In the Tongues of Men and Angels

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Summary

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When a body is found drained of blood in the heart of Florence, the case falls to the Special Operations Division of the Ministry of Holy Affairs. Standing in the way of Abel Nightroad and Esther Blanchett's investigation, however, is the Duke of Florence, Cardinal Francesco di Medici, who plots to undermine Cardinal Caterina Sforza, win the Pope's favor, and ignite the flame of war between the Vatican and the Empire.

But Abel and Esther soon discover that there is more to the murder than the bloodlust of one rogue Methuselah. Haunted by the threat of the Rosenkreuz Orden and beset by shadowy agents from within the Holy See itself, Abel's search lands him in a labyrinth of death and deception where the secrets of the Vatican's past whisper of an evil hidden in the depths of history.

Who is Zamiel? What does Cardinal Francesco know of the Vatican Section XIII, and why is Esther being stalked by a creature with blood-red eyes?

Roused to action by the AX and desperate to preserve a delicate peace, Father Abel and Sister Esther go on the offensive to put to rest a mystery spanning two worlds, two vampires, and more than 1000 years...
Winter kept us warm...

Chapter Summary

When I think my bed will comfort me
and my couch will ease my complaint,
even then you frighten me with dreams
and terrify me with visions

Job 7:13-14

Londinium burned.

The city seemed a living thing, a stone leviathan harboring secrets beneath its scales. She heard its breath beneath the rumble of collapsing buildings and boiling firelight, a voice like the continual percussive thundering one heard when one put one's ear to the waves of the sea. It was the sound of millions and millions of creatures running and struggling and dying. A sound of pain. Of suffering.

The city was an urban pattern glowing in hues of orange, ginger, and ochre, its center a roiling surface stretching equally in all directions. Its towers and churches and bridges, its domes and bell towers and quaysides, curled black like kindling. The red moonlight did little to illuminate her body under the smoke, and the fire seemed hesitant to cast shadows. Even the horizon was lost, the black sea beyond the Thames bleeding seamlessly into the sky. The city seemed almost fractal, the architecture iterative, like stone cracking in the heat. Between splintered pavingstones, like tiny islands, were nestled clusters of red light, the reflections caught in the crushed-glass surfaces, casting a shimmering haze over everything.

As she walked, she was hardly aware of walking, her footprints washed out in brightness. There were ghosts in this place, she realized, with a thrill she could not place, could not name, but there was nothing haunting about them. The histories were too real, too fresh. The sense of presence seemed somehow dense and heavy and she had to fight the urge to rear back her shoulders, to glory in her being unable to decipher, or care about, really, the solemnity, the sadness, the horror, of the burning city.

The Thames ran beside her, sure and swift and boiling in the firelight, a ribbon of magma, dead-eyed treasures floating to the surface of the current and percussing against the shore: river-bloated rats, cold-meat corpses, eels plucking at their tender fingers and toes.

She chanced a glance down at her feet, wondering, for a moment, if the river had broken its banks. She waded through a substance dark brown, like wet grass, soaked in mud. It was warm and it smelled like a coin might taste under one's tongue... and it was unaccountably and indescribably good. It was thick, viscous, and went on, endlessly, for miles, sloughing between the buildings and heaving up in billows, tossing itself in the fire and dashing itself to a fine red mist upon the broken masonry, the currents beaten by the bodies of the dead.

The red current wasn't so much deep as bottomless; it held her in its grip, not allowing her the sweet absolution of her drowning. The streets beckoned her to submerge herself beneath their surfaces, to glut herself on the viscera, but a part of her she no longer recognized was afraid of the
bones splintering between her teeth and tearing to ribbons the soft, yielding flesh of her esophagus. The world’s carcass had withstood centuries of storms and now, robbed of the change time brought, it stood muted and lame, a temple without parishioners, a faith without cause.

Millions of souls. Millions.

Mine, she thought. Mine mine mine.

Hers to consume.

