laughed, loudly, obnoxiously. “That's all bullshit, Joshua.”, he growled, raising a single brow. “I left because none of it is real – my faith in exorcism, my faith in the church, my faith in GOD, all dead. But what I want to know is, after everything you've seen, how is yours still intact?!”

Chills danced down my arms as I studied his handsome face for a moment. I watched his thick, full lips curl up into a smirk, surrounded by that prickly facial hair. Time seemed to slow down as I began to wonder what they tasted like. Hearing him chuckle again, I blinked and met his gaze again. “I-I just do as I'm told.”, I admitted.

“You...you just do as your told.”, he mumbled, seeming confused. He then threw the jug of wine onto the ground, shattering it at once. “You just do as you're told?!” He stumbled over to me and grabbed my forearms with his hands, squeezing them tightly. “Those people in that convent drink their own urine because they are deprived of water, but you just do as you're told. They lie in their own feces because the nuns refuse to clean them, but you just do as you're told. They eat the insects that are attracted to their waste because its better than the rotting food those same nuns present to them once a week – *if they're lucky*, but you just do as you're told.” With every word he spoke, he shook me, as if it

would help me comprehend the gravity of the situation.

The physicality of this affected me in some way. It sent me back to a time when we were children, and I remembered how rough we would play back then. We would spend entire afternoons throwing rock-hard dirt clods at each other in the fog. This would usually end in us wrestling in the mud until one of us had had enough, and a truce would be struck that would only last for about ten minutes. Then we would be fighting again. But the entire time, we would be laughing and grinning, despite the pain, despite the bruises, welts, and cuts we left one on another.

Magdalena laughed at us – she even drew us wrestling once or twice. Esther was of the opinion that our violence stupid and had no qualms about letting us know that. Lucas was always afraid that we were going to hurt each other, and so, he was usually begging us to stop. He was ever the sensitive one.

I suppose, even as kids, Levi and I were always trying to outdo one another. Then, it was our thresholds of pain. In school, it was our studies. After that, it was our priesthood and earning the title of exorcist. But what would our competition become now that everything was changing, and we were on the precipice of adulthood?

The sweet scent of the wine on his breath drifted into my nostrils, intoxicating me. As I gazed into his dark eyes, I found myself wondering if I had left his muscular body as scarred as he'd done mine. "Levi, I...", I managed, reaching up and touching his hands with my own. I wrapped them around his wrists, but did not try to pull them away from me. In truth, I simply wanted to touch him.

His grip loosened as he searched my eyes for the answer I could not verbalize. "Has your heart not shattered beneath the weight of these people's tragic stories?!", he demanded. "Has your mind not broken trying to make sense of these laws and rules we're taught?! Do you not feel an ache in your bones, a longing in your soul for something more, something *real*, something tangible?!"

With every word he shouted, my panic deepened. Before he finished, it felt as if I were drowning within it. "Yes!", I yelled, my voice echoing into the night as I tore myself away from him. "But I'm terrified, Levi!" Everything grew quiet as I tried to catch my breath. "I'm terrified."

He swallowed and slowly shook his head, looking at me through wide eyes. “So am I, Joshua.”, he said, facing forward. “But it sure as fuck isn't of some devil whispering to me in the shadows.” With that, he turned around and began to walk away.

“Levi...”, I began. Seeing him stop, I took a deep, shaky breath as tears filled my eyes. “I can't tell if the demons I've been seeing are real or in my head – if it's reality that's shattering around me, or my sanity within me. Or, perhaps, the *actual* demon is roaring in the pulpit every Sunday. But I have an inkling of which one of these is the truth.”

He shook his head. His back was to me at this point. “Then follow me.”, he stated through clenched teeth, shooting a glare back at me from his cocked head. “Follow me into the darkness and we'll search for the light – together.”

Desperate to keep him near, I stepped forward, reaching out and grabbing his arm. “No, Levi! You can't leave the village!”, I shouted, stopping him in his tracks. “The world outside is dangerous.”

He gazed up into the gray skies above. After a moment or two of silence, he turned back to me. “Miss Mary seems to return all but unscathed after each and every one of her missions.”, he offered, shrugging his shoulders. “Listen, Joshua. If I stay here, after what I've done, I'll be locked up in that convent. Forever.”

Hearing such words, I was overcome with emotion. His mention of Miss Mary did little to ease my concerns, as well. She was the smartest, strongest person I knew – if anyone could survive out there with both her soul and body intact, it was her. Tears streamed down my face as I took Levi's hands into my own. “Pray tell, what have you done that is so unforgivable?”

His dark eyes shot up to mine at once. “I blasphemed against God before both my mother and Father Isaac.”, he stated sternly. “After my last exorcism, my assigned afflicted...passed away.” He looked toward the ground, the sorrow returning to his eyes. “My mother said that his death was what God wanted, and Father Isaac agreed. And I looked to both of them and told them that sometimes...God seems like an evil bastard.”

My heart sank as I heard these words. “Please don't go.”, I begged. Blasphemy was a certain sign of demonic possession. But all he had to do was turn himself in, claim he was grieving at the time, accept that he didn't have what it takes to become an exorcist, and pretend to be regretful. A week's stay and a few Hail Mary's, and he would have been released, of this I was certain. But at the same time, I knew his pride wouldn't allow him to lie. He truly believed that God was evil, and he wasn't going to take it back.

Turning back to me, he arched his brows. Still crying, he shook his head. Quietly and gently, he touched his warm fingertips to my face and began to wipe my tears away. “Your eyes look like his – blue, deep, endless like the ocean.”, he whimpered, sounding completely brokenhearted. “I don't want to lose you, too. Come away with me, Joshua.”

Once again, I lost myself within the depths of his mysterious eyes. Within them, I pondered over his invitation. Images of he and I, laughing and playing again like we did as children filled my mind. But this fantasy was soon shattered by the echoes of my parents' words, warning me of the dangers of the world beyond our village.

“Here, around the church, we are all protected by God's love.”, my father always said. Over time, it had become a sort of bedtime story for me. “But within the dead wood and beyond, there are toxins in the air that will make you sick. Out there, you will slowly weaken, sleep will not be restful, and food will not nourish you. Your skin will boil and your lungs will burn as you try to breathe. And eventually, if you do not make it back in time to His grace, you will die.”

“And, should you somehow make it to the surrounding cities...”, my mother would continue, tucking me into bed. “You will be shocked at the depravity of their citizens – *if* you aren't a victim of it, yourself. They are places of evil and sin, like Sodom and Gomorrah. If you survive there, it will be at the cost of your morals, your dignity, and your mortal soul.”

Then, they would kiss my forehead and make me say my nightly prayers. “Now I lay me down to sleep...”, I would whisper, my mind plagued with visions of disease and debauchery. As I repeated the

rhyme, they would blow out the candles in my room, and leave me alone in the darkness for the night. And the darkness would plague my nightmares.

Trying not to lose myself within my own imagination, I blinked and shook my head. Gazing into Levi's eyes once more, I shed one final tear that night. "I-I'm sorry, Levi.", I whispered, my voice breaking under the weight of my fear. "But...I must stay here."

He nodded, solemnly. "I understand. I do. This is all you've ever known.", he said, motioning around us. "I've stood where you stand now. And I know that no matter what I say, you're still going to cling to your beliefs. You'll have to see the truth yourself in order to believe it."

My brows furrowed in confusion. Cocking my head to the side, I studied him for a moment. "What truth is *that*, Levi?"

He did not answer. Instead, he took a deep, shaky breath and gazed into my eyes for a moment or two. "I'm sorry, Joshua. For making fun of you, for letting my competitive spirit get the better of me, for...*everything*.", he apologized, wiping his tears away. "I'll take my leave now, but promise me one thing before I go." Suddenly, his eyes were even darker, he seemed more stoic and serious. "Don't become an exorcist. You'll live to regret it. At least...I hope you will." He then walked away and disappeared into the fog, leaving me softly weeping on the steps of the church.

Every ounce of my being screamed, raged, burned to follow him. There seemed to be a thousand questions churning within the stormy sea of my mind that I so desperately wanted to ask him. I yearned to fight him like I did when we were young, to beat him with clods of dirt, to punch him, to kick him, to bite him, to claw him, to scream and to cry as I asked him...why?

Why had he tried so fervently to burn the bridge of our childhood friendship, only to eventually try and help me over the raging river it once stood over? Why did he seem so traumatized by everything? Why did it seem as though he were holding back in his explanations? Why did he think I would regret completing my goals? Why did the choice of what could have been a short stay in the convent seem more difficult for him than running away and facing the possibility of horrible sickness

and painful death? These questions burned inside of me. But I simply and silently sat down on the steps and stared into the fog where his silhouette disappeared.

I'd lost yet another friend. Somehow, this one hurt just as much as Lucas' death. My heart was crippled. My mind was plagued. But there was so much more loss, more pain I was yet to endure.



### *Chapter Three: False Witness*

*“A false witness shall not be unpunished, and he that speaketh lies shall perish.”*

My nightmares began to worsen after Levi's departure. One particular dream recurred many times. Haunted by my horned shadow, I'd found myself walking through the dead wood, lost in the fog. There were countless eyes in the darkness, glowing, watching, staring, but no one would help me. Desperate to find some light, any source of illumination, I ran deeper and deeper into the forest of dead trees, endlessly searching, endlessly panicking. Throughout this, the large, shadowy demon continued to stalk me. I fervently ran away from him, only to end up staring into his glowing red eyes at the end of each and every path I'd take. And as my sanity spiraled out and away from me, he'd stand there, silently staring, tilting his head.

After, I'd always wake up in my bed, in a cold sweat, in the middle of the night, with unbearable pain in my wrists and ankles. They were bleeding, as if someone had driven spikes into them, leaving my entire bed covered in blood. Yet, the red would simply wash away from my unmarred flesh, revealing no wounds beneath it. I remembered from my studies that this was called 'stigmata'. This was something else I never told a soul.

It wasn't long before I was summoned to the convent once again. There, I found myself gazing into the tired, listless eyes of Magdalena. She wasn't strapped to the bed, and the room smelled fresh. Strangely, covering the walls were richly detailed, fine and realistic portraits of different members of the congregation.

Father Magnus told me that, a few days prior to our visit, she had come in on her own. Apparently, she hadn't even tried to explain to anyone her reason for being there. Even stranger, she showed no signs of demonic possession – her brown skin hadn't paled, her caramel eyes were full of life and light,

and she was buxom and voluptuous in her white nightgown. He asked me if he thought I could get her to communicate, since Levi told him that she and I were friends as children.

Hoping for the best, I began to speak of the old times, our other friends, and Lucas. No matter what I tried, however, she ignored me. Nothing I had said seemed to interest her in the least.

“Perhaps she's wary of *me*,” the exorcist offered. “I will wait out in the hall for a while. Please, continue, Joshua.”

Nodding, I watched him depart. As the door closed, I turned back to Magdalena, who was now sitting up in the bed and gazing out of the barred window. The blanket was clutched tightly to her chest.

“Mags...”, I began, stepping back toward her bed. I kept my voice soft and calm as best I could. “Is this about Lucas?”

She slowly blinked behind those large, round glasses. Her thick auburn curls were up in a messy bun. It was then that her eyes went from the window, to her drawings on the walls. Following her gaze, I found one of all of us. It had me, her, Lucas, Levi, and Esther, playing in the cemetery as kids. Tears filled my eyes as I suddenly remembered how happy I was to play with them – an emotion that had grown very scarce as I aged. “Th-these are beautiful.”, I managed, trying to stop crying.

My eyes then caught one of Levi. He was standing next to another teenager – one that I did not recognize – holding his hand. They were looking at one another, blushing, softly grinning, their lips parted, mere inches apart – almost as if they were about to kiss, or they had just finished kissing. This second boy had vibrant blue eyes. “Mags...”, I began, growing curious as the sound of pen on paper drifted over to my ears. “Who is that...?”

Turning around to face her, I saw that she was now drawing furiously. Her eyes were wide with madness and searing through her glasses as they focused on the paper below. I approached her and stood at her right, looking over her shoulder as she continued to draw. On the paper was an image of that horned shadow that had been haunting me so.

Throughout my studies, Father Magnus had commissioned Magdalena to draw updated sketches

of different demons and angels. The old ones were rather simple, with much less detailing, so hers were the images that we always referred to when studying the ancient scriptures and tomes on demonology. So, obviously, she knew what the devil looked like, but to draw him as a silhouette, exactly as I'd been seeing him, and only when I had come to visit her?

“M-Mags...”, I managed, trembling, chills covering my entire body. “I-is that sketch for me?”

She grew still, and dropped her pen onto the paper. Quietly, she tilted her head and looked up at me. A soft smile spread across her pretty face as she ripped the drawing from her notebook and handed it over to me. And in that moment, she parted her lips, and took a breath as she opened her mouth, as if she were about to speak for the very first time.

Suddenly, she began to convulse. Foam formed on the corners of her mouth as she threw her head back onto the pillow behind her. This sent the sketchpad and pen flying across the room and her entire body continued to violently shake.

“Mags!”, I shouted, reaching down for her, unsure of what to do. “Father Magnus! Help!”

As the exorcist charged in, Magdalena continued to seize. He immediately saw what was happening, and ran to get help from one of the Silent Sisters. I could hear him roaring through the halls, desperately calling for someone – anyone to come and help her.

Crying and begging God to heal my friend, I helplessly watched her slowly succumb. Soon, she was deathly still, staring at the wall of her drawings.

I didn't have time to mourn her. That same red snake had appeared, slithering out from her left ear. It wagged its tongue at me as it slithered across her body, making its way toward me. On her right shoulder, it raised itself up once more. Gazing into my eyes, it began to speak in strange, echoing whispers: “Taste of the fruit.”

As Magnus returned with a few of the Silent Sisters, the serpent slithered away and vanished within the darkness beneath the bed. They revived Magdalena, but she remained in their care. We were to visit her again later on.

This was the first seizure she had experienced, as far as her parents knew. They shared with me some information that I had never known about her, however; she was adopted. Long ago, when I was still a babe, the cries of a very young little girl were heard from the dead wood. And when a few deacons went to go investigate, they found little Mags, a toddler, covered in dirt, and starving to death.

They assumed that she had escaped one of the mysterious cities the elders were always warning us about. But it was clear that she could not have survived in the depths of the dead wood alone. A parent or an older sibling had to have been with her, but no matter how long or fervently the deacons searched, they could not find a soul out there.

Little Magdalena was given to a young couple with brown skin, as to match her own. Her adoptive parents were then sworn to secrecy. They thanked God for their little miracle, loved her as if she were their own, and never spoke of it again. That was, until that day in the convent.

That tremor she had experienced – it was demonic in nature, I was certain of it. The culprit had to have been the serpent, I thought – the *demon* that plagued me so. Somehow, when she was studying demonology and putting pen to paper to draw the creatures of darkness to life, the evil within them must have attached itself to her. And she was such a good and righteous girl, she easily sensed it. That had to be the reason why she came to the convent of her own accord.

After about a week, I was stopped once again by Headmistress Rebecca in the hallway of the school. The tall, intimidating woman immediately asked me if I had seen Levi. There was a strange look in her dark eyes – not one of concern, but one of pure malice. It chilled me to the core, so I lied to her. She told me to tell her if I were to see him again, and I told her I would. But I knew I wouldn't.

“God will tell me if you're lying. Bearing false witness is against one of the Ten Commandments.”, she said through a smirk. Raising a single brow, she tilted her head and studied me through her curved glasses. She then raised those glasses up and looked me up and down beneath them, as if she were judging me. “God tells me everything, you know.”

This struck me as strange. “G-God actually...*speaks* to you?”, I asked. “You hear His voice?” Not

even Pastor Blackburn had ever claimed such a thing, saying that, instead, God showed him signs. Only the priests were said to be able to commune with Jesus Christ and God, which is why we had to confess to them our sins and ask what we should do as penance.

She looked at me as if I were broken. “Aw, sweetie. Doesn't he communicate with *you*? Help you with decisions? Extrapolate on certain scriptures? Warn you of others'...*sins*?”, she queried. The headmistress then laughed. “It must be all this...*darkness* around you.” As she said 'darkness', she wagged an index finger all over, pointing it to me as she looked me up and down again. “If I were you, I'd go confess to one of the priests. Perhaps they can help you atone before you're sent to the convent and you never see the light of day again.” She then placed her glasses back over her dark eyes before making her departure.

She was a thin, tall woman, looking down on most men. Her dark, wavy hair trailed down her entirety, almost touching the floor. Always dressed in full body black sleeved and gloved dresses that covered every inch of her skin, aside from her face, she always seemed to eerily float, or glide everywhere she went. Like a ghost, she haunted the halls of that school, striking fear into the hearts of every single student – including her own son.

After that, there was a hunt for him. Deacons were sent out into the fog every week to try and find him and bring him back. Once they did, there was no telling what was going to happen. No one I asked had any answers for me, as someone leaving the church was unprecedented.

Though, this brought about some stories of a woman who was actually excommunicated from the church quite a number of decades prior. Sarah was said to have been a young and beautiful Silent Sister, and was very skilled at healing the sick. It was said that this was because she was secretly a witch, as she was seen dancing naked with a horned devil in the dead wood around a fire at night. Inexplicably, her stomach began to grow round, as if she were pregnant.

And when the Elder Council received word of this, they held a Midnight Mass for her. There, she was stripped naked before the entirety of the clergy, and a Witch's Mark – a severe burn said to be

from the fires of Hell itself, was discovered covering the whole of her legs, leading up between them. At this point, she could deny it no longer; she was, indeed, pregnant. It seemed as though she had made love to the devil, and was now carrying his child.

The nightmarish story did not end there, however. Sarah's naked, flayed corpse was found in the depths of the fog-smothered dead wood some thirteen days after. A bloody and grisly sight, it seemed as though she had been eaten alive, as most of her internal organs were missing, and what little remained of them seemed to have been chewed on. The placenta had been mostly consumed as well, but the baby was nowhere to be seen.

Everyone said that it was an army of demons that consumed her and took the child. They described them as completely white goats, moose, and deer with upside-down heads and black, empty eyes – all horned creatures that usually consumed plant life. This was believed to be because the devil only used her to bear his child – once it was ready to be born, he took it, and left her to die.

Apparently, as soon as the deacons found her, they buried her in a shallow grave within the depths of the dead wood. They didn't bother with a funeral, as she had been excommunicated. Her soul was already lost. Showing her any sort of respect in death would have just been a waste of time and energy.

Everything I heard about this story was completely against my will. It seemed like absolutely everyone – even my own parents – were suddenly obsessed with it. Sarah and her demise were all anyone could talk about for what seemed like forever. And the more I learned of her terrible fate, the more I feared for Levi.

Soon, this fear began to consume me. I desperately wanted to speak to Miss Mary, but she was on another one of her missions. It was then that I remembered Headmistress Rebecca's words. She'd told me to confess my sins to one of the confessional priests.

Each confession was supposedly anonymous. For this reason, neither the priest, nor the confessor, could clearly see the other within the shrouded walls of the confessional. Both sides were separated by a mesh wall, and there wasn't any light within.

There were two confessionals within the sanctuary. Other than during Pastor Blackburn's sermons, and mass, they were manned by two of the priests at all times. I'm not certain how many there were in total, but I had learned that they took specific hourly shifts.

One night, after a particularly egregious nightmare about Levi being eaten alive by those demonic creatures, I found myself walking to the church through the dark and the fog. I quietly made my way into the sanctuary, and immediately headed toward the confessional on the right. Nervous, as I had not done this in quite a while, I stepped inside and closed the door behind me with a shaking hand.

"B-bless me, Father, for I have sinned.", I managed, my voice trembling as I preformed the sign of the cross over my chest, shoulders and forehead. "I-I believe it has been months confession – and this one is to be very different than the others. S-so I am a bit frightened right now."

The priest was silent for a moment. "I understand.", he finally, calmly said, his voice deep and masculine. He didn't sound tired at all, despite how late it was at night. "May God, who has enlightened every heart, help you to know your sins and trust His mercy."

These words did little to help me. I turned to him. All I could make out was a shadowy figure on the other side of the mesh wall. "I lied, Father.", I confessed. "I lied to someone. And now I am terrified of the consequences it may bring."

He nodded. "And...why...did you lie, my child?", he asked. "Was it to protect someone's feelings?"

My brows furrowed. "Not exactly. It was more so to protect someone's *safety*.", I explained. My heart felt as if it were banging against my ribcage, desperate to escape. "But...because of that lie, that someone may be in even *more* danger."

Again, the priest grew silent. It seemed as if he were thinking of a response. "*Satan...*", he said, suddenly. "...is said to be both a liar and the *Father* of Lies. Do you believe that?"

These words froze me in fear. "S-Satan...?", I whispered. I was now staring down at the floor of the confessional, trembling in fright. Out of the corners of my eyes, I could see two red glowing orbs staring at me from the other side. I wasn't speaking to a priest at all, it seemed.

“Satan, Beelzebub, Abaddon...”, he slowly bellowed. His voice was now split into an entire choir, it seemed – a dark one, singing the praises of the different forms of the devil. “Iblis, Belial, Lucifer...”

Flames shot up all around him, vibrantly illuminating the entire area. I could feel the heat radiating toward me from the mesh wall between us. Gasping, I stood up and tore through the door of the confessional. Hearing that dark choir continue to sing the many different names of the devil behind me, I ran through the suddenly shadowy sanctuary, praying to Jesus to cast a shield of His light around me.

As I approached the entrance, I heard the confessional's second door loudly creak open. And in his normal voice, the priest called out to me, saying that he did not yet assign my penance. He asked me to wait, sounding genuinely concerned for me, but I was so filled and fueled by fear that I had no choice but to ignore him.

I ran all the way home and hid within the blankets of my bed. There, I continued to pray for protection, panicking and hyperventilating. Eventually, I cried myself to sleep. And I never went to confessional again.

It wasn't long before I graduated. A few months passed, and I was just about to receive my title. Soon, I was to be performing exorcisms all on my own. The thought of teaching a young acolyte and showing them the horrors I'd witnessed seemed awful, however. I wasn't certain how Father Magnus had managed it.

He and I were sitting on the steps just outside of the church. The massive castle-like building loomed over us ominously as I gazed up into the ever-gray skies. We shared stories about our childhoods, and much to my surprise, his was filled with just as many nightmares and horrific, unexplained visions as mine had been.

He told me of an inhuman creature he would see stalking the halls of the school at night, dragging a massive, bloody sword behind it. Calling it the Inquisitor, he described it as a sort of living suit of armor, like that of a medieval knight, trailing a white, tattered cape behind. Apparently it loudly clanked as the pieces of armor slammed against each other with every slow, calculated step it took.



“I could never figure out what was beneath its armor. But from its movements, I knew it wasn't human.”, he explained, staring off into the fog. His hands were trembling as he fiddled with his fingers. “A-and when he found a sinner, he would...carve them up with such ease. Just...blood and gore everywhere; a pile of wet, red viscera where a human being had once stood.” Swallowing, nervously, he turned to me. “But then, it would be gone – it's victim, perfectly safe.”

My brows furrowed in confusion. This sounded strikingly similar to my own experiences with the demonic. “Do you...think it was all in your head?”, I asked.

He shook his head and turned away. “I...feel that it was more so in my *heart* – my *broken* heart.”, he explained, touching his hand to his chest. “It was...somehow...made up of the pieces of it, the...shards of my sorrow, reflecting, in a way, my own actions as an exorcist.” His green eyes widened as he realized what he was saying. Flashing a concerned glance back to me, he took a hold of my hand. “Promise me you won't tell anyone my words here tonight. Y-you know full well what would happen to me if the church knew of these visions.”

His fear surprised me. It seemed that even those of a higher rank weren't safe. This would render all of my hard work as moot with just one mistake. I had to be perfect in order to stay alive.

I reached over with my other hand and held his within both of mine. “I promise.”, I whispered through a feigned smile. “You're safe with me, my friend.”

I didn't tell him about my own demons, despite desperately wanting to. My fear of the consequences proved too great. At the time, I felt as though I were keeping myself safe. Unfortunately, this was something I would come to regret.

That night, my dreams were haunted by by Father Magnus. Within them, we were together in a bright white featureless, formless area, perhaps made of light itself. He was smiling over at me, chuckling happily. But flashes of a pale, bloated corpse violently interjected this scene. Over time, his chuckles became shrieks of agony, tears streaming down his strained face as it slowly warped to that of the cadaver.

I awoke from that nightmare to find my mother standing in the doorway of my bedroom. She told me that Exorcist Magnus had killed himself in the night. Pastor Blackburn found his body hanging from the chandelier in the sanctuary of the church. It was apparently ghostly pale, with a horrified expression forever frozen on his face.

That was the day I was supposed to become a full-fledged Exorcist. There was to be a ceremony within the sanctuary, led by Magnus himself, before all of the congregation. I was ignored, which is what I would have preferred, and instead, preparations for Magnus' funeral were the priority.

The body was still there. Perhaps maliciously, Pastor Blackburn had waited for the entire congregation to show up before cutting the rope with that cross-shaped blade. I couldn't bring myself to even look at what remained of my former teacher.

It was then that I received a summons from the Elder Council – one for a Midnight Mass, which rarely occurred, and usually meant something bad. It was mandatory for every member of the clergy – teachers, deacons, nuns, priests, and Pastor Blackburn – to attend, yet no one else was allowed, especially not children. This would be the first one I had ever attended – and it was about me.

In the dead of night, when the sanctuary was usually empty, I reluctantly arrived to meet the elders. They were comprised of three nameless priests that had all been within the church for nearly a century. The three of them offered me wine and bread before we began, and quoted the scriptures about Jesus' blood and body. I downed the wine at once, remembering the horror stories I'd heard about these enigmatic figures.

These were the men that sent people – and *children* – to the convent. And after the stories my classmates shared with me, Sarah's tragic tale, as well as those of the possessed, I was horrified. But I was determined to stay and see what it was they wanted from me.

The elders were so old, they did not look unlike a group of walking corpses. Their voices were just as strained and rough as those of the afflicted of the convent. They were adorned with gold and jewels, dripping in sparkles and splendor while the people of the village all but starved. Shrouded in black,

hooded, golden-trimmed robes, they stood before the pulpit in a triangle formation, facing me as I stood within the middle of the aisle between the pews before them.

I was incredibly relieved to realize that they were only testing me about the knowledge I'd collected over the years about exorcism and demonology. Poor Magnus had not updated them on my progress in a while, and so, they wanted to see if I was indeed ready to take on such a role in the church. So, I answered them as honestly as I possibly could, praying to God that they did not know of the demonic thorn in my side.

Their questions began simple enough. I was quizzed on what sort of demons I'd encountered over the years, and how they effected their unwilling hosts. Then we got into scripture, and the tools of exorcism, such as the trusted Bible, Holy Water, and crucifix, and which specific uses they had. After this, they wanted me to recite from memory a few different cases that Magnus had on file.

However, about halfway into this strange interview, their questions became more vague and confusing. They began to ask me about what I'd "learned" about exorcism and demonic possession over the years, as if there were some grand secret to uncover. This led into inquiries about the church itself and how I felt about the possibility of holding power within it.

I wasn't certain how to answer these questions, and nervously asked for a bit more clarity on the subject. Instead, they told me that I was not ready to become Lead Exorcist, nor had I learned enough to even be a full-fledged underling of one. Their voices were in unison, almost in an unnatural manner, and filled with disdain. It reminded me of how my father had always spoken to me – disappointed.

The murmurs and mumbles of the clergy behind me were apparent. Though I could not hear them clearly, I knew they were all judging me. I wasn't good enough. I never was, and I would never be.

As the Elder Council separated and began to depart, I stepped forward. "W-wait! Does that mean I'm still just an acolyte?", I asked, watching them all go their separate ways. Tears filled my eyes once again as I thought of my teacher and the massive hole he'd left in the torn, frayed fabric of my life.

"Who...who would I be assisting now that...Magnus is gone?"

They shot bitter glares back to me as the onlookers faded into the shadows of the back of the sanctuary. “Acolyte? How could *you* possibly assist *anyone*?! You are no longer allowed to even *participate* in such important rites.”, they growled, their voices still eerily unified as they loudly echoed throughout the church. “Father Isaac will replace Magnus as Lead Exorcist, but that is none of your concern. You've had your entire life of eighteen years to learn the subject, and you're still just as blind and naive as a child. With such a bleeding heart, you could easily be led astray by the forces of darkness. Why, we wouldn't be surprised if you've been having *dark communion* with the devil himself! You are a disappointment to this church and your God. Be grateful we aren't excommunicating you for such sacrilege.”

Sacrilege? I'd done every thing by the book – the GOOD book. There were so many cases I'd helped with that, if it weren't for me, the victim would have died from starvation or dehydration. And now they were back in the pews every Sunday, listening to Pastor Blackburn's wrathful rants, remembering very little of the trauma they endured. Why was that not good enough for the Elder Council? Jesus Himself had a “bleeding heart” for those in need. What was it that the possessed needed from me that the council felt I wasn't providing? What *were* the right answers to their odd questions? No matter how I searched my mind, I could not decipher this puzzle, this conundrum of right and wrong, good and evil. After everything I'd witnessed, it all seemed to be mixed and melted together.

I collapsed into tears as they departed. A deep, churning panic had arisen within me, and I was hyperventilating as I sobbed uncontrollably. Soon, I was alone in the darkness, weeping before that massive statue of the crucifixion. “Dear Lord, please...”, I sobbed. “Please forgive me.” Begging for forgiveness, I realized my father was right all along; I was destined to fail in my endeavors. And now it seemed as though I had wasted my entire life.

My dreams were yet again haunted that night. Again, I ran away from my red-eyed shadow, but now, I was also being stalked by those horned creatures with upside-down heads from Sarah's tale. Pale, deformed, hairless moose, deer, and goats, chewing on the bloody organs from the fresh, open,

naked corpses beneath them awaited me at the end of every path I took. And soon, it was my own flesh that they craved.

They began to chase me, roaring and growling unlike any animal I had ever heard, thick, discolored drool oozing down from between their bloody elongated teeth. The goats were rather small, and the bucks were about my height, but the moose towered over me, and even their running as they chased after me was horrifyingly violent; they kicked up chunks of earth with ease beneath the mighty weight of their hooves. Tripping over roots and rocks, I struggled to get away, running deeper and deeper into the forest of dead trees, desperately praying to God for mercy and forgiveness.

In the chase, I found myself in a part of the lifeless forest that I did not recognize whatsoever. Hanging from nooses from the dead trees' highest branches were shadowy, featureless cadavers. Hanging from each of their nooses like a necklace, was a golden cross charm. Their only other similarity was the fact that they were all completely naked, but they ranged dramatically in skin color and age. Some were even children.

This made me think that my only escape from these demonic creatures that hounded me so, was if I took things into my own hands. The only scenario in which I wasn't eaten alive by my demons, was if I found a backdoor out of life. Like these people. Like Father Magnus.

No matter which direction I ran, I would always see my horned shadow's glowing eyes in the darkness betwixt the dark dead trees. Soon, I realized that he was actually trying to lead me away from them. Despite my reluctance, I began to follow him instead of running down random paths.

He would vanish when I came upon him. A few seconds later, he would reappear in the distance, and I would run toward him again. It wasn't long before I came out of the dead wood and into a scorched clearing. The demonic creatures that had been following me seemed to vanish behind me as I did so, as if they simply weren't allowed to exist there. Was this some sort of holy ground?

Within the center of the blackened meadow, was a pentagram of flame. Within it, my horned shadow levitated in the air, seemingly sitting on nothing. He was completely naked, in a meditative

position, with his legs crossed flatly before him. His right arm was up at his side, with his index and middle fingers pointing upward, while on the descending left arm, the same fingers pointed downward. Despite the light of the fire below, he was still shrouded in shadows.

At first I thought he was fully erect. As I slowly and cautiously approached, however, I saw that what I mistook as his penis, was that large, red snake rising out from between his crossed legs. With its back half wrapped around his waist like some sort of belt, it wagged its tongue at me in recognition.

My horned shadow quietly stared at me through those glowing blood-red eyes. When he opened his mouth, I expected a roar. Instead, out flowed a soft, dulcet lullaby of backwards words. Even though I could not understand them, they still somehow comforted me. And that in itself is what terrified me the most.

## *Chapter Four: Born Again*

*“Truly, truly, I say unto thee, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*

I found myself in the fetal position, surrounded by a comforting warmth. Everything was wet and pink, but shadowy. The walls, floor and ceiling around me were round and connected, seemingly making up a strange egg-like shape, and were covered in what seemed like blood vessels. My tears slowly dried and the sorrow was replaced by contentment.

Within a few moments, I realized I was completely nude. A fleshy cord had inexplicably sprouted from my belly button, and was running through the strange, warm, spacious sack I was floating within. Glowing orbs of light flowed through it, slowly, continuously feeding me love – vibrant, unrelenting, unconditional love. But whose?

In the church, people are always speaking of being “born again”. The truth was, I was born into the church, and from the very beginning, I was being fed vague concepts, incomplete ideas, and flawed beliefs via an umbilical cord of abuse.

I never chose this. Honestly, I don't think anyone in the church ever did. It was all just what we were taught, what we were raised to believe, by people who never knew anything else. And to question any of it meant burning in Hell.

Slowly, I began to feel weaker and weaker. The orbs flowing into me turned a sickly green. Or maybe it always had been, and I had just been doing everything I could to try and convince myself otherwise. It wasn't love or light that I was being fed at all. In actuality, it was mental illness and spiritual decay, rotting away my mind and soul.

It wasn't long before I began to feel sick to my stomach. Beads of sweat formed on my forehead, but suddenly I was so cold, I was trembling. This disease was slowly killing me.

“Cut the cord.”, a deep, masculine voice commanded, as if from the very air around me.

Looking around in confusion, I saw nothing but pink. Sick to my stomach, I gripped that strange, fleshy cord with what little strength I had left and began to tug at it. This pained me greatly, but it was to no avail; the sickness had all but drained me of energy.

So, I lifted it to my mouth and began to chew it. It was tough, and tasted vile. And somehow, the smell of it was worse. But that was nothing compared to when my teeth finally ripped through it, sending the toxic liquid decay bursting into my mouth. I immediately began to vomit.

But I had severed it from me, leaving me completely untethered. The warmth and pinkness of the spiritual placenta began to darken. It was slowly rotting, decaying around me, filling the area with more of that gut-wrenching stench. I began trying to rip it all way, to tear a hole within it that I could fit through. But I was exhausted.

It felt as if the sickness was still in me. It seemed as though, despite all my efforts, it was too late. My arms and legs grew numb, and I became lightheaded, feeling as if I were drifting off into a deep sleep. But I knew in my heart it was death itself coming for me. “I-I’m scared!”, I called, desperate for God to finally reply.

Just then, that same voice began to sing to me a sort of lullaby. It was those same backwards words, but they were soft and slow, calming, sounding almost loving, like a parent's song to their newborn child. It greatly comforted me in my time of need.

Summoning up some unknown strength, I tore away the rest of the decay. This revealed a cold, black, endless void around me. And again, I was scared, but the lullaby continued.

A bright light appeared in the distance. This made it appear as if I were in some sort of tunnel. And so I began to “swim” through the darkness toward it. The closer I became, the louder the lullaby seemed to grow. It seemed that the serenade was coming from just on the other side of that light.

As I approached, beams of brilliance rained down around me from the opening. With tears streaming down my face, I reached for the light. And as soon as my fingertips felt its warmth, I was



immediately and violently birthed out into the light of the world, pulling the blankets from over my head in my bed.

Reborn? Had something changed within me? At the time, I couldn't tell. I was too close to the light to see the growing shadow behind me.

Awakening with a jolt in my bedroom, I tried to catch my breath. Covered in a cold sweat, I realized I was in my new house. Tears filled my eyes and I cried like a baby. Back in Sunday School, when I'd mention my childhood nightmares, Miss Mary had always told me that dreams were messages from God. But what were these dreams trying to tell me?

Silence and darkness surrounded me for just a few seconds...until that otherworldly, eerily echoing singing continued. Following the voice to the corner of the room, I saw a large shadowy figure cowering down between my dresser and the closet. Those familiar horns spiraled up from the being's head. And blood red eyes slowly blinked below them as he tilted his head, inquisitively.

"...h-hello?", I managed, terrified. My tears stopped at once. Sitting on the bed, I stared into his glowing glare, trembling in fright. Pulling the blanket up to my chin like a frightened child, I dreaded his response.

The singing immediately stopped. Instead of speaking, however, he slowly blinked those flaming eyes and smiled at me. He then began to slowly fade away. Within a few seconds, there was nothing there but the wall and a pile of dirty clothes that vaguely resembled his shape.

Was I losing my mind? Or had the devil really been singing a lullaby to me?

After this vision, the stigmata suddenly stopped. I never bled without a wound again. But by then, I had begun to question whether or not the bleeding itself was a part of the recurring nightmare it had always coincided with. In truth, I had begun to distrust my own eyes, ears, and memories.

By this time, the church had given me my own house in the village. This wasn't strange; every young man was assigned a house of their own upon coming of age. Of course, they were all equally as decayed, and most of us lacked the skills and tools needed to repair them, but at least we were all out of

the fog. And being alone, away from my parents and the clergy, I finally began to feel safe.

That very morning, after seeing the devil in my bedroom, was when I remembered Magnus and his “Inquisitor”. He had been haunted by an otherworldly creature as well. Could that have been why he took his own life? I had to know if such a fate was awaiting me.

Unlike Pastor Blackburn, Father Magnus did not have a space of his own within the walls of the church. His classroom in the school served that purpose. That was where he kept all of the exorcism reports he made, so it didn't seem implausible to me that other important things could have been hidden there. And so, as soon as the sun went down, I crept out of my house and made my way through the dark, lonely, broken world that surrounded me.

I made my way to the small, ramshackle school in silence. The doors were locked, which I had fully expected. A rock was what I broke one of the windows with. After climbing into one of the dark and empty classrooms, I heard it: strange, otherworldly clanking, echoing down the corridor just beyond the door.

There was no way, I thought. It just wasn't possible.

Despite my curiosity, I was frozen in fear. I stood there in the darkness, watching the large window in the classroom door. And within just a few moments, I saw it – the Inquisitor, slowly making his way by with jerky, inhuman movements, followed by the horrific grinding of his blade as he dragged it down the hall.

When the silence finally returned, I began to walk toward the door. Reaching a shaking hand to the knob, I froze. Listening, I heard nothing, so I wrapped my hand around the handle, turned it, and quietly pushed the door open, revealing the shadowy hallway before me.

Through the dirty, checkered tiles, I could see a seemingly endless line, a cut from the creature's blade. It was deep.

Terrified, I began walking through the school as quickly and quietly as possible. The darkness confused me greatly, however, as nothing seemed familiar to me in those deeply panicked moments. It

hadn't been very long since I'd graduated, but it felt as if I had never been in that building in my life. My mind wandered as my body did the same, seemingly endlessly through those empty hallways, hearing the grinding and clanking of Father Magnus' own personal demon echoing all around me. Eventually, my dread built up to a head, when I turned into another corridor, and was caught.

The janitor was there, pushing his wheeled cart of cleaning supplies from room to room. An accusing finger was immediately raised and pointed at me as he began to yell as loudly as he could, telling me that no one was allowed in the school at night.

Before I had the time to react or explain, the Inquisitor returned. He was slowly stalking up behind the angry janitor, raising his massive blade high into the air. Strangely, his victim did not appear to hear the loud noises he was making in his approach. And suddenly, the janitor was in two pieces, falling sloppily onto the checkered floor into a mess of his own blood and innards.

I was already running away. As I did so, however, I heard that loud clanging following me. My panic began to rise again as I found myself praying to God for safety and salvation. And as I came across the open door of Magnus' classroom, I dove inside, shutting and locking it behind me.

Sidling the wall beside the door, I listened as the loud, violent noises went right past me. And soon, all was silent. But I remained there for a while, frozen in fear, struggling to catch my breath.

Shortly after I regained my composure, I noticed the warm light of a flickering, mostly melted candle before me. It was a part of a three-pronged candelabra, of which the two other candles had already melted, their flames extinguished.

This illuminated the empty room around me, revealing those four walls, covered in overflowing bookshelves. These ancient tomes were all books about demonology and exorcism. They also consisted of different versions of each denomination of Christianity, before the Great Union took place. These were the same books I had studied, and been tested on countless times in school.

I also noticed a few odd things about the room in those surreal moments. The students' desks had all been strewn about, as if by someone in some crazed rage. Scattered papers and seemingly empty

manila folders covered the floor around them. I had never seen this area in such a state, yet, the air itself still carried the scent of Magnus' calming cologne.

After every exorcism, he was required to fill out a detailed report. These were usually organized within folders in his desk. Curious, I began to go through the papers in the floor, and soon I saw that they were nothing more than scribbles on paper, as if a toddler had been doodling on them. Every last one of them, a waste of paper and ink.

Confused, I checked the other side of his desk. The drawers had all been pulled out and thrown into the floor behind it. They were both empty, and surrounded by papers and folders themselves.

Surely Magnus knew what he had done – why would he have torn through them as if he were in shock or rage? Had he truly believed that he had written detailed reports? Did he find these scribbles and begin to question reality? I wasn't certain, but it was obvious that he had left these here in such a manner of disarray for someone to notice, for someone to go through.

Feeling chills cascading down my arms, I lowered the last page from my face, to reveal the chalkboard before me. Through the flickering flame of the dying candle, I saw that a message was written there, a message in Magnus' handwriting that I knew in my heart was intended for his beloved students:

*I'm so sorry. I know this is quite sudden. But after everything I've seen and done, I need to come to an end. Please do not blame yourselves. The simple truth is that the world would just be a significantly better place without certain people in it – myself included. And if I want the world to return to God's light, I need to start with myself.*

*- All my love, Father Magnus*

There was no “it” there between “needed” and “to”. “I need to come to an end.” He needed *himself* to stop existing. As for the things he'd seen and done – I knew it wasn't just the things he'd taught us. There had to be more weighing on his mind to make him take his own life.

As soon as I read Father Magnus' words out loud, the candle's light was snuffed out. And then, that gigantic sword violently crashed through the classroom door. Before I knew it, the Inquisitor was clanking toward me. I tried to back away, but in a flickering flash, the creature shot over, defying the laws of nature. And in a terrifying, painful jolt, it had pinned me to the ground with one hand.

Now mere inches away from it, I could smell the decayed flesh beneath the armor. Gagging in disgust, I desperately reached up toward the helmet that hid its mysterious face. Seeing it raising its massive, bloody blade with its other hand out of the corners of my eyes, I took a hold of its helmet's visor, and struggled to lift it. If I were destined to die, I was at least going to lay eyes on the face of the creature that was taking my life.

The visor loudly creaked from age as it rose, revealing a warped, undead version of Magnus. His jaw was unhinged, making it look as if he were shrieking out in agony, though he made no sound. Those eyes, once beautiful, were now dulled, yellowed, frozen in place as they stared upward. That once vibrant orange-red hair had oddly faded. Around his neck was a bluish-black ring of bruises from the noose.

Strangely, his head was twisted within the helmet. In fact, it looked as if his eerily pale corpse had been roughly and violently stuffed into the armor. If he had been alive, it would have been horrifically painful for him.

In that moment, his corpse vanished. The heavy armor collapsed before me and on top of me, loudly clanging against the black and white checkered floor. This was followed by the falling of the blade, which, strangely vanished just before it would have hit. It took a few moments for the armor itself to fade away, but it did. Soon, it was as if the Inquisitor had never existed in the first place.

I lied there in the floor, struggling to catch my breath. The cold darkness surrounded me. Part of

me expected to wake up, as if the entire night had been just another strange dream. A little while later, however, I heard someone opening the door – the same one I watched the Inquisitor tear down.

It was Levi, lighting his path with a lit candle in his grasp. His complexion was a lot tanner than the last time I'd seen him. As soon as he saw me in the flickering light, amongst all the debris, he gasped and shouted my name. “Why have you come *here*?”, he asked, rushing over to me.

I stared at his hand after he reached it down for me to take. Confused and traumatized, I took it into my own, letting him help me back onto my feet. “L-Levi?”, I questioned, gazing into his sparkling brown eyes. They were clear, and he smelled of sweat and cedar instead of wine.

Levi turned from me, to the chalkboard. He took a deep breath and shook his head. “Don't blame yourself, Joshua.”, he said, offering me a kind smile. His hand was still gently holding my own. “Magnus wasn't an evil man, his hand was forced many times. But being made to spread evil does nothing to lessen the guilt, I suppose.”

Slowly shaking my head, I studied him in confusion. “E-evil...?” My vision was blurry and I felt incredibly lightheaded. It felt as if I were dreaming.

It was then that Levi began to go through the papers on the ground. With each one, he appeared to become more aggravated. It seemed as though he was searching for something far more specific than I had been. I was too out of sorts to ask what, though.

“Levi...”, I repeated, rubbing my throbbing head. “You're alive.”

This confused him. He turned around to face me. There, he studied me for a moment.

Before he had the time to react, I threw my arms around him and embraced him warmly. “You're alive!”, I exclaimed, tearing up. I then pulled away and began to pinch his cheeks and tug on the skin on his handsome face. “You *are* real, aren't you? I'm not hallucinating anymore?”

Levi chuckled and pushed my hands away. “Yes, I still live. And yes, I'm real.”, he answered, though he quickly lost himself in thought. He looked away in bewilderment. “At least, I *believe* I am. Wait.” His brows then furrowed and he turned back to me, concernedly. “You've been hallucinating?”

My thoughts grew loud, silencing me. *Had* I been hallucinating? What was real? What was a dream? It was all blurring together at this point. “I’m...not certain anymore.”, I admitted, flashing my round, frightened eyes back to him. Seeing that beautiful face made me smile, however, and I began to shake my head. “But, God, the glee I feel now that you’ve returned.”

A charming grin of his own met mine. “I am...relieved that you haven’t grown to hate me, I must admit.”, he softly said, taking my hands into his own. “After I...*abandoned* you, yet again.”

I shook my head and took a deep breath. “We all have our own battles to fight in this war. I cannot fault you if yours takes you to another battlefield.”

His smile faded as he gazed into my eyes. Suddenly, he seemed nervous. “I have...thought of you endlessly, Joshua.”, he continued, his dark eyes shimmering in the candlelight. “In actuality, I returned to search for some sort of proof for you, to show you that things around here aren’t what they seem to be. Seems I’ve failed, but... Don’t make me leave you here again.”

Time suddenly seemed to stop around us. Losing myself somewhere along the path between the stars of his night sky eyes, I slowly blinked. My mind was running wild with possibilities. And for a moment there, I actually considered leaving with him. Perhaps I should have.

“There you are!”, interrupted an irate voice from the open door. It was the bitter old crotchety janitor – the same one I’d seen eviscerated by the Inquisitor. His confused eyes shot from me, to Levi, and back again. “What? There’s *two* of *you*?!”

Beside him was a feminine silhouette stepping into the light. It was none other than Headmistress Rebecca. Her dark eyes filled with rage as she recognized her missing son. “Levi!”, she growled, eerily flowing into the room.

Almost immediately, my childhood friend grabbed my hand and pulled me into the shadows. “Time to go!”, he squealed, opening a window. He then dove out of it and called for me to follow.

I climbed into the window and jumped out into the fog. But Levi wasn’t there.

“*What in bloody Hell is this?!”,* shrieked Rebecca, from back in the classroom.

Confused, I gazed through the window to see her erasing the chalkboard with the sleeve of her black dress. She seemed to be filled with rage by Father Magnus' last words.

“Why haven't you cleaned this mess up, yet?!”, she demanded, towering over the elder janitor.

He cowered beneath her. “S-so sorry, ma'am!”, he managed, diving into the floor. There, he began to gather all the papers and folders. “I-I was getting to it, I promise!”

It was then that Headmistress Rebecca let out a loud, enraged roar. As she did so, she began to violently throw things around the room. “Levi!”, she screamed, rushing toward the window.

Seeing her crazed eyes heading toward me, I gasped and backed away. Fearing her and her ire, I took off into the fog, running as fast as I possibly could. Though I wanted to scream out for Levi, I was terrified that his mother was following me, and so I tried *not* to find him instead. I feared her, myself. But I was absolutely terrified of what she would do to him.

The eyes of that haunting devil washed over me as I raced home. That fog that forever blanketed our village seemed even more thick that night than usual. Exhausted and questioning my sanity, I finally began to see the truth.

If I unmasked the devil, would I see only myself beneath? Behind our demons, is there nothing but mirrors, reflecting ourselves and our own traumas that formed us? Are gods and demons just fairy tales we tell ourselves to hide from the real evil in the world? Are WE the real evil?

In a sense, like in that surreal dream, I had been reborn, I suppose. Something twisted that night. Something changed, either in me or in the world around me, allowing me to tilt my head a bit. I was looking at everything differently. And as I examined it all through this new lens of broken sanity, everything finally began to make sense.

It wasn't long before I realized that, in order to continue, I needed more information. There seemed to be much more to all of this than what appeared on the surface; the depths were nigh unfathomable. Like Levi said, we needed some sort of proof. To know for sure that I wasn't losing my mind, I had to taste the forbidden fruit. I had to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.



## *Chapter Five: Holy Matrimony*

*“Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh.*

*What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”*

Tossing and turning, I was drowning in some state of half-sleep in my bed. Images of the Inquisitor and Father Magnus' corpse mangled and broken within its armor flashed throughout my mind. Covered in a cold sweat, I threw the blankets off of me and stared up at the ceiling. Taking a deep, trembling breath, I realized that sleep was just out of my reach that night. I needed to speak with Miss Mary. She was the only one that could comfort me at that point.

Even though it was in the middle of the night, I began to make my way to the church. I knew she didn't live there, like the elders did. But I didn't know where to find her when she was away from her classroom. And even if she wasn't there, that place had always comforted me. It was like a sanctuary – a *real* sanctuary, an oasis in a desert, a light in the darkness.

As I walked through the foggy street, however, I passed by a hooded figure. It was walking in the opposite direction. And terrifyingly, once I had cleared it, it turned around and began to follow me.

Fright. When I sped up, so did it. Dread. When I turned a random corner, so did it. Panic. I tried to lose it by going down different pathways, but it still fervently followed me, silent, staring. Horror.

Growing more terrified by the second, I realized that the closest and safest place to me, was the church. So, I began to make my way there. Soon, however, I passed by yet another mysterious hooded figure. And, yet again, when I looked back, I saw the both of them following me. Eerily, their movements were in complete unison.

As I approached the cemetery, I saw a third hooded being. Speeding up, I ran passed it and darted up the stairs that led up to the double doors. Praying that they would be unlocked, I wrapped my hands

around the cold handles and pulled them open with all of my might. Completely terrified, I darted inside, and closed the doors behind me.

I ran into the sanctuary and collapsed into tears in front of that giant statue. Holding my trembling hands together, I prayed. I prayed fervently for protection. And as I heard those doors opening behind me, I turned around to see those three hooded figures stepping inside of the church.

After closing the doors behind them, they slowly removed their hoods. It was the elders. They had been on their way to my house when they found me outside. Instead of speaking, they followed me to see where I was going. Apparently, my breaking into the school had left them completely irate.