She was an ocean of ghost nets, waste and festering flesh that piled up inside her sternum, burying her, suffocating her. Her hips and legs becoming one with the smoke and shadow, trapping the last core of herself deep inside, immobile, before it too began to flake like shale, falling away into brittle bone shards as she withered and wasted away, each chip a chunk of her soul. A pound of flesh. Her ember-colored eyes bled black, trailing down her face, eating away at her skin, slicing fine cuts into her neck, then her shoulders, her breasts, the neglected space between her legs, until all of her burned and stung and itched like mad, invisible lacerations flaying and flagellating her skin.

“Stop this.”

But the whispering she felt was just a feather’s touch inside her head.

“The risk is too high. What shall we create?”

Crackling laughter wriggled through her, like maggots burrowing in her flesh, black and necrotic. And yet she was struck dumb with fear. It was sheer, bloody terror, she realized, the kind reserved for death and judgement, when her mind had no means of concocting a defense against the dark, to save her from the fire and blood and bodies. It was the most primitive, most powerful emotion of all, and she had never, ever felt anything quite like it before. It wasn't just a fear of losing her life, but a fear of losing her soul.

Another wash of sensation, a sudden sharp awareness of the wall of bone around her mind. Constraint, power-bound, grounded. No choice. No food. No freedom.

“A monster.”

A horrific hybrid of shrieking, of curious murmurs, of angry snarling vibrated through the enamel of her teeth. She started praying, silently, worshipping, praising, pleading. But He was not listening to her... God had forsaken the burning city. So she began to run, straining every muscle. Feeling for the currents of hot air, letting them lift her with every stride, the world beginning to shake as she pounded ahead.

And leapt from Tower bridge, over the Thames, into the nothingness.

She felt herself buffeted on a blast of boiling breath, her hands full of bone and her lungs full of smoke, the ground somersaulting over her and the thunder passing under the top of her head, her legs kicking the sky. She let go, and the world spiraled endlessly around her.

The sky was an angry, swollen maelstrom, a festering sore of light. The stars paled in insignificance; the city jumped and twitched as shockwaves fanned out in corolla-like bursts, fire and pumice and shell smoke rising up from the ground, bursts of flame and the thick guttering of black ash haloed by the geometry of the boiling, feverish firmament. A crimson streak smoldered over the silhouette of the city, a simmering bloodline.
Something in the darkness met her gaze, ordered her: “Don't close your eyes.”

A pause; she could see the Nightmare weighing its words. When they came, they were quiet: “Do you still let yourself remember what grace was like, before you fell from it?”

The air whispered out of her. Somehow the Nightmare felt what she did. She wanted to hold on to it to keep herself from floating away.

But her body was laughing again, her eyeballs buzzing in their sockets, nodules in her skull grinding against one another faintly. Tiny lightning-bolts of disdain shot through her heart: hatred for the Nightmare, the Creature not commanding, not controlling. Because the Nightmare did not have the wisdom. It did not have the knowledge. It did not hold the power.

She did. SHE DID.

“Give her back!” ordered a Voice -- not the Nightmare. Someone else. She could see the old wounds in the Voice's eyes.

“She’s mine,” she growled. “I found her. She’s mine!”

A shiver of certainty. She sank her fangs into the Voice’s shoulder, suddenly urgent, unmindful of her God.

"Clipă de clipă, secundele bat ritmul unei melodii; dansatori fără voie într-un vârtej anonim. Singură la fereastră îmi amintesc chipul tău." She murmured, “Maestrul meu..."

Then she saw it: an unnaturally slender creature with long black hair flying about its face like a thistle cloud, with large nose, large ears, slightly pointed, a high forehead, eyes the color of embers. The creature held itself with a sort of graceful tension, as if each slow, careful movement was made in preparation to suddenly spring away or strike out. It wore a long, carefully cultivated red coat and wide-brimmed hat. St. Jerome. But then its mouth stretched into a leer that near about dislocated its jaw, and she saw the large, sharp, slanting teeth in its skull, and knew the monster was a far cry from anything saintly. A strange chill curled from the creature like smoke from a thurible, and even though the world was teeming with little red lights, darkness veiled her Creature, her Nightmare. Shadows that seemed to boil and shift, percolating like weeping sores along the floor...