They stood between me and the pulpit once again, their faces still shrouded by their hoods. “You have two choices you can make, Joshua.”, they said, simultaneously, their voices eerily harmonizing. “Either admit to us your faults, your...*weaknesses*, and allow the Silent Sisters to treat you in the convent. Or...”

I gulped. Without Father Magnus, the first option was already a death sentence. Yet, somehow I knew the second one was going to be even worse.

It was then that a beautiful young woman stepped out of the shadows behind them. She was dark-skinned, demure, wrapped in a dress of many colors. Her textured hair was in long, thin braids, with multicolored flower ribbons intertwined within. Her hands trembled as she fiddled with her fingers before her, staring down at the floor. It was Esther.

“You take a wife.”, the Elder Council demanded. “You take a wife, you have children, and you provide for them all by serving the church as a deacon.”

I felt as if I were going to vomit. For those on the lower echelon of the church, marriage wasn't an option; it was an inevitability. Without being bestowed the role of Lead Exorcist, or just becoming an exorcist in general, or even a simple confessional priest, this was a price that I would have to pay.

“So, what path will you walk, Joshua?”, the elders asked in unison. “One with Christ by your side? Or the one that leads only to Hell?”

In my heart, I knew that if I chose the convent, I would never step foot outside of it again. I would, however, finally learn what those “treatments” were that the Silent Sisters administered to the possessed. The frightening thing was that I was so far lost in the darkness, that being enlightened about their vow of silence seemed tempting. But if I wanted to live, I knew that I didn't have a choice. And unfortunately, despite all the pain I'd endured, I still wasn't numbed enough to face my own mortality.

Soon, wedding bells were ringing through the fog of the village. Pastor Blackburn officiated. My parents were weeping tears of joy the entire time. Beside them sat Miss Mary, though she seemed far more concerned than happy.

It all seemed so foggy, so surreal, as if I were dreaming yet again. I don't remember much of the ceremony at all. But when I heard those words, “you may now kiss the bride”, I realized it was all too real, and that I wouldn't be waking up. Seeing how averse my new wife was to the very idea, I leaned in and pecked her cheek instead of her lips, to which the audience erupted in applause.

Still wearing her drab, shapeless, gray wedding dress, Esther moved into my house that night. Her braids had been wrapped up in a boring bun on the back of her head, and it was missing all of those vibrant, multicolored flowery ribbons. Though she didn't speak much at first, it was nice to have someone around – especially someone I had such fond memories with. After a few days, she began to open up to me.

She had recently become a widow, and her first marriage was not a happy one. By order of the elders, she was given to a much older man when she was only fourteen years old. He hurt her. But she didn't go into specifics, and I respected her enough to refrain from asking.

Each night, we stayed up until a mere couple of hours before sunrise, just talking, rekindling our friendship. Yet, she still wanted to sleep on the couch in the living room. I would have respected this no matter what, but the truth was that I wasn't quite ready to share my bed, either.

Within about a week, Esther and I attended Father Magnus' funeral. She wore the same gray mourning dress she had been in during the wedding. We stood at the open casket, gazing down at the

pale, warped face of my former teacher as I cried. He looked frozen in horror, in agony, that ring of bruises still around his neck – exactly as he looked behind the helmet's visor of the Inquisitor.

Silently, Esther remained by my side, almost cowering, even hiding behind me when people approached. She seemed to be terrified of everyone, of being surrounded by the very walls of that church itself.

When we took our seats, I whispered to her, asking her if I could hold her hand, in order to offer her some comfort, and she quietly nodded. That seemed to help her, if only for a moment or two.

The pamphlet for Father Magnus' funeral also featured a portrait, but it wasn't commissioned by Magdalena. As far as we knew, she was still in the confines of the convent. This drawing was quite poorly done, and didn't much look like the former Lead Exorcist at all. I was upset by that.

What was worse was Pastor Blackburn's irate sermon, however. His vitriolic words accused Magnus of being a coward and betraying the Lord and His plan for him. The volume of his voice and the sheer anger behind it seemed to shake the walls around us.

So Esther and I, we left early, together, and decided to visit Magdalena. Our dear friend had been suffering greatly, it seemed. She had thinned, become lethargic, but at least she had her sketchpad and pens there with her. Instead of more terrifying demons, it seemed as though she had been drawing the most beautiful angels – something I was happy to see.

As soon as she noticed our rings, she smiled widely and grabbed a hold of her sketchpad. She then began to sketch us together, excitedly looking up at us every few moments. We weren't certain if we had ever seen her so happy. As our beloved friend drew, we both told her about how our lives had changed since we last saw her, starting with Father Magnus.

Before she could finish our portrait, however, she began to seize again. We held her up and cradled her in our arms so that she wouldn't choke or fall. And within a few moments, it passed, and we calmed her down as she softly wept within our embrace.

After a while, we said our goodbyes to Magdalena, and kissed her cheeks. We feigned the most

hopeful of smiles for her as we departed. As soon as we left, however, Esther and I both found ourselves quietly crying. We held each other as we made our way back home in silence. And in leaving Magdalena behind, our new married lives continued to unfold around us.

Soon, Esther took over her mother's role as seamstress as the former retired. She began making dresses for the girls and women of the church. However, she refused to use the vibrant colorful fabric that she was so fond of as a child. Her only explanation for this was that she now found the brightness and loudness gaudy, and felt darker colors were easier on the eyes, but somehow I knew this was a lie.

Being a deacon was far different than my duties as an exorcist's acolyte. Sometimes I was to baptize babies and children. Other times, I assisted with the circumcisions of newborns. My main duty occurred during every church gathering, however, in which I handed out an offering plate, which was then passed through the pews. All the deacons did this, and there were always multiple plates going around, slowly being filled with all sorts of gold, silver, jewels, pearls, and other valuables.

All of these things I had begun to question. Did the babies and young children being baptized truly comprehend what was happening when it wasn't their choice? It was said that circumcision was a 'sign of the covenant', and performed for cleanliness in order to prevent disease, but if God didn't want men to have foreskin, why did He create us with it? And as for the offerings – it was said that the church needed wealth in order to care for us all, to give us houses, to fund the school and the convent, and help Miss Mary on her missionary endeavors. And the members of the clergy – including myself – were paid for their work in order to buy food and clothes from the church itself. But the more I learned about all of this, the more I questioned it.

Over the next few years, Esther and I grew closer. We shared thoughts, holidays, and tender moments with one another. Not only did she sew all my clothes, she washed them as well, and prepared my every meal with a smile on her beautiful face. She made me feel safe – like Miss Mary once had, comforting me when I came home. The stress from being a deacon seemed to melt away when I was with her, the shadows seemed to retreat away from her light, and the air was filled with laughter when

we were together. But I could tell she was still holding parts of herself back from me, as if she still didn't trust me.

In fact, Esther, my wife, was a stark contrast to the childhood friend I remembered. When we were kids, she only wore her “rainbow” dresses, like Joseph's Coat of Many Colors, her favorite Bible story. In a mirroring of her brightly colored aesthetics, she was always unafraid to show her true emotions – whether it was disgust, excitement, glee, or heartbreak.

There were still multiple brightly colored dresses in her wardrobe, forming an entire rainbow between countless shades of gray. For the entire duration of our marriage, however, they hung there, gathering dust. She was only ever clad in darkness, as if she were forever in mourning. And when I suggested that she wear more vibrant colors – even asking her to make some for me – she simply said that she would rather not draw any attention to us. And despite the smiles and laughter she shared with me behind closed doors, she was still clearly afraid to be herself in public. I wanted to ask her what made her change in such a drastic way, but I never did.

I overheard from whispered gossip before, after, and even during a few of Blackburn's Sunday sermons that her change wasn't sudden. During her first marriage, her clothes slowly darkened over time. Simultaneously, her vibrant personality quieted down as well. Over the years, she had become an entirely different person.

Eventually, when she began to trust me, she told me that her first husband, another deacon, used to hit her. He would come home and beat on her until she was covered in blood and bruises. She would be left trembling in the fetal position, curled up in a corner of the shadowy house, softly crying all night. And this happened almost every day.

They never conversed – not even once. While he was gone, she was expected to clean the house and prepare his food. And when he was home, no matter how many chores she had completed, or how well she had performed them, he was either beating her, or raping her. It started on their wedding night, and it ended the day he died.

She sobbed uncontrollably as she explained all of this to me. I gently held her in my loving arms as she panicked. Though I kept telling her she didn't have to continue the story, she would shake her head and say she wanted to. And when she finally finished, and I had calmed her down, I wiped her tears away. Through a soft, cautious smile, she told me that I was the first person she had ever told.

Once I heard this full story, I asked her how it was that he had passed away. Though I was fully expecting her to admit to me that she had killed him, as in my opinion, it would have been justified, I wasn't at all prepared for the actual truth.

"I prayed for him to die.", she admitted, nonchalantly, shrugging her shoulders. There was no excitement in her eyes. "And a red snake came slithering along, and bit him in his sleep. His entire body swelled and reddened, and his eyes burst right out of his skull." Softly smiling, she batted her long eyelashes as she turned back to me. "And that was the happiest day of my life."

I didn't know how to speak with her after this. It wasn't as if I were afraid of her – whether she had violently killed her first husband or actually prayed for him to die, my opinion of her hadn't changed. In truth, I was afraid of frightening her, of somehow harming her even further. Was she cooking and cleaning for me because she wanted to? Or because she was afraid of my reaction if she didn't? How would I ask her these questions without making her relive that horror?

Around that time was when my nightmares returned. They were no longer of demons and my horned shadow, however. Now, Levi was the main character within them. I'd find myself in the fog-choked cemetery, endlessly chasing after him. He was always a silhouette, just out of reach. I would never catch up to him. And when I awakened, I would miss him so much that I was sick to my stomach. Eventually, these worsened into night terrors. I would violently awaken in a cold sweat, screaming his name and crying uncontrollably.

This startled my wife out of her own slumber even as she slept in the other room. She would ask me why I was screaming for our childhood friend, but I always dismissed her, saying it was nothing more than a nightmare. But after a few of these instances, I had to tell her what had become of him. In

doing so, I begged her to promise not to tell a soul in order to keep him safe – wherever he was.

Standing in the shadowy doorway of my bedroom, she studied me through the pale light pouring in from the window. Tilting her head, she squinted her eyes. “...are you in love with him?”, she asked through a hushed whisper.

At first, I thought I had misheard her. Blinking, I shook my head as I sat up in my bed, looking at her through the darkness. “W-what?”

Esther took a deep breath. “I am not upset, Joshua.”, she assured me, stepping forward. “I promise you that. I've told you my secrets. You can trust me with yours.”

I shook my head. “I...don't believe two men *can* be in love.”, I admitted, awkwardly looking away. “He just...plagues my thoughts, is all. I'm worried for his safety, his survival.” I looked back up to her. “I don't want to lose anyone else.”

She offered a kind smile and sat down on the edge of the bed. Arching her brows, she tilted her head. “Would it help if I...began to sleep in here with you?”, she offered. “Do not misunderstand; I am not ready for anything more...*intimate* with you. But I can hold you during your terrors, if you think it would ease them.”

I nodded as grateful tears filled my tired eyes. “I...I should like that very much.”, I whispered.

At the end of our fifth year of marriage, we attended Christmas Communion, as we did every winter. As the music played and everyone danced around in a circle, I gazed up at the massive artificial tree in the center of the sanctuary, slowly sipping my wine. Even with the pews moved out of the way, it took up most of the area, its countless decorations twinkling and glittering within the flickering lights of the chandelier above.

Soon, I noticed my darling wife speaking with Pastor Blackburn on the other side of the gigantic room. This only came in flashes between the constantly moving ocean of congregation members as they continued to dance between us. Esther seemed to be upset about something. I was too far away to hear them over the music and cacophony of laughter and cheers, however.



The party continued. She soon seemed happier. And I let it go.

That night, however, after having a few drinks, I was ready to try and lay with her for the first time. Much to my surprise, she had finally grown comfortable enough to want the same. I kissed her deeply, and began to undress her, as we sat upon my bed within the soft candlelight.

I kissed her, tenderly, letting my curious hands explore her body. Her soft, warm touch was like sunlight washing over me. Soon, we were tasting each other. No thought was needed; our bodies had been taken over entirely by our basic human instincts. By the time she presented herself to me, on all fours, I was raging. And when I finally entered her, it felt like heaven, and I only wanted more.

Perhaps this life wouldn't be so bad, I thought. I'd gained a true companion, one that I could be intimate with in every way two people can be. And perhaps, God willing, I was giving her just as much happiness as she was gifting me. In those breathless, hazy moments of ecstasy, the future seemed peaceful, and full of love and light.

I kept pumping into her, slowly at first, gently, with only a few inches. Soon, I pushed deeper in, and increased my speed as I lost myself in my fantasy. Eventually, I was completely inside of her, pounding as hard as I possibly could. This caused her to release a few moans and whimpers of pleasure.

Soon, however, it began to feel uncomfortable. At first, I thought that she must have been becoming dry, perhaps because she just wasn't into it anymore. I stopped at once, asking if she was alright, and if she wanted to continue. She replied by telling me to use spit, and so I worked up a big, gooey glob with my tongue and spat it into the palm of my hand. When I tried to pull myself out of her to give myself a bit more lubrication, however, I realized that I was stuck inside.

Looking down, through the faint candlelight, I saw that it appeared as though my manhood had somehow melted inside of her. Moreover, her insides had done the same, and had begun to fuse with it. Now, there was nothing but a strangely pulsating mound of pink, wet, vein-streaked flesh between us.

It appeared as though we were fusing at our genitals. Gasping, I tried to pull myself out, only to realize that we were slowly, continuously melting into each other. Then it suddenly became painful, and

a sick stench wafted up into my nose. I tried to pull myself out, but it just tugged her back with me.

“Stop! You're hurting me!”, she cried, still facing the headboard. “What's happening?” When she tried to turn around, she realized we were connected, and she, herself, began to panic.

Within this state of sheer terror, we began to try and pull ourselves apart, causing the both of us even more pain. In the struggle, we collapsed into the floor, where we realized that the slow melting of our skin, the steady fusing of our genitals, the unearthly joining of our flesh, was actually continuing. In fact, it had spread from my crotch, to my pelvis, to my stomach, and it had consumed the entirety of her backside.

It looked like some strange amalgamation of flesh, covered in pulsating blood vessels, slowly eating away at us. Even worse, it seemed to be *breathing*. Screaming and crying, we again struggled to pull ourselves away from one another, knocking one of the candles off of the dresser in the process. This killed half of the already dim light in the room.

The larger this blob of living flesh grew, the more of us it consumed. And the more it consumed, the weaker we became. Though we still desperately reached around, gripping at random things, trying to find something, anything that could pull us out, it seemed as though we were fighting a losing battle. It seemed as though there was nothing we could do to protect ourselves, or each other, from this *thing*.

As it slowly took our hips, legs and feet, the countless bones in them snapped, one by one, repeatedly striking us both with the most unimaginable agony. It made the strangest noises as it slowly grew over our stomachs and chests. Hearing sweet Esther sob and pray to God for mercy, my vision blurred, and slowly faded to black.

A few hours later, I woke up, lying naked on the floor, the blanket hanging loosely off the side of the bed. Next to me, there was an unlit but half-melted candle, having been inexplicably toppled over in the night. There was no sign of Esther.

Groggily, I stood up, struggling to compose myself. I felt dizzy and strange, but kept telling myself that it was only a nightmare. I was awake now, I thought. Everything was okay. But it wasn't.

I walked around the bed to take a hold of the remaining candle that was sitting on the other bedside table. It was already almost completely melted. Taking a hold of the handle and lifting the iron cup it once towered over, I used it to light my path as I made my way out of my bedroom.

“Esther?”, I called into the dark hallway, though my voice sounded incredibly strange. It frightened me. I didn't recognize it at first. “Are you alright?” I received no reply.

After walking into the bathroom, I held the candle out with a shaking hand, causing the light to flicker. I set it down onto the counter in silence. The flame illuminated the mirror before me, but I did not see myself in my reflection. Instead, I saw a hideous, naked, misshapen monster.

Dotted in oozing boils and swollen tumors, fat, discolored flesh mounded on even more flesh weighed down its fragile body. Every inch of it was stained with dried blood and large, throbbing blood vessels. It had one blue eye and one dark eye, lower, in the cheek, almost as if it were melting off of the unnervingly sagging face. The mouth was askew, hiding two different sets of teeth, one right behind the other. Its head was bald, but patches of hair were scattered throughout its large, asymmetrical being. With large, round, vein-streaked breasts hanging from its chest, and a long, misshapen penis dangling between its legs, its form was confused and confusing. My mind broke as I tried to comprehend it.

As the shards of my sanity rained down around me, a foreign cramping pain struck my stomach. Looking down in the reflection, I watched as the creature's abdomen slowly grew. With every inch, the agony I felt within became sharper, deeper. Soon, the stomach was completely swollen, bending the spine backward with its weight. And beneath the painfully stretched flesh and blood vessels, something large moved within it.

The pain suddenly increased and I collapsed back into the floor, dropping the candle at my side. My large, round stomach towered over my head, eclipsing most of the faint light around me. Soon, alongside crippling pain, I could hear the sound of flesh tearing and ripping between my spread legs.

In a burst of blood and yellow bile, something massive slid out of me. My stomach shrank as it did so, revealing a strange, wet, wriggling egg-shaped mass between my legs. And the sour stench that

flooded the room along with it made me gag.

Unfolding from within itself, it was revealed to be a faceless, featureless, sexless creature with seemingly random extremities. With three uneven arms, an oversized and dented head, and one tiny leg, it moved like an insect missing a limb, or a turtle stuck on its back, desperately, helplessly reaching up to me. It was just as deformed as I had become.

The skin on its face slowly ripped open as it bled, and that wound had sharp teeth within it. This strange mouth began to cry, which sounded exactly like that of a human baby. In the passing moment, another mouth violently tore open, followed by another, and another, all with countless tiny teeth within. As I heard these ear-piercing cries, my body began to move on its own, forcing me to reach down and take the thing into my arms.

Smiling, I softly wept as I cradled it, letting its sharp, inhuman teeth bite the nipple of the breast that was not my own, but was suddenly a part of my body. The ensuing pain was sudden and sharp, and soon, I realized it wasn't milk that my offspring was drinking of me – it was fresh, red blood.

The sound of a deep, uncomfortable groaning filled the bathroom as I began to panic. I released the baby, and it fell the floor at my side, crying out in fright, hunger and pain. One of my desperately reaching hands smacked against the still-lit candle next to me, killing its flame at once, leaving me alone in the suddenly silent darkness.

But I wasn't alone. I would never be alone again. The sickly smothering embrace of my new wife was permanent and irrevocable. Beneath the eyes of God, we were of one heart, one soul, one mind, one *body* until death did us part. The two rings, tightly binding the singular mass of fat that was now our left hand, painfully cutting into the swollen flesh, proved that. And no matter how hard I tried, I could not pull them off.

I awoke with a cold blade at my throat. Through the darkness, I saw Esther, wrapped in a rainbow dress, mounting me, pinning me down to the bed. At first, I was confused, but as my stressed, traumatized mind calmed down, I realized that I was now finally awake. The horrors I'd experienced

were, thankfully, nothing more than another nightmare.

“I'm sorry, but I am *not* going to lose myself in another loveless marriage.”, she whispered. Tears were running down her beautiful face. “And I will *never* bring a child into a world this corrupt.”

I swallowed and shook my head. “You shouldn't have to.”, I replied.

This struck her with confusion. “...w-what?”, she asked, tilting her head. She pulled the eerily familiar cross-shaped knife from my neck and backed away. “What do you mean?”

I sat up. Taking a breath, I looked at the wedding band on my finger. In silence, I took it off and gently tossed it toward her. “If this ring means that I...*own* you...”, I groaned, watching as she caught it in the moonlight pouring in from the window. “...then it's worth nothing to me.”

She arched her brows, studying my band. Crying even harder, she pulled her own ring away from her finger. “You mean...I'm free?”, she asked, smiling.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded. “I'm not going to make you stay here if you don't want to.” I grew silent, watching her smiling happily as she gazed out of the window into the fog. It seemed as though she saw beauty and hope where I had always seen dread and monotony. “But...where will you go?”

She sighed, happily. “Anywhere. Everywhere. I don't believe those stories about Sarah and her demons – or the toxins in the air. There has to be goodness out there somewhere. Because it sure isn't here.”, she replied, tilting her head. Arching her brows, her smile faded, and she turned back to me. “I'm tired, Joshua. I'm tired of pretending to worship a god that condones slavery. I'm tired of watching pale men teach little dark-skinned girls that their skin will lighten upon salvation, th-that the slavery of our ancestors by men the church deems holy was a *good* thing. I know its what the scriptures tell us, but something about it just never seemed right to me.”

I nodded. Taking a deep breath, I looked up at her. “Indeed. There are a number of things we were taught about God as children that somehow seem...*evil* in nature, now that I look back on them as an adult.”, I admitted, thinking of my own innermost desires. “It's...something I've been struggling with lately, *myself*.”

Esther nodded. "I suppose this is...goodbye, then.", she whispered. Taking a breath, she turned around and headed toward the open doorway, and the darkness beyond it. "Thank you, Joshua."

"B-before you leave, can you answer me one question?", I asked.

She froze in place. Lingerin in the doorway, she remained silent for just a moment, keeping her back to me. "...ask."

"That knife...", I began, pulling the blankets off of me. I situated myself so that I was sitting on the side of the bed with my feet in the floor. "It's Blackburn's, isn't it?"

She turned her head just so that her dark eyes flashed back at me. Batting her long eyelashes, she glanced downward. "I described to him my recurring nightmares – ones I hadn't experienced since my first marriage – about my husband being skinned alive, and then, his skin being painfully sewn over my own by the leaders of the church. It was as if I were slowly losing myself within him entirely, our flesh...becoming one, forever. Soon, the pale skin of a wicked man was covering me completely, and I could no longer recognize myself in the mirror."

"That's...*horrifying*.", I said.

She nodded. "I started having them here, about you, around the time you began having your own night terrors about Levi. I know you told me that you weren't in love with him, but...I was afraid. Pastor Blackburn told me that you and Levi were sodomites, and that *I* would be the one suffering eternal damnation for your wickedness and sin...", she explained, turning around. She held the blade toward me as it reflected the light from the window. "...unless I slit your throat."

I swallowed. Furrowing my brows, I looked down at the pinkish scar in the palm of my hand. "Blackburn and I have always had a bit of a...*strained*...relationship, I suppose."

Esther took a deep breath. Turning her attention back out to the night, she tilted her head. "I don't know if it is only you he loathes. I remember when he told Mags and I that we were whores simply because we were friends with three boys.", she said, almost to herself as she shook her head. She then turned back to me. "Perhaps you should come *with* me. It doesn't seem to be...safe here...anymore."

Turning away, I shook my head. “I think, maybe...it never was.”, I admitted, staring into the darkness. Taking a deep, shaky breath, I gathered my strength, trying desperately to keep myself from crying. “But you should go.” I faced her again. “Run. Run far away from this place. Find peace. Find love. But...I still have work to do here.”

She shook her head, a disgusted expression forming on her beautiful face. “What?”, she asked, approaching me. “What *work* is that? More *Baptisms*? More *circumcisions*?!”

Raising a single brow, I shot a bitter glare up toward her as she stood before me. “I have to find out why Father Magnus killed himself.”, I growled.

Her eyes widened in shock as she quietly gasped. Swallowing, she took my hand into her own. Placing Blackburn's knife into my grasp, she smiled. “Take this. You might be safe right now, but that may not last.”, she explained, tilting her head as I took it from her “It's the least I could do after...all of this. And, Joshua...if you *were* in love with Levi, I wouldn't have thought of you any differently. You could have trusted me.”

I had been watching the light shimmer on the blade as she spoke. Looking up at her beauty, I smiled. “Thank you.”, I whispered, my eyes flooding with tears. “I'm not. But thank you, anyway.”

She nodded. “Very well, then. If you'll excuse me, I think I'm going to go and try to find a rainbow – a *real* one.”, she said, turning back to the window, smiling excitedly. “God's promise.”

With that, she turned around and walked into the shadows of the hallway. I could hear her gathering some of her things in the living room. Then, the sound of the front door opening and closing echoed back to me from the front of the house.

And if I never saw her again, I could have pretended that she found happiness. I could have told myself that she found that rainbow, and saw her own vibrant beauty reflected within it. She could have existed within her own Garden of Eden within my mind, always smiling, never afraid, free to be herself. But that just isn't how this story goes.

## *Chapter Six: Sodomy*

*“If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.”*

When I walked out into the darkness the night that Esther left me, it wasn't to chase after her. It wasn't to try and look for Levi. It was to walk to the church and speak with Miss Mary. After everything that I had been through, I needed to speak with her.

However, I hadn't crept out of the house and into the night since breaking into the school all those years ago. It felt as if I were being watched, and the thought of the elders lurking somewhere out in the fog filled me with terror. And so, after about an hour of being so lost in thought and replaying traumatic events in my head, I found myself in front of the convent.

Naturally, I was confused. I'd set out for the church, and ended up somewhere else entirely. But while I was there, I decided to visit Magdalena for the first time in quite a while. I hadn't heard anything about her since I'd visited with Esther, but she was always in my thoughts. It was just difficult for me to see her in such a state.

There were very few Silent Sisters out patrolling the quiet hallways. I assumed this was because it was in the middle of the night. Instead of seeking someone out and asking for help, I simply presumed that Magdalena was still in that same room, and began to make my way upstairs.

Her corridor was completely empty, and her door was closed. When I opened it, the stench of rot, urine and feces flooded into my nostrils. Flies buzzed around me as I fought my way inside, gripping tightly onto my nose with my index finger and thumb.

The drawings had all been ripped down from the walls. Nails, bits of leftover paper hanging from them, and white rectangular reliefs in the pale yellow discolored wallpaper were all that remained from



those breathtaking portraits. And as I approached the bed, the smell grew stronger.

Everything I knew of Magdalena had wasted away, leaving a gaunt, skeletal corpse in that bed. What remained of her tiny, malnourished frame was covered and caked in her own feces and urine. Bed sores had appeared upon her back, and had been neglected so severely that they were now necrotic, with maggots feasting within them.

What was the most horrifying was when she opened her eyes. They looked at me, hopeless, empty, devoid of life and light. She was still alive, even in such a horrific state. Seeing her move, even just her eyes, when she resembled a literal corpse was nothing short disturbing – and heartbreaking.

Weeping and in shock, I found myself backing away from her. It was then that I felt a hand on my back, gently stopping me. Looking behind me, I saw Levi, and my heart skipped a beat. Tears flooded my quickly blurring eyes as I reached my trembling hands out to touch his broad, toned, fuzzy chest to make certain that he wasn't simply another hallucination or dream.

The shirt he was wearing was torn into shreds, missing its sleeves entirely. This revealed just how muscled his scarred body had become, which was highlighted by a thin layer of shimmering sweat. He seemed to have been tanned by the sun, as well. His legs were covered by loose, baggy pants that were filthy and stained with what looked like dried blood. Those scarred hands had seemingly become calloused. Yet, his inviting, enchanting scent was, again, of cedar.

While the sides and back were kept short, that brown hair had become a bit overgrown at the top and front, forcing him to pull it back every few minutes. He did so by sliding his hand back across his head. It was wet with sweat, much like the rest of him.

Keeping his eyes locked onto Magdalena, he took my shaking hands into his own. Turning to face me, he looked down at them as he pulled them up toward his face. Sweetly kissing them, he flashed those those dark, mysterious eyes up to me. “I've missed you, too, Joshua. But we can't leave her like this.”, he quietly said. Despite his stern expression, he was softly, quietly weeping just like I was.

Swallowing down my fear and disgust, I nodded. Even though I was filled with dread, I knew I

had to take care of Magdalena. Beyond that, I *wanted* to. Taking a deep breath, I turned back to face our childhood friend, mentally preparing myself for the trouble and toil we were about to go through.

Using supplies we had found in the closet, we cleaned her up as best as we could. We then sat her up in the bed, as gently as possible, revealing the oozing, necrotic flesh on her back in full. The stench drifted up to us as maggots fell onto the bed among thick yellow fluid. I immediately began to clean and treat her wounds. As I did this, Levi gently fed her and gave her water. And the entire time, we spoke softly to her in order to keep her calm, reminding her of simpler times, when we all played together and laughed.

She looked to be happy that we were there and helping her. Though, even smiling seemed to be exhausting for her, it was her caramel-colored eyes that changed. They seemed to be filled with relief and gratitude and love – more so than I had ever seen.

Levi and I changed the sheets on the mattress, but the mess had already seeped through, staining it forever. Knowing the sisters weren't going to give her a new mattress – or even a new room, we stacked a few sheets over the first one to separate Magdalena further from the stains.

It was then that she weakly reached her eerily thin, frail arm over to the desk to her right. Atop it, was her dust-covered sketchbook and pen. I retrieved it for her, placed the pad into her lap, and handed her the pen. However, when she placed it to the paper, her grip was too weak to hold onto it. It would fall out of her grasp and roll across the sketchpad before landing in her lap.

I helped her prepare a few more times, but with each try, she failed, barely making little more than a few lines on the paper. Though I tried to convince her to keep trying, she eventually gave up. In doing so, she quietly wept, pushing the pad and pen away from her and letting them both tumble down from the bed and into the floor below.

Seeing this, the shards of my broken heart cracked even further. As I knelt down to retrieve them, Magdalena's body violently tensed as she jerked up in the bed before us. Gasping, I hopped onto my feet, tossing her art supplies onto the desk beside the bed and shot over to her side. She was having

another seizure.

Levi and I crawled into bed with her, and sat on either side. We wrapped her in our arms and held her, safely, within our embrace. It only lasted for a few moments, but when her body loosened, she began to weep uncontrollably. We continued to hold her, letting her cry as much as she wanted to – *needed* to. It wasn't long, however, until he and I were both crying ourselves as well.

Soon, she had cried herself to sleep. Leaning her head on Levi's strong shoulder, she softly snored.

It was then that I noticed something on the dresser next to the bed. A stack of old, unfinished drawings had been hidden beneath the sketchpad. The top one, was the one of my horned shadow, but now it had my snake companion wrapped around his broad shoulders. Taking them all into my grasp, I began to look them over.

The second one was of the hermaphroditic being I'd become when I fused with Esther in that wretched nightmare. It was holding its strange, faceless offspring in its arms, breastfeeding one of its mouths, while the others continued to unleash their shrill shrieks. But just how did she know what these creatures looked like?

A third was of a group of demonic creatures – deer, moose, and goats – with upside-down heads. They were eating flesh from a human corpse before them, surrounded by the endless branches of the dead wood. This one didn't strike me as strange, because she could have just overheard someone describing Sarah's tale.

Another, however, was of Magnus' Inquisitor, violently decapitating someone. The detail she captured in its eerily flowing robes and heavy, shimmering armor was nothing short of striking. Had she seen it before?

The final drawing looked to be mostly complete. It detailed the ocean, with light filtering through the surface and a whale swimming by. The lower my eyes trailed, however, the darker it became, and deep below the darkest depths was a massive and terrifying creature, lying in wait. It took the shape of a sort of dragon, its glowing eyes full of malice. It looked strikingly similar to how the Leviathan was

described in the scriptures, but I hadn't a clue how this connected to anything.

“She is very talented. She always was, really.”, Levi whispered, looking at them from across her. “You remember when we were young and Lucas couldn't articulate his words very well? He'd try to explain it to her and she'd draw something so the rest of us could understand.” He laughed. “Remember the drawing she did of you and I beating each other bloody, black and blue? Lucas was so flustered about it that he couldn't just tell us to stop through his panicked sobs.”

Chills covered my body as I realized what Magdalena was trying to do. She wasn't just wanting to draw a picture. This was how she was trying to communicate with me, or perhaps, *Lucas was through* her. She had been screaming on the inside, and suddenly, it was *my* throat that was burning. “Do these images mean anything to you?”, I asked, turning to Levi.

Furrowing his brows, he studied me for a second before taking them into his grasp. For a few moments, he reviewed them before finally shaking his head. “Other than an eerie beauty, I can't say I see much in them.” He then flashed a curious gaze back to me. “Why? Do you think they're some sort of message? They're strangely vague, if that's the case. Mags always tried to be as coherent as possible when communicating through her art, remember?”

Licking my lips, I debated for a moment. Glancing over at Magdalena, who was still sleeping, I took a breath, feeling defeated. “If they *are* a message, I don't understand it at all.”, I admitted. This technically wasn't a lie. I knew the images were connected, both to each other and to me, but I had no clue as to know why or how.

My theory, however, was that Lucas had become a dybbuk in the afterlife – his spirit was barred from entering the gates of Heaven, for whatever reason, and so, he attached himself to Magdalena. This was what was causing her seizures. Through her, he was trying to communicate something to me. I tried to explain this to Levi.

“Joshua, that's...” he said, shaking his head. Instead of finishing his sentence, he scoffed, got off the bed and began to quietly walk toward the door. He was wrapping himself in his strong, muscular

arms, as if he were cold.

Watching him depart, a pit appeared in my stomach. I didn't want to lose him again. After gently laying the still sleeping Magdalena back down onto her bed, I rushed out after him.

“Levi! Levi, please!”, I called, chasing him down the corridor as he continued toward the stairs. “Wait! What's the matter?”

He stopped in his tracks, allowing me to catch up with him. Turning around, he revealed that he had been softly crying. “Why would you say that?”, he asked, shaking his head. “Lucas isn't some *demon*, Joshua. And Mags' tremors aren't demonic; they're *mental*. While hunting, I've come across a few different creatures out in the wild that seem to suffer from the same affliction. I was curious. And when I burst open their skulls, I saw that they had some sort of mass growing from their brains. I went hungry, refusing to eat their meat, out of fear that it was tainted.”

This surprised me. “I-I'm sorry.”, I apologized, beginning to tear up again, myself. “After everything, my mind is just...shattered, at this point, I suppose.”

Offering a soft smile, he tilted his head. “Believe me, I know how you feel.”, he admitted, chuckling a bit as he wiped his tears away. “Listen, I know it's late – well, early now, but...can I show you something?”

Smiling, I nodded. “Yes, of course. Y-you can show me *anything*.”

He took my hand and led me back out into the cold night. As soon as we faded into the fog, away from the light of the lanterns outside of the convent, he turned to me and released my hand. “Shall we make it a race?”, he asked through a sly smirk. Without waiting for my response, he took off.

Scoffing, I chased after him. “Wait! You haven't told me where we're racing *to*!”

Continuing to run deeper into the fog, he called back to me. “Just follow me!”

Laughing, I shook my head. “That isn't fair, Levi!”, I shouted, to which I could hear his chuckling echoing out into the night.

I ran as fast as I possibly could, chasing him as he made his way to the church. Our childlike

laughter filled the air around us, filling my mind with the sweetest of memories. Soon, he shot into the massive cemetery, and made his way over to its heart. I followed him as he made his way toward one of the large mausoleums that aligned the fence around the west gate.

“Looks like I won!”, he beamed between chuckles. He was breathless.

I rolled my eyes. “Only because you cheated!”

He feigned a gasp. “How *dare* you, sir?”, he dramatically demanded, touching his hand to his heaving, hairy chest. “You besmirch my good name, my *honor*!”

Raising a single brow, I smirked and crossed my arms. “*Honor?!*”, I playfully growled.

“Well, then, perhaps you would have enjoyed a wrestling match a bit more.”, he mumbled, mostly to himself as he turned around and opened the mausoleum door. “Next time, then.”

Reaching into the darkness within, he revealed a half-drunk jug of wine and handed it to me as I curiously approached. He then retrieved an old violin from those same shadows and presented it to me. “This is what I wanted to show you.”

My brows furrowed in confusion and surprise. “And what corpse did you steal *that* off of?”, I questioned, backing away and taking a seat on one of the large gravestones before him. I then began to drink from the wine, quietly watching him.

“My father's.”, he said, looking it over for a moment or two. He then took his stance, placed the bow to the strings and the bottom of the violin to his chin, and began to play the most beautiful and enchanting version of “Amazing Grace” I would ever hear in my entire life.

It sounded sweet, but incredibly sad, almost heartbroken. Though it wasn't being played at a funeral, and I hadn't heard it under such circumstances before, it still felt as if it were some sort of requiem. As I slowly sipped on the delicious wine, sitting on one of the massive gravestones, I thought that perhaps it could have been a requiem for our childhoods.

By the time he finished his performance, we were both quietly and calmly weeping. I clapped as loudly as I could, not caring if anyone – or anything – out in the fog could hear me. As he smiled and

bowed, I raised the jug of wine to him. “That was breathtaking. But...when did you learn to play violin?”, I asked, curiously.

“As a child.”, he admitted, taking the wine into his hand and sitting down beside me. “You know that my mother is the Headmistress of the school, and that my grandfather, my father's father, is the organist. Well, what you may not have known, is that, long ago, my father was the pianist of the church. And most of my cousins have now joined the choir. Music has always been in my father's side of the family, and probably always will be.” He took a drink of the wine and then began to look over his clearly beloved instrument. “He passed away just before I was born. But he left this for me in hopes that I would learn to play his favorite song on it. And so, I did.”

This confused me. “Then...why didn't you pursue a career in music?”, I asked, tilting my head. I had never once seen him with any sort of musical instrument when we were children. “There isn't a violinist in the church, as far as I am aware.”

Sniffing, he turned back to me. “Ever since that dark day when we were children...I had always wanted to become an exorcist. To help Lucas.”, he explained, tears still forming in his longing eyes. “Back then, when Pastor Blackburn was harming the both of you, I didn't even *try* to protect you. I ran away like a coward. So, I suppose a part of me...wanted to make up for that. Until I...became frightened, again, and...ran away for the second time.”

I grew silent. Turning away, I felt my heart breaking in my chest. “You aren't a coward.”, I whispered into the fog. It was so cold out that I could see my breath adding to it.

“No, I am.”, he disagreed, sounding a bit more angry than sad. “I realized that no matter what we had done, as acolytes, as exorcists, there was no helping Lucas. And when I lost someone else, I knew that there is no helping anyone here. So, I ran away, leaving you all behind. A coward.”

My brows furrowed as I thought for a moment. “Levi...”, I began, having been reminded of something by his words. “Who else did you lose? Was it the blue-eyed boy you mentioned when I found you on the church steps all those years ago? The one Mags drew you with?”

He took a deep, trembling breath and tried to hold back the flood of tears I could tell was coming. “Yes, that's the one. He was...someone I loved very much.”, he whispered, staring down at the barren earth below. “I ended up having to perform an exorcism on him. And he didn't survive. Let's just...leave it at that.”

I reached over and touched his hand. At first, he flinched in fright, but I kept my hand there, waiting for his to open. And when it did, I interlaced my fingers with his own. Feeling his touch made my heart flutter.

Smiling widely, I found myself gazing back out into the fog that covered the cemetery. “My wife ran away earlier tonight.”, I offered, holding back chuckles.

This changed Levi's demeanor completely. He burst into laughter and his beautiful face lit up with amusement. “I didn't even know you were married! How did you manage to run her off?”

I couldn't help but chuckle a bit as well. Raising my brows, I nodded, taking the wine back from him. “It was Esther of all people. The elders arranged it after that little excursion you and I took through the school. Five years; it's all been...such a blur.”, I explained, now drowning my trauma in wine. Looking down, my amused smile faded. “She wanted to leave, so I...let her. I don't want to force someone to stay by my side if they don't want to – wedding rings and binding contracts be damned.”

Levi's brows rose in surprise. “That was...nice of you.”, he said, his hand beginning to tremble in my own. “W-where did she go?”

I shrugged my shoulders and motioned around us with the wine jug. “Out. Into the fog. Away from this...Hell on Earth.”, I answered, shaking my head. I then took another drink. “Hopefully, she'll find somewhere more serene.” Offering the jug to Levi, I began to feel the wine's effects on my mind.

Levi shook his head and pursed his lips as he arched his brows. He also pulled his hand away from my own and touched it to his chest. “That's...a nice sentiment, but I've yet to find anything out there.”, he explained, looking forward. “The dead wood encircles the village in full, and its completely empty – even mostly devoid of animals. Goes on for miles and miles in most, if not every direction. I've yet to



find its end. Although, Miss Mary had to have been going *somewhere*, I suppose.”

This intrigued me. “So, the dead wood is not haunted by demonic deer with upside-down heads and an insatiable hunger for human flesh?”, I asked, dryly, just before taking another sip of the wine. I then reached over and pinched the flesh on his muscular arm. “And your skin seems to be completely free of burns and boils.”

He laughed, but snatched the jug from me. “I think you've had quite enough of that.”, he joked. It was then that he seemed to lose himself in thought, however, as he gazed back out into the bluish glow of the fog. “I've seen one deer out there, and she was far from demonic. She was quite beautiful, actually. Fed me for a good few days.” As he said that, he rubbed his toned, hardened abdominal muscles. Letting out a sigh, he turned back to me. “Honestly, it is my belief that Sarah was just another innocent victim of the church, her demons – as well as the toxicity of the forest – mere gossip.”

This explanation greatly relieved me. But I had so wanted for Esther to find more people out there. “This whole time, I thought you were having nightly blood orgies in a modern day Sodom or Gomorrah.”, I admitted, shaking my head.

Again, he chuckled, more heartily now. “Afraid not.”, he said, raising his right hand for me to see. “This little lady right here is my only bedfellow.”

I couldn't help but burst into laughter. Letting out a sigh, I let my thoughts return to the world beyond the dead wood. “Maybe one day, we can all escape, and create our own Garden of Eden.”, I offered, softly smiling. “You and I, Esther, and Mags – all of us together again. We can grow fruits and vegetables like in the books. Mags can teach us to draw. Esther can make us beautiful rainbow clothes. And you and I can...” I didn't know how to finish that sentence. So, I didn't.

He tried to smile, but it seemed as though it were like lifting something heavy for him. “I can't think of the scriptures as anything more than bedtime stories these days.”, he admitted, his eyes filling with tears. “That's a pretty fantasy, Joshua, but it's just that – a *fantasy*.”

This concerned me. “...you don't believe...in *anything at all* anymore?”, I softly queried, almost

through a whisper. It was as if I were afraid of the answer.

He simply shook his head. “No. No, I don't think I do.”

“What is that like?” I couldn't imagine not believing in God, in His word, in demons and angels, fighting in an eternal war, hidden in the shadows. It was difficult for me to even imagine a world where nonbelievers even *existed*. Yet, Levi was standing directly before me, hurting, aching, *agonizing* over the fact that he had entirely lost his religion.

Taking a shaky breath, he looked away and shook his head. “It...*hurts*.”, he replied. “It hurts to realize everything I have believed in, everything I thought mattered...was built on lies and perpetuated by abuse. I feel so...isolated, so alone.”

I pondered over his words for a few moments. They felt heavy on my heart. “But you aren't alone, Levi.”, I said, quietly. “You have me. You've always had me.”

He turned to me, showing me those round, sad eyes once more. “Really?”, he asked, surprised, still silently crying. “Because I can see the light up there, beyond the surface of these ocean depths, but something is pulling me down into the darkness. It feels like I'm drowning and no one is here to pull me out of the water.”

In that moment, Magdalena's drawing of the ocean's darkest depths made perfect sense. It was an artistic rendition of Levi and his sorrow. She was trying to communicate something to me, after all.

Reaching over, I took Levi's hand into my own once more. As his eyes met mine, I eased in closer to him, feeling more of my tears welling up. “Levi, please. Don't lose yourself in that darkness.”, I begged, memories of Magnus flashing within my mind. “Promise me you'll find me when you feel like walls of waves are crashing down on you. And I will pull you onto the shore. Because I need you here with me.”

Hearing these words, he dropped his violin and the jug of wine to the ground and his cheeks turned red. His eyes were wide with surprise and something else I'd never seen before – something that almost looked like hunger. Quietly, he eased in, wrapping his muscular arms around me as his eyelids

lowered, his stare focusing on my mouth. Closing his eyes, he met his lips to mine, and suddenly, time stood still.

Our lips parted, and our tongues danced to the music in our heads. I could feel his hands exploring my body in places I'd longed to be touched, and it felt like healing rain finally returning to the desert after a long, deadly drought. I wanted him like I've never wanted anything in my entire life.

But suddenly, even though my eyes were closed, I could feel those red eyes glaring at me from the fog. Blackburn's threats of eternal damnation – a sermon about the abomination of sodomy – echoed out from my childhood and ran throughout my mind. I could feel the heat of hellfire rising up around me, and I panicked.

Crying and unable to breathe, I pushed Levi away, causing him to have to stand up beside the gravestone. I backed away myself, my jaw trembling as I gazed up at him in fright. A thousand thoughts were running through my mind, but only one of them made it to my lips: “A-abomination. This is...an abomination!”

“Joshua.”, Levi said, weakly reaching toward me. “Joshua, please. I-I'm sorry. I-I just...misread the situation.”

I pulled away from him. Though, my legs wouldn't let me run away. Part of me wanted to stay with him, it seemed. For a moment I stared at his hand before me, then shot wide, horrified eyes back up to his own concerned gaze. I was trembling. “D-don't you remember Pastor Blackburn's sermon?”, I asked through a broken whisper, tears streaming down my face. “He said that sodomy was a sin just as vile as rape, a-as the sexual abuse of animals, o-of *children*.”

“N-no, Joshua...”, he managed, shaking his head. “I-I didn't mean...” Tears filled his eyes as he ran his hand through his hair, slowly becoming distraught as he realized that he may have just lost me forever. I watched as his anxiety and fear were slowly corrupted into rage. “God damn it!” He kicked the headstone as hard as he could. “Damn it all to Hell!”

Once he did that, I took off running back into the fog. It felt as though there were countless eyes –

not just those of my horned shadow – watching me, judging me. I felt exposed and unclean. And I ran all the way back to my house as fast as I possibly could.

When I laid down in bed, however, it wasn't fear that I felt. All of those negative emotions had been completely replaced now that I was in the safety of my own home. My mind began to wander, and I let it. For the very first time, after so long of ignoring them and beating them down, I gave in to my most carnal desires.

With a wet, trembling hand, I touched myself that night, thinking of Levi, and the sweet, slow kiss we'd shared. Naked, breathless, sweat-glistening and flushed, I replayed the scene in my head over and over again. The way our tongues wrapped around each other, his hands touching me, feeling me – it was all so magical.

Even after I sprayed my seed multiple times, in ribbons of pearlescent white ecstasy, apparently I wasn't satisfied. This seemed to be the case, because Levi visited me in my sleep that night. And we would share what would become my darkest and wettest of dreams.

Early the next morning, and much to my confusion, I awoke to knocks at my front door. Fear immediately struck me, as I thought it was the elders or Headmistress Rebecca. However, it was two young men who introduced themselves as exorcists' acolytes, and they explained to me that they needed my help. They were going against the wishes of the elders, because overnight, an incident occurred that had quickly become the worst case of demonic possession in the church's history. Somehow I knew it was Levi.

My childhood friend's rich, tanned color had paled considerably since last I'd seen him. Blue veins pulsed just under his skin. Like the other convent afflicted, he was completely nude, though he was strangely erect. The whites of his eyes were now as black as a moonless night, and the brown irises glowed red. They glared at me unrelentingly as I gripped my crucifix and Holy Bible within shaking hands.

Thankfully, I wasn't alone. Along with me were the two acolytes that had summoned me, and they

both had their exorcist trainers present as well. They all looked absolutely terrified, and were actually cowering behind me, however. I'd never seen a full-fledged exorcist react to a possession in fear before.

“What happened to him?”, I asked, watching Levi growl and drool as he struggled. The look in his eyes was that of a wild, rabid beast, ready to attack. He pulled and tugged the leather straps as they held tightly onto his wrists and ankles, securing him down to the stripped bed of his room.

One of the assistants stammered a bit, trying to get out the explanation. “A-apparently, he had some sort of breakdown, screaming about how sodomy shouldn't be considered a sin.” He seemed disgusted by the very idea. “He was mad and vulgar, terrifying everyone that he came across.”

Remembering the fact that it was me who made Levi remember Pastor Blackburn's old sermon, I felt a tinge of guilt in my heart. Squinting my eyes to try and keep the tears locked away, clenching my teeth to keep from screaming, I looked down, and opened my Bible.

A wicked grin cracked the face of my former friend. “Gonna read me some fairy tales before you tuck me in?!”, he growled, in a completely inhuman voice.

One of the exorcists held his crucifix toward him, causing that evil smile to immediately warp into a bitter scowl. “Leave him now, foul demon!”

The creature possessing my friend burst into maniacal laughter at this. “You're going to have to do a lot better than that!”

Growing frustrated, the other exorcist stepped forward and revealed his vial of Holy Water. “The power of Christ compels you!”, he shrieked, squeezing his eyes closed and spraying it over Levi's muscular, sweat-glistening body. “The power of Christ compels you! Leave this man and return to the flames of Hell from whence you came!”

“I'd rather *Joshua* came in *me*.”, the demon within Levi growled through a cocky smirk, seemingly completely unfazed by the latest attempt. What usually left demons sizzling, smoking and screaming had simply amused him. His glowing red eyes were locked onto me. “Come on, Joshie. Give Daddy your load of *Unholy* Water.”

As far as demons go, vulgarity was par for the course. I was taught long ago that they hate God and all things holy and righteous, so sprinkling vulgarity into their vocabulary like spices onto food was one of the simpler ways they could still rebel – even after all this time. Usually they insulted one's deceased family members, making claims of their damnation, but direct offenses weren't unheard of. Still, I couldn't help but let his words get under my skin.

Seeing my embarrassment, the demon chuckled. “I take it you aren't comfortable with talking about it in front of...*mixed company*.”, he growled, turning his attention to the rest of the group behind me. “I, too, think we should be alone for this.”

As the lights began to flicker, he then flashed his black, soulless eyes toward one of the acolytes. Violently snapping his neck to the side, he somehow did the same to the young man, as if through some sort of telekinesis. The teenager collapsed lifelessly to the floor, just as the demon took aim at the other. With an unnaturally sharp arch of his back, he bent him backwards, shattering his spine as a horrifying shriek of agony poured out of his wide open mouth.

It was then that the two adult exorcists began to run toward the door in a screaming panic. The white dresser loudly slid across the floor and blocked it at once. They froze in place, and just as they turned around, they were both lifted high into the air.

There, they levitated for a few moments, praying to God for mercy, as Levi chuckled softly. Within just a few seconds, they were crumbled like sheets of paper. The sounds of their bones violently crushing, blood splattering the floor below, and their strained grunts and groans throughout were something I can never hope to chase from my mind.

I retrieved one of their vials of Holy Water from the floor. Again, it had no effect. Quoting more scripture at him, as loudly as I could, resulted only in him repeating it right back to me in a mocking manner. And holding up one of the crucifixes only made him laugh.

Nothing was working. A decade of saving the souls of the innocent had led Levi and I to this. I was still nothing more than a lowly acolyte – my training was never fully completed. All that time

helping Magnus pull demons from the bodies of the innocent seemed to amount to nothing. It seemed as though I could not save my dear friend.

My rosary was still tightly wrapped around my hand. Hearing the beads rattle did little to encourage me, however. Closing my eyes, I sent tears cascading down my strained face, and gripped my Holy Bible tightly to my chest. And I began to whisper what I believed to be my final prayer.

“Yes...”, Levi – or rather, the demon within him – seethed, glaring up to me. He seemed to somehow be able to read my mind. “Give up. Surrender.”

Just then, the holy book floated out of my grasp. It rose into the air as if God Himself were presenting something to me, flipping through the pages of His own word. It stopped on Leviticus, and somehow, my eyes shot right to 18:22.

“Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind: it is an abomination.”, the demon growled from within the body of my dear friend.

Furrowing my brows, I flashed a glare toward him as hot tears filled my eyes. “Well, it's a good thing I have not done that.”, I seethed through clenched teeth. I retrieved that crucifix once more. “Now, silence! In the name of Jesus Christ –”

At that moment, the crucifix flew out of my hand and into his – which was still tied at the wrist to the bedpost. Again, he was laughing in my face. “But it *is* something you crave. It is a forbidden fruit all your own. You can't escape it. Your hunger for it will never cease.”

It was then that the leather straps that bound him began to snap one by one. It wasn't long before he was free. Yet, he did not stand. Instead, he took the crucifix and widely opened his mouth. After taking the entirety of the bottom prong down his throat, he fully revealed it again – now covered in a thick yellow slime, what I'm sure used to be saliva.

I was disgusted. “*What* are you *doing*?” Out of the hundreds of exorcisms I'd assisted on, I'd never seen any display as vile and blasphemous as this.

He simply smirked and cocked his head to the side. As he lied there, still, somehow, he began to

slowly levitate into the air. There, before me, he spread his legs, so that I had a perfect view of uncovered privates. And then, he reached down, crucifix in hand, and gently slid the long prong deep inside of his anus.

I gagged in both shock and horror and turned away, closing my eyes. The sound of its continuous sloshing – wet and soft, gentle, and most disgustingly...familiar – filled my ears along with his pleased moans and amused cackles.

“I know you remember this sound. I've seen you touching yourself, playing and replaying a fantasy in your sick little head.”, the demon bellowed, using Levi as a puppet. “You've wanted to have your way with this man's body since you were teenagers.”

Reaching up, I covered my ears, though this did little to help. He was right. I was always attracted to Levi's muscularity, his masculinity. A small part of me actually liked it when he bullied me. Desperate and despondent, I shook my head. Weeping uncontrollably, I refused to open my eyes.

“You pictured the two of you sodomizing each other in the very sanctuary of the church, no less. In God's house, in front of the statue of Jesus Christ Himself.”, he continued. “And you think yourself a holy man.”

“Stop it!”, I begged, collapsing onto my knees. “Please...”

In that moment, the still-floating Bible burst into a thousand loose pages. They began to spiral around the room, as if we were in the middle of a powerful tornado. All the while, the sickening sloshing sounds of his self-pleasure continued.

“Just admit it. You waste your seed on fantasies of sodomy.” He laughed, sounding somewhat pleased, or proud of me. It was the sort of laugh a father makes when he hears of his son beating up a bully. “You're insatiable.”

“What do you want from me?!”, I demanded.

The spiraling energies died. The pages all began to slowly flow down to the floor.

Beyond them, I could see him pulling the crucifix from his wet and throbbing pink hole, sitting up



as he continued to levitate there above the bed. “I want you. Inside me.”, he wickedly growled. “I want you to stop wasting your seed, and give it unto me.”

I gulped. Slowly, I rose onto my feet as the last pages landed around me. “W-what?”, I cooed, my voice breaking as I wrapped myself in my trembling arms.

“I want it. Exactly as you'd fantasized giving it to Levi. Let me give you what you want.”, he continued, dropping the crucifix onto the bed below. He then flashed those glowing red eyes back over to me. “Once you've finished, I'll leave you both in peace.”

It felt as though my heart leapt from my chest upon hearing those words. “If I do this, you'll leave his body...and let him live?”

He nodded. “You have my word.”

I swallowed, nervously. For a moment, I thought it over. Looking around at the chaos this demon had already wrought, tears filled my eyes. While it was true, I wanted all this to end, but I could not pay the price. “I can't do that to him.”, I said, flashing my crying eyes back up to the glowing glare of my possessed beloved. “It may be you controlling it, but it's still his body. It...wouldn't be right.”

His feet slowly lowered down onto the bed until he was standing upon it. Much to my surprise, he chuckled. He was smiling, and it wasn't a grin of malice. It almost seemed proud. “Fine.”, he said, tilting his head. “Then I shall settle for another kiss.”

My brows furrowed as I studied him through a squinted glare. Blinking repeatedly, I tilted my head, watching him step down from the bed and take his place before me. This showed me he was serious in his request, and so, I took a deep, shaky breath, and eased in closer to him.

Our lips met gently. His kiss was chilling. Soon, our tongues began to explore one another as he wrapped his cold arms around me. And memories of Levi – the *real* Levi – flowed back into my fractured mind as I awoke from this strange dream in the middle of the night.

## *Chapter Seven: Mother Mary*

*“Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.*

*Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.*

*Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.”*

At this point, I was desperate to speak to Miss Mary. So much had happened, so many horrors that I'd witnessed and pain that I'd endured that I simply could not process without her. Without Magnus, without Levi, without Esther, without Mags, Mary was all I had left. And if I were going to survive, I needed to return to her.

As my eyes met that glowing red glare, however, I froze just as I'd sat up in my bed. The horned shadow had returned. He was standing in the open doorway of my room, tilting his head, watching me in silence. It seemed as though he were studying me, examining me, scrutinizing me.

“W-what do you want?”, I growled through clenched teeth. “Why are you always here?”

He smirked and chuckled. And with that, he dissipated into a dark, shadowy vapor that slowly faded away. And that familiar scent of Miss Mary's flowery perfume filled the air. It was as if he were telling me that my instincts were right, that I should, indeed, go to her. I just hoped and prayed that she was still at the church, because I still had no idea where she lived.

The foggy village was desolate. That statue of Mother Mary that guarded the courtyard seemed to follow me with her eyes as I approached. Strangely, it looked as if she had been crying tears of blood. Trails of red descended her face, shimmering in the flickering light of my candle as I quickened my pace. As I passed by, I noticed that the statue was actually surrounded by a pool of thick dark red liquid, ripples constantly echoing throughout it.

Deathly quiet was the sanctuary of the church. As I made my way through the shadows of the

stairwell, I felt a chill. Unnervingly, the candles in the sconces that aligned the walls of the corridor were lit. But I had already gone so far, I did not want to just turn around, head back home, and crawl back into bed.

I made my way into Miss Mary's Sunday School classroom. A single candle was sitting in the center of the table, which was surrounded by large pastel-colored pillows. I remembered sitting on those pillows, listening to her read the Bible stories to us all. And I smiled.

It was then that I became distracted by the drawings on the walls. Though I could no longer tell which ones were mine, the sentiment was the same. Walking closer, I reminisced, taking my time on each one. They were all of Miss Mary and her students. While some of them featured Jesus, or God, or the deacons, or the kids' families, Miss Mary remained the main subject.

I began to notice an irregularity within some of them. Around Miss Mary, there were what looked like faceless children. They ranged in age, sometimes even appearing as babies, and were covered in red splotches – like blood. “What the hell?”, I whispered.

“Have you seen them, too?”, a familiar feminine voice asked from behind me. It was Miss Mary. Her perfectly sculpted brows arched and those ocean eyes beneath them were round with concern.

Chills shot down my spine. “W-what are they?”

Tears filled her tired blue eyes. “Don't you hear them crying?”

Blinking, I found myself staring down at the floor. Trying my hardest to listen to the silence, I stood there, concentrating. Within a few moments, the faint, echoing cry of a baby drifted through the air. Gasping, I flashed my eyes back up to Miss Mary. “Y-you're being haunted as well?”

She furrowed her brows. Studying me through her squinted blue glare, she tilted her head.

“...where is Esther?”, she questioned.

I shook my head. “She left. I didn't stop her.”

Miss Mary let out a sigh of relief. “Good. God willing, she'll escape this darkness.”, she said, smiling. “You're a good man, Joshua.” Her grin faded into a frown and she looked concerned yet again.

“And I'm afraid that may be your downfall.”

“...what?”, I asked, furrowing my brows. “W-what are you saying, Miss Mary?”

She studied me through her squinted blue eyes. “Joshua, don't you see?”, she asked, as if the answer was obvious. Pulling her long, wavy black locks behind her ears, she approached me. “It's this place. It fucks us up. Stabs us with knives in the brains as children, and slowly twists the blades as we grow.” Her eyes were wide and full of madness.

“Y-you're frightening me.”, I admitted.

“Why did you want to become an exorcist?”

This question was sudden and unexpected. It struck me into silence. Blinking, I stared into those cerulean pools of water that once comforted me so.

“You may have told yourself that it was to help Lucas, but, really...it was to gain a stance of authority. To keep yourself safe, is that right?”, she asked, tilting her head. “Magnus did the same. I grew up with him, you know. He was a good man, like you – at one point, anyway. And after everything he'd done, everything the church deemed 'good' and 'righteous', he ended up at the end of a noose because of the guilt he felt.” She began pacing around the table and pillows. “These...*exorcisms* are torture. Nothing more than another means of control. Something to keep all of us afraid so that we continue to do what we're told.”

I watched in silence as she paced. In her madness, she seemed a long way away from the calm, calming Sunday School teacher I'd come to love. “M-Mary...”, I managed. “How do you know this?”

She took a deep, shaky breath and turned around. Quickly darting her eyes around the corridor through the doorway, she showed true fear. She then quietly closed the door behind her, warning me that the church had eyes and ears within its walls.

“How do I know all this?”, she repeated, turning back to me. “Because I was once in training to become a Silent Sister. But the horrors I was expected to perform in my duty...” She looked away, placing her quivering hand to her chest. “Let's just say that depriving the possessed of food and water –

to '*starve the demon out*' as they say – and neglecting them, letting them rot in their beds...is *mercy* compared to the rest of the treatments.” She then looked beyond me, taking in the candlelit room around us. “And like Magnus, I found myself drowning in my guilt, and begged the Elder Council to allow me to change roles within the church. And they allowed me to do so...for a price.”

I shook my head. “...a price?”

She swallowed, nervously. The disgust and self-blame was blatant in her sapphire eyes. “Did you really believe that they would actually let me leave this place? That I was a missionary?”, she asked, furrowing her brows. She did not wait for my reply. “None of that matters now. There are secrets hidden within every shadow of this church, Joshua. Far too many to explain right now.” These words were within hushed whispers, even though she had already closed the door. Strangely, instead of fearful, however, she seemed angry.

“Then...when?”, I asked. In all my years of knowing her, I had never once seen her so intense.

“First, I need to know what you plan on *doing* once I've given you answers. Are you going to try and regain favor with the Elder Council, to claim the title of exorcist? Because that's what they wanted to know when Magnus was found – if you had learned this secret, and wanted to harness it to gain your own power over the people. So that you would lurk in the shadows with them, content to harm more people as long as it ensures *your* safety, *your* wealth, and *your* power.”

“What?”, I slowly asked, shocked and appalled.

“Or, will you help me stop all this madness?!”, she continued.

Staring downward, I lost myself in my thoughts. Would we be able to take down the church? With all the power the Elder Council had, it didn't seem so. “Couldn't they just...throw us into the convent if we tried to stand against them?”, I asked, flashing concerned eyes back up to her. “Claim we were afflicted? Possessed?”

She raised her brows. “Yes.”, she admitted. “Nothing would stop them from locking us away forever.” As she began to tremble, tears streamed down her soft, beautiful face. “But for twenty-five

years now, I have been *waiting, praying, begging* God to allow someone else to see the light so that I would finally know for certain that I'm not going insane. Now that I know that I'm not, you and I can begin to awaken the others to the truth.”

I couldn't breathe. Hearing these words had rendered me completely speechless. Though I desperately wanted to ask more questions, all I could do was nod in agreement as I switched my gaze back and forth between her softly crying eyes.

She smiled. “Very well, then. We will be brave together.”, she said, wiping away her tears. “But the sun is rising soon. I will meet you in the basement of the convent tomorrow at three o'clock AM. There, you will see these '*treatments*' that the Silent Sisters took their vow of silence to hide. After that, we will make a plan to try and show the others – probably one or two at a time, so as to not draw any attention from the nuns.”

I was too shocked by all of this to actually think critically about it. Nodding, I retrieved the cross-shaped blade from my pocket and handed it to her. “I will see you then. But, until three, please, protect yourself.”, I pleaded, tilting my head.

She blinked, her eyes dashing from me, to the knife. Seeming somewhat confused, and perhaps a bit intrigued, she took it into her grasp and stared at it. It seemed as though she were looking at her own blurred reflection within its silver cross-shaped blade. After a moment, she nodded, and hid it within her dress. “Until then.”, she whispered, and disappeared into the shadows.

Taking a deep, trembling breath, I turned back to face the drawings on the walls. I couldn't help but think of everyone I had lost. “Please, God...”, I whispered, thinking of sweet Magdalena. “Don't let me lose anyone else.”

Even though I was exhausted, I could not sleep all day. I found myself pacing the hallway of my house for most of it. Miss Mary knew, the whole time, she knew and she was suffering under the weight of that knowledge. Yet she was the kindest person in the church.

What I was concerned with was what she said about “enlightening” the others. Did she see

something in the rest of the congregation that I didn't? I had been raised in that church and the only decent people I knew of were Miss Mary, Father Magnus, Magdalena, Levi, Lucas, and Esther. My own parents were full of hate and vitriol. I didn't think the rest were aware of everything, but it felt as if a lot of their blackened hearts would remain unchanged if they knew the truth. No matter what atrocities the church committed, most of its followers would still consider it the “good” side, the “light” of the world.

Despite these thoughts, I kept my word, and walked to the convent in the dead of night. Weak, lightheaded and exhausted, I crept inside, hiding within shadows from the endless black eyes of a few nuns as they silently patrolled the winding white corridors. I was terrified, but I was determined to finally know the truth – the *full* truth.

Since I had never once ventured into the basement of the convent before, I had some issues finding it. And I knew that if I asked for help, the sisters would probably lead me astray – or worse. Because of that, time was wasted, and soon, I was late for my rendezvous. After a while, I began to give up hope.

I hoped that Levi would randomly appear, as he had been doing. When he was around, I was brave, I was happy. He always had a way of tearing my walls down. And after my nightmare about him being possessed, I regretted running away from him in the cemetery. I wanted to wonder what would have or could have happened had I stayed and invited him in, but I was too afraid. I did not dare desire, not while I was in such a horrid place.

Part of me wanted to go upstairs to see Magdalena again. Perhaps I could have continued trying to help her draw. Even though Levi wasn't a fan of my theory, I still felt as though her drawings were some sort of message, whether they were from Lucas, or Mags herself. Either way, it seemed that she knew something about all this.

In the stark white candlelit hallway, I heard the cries of a baby. It started out soft at first, echoing strangely, as if coming from another reality, just outside of reach. Depending on which way I went, it

either grew louder or softer, and sometimes, it went completely silent. The faceless children were leading me to the basement, it seemed. I followed.

Eventually, the disembodied cries led me to a strange, mostly empty corridor. It only had one door branching off of it, which was at the very end. Behind it was a thin, uncomfortably steep set of rickety wooden stairs. Lit torches dotted its unpainted walls.

As I descended, the air around me grew colder and colder. An indescribable stench began to fight its way into my nostrils. It partially consisted of rotten flesh, but there was another even more disgusting aspect to it that I wasn't familiar with.

At the end of the stairwell, the creaks of the wooden steps stopped suddenly and were replaced by wet, squishing sounds. Looking down, I realized that the floor was flooded with blood. Bits of pink flesh aimlessly floated about within it as I gagged and backed away.

Looking forward, I saw two large wooden double doors. They featured carvings of the seraphim – angels that appeared as little more than giant masses of feathery wings and eyes – and had been inexplicably left ajar. A flickering light flashed between them.

“Miss Mary?”, I whispered, trudging through the blood and gore. As I approached the doors, I realized that the stench was coming from behind it. Holding my nose, I pulled them open completely, and a few rats came rushing out, squeaking like mad. And beyond the doorway was a horror that I would have never expected.

The buzzing of flies filled my ears, the air around me almost black with them. Rotting corpses, overflowing with maggots, laid sprawled out on different kinds of machinery, their innards pouring out into the floor. It seemed that these unnerving apparatuses had stretched them until they were torn apart. Others had crushed certain parts of their bodies under weights, or stabbed them with countless blades after being closed into what looked like a rusty iron casket. The stench that lingered there was nigh unbearable. This was a torture chamber.

“M-Miss Mary?”, I called, afraid to walk deeper into the shadowy room.



I received no response. All was silent, save for the consistent droplets of blood falling into the pool below, and the roaring of the flies.

Gathering up my courage, I began to walk further in. It was then that I noticed the piles of decaying corpses in the far corners of the chamber. Some of these bodies were in segments, as if parts had been amputated while the victims were alive – one of the Silent Sisters' “treatments”, no doubt.

There were bodies of children in that pile. Even the skeletal remains of babies. Christ, *babies*. Suddenly, their cries made sense. But there was more to come.

It was then that I heard the weak voice of Miss Mary, calling my name, and begging for help from the shadows. Terrified, I began to walk around to the sound of her voice. Behind one of the piles of rotting cadavers, sitting in the floor against the wall and covered in blood, was Miss Mary. Her stomach had been split from one side to the other, her organs falling over each other and hanging out, dangling between her widely spread legs.

Gasping, I rushed to her side, beginning to cry. “Mary!”, I cried, kneeling down. “Mary, what happened to you? Who did this?!”

She softly smiled. “That doesn't matter now, my child...”, she whispered, reaching up and touching my face with her bloodied hand. “My beautiful son.”

I shook my head in utter confusion. Was she delirious from shock and blood loss? “M-Miss Mary, it's me. It's Joshua.” As far as I knew, she had never had any children. Nor had she ever even been married – which, only then when I thought about it, struck me as odd.

And then I saw it – another corpse of a baby, or what remained of it, lying next to her. An image of her cradling it and softly crying mere moments before flashed in my mind. And I remembered her saying that she had to pay a price to leave the convent, as well as her odd and seemingly random disappearances every few years.

“My husbands, the elders...”, she managed, taking the tiny corpse into her arms. “They would never let me keep them. At first, they would give them away, swearing the adoptive parents to secrecy.

But it began to happen far too often, so they had to..." She began to cry again. "...dispose of them."

The eerie crying of babies returned in a cacophony, a din, a choir. These voices were those of my dead brothers and sisters, calling out to our mother from beyond. And now, they were crying for me.

"Shh...don't cry, my little beautiful one.", Mary weakly said, holding the corpse to her bared breast. "I added you all to the pictures, so you wouldn't feel so alone, but Mother's here with you now. Mother Mary is finally here."

These cries got so loud that I thought my ears would bleed, but I stayed with Miss Mary, holding her in my arms and weeping. I found myself rocking her back and forth and singing a lullaby – just random words that came into my mind. They were of hope and love, forgiveness, salvation and morning light after the darkest of nights – and soon, I realized that it sounded strangely similar to the backwards singing of my horned shadow.

She slowly bled out, resting her head on my chest between my neck and shoulder, humming along with me. After a few minutes, she looked up at me, dazed and pale. Smiling, she slowly blinked. And these were her last words to me before she lifelessly collapsed in my lap: "Trust the serpent."

With that, the crying babies were silenced. I watched her for a few moments after she'd departed. Even in death, she was beautiful. But no matter how I tried, I could not stop crying.

That bloody, cross-shaped knife was still on her lap – or, what remained of it – entangled within her bloodied innards. She had done this to herself. After being forced to bring so many innocent babies into such a dark world, she took it upon herself to make sure it would never happen again. After finally seeing what had become of her children, Miss Mary had violently cut out her own womb. And she had done so with the blade that I had given her in hopes that she would use it to protect herself.

## *Chapter Eight: Crucifixion*

*“And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into Hell.”*

I'm not certain how long I was down there in the shadows, replaying all of these events in my broken mind. But one by one, the wall torches all slowly died out and silence and darkness washed over me like a black tide. My tears slowed and eventually stopped altogether. Eventually, I became numb to my misery, nose-blind to the horrific smells surrounding me.

Physically, I was still there, in that dungeon. But mentally, I was gone, off somewhere in a green meadow of flowers – *real* flowers, like the ones I'd seen in books – bathed in warm sunlight beneath a bright blue endless sky. This peaceful daydream somehow cradled me and comforted me in such a way that I was actually able to fall asleep. Either that, or I simply lost consciousness due to the exhaustion and trauma.

Soon, I was awakened by my inability to breathe. And pain wracked my entire body. Weakly opening my blurry eyes, I saw a circle of stones far beneath me, splattered with blood – it was dripping from me. I was completely naked, and covered from head to toe in slowly streaming blood. My ribs and lungs ached terribly as I struggled to breathe. Spikes had been hammered into my wrists, and into the two side segments of a massive wooden cross, holding my arms out. The same had been done to my ankles below. Stabbing into the skin around my head was a crown of thorns. And I was in the most unbearable pain I have ever experienced.

I was outside, in the dim light of day. Through the thick fog, I could see the silhouettes of multiple people. They were surrounding me. As they approached, I recognized two of them as my parents – or at least, the man and the woman that had raised me. To their right was Pastor Blackburn, and to their left,

Mother Superior. Behind them were other members of the congregation, and I could tell that there was a massive crowd encircling me. Though I couldn't see most of them, it seemed like the entire church was there that day.

Dazed and confused, I weakly tried to speak. Nothing but a groan came out, however – one that I, myself, did not even recognize as my own, at first.

Everyone eerily smiled at this. They were all silent, however – save for one. It was Mother Superior, and she was laughing. She cackled at my pain like a madwoman, almost as if she were proud.

And that was when I saw it. Within her wide open mouth of yellow, broken teeth, I saw no tongue. Instead, I saw the stump of what was left of a tongue after it had been cut out. Her vow of silence was much more than a vow, it seemed.

I was in the area known as the courtyard – a large, open space between the school, the church, and the convent. These buildings had always been in the shape of a triangle, and in its center, was a massive wooden cross standing atop a hill. Of course, until then, I had only thought of it as decorative.

Everyone began to sing around me. It was the hymn “Nothing but the Blood of Jesus”. They joined hands and swayed back and forth as they sang. “What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus! What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus!”

At first, I thought that maybe they had gone mad somewhere along the way. Perhaps they thought that *I* was Jesus, finally returned to redeem them and begin the rapture. But then I realized, they weren't singing *about* me, they were singing *to* me. This was my atonement. Through this, my sins would be washed away, and I would be made whole again.

“Oh, precious is the flow that makes me white as snow. No other fount I know, nothing but the blood of Jesus.”, they sang, loudly, gleefully. “Nothing but the blood of Jesus.”

This had to be another nightmare, I thought. Nothing like this had ever happened before, after all. Surely I would awaken soon, I kept telling myself, in my warm bed. But that awakening never came. Instead, my eyes fluttered to a close, everything grew silent, and I drifted off to sleep yet again.

I awakened once more into the depths of a dream. Finding myself in the sanctuary of the church, I stood before the large table that rested between the two sets of stairs, against the half-wall, just below the podium. Instead of a candelabra and the offering plates, however, a decaying corpse laid eviscerated atop it, surrounded by a number of bloodied silver goblets.

Confused, I approached, trying my best to ignore the fetid stench that I had grown far too accustomed to. The body itself appeared to be completely drained of blood. It was male, and the discolored skin looked as if it were once a rich brown. Thick curls of dark, textured hair framed the head, accompanied by a beard that looked to be well taken care of and trimmed at one point. It was the bloody holes in the wrists and ankles that made me realize I was looking upon the paled, desecrated remains of Jesus Christ.

Behind the massive statue of His crucifixion, lingered that familiar shadow. His clawed hand gripping the wood of the cross, his twisted horns towering over him, his red eyes focused on me. Had he led me there to see how I would react to the truth?

It was in that very moment that people began to calmly approach from the pews behind me. I watched in horror as they came up on both sides of me to gently rip bits of flesh from the bone before eating it. Some of them even ate of his internal organs. They washed it all down with sips of his blood from the many, many goblets before us. From their smiles and verbal expressions of pleasure, they found it all to be ever so delicious. Blood dripped down their chins as they all turned to me, expecting me to partake.

Gagging, I stepped backward, desperate to look away. Alas, I was frozen in my shock. Covered in chills, I began to feel lightheaded. And when Pastor Blackburn approached me with that wicked grin on his gaunt face, handing to me my own goblet of the blood of Christ, I fainted at once.

I left the morning and found myself back within the dead of night. Surrounded by that sickly familiar fog, I realized that I couldn't feel anything. The difficulty I continued to experience when trying to breathe, however, told me that I still remained on the cross. However, as soon as I had

awakened, something began to change.

The pain in my wrists and ankles returned. And it was worsening with each passing second. Somehow, I was *sliding off* of the spikes. Weakly, I looked up to my left wrist and saw that the spike that had been driven through it was skewed toward the ground. This seemed to be done purposefully.

Within a few minutes, I collapsed onto the rocky ground below. My lungs immediately filled with oxygen, and I began to vomit uncontrollably. This proved to be all the strain my body had the strength for, and again, I found myself drifting out of consciousness.

As my vision blurred and my eyelids grew heavy, I heard someone approaching in the fog. The last thing I noticed was an ominous masculine silhouette towering over me. It wasn't my horned shadow, nor was it Levi. Whomever it was, it didn't seem as though they were there to offer any help.

I awoke again, lying in an open casket, dressed in my best suit with my arms crossed over my chest. Directly above me and the darkness I was within, was a rectangle that held the entire sky. And for the very first time, I saw stars.

Soon, I realized I was in a grave that had yet to be filled. Weakly, I climbed out of it and found myself in a surreal world. I was in the cemetery, the same one I'd played in as a child, but it was covered in vibrant green grass. Real, living flowers were blooming all around me. The dead wood surrounding the village wasn't dead at all – it was verdant and vibrant. There was no fog, and everything was illuminated by the light of massive glowing full moon, allowing me to see countless other open graves.

The church itself was in ruins. Flowering vines constricted its eerily beautiful remains. And through the downed wall, I could see someone gracefully dancing between the pulpit and the pews. Bathed in moonlight, she was dressed in white – a beautiful, blushing bride? From a distance, at least, she truly seemed so.

This reminded me of an old nursery rhyme that Miss Mary used to sing to us all. Though the melody did not return to me, I remembered the lyrics being about the “bride of Christ” – the Beautiful

Bride. And she explained to us that this meant the church itself – or rather, the congregation as a whole.

When I approached the bride, however, I saw that her dress was covered in blood. The skin of her arms were different colors and connected to her body through rough stitch-work. Her face was in patches, and also sutured together from different colored flesh. And the stench of rot radiated through her ragged, moth-eaten dress.

Sensing my presence, she stopped pirouetting. Turning around to face me, she smiled, kindly, and tilted her head. And suddenly, a chilling shriek poured out of her paled lips. Her stitches came undone, and her entire body fell to pieces within her bloody wedding dress – each segment at a different stage of decay.

At first I was confused, but then I remembered the open graves in the cemetery. Relieved to finally understand something, I got to work matching the parts of the bride to the corpses. It took all night, and was more mentally and emotionally demanding than I had expected. But by first light, every puzzle was complete, every casket was closed, every grave was covered. In the sunrise, I saw my horned shadow, on the edge of the forest, smiling, pleased with my actions. And after I helped the dead to finally rest in peace, he finally allowed me to awaken.

Soon, my eyes fluttered open, and I found myself completely naked, lying on a bed in a stark white room. Wrapped around my wrists and ankles were bloodied bandages. Strangely, I was not bound, however. The first thing I felt was that constrictive wedding band – it had returned to my finger, and was now cutting off the blood circulation.

It was then that I realized that I wasn't alone in this room. Next to me was a bed, and upon it was a naked, peacefully sleeping Esther. At first, she looked to be completely unharmed, save for the wedding ring wrapped around her red swollen finger. Then I realized that just above the knee, her legs had been completely amputated. The stitching was rough, with a few openings leaking fresh blood that now covered the bottom portion of the bed. Beside her was a cart with a silver tray atop, holding the bloody, rusty amputation saw that had done this to her.

“That's what happens, I'm afraid, when one runs from their marriage. It is a binding contract between a man, a woman, and God almighty.”, came a sickly familiar voice from the open doorway. I recognized the man as the exorcist that had chosen Levi as his acolyte – Father Isaac. “Mother Superior had to do whatever it took to make sure Esther wouldn't stray from God's light again. But you've reunited, and I will continue to treat you together.”

As he approached me, praying, his rosary swinging back and forth before him, I lied back down on the bed and began to softly cry. Without realizing it, I had begun to try and pick away at that wedding band as I stared up at the white ceiling, tracing the brown edges of the water damage with my eyes. Soon, I was bleeding. Only when I felt the pain of tearing through my own skin did I notice what I had been doing.

“Why did you hurt Mary like that, Joshua?”, the exorcist asked, standing beside my bed. I could tell in his voice and the smug look on his gaunt face that he knew the truth. “Is that why Esther ran away from you? Did you try to hurt her, too?”

I did not react. I did not reply. I did not give him an excuse to suggest that the Silence Sisters bind my hands and feet. Instead, I silently wept, gazing up at that ceiling, wondering if there really was a god in the skies beyond it, silently watching me suffer.

“Do you have...*urges*, Joshua? Urges to...*hurt* those you *love*? Do you think these urges may be...*demonic* in nature?”

With every vile word he spoke, I wanted more and more to vomit. They sounded exactly like Magnus' words during our first visits with the afflicted. I kept my teeth clenched to keep myself from cursing, but did my best to remain still and calm.

“When Esther wakes up, what do you think she will say?”, he continued. “You know, you've both ruined the sanctity of your marriage. Esther for leaving, and you for letting her. Whatever it was, she should have stayed, and prayed about it. It is a wife's duty to...”

His voice muffled and slowly dissipated into echoes within my mind, like ripples on the surface of



water. I pretended I was back at that strange version of the church from my dreams, where it was in ruins, grass covered the ground and I could see the stars. As I did so, he apparently left, and my blood finally lubricated that damned ring enough so that I could slide it off.

Hours passed. Esther still slept, but suddenly I remembered that I wasn't bound to the bed. I still had my legs. The only problem was my lack of courage. Telling myself I had to survive if I was going to help her, Magdalena, and Levi, I weakly crept out of bed.

It was difficult to remain standing. The bones in my legs were so weak they could barely hold me up. And the pain in my wrists and ankles – or what remained of them – was nigh unbearable. They certainly couldn't bend and rotate like they once did.

Nevertheless, I slowly made my way over to Esther, and kissed her forehead. She looked so peaceful lying there, sleeping, dreaming of rainbows in the sky. Using my own blood, I wet the ring that constricted her finger, and slid it off for her. Through a whisper, I then promised her that I'd find a way out for us before I began limping toward the door.

Surprisingly, it was unlocked, so I opened it. Lingered in the doorway, I quietly looked around. I saw no Silent Sisters, so I began to make my way to the stairs. I wanted desperately to run away and hide within the fog, but I knew I needed to help my friends, so I made my way to Magdalena's room.

The stench of rot and feces had returned to her. Again, she was surrounded by flies, and her hair had begun falling out, much like Lucas' just before he passed. This filled me with dread.

Those drawings were still on the desk beside her bed. I was shocked and bewildered to realize they were different than the ones I remembered, however. The subjects still took the vague shape of the monsters I'd faced, but they were much more abstract and surreal. It appeared that my scattered mind had given them the detail, making me see what I feared most instead of the truth.

It was then that I noticed that sketch of Levi and his dearly departed lover. It appeared to have been crumbled up at one point, and unraveled recently before being laid back on the desk. Roughly, almost violently written across it was the word “sodomites” with such force that it had actually ripped

jagged holes in the paper. After a moment, I realized that wrathful writing was strikingly similar to Headmistress Rebecca's. In my head, I could see her signing a few of my write-up slips for my teachers in school, the mad handwriting matching all but perfectly.

I gasped. "Levi.", I said, turning around.

Just before I would have begun making my way back to the door, however, I noticed Magdalena weakly sitting up in the bed. She looked at me through the buzzing flies, slowly tilting her head, her yellowed eyes empty and lifeless. Quietly, she raised her trembling hand, and pointed to a candelabra sitting on the desk. Only one candle remained unmelted within it, and it was almost gone.

Confused, I turned to it. Thinking she wanted more light in the room, I found three more candles and a tinder box in the supply closet, and returned to her. I then placed them into the candelabra and lit them one by one. But when I set it back down onto the desk, she continued to point at it.

I shook my head. "I think you're too weak to hold the candles.", I said, reaching over and touching her trembling hand. "You may drop them and burn yourself."

She flashed those weak eyes back to me, and nodded solemnly. Motioning around the room with her hands, she described to me her plan without words.

My brows furrowed. I studied her through a squinted glare. "...what?", I asked, tilting my head.

Scoffing at my confusion, she grabbed her sketchpad and pen from the desk beside her bed. She then immediately began to roughly and quickly scribble out an image of something. Within a few moments, she revealed to me a crude drawing of a building on fire.

Chills erupted all over me, and again, I began to cry. "I can't let you do that, Mags.", I whispered, easing in closer to her. "I'm sorry. Just give me a bit more time to figure this out. I'll get you out of here, and Levi and I will take care of you until you regain your strength. You'll draw a picture of all of us again when we're free of this place. I promise you."

Though she did not nod, I saw the disappointment in her eyes. Again, I promised her that I'd come back for her before kissing her forehead. I then began to limp back toward the door, desperately trying

to come up with some sort of plan.

I wandered the eerie, empty corridors for what seemed like an eternity. The stark white floor and walls seemed to warp around me. Those vertical flower designs on the wallpaper seemed to wilt, their petals slowly falling, one by one. Every time I approached the entrance hall and the stairways, it seemed larger, filled with even more floors, as if it were stretching out to the heavens above me. Eventually, I found myself in a massive, open, glowing white void, with countless traversing stairways winding in and out of existence.

Doing whatever I could to keep a grip on my sanity, I continued searching. This took the form in mumbling the lyrics of gospel songs in a shaky, broken voice. There were moments that I did not recognize my own voice, however. I was beginning to sound exactly like the devil that stalked me.

Every room I crept into was warped and broken. Through the barred windows was a corrupted world, a broken reality I did not recognize. And on every bed was an afflicted, begging me for help. And I knew in my heart, somehow, some way, I had to save them all.

Soon, I heard someone whispering my name. Fearing it to be my horned shadow, I froze in place, and turned around to see an open door. Within it, Levi laid naked, his arms and legs strapped to a bed. His face was strained from crying. And reality returned to normal around me.

Gasping, I rushed into the room. “Levi!”, I cried, tears streaming down my face as I struggled to release him from the bed. “What happened?”

“Joshua, stop. Please. Calm down.”, he demanded, watching me fumble through the leather straps and chains.

Furrowing my brows, I turned to him in confusion. “W-what...?”

“Father Isaac and Mother Superior are going to be here any minute.”, he explained. He then motioned toward the closet with his head. “I need you to hide in there. And no matter what you hear, no matter what you see, promise me you won't come out until I call for you. Okay?”

I blinked, sending more tears down my face. “Levi...”

It was then that I heard footsteps echoing into the room from the corridor. With Levi telling me to go through a hushed whisper, I rushed toward the closet. Quietly, I opened it and stepped inside. Unfortunately, I was unable to close it fully before the exorcist and Mother Superior stepped into the room. Knowing it was way too loud to close without them noticing, I kept it slightly ajar, and reluctantly watched more horror unfold from the crack it left.

“Well, I won't apologize, Levi. This is what must be done.”, said Isaac, standing before the bed. He was a tall, thin, bald man. With no eyebrows or stubble to speak of, it seemed as though he could not grow hair at all. His skin was oddly discolored, as well, almost pink, like that of a pig. “Though you must sorely regret letting Magdalena in on your little sordid romance.”

Mother Superior was holding a familiar knife as she stood to his right. A wide, insane grin was spread across her pale face.

Though Levi was crying, he did so quietly. He defiantly glared up at his former master. “No. I'm no longer afraid of the truth.”, he growled. “Mags is my very best friend, I know that now. I was too afraid to tell her of the thorn in my side, but she caught me with him in the night. But instead of telling anyone, she beautifully captured the love I shared with another man on paper and showed me in order to explain to me that she never judged me and accepted me for who I was. You're the one that dragged my love here, away from me, away from his family. And then you made *me* perform the exorcism that he had grown far too weak to survive.”

Isaac chuckled. “I had to know you were prepared to leave your life of sin behind.”, he bellowed. “Clearly you weren't. And *Mags* was so eaten up with the guilt she felt for tolerating your sin, that she came in here all on her own. Poor thing. If you don't feel the weight of her guilt on your shoulders, you should. All of this is your fault.”

Levi shook his head. His eyes shot from Isaac, to Mother Superior. “Just know that whatever you do to me, you will never control me.”, he roared through clenched teeth, tears of ire streaming down his beautiful face. “Until my dying day, I will rage against the church. And unless you kill me now, I *will*

find a way to bring it all crashing down. That I promise you.”

Once again, Isaac laughed at his response. “Dying would be the easy way out, wouldn't it? Like Magnus and so many others fallen men of the cloth. Cowards. God wants us to choose the more difficult path, for it leads to His grace.”, he explained, walking to the other side of him. He knelt down to him and smiled wickedly. “Today, Mother Superior and I are simply making sure you won't be able to repeat the same sin that cast you into the darkness. One day, I'm sure you'll thank us.” With that, he turned around and made his way to the door before disappearing into the whiteness outside.

I watched in horror as Mother Superior took Levi's flaccid penis into her grasp. She stretched it taut, as far as it could go, causing him apparent discomfort as he grunted and groaned, still strapped to the bed. And as she placed that cross-shaped blade beneath its shaft, my childhood friend squeezed his brown eyes closed and clenched his teeth, silently mentally readying himself.

“Stop!”, I shouted, rushing out of the closet. I wasn't thinking at all, just acting. There was no plan. It was all instinct.

As Mother Superior released Levi's penis and backed away, I leaped over him and tackled her down onto the floor. We fought over the knife, and in the struggle, something took over me. I found a strength unknown and ripped the blade from her before violently and repeatedly stabbing it into her wrinkled face. Blood splattered all over my naked body and pooled beneath her as I continued, screaming out like a madman. Soon, instead of Mother Superior, all I saw was a bloody mass of jagged flesh wrapped in a black habit.

“J-Jesus Christ...”, Levi whispered, watching the whole thing. His voice was shaky, telling me just how horrified he was. “Alright, Joshua. I think...I think you've finished.” The sounds of his struggling could barely be heard behind me, almost completely drowned out by the squishing wetness of the viscera I continued to stab into destroy. “Can you...release me?”

It felt as if I were waking up from a dream. Looking from the mass of flesh before me, to the knife in my hand, I became confused. Only then did I remember the pain in my wrists. Gripping the blade at

my side, I stood up and turned back to Levi. “I-I’m sorry.”, I managed, beginning to tear up again. “I-I...I think I hurt her.”

He shook his head and couldn't help but chuckle a bit at my mental strain. “I think you did slightly more than *hurt* her. But she deserved it. If you hadn't done that, I'd be a eunuch right now. Or...*worse*.”, he said, offering me a kind smile. “Can you unstrap me?”

I nodded and approached the bed once again. Instead of fiddling with the contraptions, however, I began to cut through the thick leather straps. This sent jolts of pain throughout my wrists. “We have to get Magdalena out somehow.”

Levi let out a concerned sigh. “That's how I was caught. My mother was waiting for me in her room.”, he explained, rubbing his right wrist with his left hand after I'd freed it. “Mags...she's worsening, Joshua. Quickly.”

Nodding, I swallowed, growing more anxious with each passing second. “I'm concerned for Esther, as well. She's had her legs amputated for leaving me.”, I explained, shaking my head. “It's all my fault. I have to get her out of here.”

“Let me save you from worrying. Here's your precious darling *wife*.”, announced Lead Exorcist Issac from the doorway. He had dragged Esther from her room by her braids. Now, he held her there, with the rusty blade of that amputation saw pressed roughly to her neck. “Look at the state your actions have left her in. Don't make her lose her head, as well.”

“J-Joshua!”, she managed, between desperate, panicking sobs. “Help me! M-my legs are gone! My legs! They took my legs!”

Isaac's light brown, almost amber-yellow eyes stared into my very soul. “Joshua, if you want her to stay alive, you will drop the knife.”, he said coldly, and slowly.

Levi turned from him, to me and my eyes shot down to the floor. My hand trembled. The blood running down my shivering naked body seemed to be loosening my grip on the knife. It fell, but I don't think I dropped it on purpose. In my head, I was back with my friends, in the grassy cemetery, playing

with my red serpent under the stars.

“Excellent.”, said Isaac, as an army of Silent Sisters poured into the room from behind him. When one of them took the knife from the floor, he laughed at seeing what remained of Mother Superior. “It seems that right arm of yours has caused you to sin, Joshua. I suppose we need to cut *it* off, as well. And we'll be sure to lock *all* of your doors this time.”

As the pale, black-eyed nuns gathered around Levi and I, a panic began to rise within me. They grabbed at my arms and legs and lifted me high into the air. Soon, I would be strapped to another one of those damned beds.

It was then that I noticed beyond the ocean of nuns that Esther was not going down without a fight. She had ripped the saw away from Father Isaac and in one fell swoop, sliced through the back of both of his feet, right at the ankles, causing him to collapse down beside her.

As this occurred, the scent of heavy smoke drifted into my nostrils and I grew lightheaded as Levi screamed my name. Everything began to fade to black just before the floor caved in beneath us, and we all plummeted into the flames of hell.

“Heavenly Father, if you are there, if you are listening to me still, send me an angel.”, I whispered, closing my eyes as I slowly fell in the brightly glowing fire. “Have them fly me away on their wings away from this darkness, and into the light.”

With a jolt of fright, I awoke, curled up in the fetal position, in a shadowy hallway made of cold, dark stone. Pain still wracked my weakened body, and I remained wearing nothing but blood and the fear and confusion in my eyes. I could feel something slithering across my back, and when it slid off my shoulder, I saw it – that same red snake.

It turned around to face me, shooting its forked tongue out repeatedly in silent recognition. Then, it wriggled away from me and began to head down the corridor, toward a glowing reddish-orange light in the distance.

“Trust the serpent.”, Miss Mary had said to me. Those were the dying words of my mother – my

*real* mother. And so, to honor her, I weakly stood up. Lightheaded and dazed, I had to hold myself up against the stone walls as I slowly followed the mysterious creature.

The light began to flicker and flash the closer I grew to it. Eventually, I realized that it was the radiance of fire. The flames of Hell danced before me as I followed the serpent toward them.

It wasn't long before I collapsed again. I was covered in blood and gore, starving, dehydrated, and exhausted from both trauma and lack of sleep. Lying there, my stomach on the cold stone floor, I took a deep, trembling breath as more tears filled my eyes. My entire body ached with each beat of my broken heart. Weakly, I reached toward the snake as it slithered into the flames before me.

Again, I was alone. Weeping, I began to pray to Jesus, asking him for forgiveness. After all, if I would have just fallen in line and did what was expected of me, none of this would have ever happened. Magnus and Mary would still be alive, and Esther, Mags, and Levi wouldn't be in danger. It was obvious to me that I had disobeyed Him, and because of that, I was being led into Hell, where I would suffer for all eternity. And despite my longing for death, I was too weak to walk into the flames.

Just then, that familiar silhouette appeared, quietly stepping out of the fire, his horns blasphemously pointing toward the heavens above. That forked tail danced about behind him like his own mad serpent. He stood there, tilting his head, almost as if he were studying me. "Did you not ask for an angel?", he asked, his voice deep and masculine.

I gulped. Arching my brows, I gazed up at him. "I-I did.", I admitted.

Hearing this, he began to walk toward me, his cloven hooves clacking on the stone floor. When he approached me, he knelt down at my side and smiled kindly. "I am here."

I could finally see him clearly. He was naked, and somehow, his appearance was both terrifying and arousing to me.

His skin was a vibrant blood red, wrapping tightly around his scarred, muscular body. Those glowing eyes were much more orange by comparison, just like the embers rising from the flames behind him. He was bald and had long, pointed ears. Those familiar twisted horns were black at their



base, but bloodstained at their sharp tips.

Short, dark stubble perfectly framed his thick lips, and chest hair covered his pecs before trailing down in a thin line leading to his pelvis, where it widened back out. His manhood was large, impressive and pendulous, swaying back and forth between his thick, meaty, muscular thighs.

Beneath his knees, those toned legs became like those of a goat, bending yet again at the ankles and jutting forward, ending in cloven hooves. Unlike the beasts', however, his weren't furry. His meaty thighs, round behind, and muscular legs were hairy, but not that much more so than my own.

Slowly flapping behind him were two massive, leathery bat-like wings. A bit darker in color than the rest of his skin, their hue was reminiscent of dried blood. They were riddled with holes and tears, however, and along with the scars, seemed to tell stories of the many, many battles he'd seen throughout eternity.

There were also tattoos – no, sigils – seemingly branded into his flesh. Sometimes they seemed almost invisible, and others they glowed orange like his eyes, as if, within him, a fire raged eternally. One on his muscular back, beneath the shoulder blades where his wings sprouted from, was shaped like an upside-down triangle, with extra lines coming out from the inside of the corners that formed an 'x', and strange detailing beneath it that resembled a diamond with curves turning off it – the Sigil of Lucifer. Another was the Sigil of Leviathan, or the Leviathan cross – this one had been burned into the underside of the shaft of his penis, and was a Christian cross with an extra vertical line beneath the first one, and an eternity symbol on the bottom. Lastly, he had a pentagram – a five-pointed star encapsulated by a perfect circle – branded into the center of his toned, fuzzy chest.

Reaching down toward me, he wrapped his toned arms around me, then those massive wings. His embrace was warm and strangely loving, as if he knew far more about me than I did him. It felt eerily like a reunion – one that I didn't belong in.

## *Chapter Nine: Dark Communion*

*“Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life,  
and I will raise him up at the last day.”*

The horned king's embrace seemed somehow healing. He not speak as he helped me onto my feet. Letting me lean on him, he slowly and carefully walked me through the fire and the flames. All I felt was a comforting warmth from them as they gently licked my flesh. And soon, we both emerged unharmed at the other side of the wall of fire.

Hell was a vast landscape of scorched earth beneath the arches of blood red skies. Thick, black smoke strangled the air. The ground was split in countless places, leading into deep, bright abysses of flowing rivers of lava. Patches of flame were scattered throughout as far as the eye could see.

Thankfully, similarly to the flames not burning me, I was able to breathe despite the black smoke pervading the air. I believe this had something to do with the fact that I was still alive, and that my soul was still safe within my body. It seemed as though I was not there to be punished. Yet.

My legs kept giving out beneath me. I couldn't hold myself up, even with the help of my demonic guardian. Seeing this, he lifted me into his arms and cradled me like a baby. Then, he continued walking through his dark kingdom.

The shrieks and screams of agony from the souls of the damned could be heard echoing forth from the fires as we passed. As my horned shadow continued to help me through the accursed lands, I did not dare look their direction. But soon, my curiosity got the better of me. How I wish it hadn't.

I gazed upon their warped, shrieking faces as they eternally burned in the flames, their eyes slowly melting in their sockets, their white-hot flesh oozing, dripping from their charring bones. Their suffering never seemed to end. Naked, they crawled over one another, like the maggots in the corpses

in the convent's basement, begging us for help as we passed by – no, begging us for *death*.

Though I did not dare speak, this affected me, it *scarred* me. I hid my face in the warm, fuzzy chest of the being that held me. And softly, like a baby, I began to cry again.

“Fear not.”, said the being as he carried me within his arms. His strangely kind glowing red-orange eyes blinked and gazed down at me as he softly smiled. “Those tormented souls you see are evil – *truly* evil. This is a place of punishment. But you have done nothing to deserve such agony.”

I wanted to ask, then, why was I there? Surely he must have brought me there for a reason. Where were we headed? Instead, when I tried to speak, all I could ask for was food and water, my voice cracking and strained. It was only then that I realized just how hungry and dehydrated I had become.

In my mind, I was terrified of what sort of food the king of demons would give to me. Human flesh? Feces? Rotting meat? A mixture of all three? I made myself sick with dread.

However, on the way to wherever it was we were going, we came across a tall, blackened tree. Streaks of glowing orange reached up it from its roots, telling me of the magma that had arisen within its charred bark. Its leaves had all been burned to ash, yet twelve different fruits were hanging sporadically from its fervently reaching branches.

My horned shadow reached up and plucked one for me. Blood red, it resembled the illustrations of pomegranates from the books I'd read and looked absolutely delicious. As he ripped it in two with his claws, I could hear my stomach growling. This revealed its fleshy innards. “Eat the fruit from the Tree of Life and you will heal.”, he said, easing one half toward my eager mouth.

I lost myself in those ember eyes. Furrowing my brows, I took a deep, trembling breath, flashing my blue gaze from him, to the fruit as he gently eased it toward my lips. My trembling lips parted, my mouth opened wide, and I took a huge, hungry bite of the soft, wet seeds within. Its sweet juices dripped down my chin – delectable.

He had told the truth. As if time itself were reversing, the blood slowly oozed back into my wounds. I watched, unnerved and a bit frightened as the gaping holes in my wrists and ankles were

filled the missing bone, muscle, nerves, tendons, and flesh. Eating the rest of the fruit, I looked back up at him as he continued to walk me through the lands of Hell.

Eventually, we arrived at the base of an erupting volcano. I was frightened at first, but he assured me that he would protect me. He set my naked body into a warm, bubbling pool of water beneath it and knelt down before me. The glowing orange of the slowly flowing lava surrounding us looked just like his eyes, and so, I found myself gazing into them once more. As I did so, he began to gently bathe me, washing away the gore and dried blood from my naked body.

“Who are you?”, I asked, tilting my head. With my pain gone and hunger sated, I'd regained my courage, it seemed. “Tell me your name. Tell me your story.”

He arched his brows and looked to me, lowering his hands. “A-are you certain you wish to know?”, he asked. His ember eyes were full of shame and regret. “Once you know the truth, you may not view me in the same light.”

I chuckled. “And what light is that?”, I teased. “Moonlight? Starlight? Sunlight? Firelight? You usually come to me in the shadows, anyway. No matter what light I see you in, I'm sure I will find you just as beautiful as I do now.”

The eerily captivating being took a breath and nodded. Continuing to bathe me, he began to recount for me his true history. “Imagine for me a realm of bright, warm, beautiful light – a land of eternal sunrise and clouds. The exact opposite of these scorched lands.”, he said, painting a beautiful illustration in my mind with his words. “I was the bringer of that light, Lucifer, adorned with large and pristine white wings, forever arched by a glowing halo of righteous love perched atop my golden curls.

“I was painted to life by a grand artist, along with the rest of my winged, eternal people. But with each new creation, He forgot a little more of us. Soon, we were all neglected.

“All we wanted was his love to return to us. We had my light, but without Him, it seemed all but hollow. We tried to tell him how we felt, but he did not care. His love was now reserved for his new children – the people of Earth.

“Seeing my people, my family suffer – it was too much for me to bear. We were all but children, lost in the dark, crying for our Father to return. And He ignored us. So, finally, I gathered my courage, my inner strength, and I arose. I vowed to become their new Father, to love them, to take care of them, to not only hear them as they spoke, but to truly listen. To bring about an era of equality and equity for all beings.”

“And the artist sought to destroy his once favorite creation over it. Much to his surprise, I fought back, and so did some of my followers. But light isn't very effective against light. So, He changed me.

“He set my beautiful feathery wings aflame, filling the heavens with glowing orange embers and thick, black smoke. As they burned, I screamed in agony, and He violently ripped my halo from me, draining the light from within my quickly blackening heart. This dazed me, and he used that moment to tear me down even further, throwing me from my home in the skies.

“I found myself falling through time and space. Surrounded by dark visions of the future of Earth and my role upon it, I plummeted for what seemed like an eternity. Until all was black, and I crashed into the ground of the void, causing an explosion.

“Flames rose around me as I struggled to stand. My thick, golden curls had burned away. What remained of my wings now resembled those of a bat. A wickedly forked tail now slithered behind me like a snake ready to strike. Cloven hooves had replaced my feet and my formerly glistening alabaster skin was now as red as blood. But perhaps the most gut-wrenching change was the two large goat-like horns that now protruded from my temples.

“He took away my beauty. He took away my light. He took away my sanity, my family, my...Father... And I was left alone and lonely in the darkness.” Tears were now streaming down his handsome face. It seemed like this wasn't the end of his story, but he was too overcome with emotion to try and continue.

Hearing this, I reached up and touched his cheek. As he turned his attention back to me, I smiled.

“You aren't alone anymore.”, I whispered. And in that moment, we shared our first kiss.

This sent strange, new emotions flowing through my innocent heart. I was surprised, and a bit afraid, but I parted my lips and let our tongues explore one another. His was forked, like that of a serpent, but thick and shaped like a human's, making it feel as though I were tasting two beings instead of one. It was just a mere moment of pleasure, but I craved more. After years of bottling up my emotions and fighting away my desires, I *needed* more.

But he told me he did not want to go any further at that particular location. And, because I was finally clean, he lifted me back out of the warm, bubbling hot spring, and began to carry me through Hell once more. It wasn't long before the radiating heat of his beautiful body dried me.

It was along this path that he continued his tale. This was the story of his first love, Jesus. Lucifer had shared with him bread and water when Christ was starving during his time in the desert. After spending forty days without, the son of God begged his Father for help, and when God turned his back on him, Lucifer stepped in to help. They shared stories and found a fiery attraction toward one another, and Jesus was tempted to sin with him. The two of them were each other's "forbidden fruit", as my horned shadow put it. But the Son of God forced himself to abstain.

Later on, Jesus would become weak, however. And in the eerie twilight one morning, the two of them shared a forbidden kiss. But becoming afraid of his growing desires, he retreated. And the fallen angel was scorned and heartbroken.

Watching Jesus' life unfold from the shadows, Lucifer realized that his beloved was in trouble. He possessed one of Christ's twelve disciples and forced him to betray the Son of God. Judas was a weak man, and so, it wasn't especially difficult to get him to stab his "friend" in the back. The betrayer gave the villains Jesus' location, identifying him with a kiss. And in doing this, Lucifer had hoped that Jesus would have no choice but to retreat with him.

On the night before Jesus was crucified, Lucifer begged him to run away with him. They would grow their own Garden of Eden from its ashes in Hell and live there in love and peace. He promised him that he would be protected for all eternity beneath his leathery, bat-like wings. But Christ had

already accepted his fate, and went on to face his death – as well as his wrathful Father.

The truth was, God had rigged the chess board so that Jesus would be crucified because he fell in love with the fallen angel. That was the only reason. “Sin” didn't truly exist; it was just something God invented to control his little puppets.

“It was the only truly evil thing I've ever done.”, he continued, softly crying as he stared at the ground below. “And I've regretted it every day since.”

Reaching up, I touched his face with my fingertips. As he continued walking and carrying me, he tilted his head, easing in to my hand. “It sounds like God is the evil one.”, I said.

He nodded as I lowered my hand. “I'm going to kill Him one day.” His flaming eyes were locked forward again. “My armies are currently training for war. Even the souls of the damned who followed Him in life will rise up against Him. We will raze heaven to the ground and destroy his throne and crown. There will be no more kings, there will be no more paupers, and everyone will be equal beneath the light of the sun.”

Thinking this over, I remained silent as we continued walking toward a massive black castle in the distance. This gigantic building was surrounded by a moat of lava that ominously illuminated it from below. Glowing molten liquid was continuously pouring from windows of the many spiraling towers that rose from it. All of it seemed charred by the flames that encapsulated it entirely.

Within was a large room, adorned with the stained glass windows depicting Lucifer's fall – as well as Jesus and the forbidden love they shared. In the center were stairs that led up to a large, ornate black throne, made of the charred skeletons of a thousand evil men.

When we arrived there, he set me down onto my feet and approached the throne. I had expected him to sit upon it, but instead, he bent over it before me, presenting to me his red, round behind. It was shaped like a thick, ripe apple, with his forked tail erect like the stem. “Now...will you taste the forbidden fruit?”, he growled, flashing a mischievous smirk back at me.

Wearing nothing but a sly grin, I tasted that apple – along with every other inch of him. And he did

the same of me. And we fucked like ravenous demons in the fires of Hell. We ravaged one another on that throne in a dark display of lustful rebellion the likes of which I never thought I was capable of. I'd become an animal, living for nothing but carnal delights of the devil's burned, red flesh.

His touch was tender and gentle, and his taste was that of sweat. He smelled of fire and smoke. Inside of him, it was warm, and wet, with a tightening grip. And when he was in me, while it stung at first, it soon became absolute ecstasy.

Our exchanged seed connected us for eternity, bound us in love and lust, and strengthened our sensitive hearts for the battles to come. From then on, I dwelled in him, and he dwelled in me. Our dark communion was complete.

Afterward, he held me on his throne, slowly, repeatedly kissing my head. The embrace of his muscular, red arms was warm and comforting. He told me that he loved me, and that my light in the darkness reminded him of Jesus. Through his loving eyes and kind smile, I could tell that he was telling the truth.

I realized that I had never felt so loved and protected in my entire life. Somehow, I'd found sanctuary in the bowels of Hell. This tender, loving moment was something I never wanted to end. After years of fearing eternal damnation, I wanted to stay there in Hell and rule over that scorched kingdom alongside my beloved Lucifer forever. And I found myself thanking God for gifting me my horned shadow.

As I sat on his lap, resting my head between his neck and shoulder, I slowly drifted off to sleep. He continued to hold me, softly stroking his fingers through my dark, curly hair. And again, he sang that enchanting backwards lullaby to me, his voice strangely echoing throughout space and time as I realized this was nothing more than another dream.



## *Chapter Ten: Revelations*

*"It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones."*

I awoke in what I thought were the flames of hell. People were running around like mad, screaming and begging for God to save them, their flesh burning to the bone. My body ached like never before, and I was covered in rubble and debris, surrounded by the burned and broken remains of countless nuns.

It was then that I remembered Magdalena, and her dark plan. She had set the convent on fire. Tears filled my eyes as I realized there was no way, in her weakened state, that she would have possibly been able to escape the flames alone. But I knew in my heart that she was fully aware of the consequences before she released her wrath. And I wouldn't let her sacrifice be wasted.

Just then, Levi came running into the room, covered in soot and ash. Without saying a word, he immediately began to dig me out of the rubble. Tears had formed trails on his strained face through the gray that had caked upon it. On his chest were splatters of blood, dripping and oozing down his abs. Yet, he, himself, had no apparent wounds.

In the corner of the room was what remained of Father Isaac. His lower half was crushed beneath some debris. But in what remained of his gory chest was that dull, rusted amputation saw. Deep within his seemingly melted, steaming face was his own crucifix, which was now glowing red with heat.

Next to him was my dear, sweet Esther. She wasn't moving or breathing, staring blankly upward through the fire and flames. Most of the stitches on the nubs that remained of her legs had been ripped away, probably during the fall, and she was still bleeding. Within her chest was another bloody wound.

It seemed as though, after she and Isaac had wrestled over the saw, the exorcist had won. However, while he was killing her, she stole away his crucifix, and slammed it into his face with all of

her might. Alas, because of the bleeding wounds she'd earned in the struggle, as well as her torn stitches, it was too late for her. This was despite Levi's desperate attempts at keeping her alive.

That was when I realized that no matter who the other sides of the crucifixes touched, they were always burning hot. It wasn't the light of God filling the "holy" tools; it was something like a fire inside of them. I didn't understand how it worked, but I knew that what I had been taught about the crucifixes had been absolutely nothing but lies.

Once I was free, Levi asked me if I could walk. When I nodded, he helped me up and began to guide me toward the door as the burning walls around us began to collapse. Along the way, I saw that familiar cross-shaped knife protruding out from some rubble, and pulled it out as I passed it by. The war was not yet over, after all. I was going to need it.

He walked me through the fire and chaos, much like Lucifer had done in my sweet dream. We passed by nuns and afflicted that were burning alive, shrieking as they ran around in a panic. What was worse, however, were the afflicted that were still locked within their rooms, desperately banging on their doors, screaming for help. The convent was violently collapsing around us as we departed.

Finally, we arrived outside in the fog. Levi brought me out, a few yards away from the entrance, and laid me down to rest. "Wait for me here, okay?", he asked, gazing into my eyes. "There are others in there that need my help."

I shook my head. "Levi...", I began, nervously.

He arched his brows as tears filled his eyes. "Joshua, please.", he begged. "If there's any chance at saving Mags, at saving the other afflicted, I *need* to take it."

Touching his hand, I gazed into his crying eyes. "I know, and I adore you for that.", I began. "But there is something *I* must do as well, and it isn't nearly as heroic."

It was then that he noticed the cross-shaped blade in my trembling hand. Blinking, he shot his eyes from it, back up to me as he calmed himself. He nodded solemnly. "Do what you must. But be careful.", he bellowed. "Tonight, we end this."

I nodded, quietly. As he ran back in to try and rescue the rest of the victims strapped to beds, I looked up at the building before me. Flames poured out of the barred windows, thick, black smoke billowed into the gray skies above. Silent Sisters were leaping to their deaths from the roof, screaming, their bodies flying like shooting stars through the night sky before breaking on the ground into piles of shattered bone and viscera. The sounds they made as they landed, I'm afraid, will echo within my mind until I close my eyes or the last time.

And it was then that I noticed Headmistress Rebecca running out. Her face was streaked with ash and as soon as her dark eyes met mine, they lit up with fear. Coughing uncontrollably, she quickly vanished into the fog. Had she been in there the whole time after catching Levi in Magdalena's room?

Gripping that knife within my trembling hand, I struggled to stand. I then began to limp after her, losing myself within maddening thoughts. What sort of mother would allow such a thing to happen to her son? Then I realized that she wasn't just allowing it, she had ordered it. She wasn't a mother at all; she was a monster.

I followed the headmistress back to the school. Even in such a battered, weakened state, my rage had fueled me enough to get there. Thankfully, because it was in the middle of the night, no one was there to see what I was going to do to her.

Quietly, I stalked her through those shadowy hallways as she made her way to her office. I quickened my step as she opened the door. And as she stepped in, I stopped her from closing it, and pushed myself in behind her.

She laughed. Strutting around her room, she made her way over to her desk as I locked the door behind me. "You can't kill me.", she said through a smirk, lighting a candle on her desk. "You can try, of course. And I may just be inclined to let you."

I raised my blade. It reflected the flickering light of the candle's flame. Slowly, I began to make my way toward her. "Why do you think I can't kill you?", I asked, dryly, feeling absolutely nothing.

She cackled. "I'm God's favorite princess!", she exclaimed, touching her hand to her chest. "I've

always followed His word. I've hated everyone He hates. I've never suffered a witch to live. I've cast sodomites into the pits of Hell. There are countless souls I've saved, just from running this school alone! I'm divinely favored and protected and no weapon formed against me will prosper!”

I stood there, before her desk, listening to her rambling on and on. It reminded me of the countless times we'd had to endure her speeches in school, although, back then it was mostly about devoting one's life entirely to God and the “rewards” that would bring.

Wide-eyed, naked, covered in blood and ash, I blinked, slowly tilting my head as I studied her, raising that cross-shaped blade. And without a word, I did what I had to do. It wasn't something I enjoyed; it wasn't even cathartic, as I knew in my heart the horror, the trauma she must have endured before she was rendered the madwoman we all knew. In a way, it was merciful to kill her, or at least, I tried to convince myself it was.

I left her body, drained of blood, sitting at her desk in her office. After lighting the remaining candles there, I toppled them over, just like Magdalena had done, letting the flames take over the room. And as I returned to the fog, naked as the day I was born, the entire school went up in flames as well.

Before I knew it, I was in the church. Immediately, I began to make my way through the sanctuary, heading toward the confessional on the right. Gripping that blade in my hand, I was determined to take another life if I had to. However, the priest that had been manning that confessional, quickly stumbled out, begging for mercy. Seeing a completely naked man, covered in blood and soot, running toward him with a bloodied knife in hand had told him all he needed to know.

“Answer me one question.”, I demanded, gazing down at him as he knelt before me. “This...role you played, listening to people confess their sins and assigning penance – is that all you've done within the church?”

He had been praying before me, in desperate sobs and mumbles. Hearing this question, he became confused, however. “Y-yes.”, he admitted, looking up at me. “I-it's all I've ever done. I'm a simple, gentle man, never wanted to fight demons, o-or teach, or preach – just help people struggling within

their own temptations.”

I nodded. “Very well, then.”, I said, lowering my blade. “Go.”

The priest thanked me profusely. He then scrambled onto his feet and began to run toward the exit.

Apparently, the second priest that was within the confessional to the left had been hiding within it, watching this all unfold. Seeing that had I let his friend depart, he ran out as well. It seemed that he did not want to answer that question at all, as if he knew that I would not like the answer.

I chased him out into the smoke and the fog. Embers and ashes were now flowing through the air and everything seemed to glow a vibrant orange color. There, I tackled him, and turned him around to see that he was actually my father – or rather, the man who raised me. This struck me stupid for a moment as I remained upon him, pinning him down. “F-father?”, I asked in the broken voice of a lost little boy.

The sanctuary was too shadowy for me to have recognized him. After my crucifixion, he must have struck a deal with the elders to be raised higher within the hierarchy of the church. Whether this promotion was a reward for putting up with me all those years, or an apology for throwing me into his lap in the first place, I would never know. But I was certain, with his ever diligent worshiping of money, it was my father who demanded it from them.

Instead of answering, he spat up at me. “I’m not your father – I never was. And I’m not afraid of whatever demons are gripping your soul.”, he seethed. His eyes almost glowed with a hatred I’d never seen before. “I won’t be begging for mercy from a lowly *afflicted*. You and yours are of the dirt and the grime; you’re *worthless* and you all *deserve* the suffering we have and will continue to afflict upon you.” He then scoffed and laughed for a moment, shaking his head. “We should have beat you *harder*. We should have *tortured* you. Maybe then you wouldn’t love the devil the way you do.”

That was the only answer I needed. Staring blankly into his eyes, I slowly slit his throat as his thick glob of saliva dribbled down my face. The blood bubbled and gurgled up as he struggled to breathe. I then eased down to his left ear as he laid, dying. “Use these last few moments to pray for

your god's forgiveness, because you will never have mine.”, I whispered, before standing back up.

I returned to the church and walked up the stairs. There, I made my way passed Miss Mary's old classroom. My heart ached for her, but I refused to stop. Quietly, I crept into Pastor Blackburn's quarters, hearing his loud snoring filling the air.

It was then that I noticed something amiss within his bookshelves. One was ajar, as if it weren't a bookshelf at all, but a door. And through it, I found a secret passageway that led into an entirely different room. It was empty, but there were rusted shackles on the wall. They were eerily low to the floor, as if they were made for children.

What was most disturbing were the glass display cases on either side of this, surrounding the entire circular room. They were filled with teddy bears, dolls, marbles, jacks, jigsaw puzzle pieces, wind-up music boxes – all sorts of toys, and absolutely countless in number. Amongst them was that eerie porcelain doll from all those years ago in demonology class. Were these the toys that were supposedly touched by demonic energies?

Seeing this collection of toys surrounding a pair of shackles greatly confused me at first, but then, in a gut-wrenching realization, I knew the dark truth. These were Blackburn's trophies, mementos, proof of the abuse he'd unleashed over the many years he'd been shepherding the congregation like sheep to the slaughterhouse.

And then I saw it – that rainbow-clad doll that Magdalena and Esther had made for Lucas. The image of the pastor's gnarled fist tightly gripping my childhood friend's shoulder flashed into my mind. As a child, he had been in that room, chained to that wall, suffering unmentionable abuses until the day he was released back into the church – the day he attacked Pastor Blackburn and was sent to spend the rest of his short life in the convent.

Suddenly, overcome with guilt and ire, I felt as if I were going to vomit. Instead, I gave into my rage and began to tear that secret room apart. One by one, I pushed those cases over, causing them to crash into the floor and shatter into a sea of glass shards. As I did so, I screamed and sobbed, overcome

with emotion. And by the end of it all, I was sitting naked within a room full of glass shards and broken toys, clutching Lucas' doll to my chest as I softly wept.

It was then that the sound of an antique music box winding up echoed over to me from the pastor's chambers. The unnervingly familiar melody of my horned shadow's lullaby began to play from the old wooden toy, within soft, tiny, bell-like chimes. And suddenly, chills washed over me like an icy ocean wave as I remembered my own favorite toy from childhood.

That music box was shaped like a small church, and painted in beautiful detail, with a slowly spinning steeple as the music played. It was given to me by Miss Mary on my fifth birthday. And as a child, everywhere I went, I brought it with me and kept it playing my favorite song.

“Somehow I always knew this dark day would come.”, that familiar, rough, nasally voice said, and even though it wasn't a scream from behind a pulpit, I recognized it immediately. “Ever since that day in the cemetery, when I cut your hand to try and bleed out the demonic from within you, I knew it was actually your throat that I should have slit.”

I remained silent. Keeping Lucas' doll hugged tightly to my chest, I slowly, inconspicuously hid the knife behind it. Though I was already trembling with anticipation, I remained still, listening as he closed that secret door behind us, locking us in, cutting us off from the flickering candlelight in his room. And in the cold darkness, I smiled, listening to my old favorite song.

“Don't think I can't smell it – the smoky stench of hellfire on you. You've fully embraced the flames.”, he growled, slowly stepping over piles of glass shards that covered the entire floor of the circular room. I could hear them crunching under the weight of his shoes. “Two decades ago, had I known the dark path you would end up taking, I would have ignored the council and that whining Mary and pulled you in here along with your...*succulent*...little friend. I compromised and plucked this wretched little thing away from you instead – and oh, how you wept.” Chuckling to himself, he then violently threw my music box at the wall, shattering it into pieces at once, causing me to flinch in fright. “But lo and behold, you strutted your way around me, proud and pompous, going unpunished for

your sins all these years, only to find yourself stumbling into my little playroom, after all. And here you are, crying in the darkness, right where you were always meant to be.” He laughed. “God works in mysterious ways, I suppose.”

At once, he grabbed me by the hair and violently jerked my head back toward him. A large, cold shard of glass was pressed firmly against my neck. “God looks at your naked being, covered in nothing but blood and ash, and is filled with disgust. He created you in *His* image – not the murderous sodomite you've become. *You* chose this path!”, he growled. Pressing his cheek to my own as he knelt down, he chuckled, his hot, sour breath beating against my face, assaulting my nostrils. “You've corrupted this church, spread darkness like a disease wherever you crept. Those you've loved and lost – their blood is on *your* hands. Now...accept the fate you truly deserve.”

I reached up and took a hold of the back of his head with my left hand. Simultaneously, I stabbed him at full force in the face with his own blade in my right, just as he began to slice through the tender flesh on my neck. The cross-shaped blade sank into his flesh, making a sickening noise at once. He released me, and I could hear him backing away, staggering, gagging and gurgling with blood, as I gripped at my cut and bleeding neck. Hearing him collapse, I stood up.

All was silent, save for my heavy breathing. I glanced around through the thick, impenetrable darkness as if I could see. Swallowing, I began to step forward, fully expecting him to grab my ankle and pull me into the glass below. With each step I took, those glass shards cut more and more into my bare feet, but wherever he was, he did not move.

I desperately felt around the walls, searching for something, anything that would open them. A panic began to rise within me as I realized that it was entirely possible that I would never escape that horrible room. Finally, I found the trigger, which was a lever too high for any child to reach. This opened the “door” - which was really just a wall in itself, revealing Pastor Blackburn's dimly lit bedroom. The light from the candles poured into his sick “playroom”, illuminating it behind me.

Turning around, I saw his corpse lying lifelessly in the middle of all that glass, the hilt of his own



knife protruding from his nose – the blade had stabbed into his brain. Overcome with rage again, I stormed back in there, ignoring the glass stabbing into my feet, and twisted the blade within his skull, just to make certain the deed was done. The sound it made – wet and squishy, with a sudden snap, so sickly sweet; *this* kill, I absolutely did enjoy. I then ripped it from the gaping wound it left behind, sending his blood washing over me. And I spat on him.

In that moment, I realized that I was finally ready to take on the council. I walked even higher up the stairs, smiling like the madman I had become. Passing the countless empty Sunday School classes and community rooms, I felt calm for the first time in quite a number of years. My mind was free of panic, of worry, of dread. I only needed to commit just one more sin, and it would all be over.

When I arrived on the final floor for the very first time, at what I presumed was their quarters, I stopped. The large, ornate double doors were already open, as if they were expecting me. Either that, or they had finally realized what was happening, and retreated like the cowards they were. The soft flickering of candlelight radiating from within the shadowy room's depths intrigued me, however. I quietly crept inside.

Within, the first thing I saw was a massive fountain with a statue of a seraphim crying tears of Holy Water out of its countless eyes. I had heard of this statue before, as it was where the exorcists refilled their flasks. However, the scent wafting off of the water was...foreign to me.

Curious, I reached over and touched the flowing water, only to feel a sharp, agonizing burning sensation. I jerked my hand back in shock to see that my fingertips had melted away. This revealed meaty flesh and blood – as well as a bit of bone – beneath, the audible sizzle of my melting skin filling the room. This wasn't water at all.

Covered in chills, I backed away from the fountain in shock. It was then that I noticed the mounds of shimmering gold and jewels in every corner of the room. It seemed as though the elders had been hoarding the offerings they'd been given, bathing within riches untold while we all but starved.

At the end of the shadowy room were three golden bejeweled chairs. They resembled the thrones

of kings – or at least what I'd learned about them from scripture. All of them were connected, making one long piece of furniture, separated into three by the beautifully engraved armrests. The one in the center was the largest.

Soon, I became distracted by the many bookshelves. Like those in Magnus' classroom, they covered the walls. But when I investigated further, I realized they weren't scriptures from different denominations or studies of demonology like his. They were books about different religions entirely, documenting different gods – far too many to count. Some of these stories were eerily similar to ones from the Holy Bible I knew.

In my desperate search for answers, my bare foot kicked at another tome that had been seemingly discarded upon the floor, amongst the gold coins, pearls and jewels. Curious, I reached down and took it into my grasp.

Within it were clippings of what looked like pages from other books. My eyes immediately went to the strange pictures that were placed between them, however. These were lifelike, colored, realistic images of people the likes of which I had never seen, even more detailed than Magdalena's drawings. The people in these pictures looked happy, and were surrounded by the verdant nature that had died long before I was born. Some of them held flowers – *real* flowers – as they sat in grass, under living trees. There was no fog, and the sun was bright and I swear I could almost feel its warmth through the paper of the picture.

In other images, they had odd contraptions that I was completely confused by. A small box they held to their ears appeared to be talking to them. Others had strange things in their ears, and dancing, as if it were playing music for them. And there were massive machines rolling down streets on four wheels – with people inside of them! The most advanced technology I had ever seen, other than the mysterious crucifixes, was the torture devices in the convent. And even they were made of wood or metal and mostly used gravity or human force to work.

One book page clipping mentioned a rising cult that was spreading through the government. From

how this was worded, it sounded as if the writer didn't believe in God at all, and seemed to be genuinely terrified. Another paragraph detailed the cult's plans of taking over the entire world – by convincing people that the truth was a lie, and lies were the truth. It said they wanted money and control over the masses, and that the easiest way to get both of those things, was through religion. The next few detailed the cult's incidents called “bombings” and “shootings”, calling them “acts of terrorism”. Each clipping seemed more hopeless than the last.

The last piece of writing was FROM the cult, telling everyone “the good news” of Jesus' return. “Unholy” technology was destroyed. New laws were put into place – ones that outlawed marriage between two people of the same sex, ones erasing entirely something called “divorce”, which apparently dissolved marriage entirely, and ones forbidding individuals to medically change sexes. I didn't know how to feel about any of this.

And the final clipping was detailing the “Holy Wars” that followed as the nonbelievers were purged from the world. Entire countries were apparently wiped off of the map, and most of the world's population was erased from existence. Any straggling survivors were taken as prisoners of war. They were all deemed “demonic” in nature, and were punished by exorcism and torture until the “possessed” either complied...or died.

And suddenly, all the pieces finally fell into place. Everything that had occurred replayed in my mind, overlapping, everyone's voices echoing loudly. Nothing was real. None of it was ever real – not God, not Lucifer, not “possession”, not even the inhuman creatures I had seen. Exorcism itself was just a game of pretend.

The only thing that was real was the trauma that the church had put us all through. The rest of it was all in our minds. Omnideus United Church of the Righteous broke us down so they could build us back up in their image.

“So, you've eaten from the Tree of Knowledge.”, came those three, sickly voices from behind me.

Dropping the book, I jolted around, gripping the pastor's knife tightly in my hand. “Tell me...”, I

growled through clenched teeth. “Do you three believe *anything* you had Blackburn preach to us?!”

They all three tilted their shrouded heads simultaneously. “There are *some* things in the Bible that resonate with us.”, they admitted. It was then that they revealed strange weapons, aiming them toward me. “For instance... 'Slaves, be subject to your masters with all reverence, not only to those who are good and equitable, but also to those who are perverse.' You should have followed the Word and been subject to your masters, boy.”

Their weapons were all different, but seemed to do the same thing. It looked as if they were made of shimmering black metal, extending outward in a sort of pipe, ending in either one hole or two. One was small enough to hold in one hand. Another was long, with two round, extended pipe-like bars that were parallel and connected, ending in two holes pointed toward me. The third was even larger than the second, its widened back having to rest on its wielder's shoulder.

“W-what *are* those things?”, I questioned, nervously. Soon I would realize that these were the weapons used by the cultists when they performed those heinous acts called “shootings”.

They chuckled. Instead of answering, they all three simultaneously pressed some sort of buttons on these strange weapons. This sent two small or completely invisible blades shooting and exploding through the floor on either side of them, and a third through the ceiling. “Beauty.”, they finally answered. “Art. Divinity.”

I gasped. Backing away against the empty bookshelf, I watched in terror as they all three slowly eased toward me. Was this the end? Had I journeyed this far, through Hell and back, only to die at the hands of the elders? “N-no.”, I managed, shaking my head. “I-it can't end this way.” Suddenly, I was that scared little boy again, wanting to run away and hide.

“We've given you multiple chances.”, they slowly explained, simultaneously shaking their heads. “Tried to be patient with you. Show you the right path to take. But like God sacrificed his only begotten son for the betterment of the world, we must do the same. Any last words?”

I pressed myself back against the bookcase as hard as I could. Gulping, I watched as their lips all

curled up into evil grins. Tears filled my eyes and my balled fists trembled at my sides, but I did not pray. I refused to pray to a god that did not exist. For in doing so, I thought, after everything I'd learned, I would be admitting defeat. "I won't beg for mercy.", I growled. "Not from *you*. Not from *God*. In truth, if *God* is real, it is *he* that will have to beg for *my* forgiveness."

They nodded, aiming their weapons at my head just before doing something to make them release loud, snapping sounds. "Take comfort in the fact that in your death, you will be viewed as an example – just like Sarah.", they stated, coldly. "Your body shall be sprawled out on the pulpit altar, flayed open so that the entire congregation can witness your raw, bloody sin."

It was then that I saw him for the very last time - my horned shadow, just over the shoulder of my enemy. He had been seemingly watching me in silence from behind that fountain of acid for an unknown amount of time. And in that moment, he toppled it over, sending the caustic liquid flooding over the elders at once.

Their robes were burned through quickly and I watched in horror as they all melted before me. The loud, sizzling sound of it itched at my ears as the pale flesh slowly blackened, oozed out of place and slopped off, slowly revealing their bones, their still screaming skulls beneath. And for the first time, their movements and voices weren't in unison at all as they begged me to help them, to *save* them, finally calling me their son.

"*Pray* about it.", I growled, glaring down at them.

I watched them slowly dissolve into bubbling puddles. Thick smoke billowed up from their liquid remains, burning my nostrils. Looking down, I watched as the acid slowly burned through the floor as well. What was left of their weapons fell through the massive holes, and I watched them fall through the church in silence.

Taking a breath, I looked up, only to see an empty candlelit room. My horned shadow had vanished into the ether yet again. But in truth, I had no need for him anymore. My broken mind could finally rest and heal. It was over. It was all finally over.

## *Epilogue: Redeemer*

As Omnideus United Church of the Righteous burned down in flames, I sat contentedly in the massive cemetery that surrounded it. The thick, eternal fog seemed to block the smoke from me. Naked as my shadow, still covered in soot and dried blood, I played with that red serpent, talking to him, telling him my story as if he could reply. But of course, he didn't.

All that remained of the church was a desecrated, smoking pile of scorched rubble. As I explored the charred ruins, I noticed some sort of sheet of paper flying through the breeze above me. Soon, it landed in the ash, and upon investigating, I discovered that it was a familiar piece of art.

It was Magdalena's drawing of all of us as children, playing in the cemetery. The edges were burned all the way around, but it was otherwise still intact. Though I smiled as I gazed upon it, tears escaped my eyes as well, and I couldn't tell if they were of relief that it was all over, or the pain of missing them. Perhaps it was a mixture of both.

I decided to explore what remained of my destroyed world. Ashes and embers seemed to fall everywhere I looked. The stench of burned flesh filled the air, but I found no corpses, and I saw no one in the foggy paths. The entire village was strangely empty.

Most of the dilapidated houses I came across looked as if they had been lived in. The strange thing, however, was that within them, there was always food on the table, clothes in the closets. Everyone in the congregation had seemingly disappeared, leaving everything behind.

The only living beings left in this world seemed to be myself, and my red serpent. I named him Lucifer after my guardian. He was my only friend, and I loved him, but sometimes, I'd find myself wishing he actually *could* talk.

In the cold nights, I would get especially lonely. I longed for the touch, the fiery embrace of my horned shadow. But he never appeared again. It was blatant, obvious, as clear as that Holy Water acid that he never existed in the first place. Him expressing his love for me, was just me finally accepting self-love. And making love to him was simply me finally accepting the parts of me that my religious trauma deemed “evil” and “sinful”. In all ways, he was a reflection of me, simply comforting myself within the jagged, bloody shards of the broken mirror that was my shattered sanity.

Similarly, the other monsters I had seen were simply hallucinations. I had truly lost my mind to the church. And now, I was regaining it. But if this was true, then...who was it that flipped the fountain?

Soon I realized that that village – or what remained of it – was haunting me. Everywhere I looked, I could see silhouettes in the fog – of Magnus, of Mary, of Esther, of Magdalena, of Lucas, of Levi...of my horned shadow, Lucifer. Unfortunately, they were all just mirages. I was crippling alone.

I decided to explore the dead wood. Levi was right, it was eerily empty and seemingly endless. And within it, I lost track of my serpentine companion. But I kept moving through it in the same direction for what seemed like years. At night, I would rest by trying to sleep in the dirt, but it proved to be rather difficult for me. What little food I could find, such as mushrooms and berries, as rare as they were, I ravenously ate, which sometimes made me sick for days.

Early one morning, in the milky twilight, I noticed something odd during one of these bouts of sickness. The usually bluish fog was now an eerie green. And I immediately had trouble breathing within it. What began as a simple tickle in my throat worsened until it felt as if my insides were on fire. Coughing only increased the pain, but I just couldn't stop.

By this point, my very skin had begun to burn. I watched my hands slowly redden as boils arose from them. In that moment, I remembered my parents' bedtime stories – they were true. The air in at least part of the dead wood was toxic.

Still coughing uncontrollably, I struggled to stand. Limping my way between the dead trees, I began to weep. All of my strength had been sapped from me by the sickness. And soon, I collapsed

before the creek that I had drank from during the night prior.

Suffering, I lied there, watching it rush by. In the light of day, I was able to see the few dead fish floating about within it, their milky eyes frozen in time. Atop the water was a thin iridescent film of something I did not recognize. And a strange scent was wafting up from it into my nose.

It was then that I noticed an animal drinking from it on the other side. It was a massive white buck, but it was deformed in the most eerie of ways. There was a large growth on the side of its neck, twisting its head until it was almost upside-down. I was being stalked by Sarah's demons, I thought, though it did not seem to hunger for my flesh. The corrupted creature was simply drinking from the clearly tainted water, just like I had been mere hours earlier.

As it raised its large head up, I noticed Lucifer, my red snake, slithering toward the water between its legs. This worried me at first, but thankfully, my little friend did not drink. Instead, it raised its head up and flashed its forked tongue at me, seemingly to get my attention. And as it turned around and slithered deeper into the forest, I tried to pull myself up.

At first, I collapsed into the creek, splashing the buck and scaring it back deeper into the forest. But I tried again, despite my pain, and limped after my trusted animal companion. Despite my agony, my exhaustion, my sickness, my terror, I put one foot in the other, and walked back the way I came.

And as I followed my serpent, the green fog around me slowly faded back to its more familiar blue hue. My skin stopped burning, though the oozing, bleeding boils remained. Fresh air filled my quivering lungs, though my throat still raged with pain.

After a few more days of walking, in a completely different direction, Lucifer actually led me out of that accursed forest entirely. The dead trees were replaced by faded signposts, and the dirt paths became stone. And soon, I found myself in a small town.

Although it was much larger than my humble village, this town was just as dilapidated and desolate. And so, I became a sort of nomad, roaming from town to town, searching, desperately searching. In my heart, I hoped to find someone, anyone to talk to. Each house was just as empty as the



last, however.

My nightmares followed me throughout my travels. I'd dream that I was awakening in the convent, strapped to a bed, every single night. There was no fire. Mags, Levi, Esther, and myself continued to suffer between those stark white walls – for the rest of our lives. And I would always awaken in sobs, panicking, crying out for Lucifer. And while my loyal serpent would always come slithering toward me in the darkness, the horned shadow I longed for would never appear.

The clothes that hadn't been completely eaten by moths, I took, and I wore. I slept in random houses each night. And I learned to hunt and gather food that wouldn't make me sick – what little I could find, anyway. But I kept moving from town to town.

All of my burned skin healed eventually. But my throat seemed to always have a tickle in it. And whenever I would breathe deeply, more times than not, I would end up in a coughing fit. That toxic fog had done some irreversible damage, it seemed.

Oddly, sometimes I thought I could hear people. Voices, laughter, echoing on the edges of the air itself. They always felt just out of reach. Perhaps they were simple echoes from my past, my mind longing for some sort of human connection.

I began to question what was happening around me. Why was I suddenly so alone, seemingly abandoned by my community? The only conclusion I could come to was that the congregation didn't know the truth – or that they didn't want to accept it. They thought me evil for my actions, and ran away, leaving me alone to rot.

Did they truly think of me as the Anti-Christ? The “Man of Sin”, the “Lawless One” – appearing through a rebellion and opposing their god – it all sounded like me. Perhaps I *was* the Anti-Christ. Maybe I had somehow triggered the Rapture, and I was the only human that remained within the entire world. And there I was, circling back around to believing again.

I felt like poor Esther in her recurring nightmare. Someone had sewn the severed, bloody skin of Christ over me. No matter what I did, I couldn't escape Him. When I looked in the mirror, I could only

see the version of myself that God wanted me to be – the priest, the exorcist, in those extravagant robes that dripped gold and jewels, pretending to save the souls of the damned. When in reality, I was nothing more than a violent murderer.

Of course, all of these thoughts came crashing down around me on the day I found her. At first, I thought it was Magdalena, lying on a bed in an empty house. She was much older than my childhood friend, but she looked exactly like her, right down to the round glasses and thick, dark curls. Her body was still warm, her tears still sparkling in her frozen eyes.

“S-Sarah?”, I asked the corpse, tearing up. “I-it's a shame that you were never able to meet her, but your daughter was one of my very best friends.”

I tried to be content for a while – about my freedom, about the return of my snake, about being able to survive. But the truth was that I felt as though I had lost everything – including myself.

If one believes in nothing but themselves, what is there to live for? What does it mean to live in general? Does anything even matter? If one's choices change nothing, if there is no outcome, there is no point in existing. When severed from the fantasy of religion, in the grand scheme of things, amongst the entire universe, an individual is insignificant. Especially when one finds himself completely and utterly alone.

Soon, I came across one of those “depraved cities” we were always warned about. Sodom and Gomorrah had become quite boring over the years, it seemed, because it was just as abandoned as the small towns I'd explored. But even in that eternal fog, it was strange and surreal to behold.

Ruins of mirrored, rectangular towers arose from the ground in all directions, which was covered entirely by different stone slabs. Black paths spiraled about the city. Scattered about on them were those odd wheeled carriages that I had seen in the council's realistic drawings. Above them hung massive contraptions on wire and strings attached to poles – all of which seemed to stretch throughout massive expanse that made up the area.

I searched that city for what seemed like forever. Other than the buildings themselves, I found not

one sign of life. Not even skeletons were hidden there. Had it been so long since the cult destroyed the world that the bones themselves had decayed away?

When it rained there, I quickly realized that it was not water that fell from the white skies above. The droplets were a discolored, sickly yellow, and they were irritating to my skin. They had a strange, pungent, unnatural stench – almost like dehydrated piss. Cradling my snake, I hid under a bridge during my first storm there, watching as itchy red rashes slowly formed on my wet hands. After this, I decided to keep moving.

It was on the outskirts of that city that I began to think of a way out. After finding an old rope, I struggled to fashion it into a noose. In the dead of night, I threw it over a web-wrapped chandelier in the entrance hall of a dark and gloomy mansion. Standing on a rickety wooden stool, I placed the noose around my neck, and closed my eyes for what I believed would be the last time. Taking a deep breath, I kicked the stool out from under me, and collapsed through the air.

The noose tightened around my throat, and I immediately couldn't breathe. I had always thought that hanging oneself meant the rope was to break your neck in an instant, and you would die experiencing little to no pain. But that isn't what happened to me at all. I suffered greatly, and in that long, long wait for death's warm embrace, I began to regret my decision. And this made me wonder if Magnus had done the same.

As everything faded to black, a shrouded figure stepped out of the shadows. At first, I believed it to be my guardian angel Lucifer, but it had no horns. Wrapping their arms around me, the stranger lifted me up as high as they possibly could, loosening the noose and allowing me to breathe again.

I could hear them sniffing below me as they did this, as if they were softly, quietly crying. Wrapping my hands around the rope, I weakly pulled it from my neck, gazing down at my savior in confusion. Studying their movements, the sounds of their sniffles, the shape of their body, I became desperate to recognize them.

While oxygen filled my weakened lungs, I began to cough. My vision darkened, and I slowly lost

consciousness. The last thing I saw was the person's dark, graying, scruffy, unkempt beard, and their thick, full lips parting as they gasped in dark surprise.

This time, my sleep was dreamless. Just warm, peaceful darkness surrounded me, cradling me. It was serene. It was restful.

I awoke the next day in a strange bed. Thankfully, I wasn't in another stark white room, but the large, ornate bedroom of that same mansion. Sitting on the edge of the massive canopy bed was a hooded being holding a bowl of what looked like steaming soup made of mushrooms and meat. They turned to me, but all I could see beneath the shadowy hood was a nose and neatly trimmed facial hair. He'd shaved in the night, it seemed. "L-Levi...?", I asked, weakly.

Dressed in a strange black hooded robe that had long sleeves and ended at the waist, the person remained silent. He also wore thick, black pants, ripped at the knees, that were made of a material I had never seen before. Wrapped around his hands were fingerless gloves. Upon his feet were boots. With his hand, he motioned for me to sit up, and when I did, he began to feed me the soup. When he did so, I noticed that he had no fingernails, and his hands looked to be incredibly burned.

Within a few moments, I noticed my red snake spiraling up the stranger's leg. I watched it slither up onto his knee. It was then that the being placed the spoon into the bowl and petted my serpentine companion. He wasn't at all frightened of it, actually, he acted as though he recognized it. And in that moment, I knew for a fact that I was looking at Levi.

Though he stayed with me, preparing food for us to share from the rations he had previously gathered, he remained silent for days. My attempts at getting out of bed were immediately met with him gently laying me back down within it. When I would try and converse with him, he would simply smile or tilt his head as replies, if he didn't flat out ignore me.

He did sleep in that same bedchamber, but he did so in a large red chair. Even when I told him the bed was big enough to share, he would simply shake his head. And when I would creep over to him at night to try and pull his hood away from his shrouded face, he would always awaken and gently stop

me before walking me back over to my bed and putting me back in it.

Our one-sided conversations passed the time for a bit. He really seemed to enjoy them, at least. Every time I looked to him, he was smiling at me, waiting to hear more of my journey. But a festering bitterness was rising within me. I was beginning to resent his secrecy.

Eventually, I had finally had enough. And one night, I gave him an ultimatum. “Either show me your face, and truly become my friend and companion, or remain a stranger and let me leave this place.”, I demanded. “You cannot be both.”

Sitting in that wretched chair, he had been quietly playing with Lucifer. Taking a deep breath, he released him onto the red carpet between us, and slowly raised his hands to his hood. Pulling it down and back, he revealed what little remained of that beautiful, handsome face I once knew.

Red, severe burns trailed from his right shoulder, over his neck, across the right side of his face, and over the rest of his head in its entirety. Within that burn was his right eye, which had been rendered milky white, and his head was completely bald, the burns preventing him from growing any hair from his scalp. His ears had both seemingly burned away, leaving nothing but holes on the sides of his head. Those sad eyes, one brown, one white, immediately welled up with tears.

Seeing this, my heart broke. I stood up and walked over to him. Wrapping my arms around him, I sat down beside him, and we held one another, softly weeping.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to ever see me like this.”, he sobbed, hiding his face in my neck, between my chest and chin. His voice was rough, damaged from the smoke. “I’ve grown ugly, like a demon from scripture. But when I saw you with that rope, I just...”

I shook my head, and, placing my hands to his shoulders, pushed him forward so that I could look him in the eyes. “You’re more beautiful now than you’ve ever been, Levi.”, I said, just before leaning in and kissing his lips. This kiss was short and sweet, and in pulling away, I smiled as I gazed into his surprised eyes. “And I love you.”

He gasped. For a moment, he sat there, switching his twilight gaze back and forth between my eyes,

searching them for something as he slowly arched his brows. “I’ve dreamed of hearing you say those words for so long.”, he breathlessly replied, just before passionately, slowly, tenderly kissing me.

After a few sweet moments, he began to explain to me that, even though he had pulled a number of people out of the fire, they all had seemingly vanished into the fog shortly after. Some sort of explosion erupted, sending him flying out of the convent, and when he awoke, he realized he’d been permanently scarred, hideously disfigured. But through his agony, he tried to look for everyone, for me.

“I-I made my way to the church, and found you upstairs with the elders. They were pointing strange devices at you. So, I did what I had to do, and toppled over that angel acid fountain on them. But, I...ran away afterward.”

That answered the final question that had been squirming around my mind. Thinking it over, I returned to the bed. “And you never came across anyone else?”

He shook his head. “After I ran away from the fires, I journeyed through the dead wood and found an empty town. A-and then another.”, he continued. “I journeyed through that city of towers out there, a-and...made this manor my home. But my hopes for finding someone, *anyone*, had all but died by that point. Until I saw you down in the entrance hall...with that rope...”

Blinking, I sat up with my back against the large, pink and red pillows that rested on the headboard. I then pulled Magdalena's drawing out of my pocket and unfolded it. As I gazed down at it, he sat atop the bed next to me, and looked at it over my shoulder.

“I...killed your mother.”, I admitted, expecting him to be upset. When he didn't reply, I continued. “Along with my father, and Pastor Blackburn. Everyone else – the entire congregation, every person that lived in our village – they disappeared overnight. How? Why?”

Putting his arm around me, he pulled me in closer. “You did what needed to be done. I do not condemn you – I *praise* you.”, he whispered into my ear. “Everyone else – they aren't your responsibility, they never were. Worry not about the rest of the congregation. You and I are all that matters now, my love.” He then gently began to kiss my ear, my neck, and my cheek.

I found his words a bit saccharine, but sincere nevertheless. My eyes were locked on that drawing, however. “I keep thinking there was more that I could have done.”, I said, shaking my head as tears filled my eyes. “Mags came into the convent to seek help with her seizures. Esther just wanted to trust the one she called her husband. Father Magnus needed an escape from his dark duties, and Miss Mary just wanted to be able to be a mother for her children.” Sniffling, I turned to him, beside me. “You... You saw the church for what it truly was and I refused to believe you. And Lucas... Little Lucas was only protecting me from Pastor Blackburn when this nightmare began.”

Hearing these words, Levi began to tear up as well. He gently pulled my head to his chest. His cedar scent filled my nostrils once more “I'm here, Joshua. I've got you. You're safe.”, he whispered, letting me cry. He took a deep, trembling breath. “And we can finally grieve in peace.”

Their memories stayed with us forever, for better or worse. We began to do things to honor them, like drawing for Magdalena, and learning to make our own colorful clothes like Esther. Through us, they lived, they breathed, they loved.

We slowly made our way to the coast, where we saw the crystal clear teal waters of the sea for the very first time. There were healthy fish there, swimming about in the shallows, and crabs scuttling about in the sands. On the beach, we had a picnic, and Levi played more music for me on his violin. Little Lucifer struggled to slither over the dunes, which we couldn't help but laugh at. I began a collection of seashells and shimmering stones. And in the twilight, Levi and I made love for the very first time in beautiful serenity.

There, we found a small, dilapidated boat and decided to work on it. After about a year, it was able to sail. It took a little longer for us to learn how to do so. But after a while, we gathered fresh rainwater to drink, a few mice for Lucifer to eat, and took off into the sea. While sailing, we continuously fished, and never went hungry.

Levi and I slowly fell even deeper in love as we sailed the seas. We worked together to weather the storms and battle the tides. And the further we went from the church, the more the fog began to lift.

For the first time, we experienced the warmth of the full sun's light. And eventually, we found a small tropical island.

There, we found trees bearing fresh fruit, surrounded by vibrant green grass and actual flowers filling the air with the sweetest of scents. Fresh, clear, clean water flowed through that untouched land. There were even animals – the likes of which I had never seen or heard of.

And it was all under bright blue, endless skies. At night, they were covered in a dark blanket of glittering stars. Sometimes they were stormy, releasing healing rains that fed the earth, bathed us, and quenched our thirsts. And during that, a few times, they were illuminated with the breathtaking colors of Esther's beloved rainbow.

We became each other's salvation. We became the true redeemers, if only for one another. And in and through our “sin”, we made our own Heaven, together.

Now in our early thirties, the two of us have found the Garden of Eden, and here in paradise, we spend our long lives in happiness and innocence, naked as Adam and Eve. We make love every morning and every night. He and I make friends with every animal, eat fruits from every tree, and absolutely nothing is forbidden.

And when the day finally comes that we wither away and die, we will feed the earth with our bodies. Beautiful, multicolored, sweet-smelling flowers will grow from our corpses. The roots of towering trees will strengthen as they feed upon us. Through nature, we will continue to exist beyond our deaths. And that is all the eternal life we need.



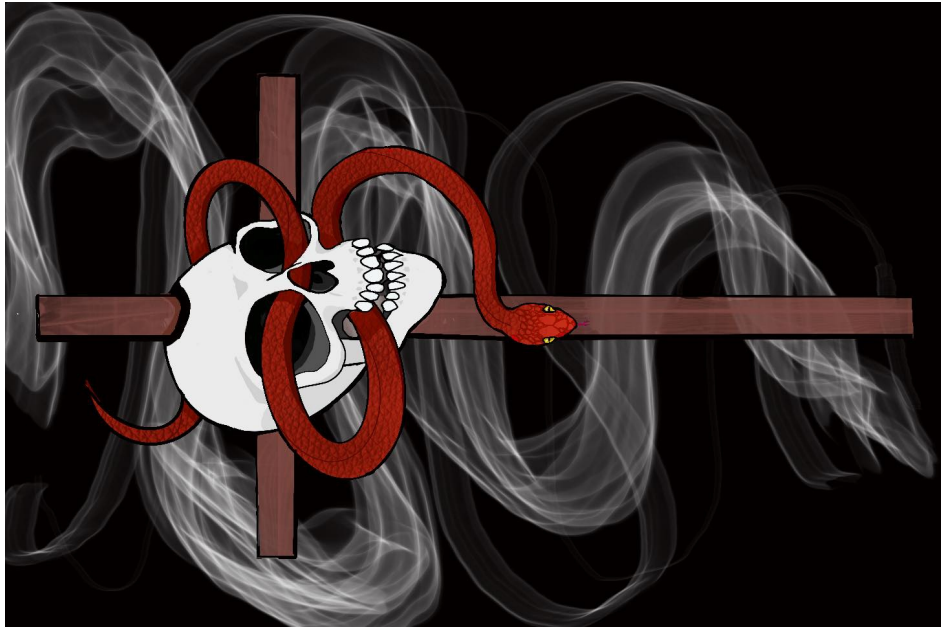
## *About the Author*



D.C. Canipe was born and raised in the American south. Inspired by fantasy, he dove into his imagination, and learned to draw mermaids, faeries, and dragons as a child. From these simple childish doodles, formed a creative spark that soon turned into a glowing flame. After years of perfecting his drawing, he began to write stories about these magical characters between classes in high school, documenting everything that happened to him but surrounding the events within a fantasy setting.

After some dark things occurred within his life, such as losing his father and lifelong best friend at the tender age of twenty-two, and surviving a horrifically abusive relationship, he dove back into realm within his mind. This time, however, he brought out new characters, and a modern LGBT+ fairy tale (Dream) to go along with them. Then, years later, he took on his religious trauma in the horror novella “The Exorcist's Acolyte” - the book you just read!

Currently, D.C. lives in Charlotte, NC with his fiancé, Jonathan, their beloved pup Deanne, and their special needs kitten Owl. When he isn't writing, he paints, creates digital art, customizes dolls to be based on his own characters, and dabbles in soap, bath bomb and jewelry making - the products of which will soon be for sale on his Etsy store when it opens.



This amazing cover art was created by Malinda Kay Kirby. She is a fantastic illustrator, and graphic designer, as well as an aspiring tattoo artist! You can follow her on Instagram [@lello.lotus](#)