“Too many lives. Too long."

The Nightmare looked into her face. Despite the dimness, the monster's pupils had shrunk to point singularities in pools of blistering red, as though too much light had been poured into them.

“Let her go,” the Voice ordered.

“Let her go!”

"Esther Blanchett!"

She screamed.

She screamed as a man's arm slid around her chest and lifted her off the mattress.

Her hand shot out, her knuckles making contact with something fleshy but unyielding, cartilaginous. She heard a high, startled yelp.
"Goddamn Red, calm down!"

"León, you're bleeding..."

"No shit, Four Eyes. Hold her, 'fore she bashes your pretty face in, too."

"Miss Esther... Miss Esther, Miss Esther, wake up. It's us... it's us."

Esther whimpered in anticipation of a blow, of pain, her heart pounding in growing panic. Her throat caught, her breaths coming out in rapid, staccato pants as something in her chest withered. A hand touched her crown, gently, tenderly, and Esther twitched, feeling someone tuck a strand of red behind her ear.

Her eyes flew open. When a figure crouched down at her bedside, it seemed to take ages for her to turn her head to see who it was. All she could make out at first were two dark shapes, vague outlines of heads and shoulders silhouetted against the light streaming in from the street, the rest of their bodies lost in the shadows of the room. One had blood seeping from his nostrils.

"Father Garcia," mouthed Esther. Her head felt fuzzy. She sucked air through her teeth, chest tight with anxiety. She wanted to void the contents of her stomach.

"Glad to see you're still with us, kid," said León thickly, nasally, blood dripping down his lip as he spoke.

"Oh... your face..."

"You gotta mean right hook, Red. Good to see my lessons are payin' off."

Getting a pat on the head from Father León Garcia de Asturias was not unlike being pawed at by a particularly affectionate St. Bernard dog. He was big and warm and burly, with a robust frame and a general air of negligent repose -- dashing in an earthy sort of way. He couldn’t have been more than a decade older than Esther at most, though he acted far younger. Roused from sleep, his dark hair furled down the nape of his neck while his fringe covered the right side of his face, going a little past his jaw-line. His eyes were bold, black, like that of a child, framed by thick lashes. He wore concern strangely on his boiled-leather face.

An anxious feeling skittered through Esther's belly, then quickly disappeared. Her gaze swung towards the second occupant in the room.

Father Nightroad seemed dazed. His eyes looked unnaturally blue against the flush of his face, their depths suddenly misty beneath a fan of thick silver lashes.

To the casual passerby, Abel Nightroad's appearance would not have inspired much confidence. His mantel was patched in spots, his cassock frayed at the cuffs. Peaking above the neck of his uniform was an old shirt that, Esther knew from her forced proximity to the man, was missing a button and splotched with his syrupy, sugary tea. The ribbon with which he used to tie back his hair was knotted not once, but thrice, as if he'd forgotten whether he'd tied it and, rather than glancing in a mirror to check, had simply tied it again... and again... for good measure. His silver tail fell over one shoulder in a slack rope, and his frosty eyebrows rose from his forehead like two great snowy horns, curling over a pair of bent and foggy glasses as thick as bottle bottoms. All in all, he looked like someone who'd gotten dressed in the midst of a whirlwind and, thinking he still looked too presentable, had thrown himself down a flight of stairs.

It was when Esther looked in his eyes, winter blue and wide, that everything changed.
Reflecting no light save their own, they shone brightly in the shadow-muffled night, and there was in them a look of such uncommon energy and kindness and understanding that she forgot entirely about the stains on his cassock and the fingerprints on his glasses and that his hair tie was knotted thrice over. She looked in them and knew that she was in the presence of something beautiful, of someone magnificent.

"Father Nightroad..." Esther tailed off. She realized, with a start, that Abel's fingers still hovered near her hair. León coughed conspicuously, and Abel's elbow hinged back, snatching his hand away.

“So, err…” León’s dark eyes darted between the two. “You... you all right, Red?”

Esther felt so foolish. “Yes, Father. I had a bad dream.”

“Hell, I’d say.” He touched the back of his hand against her forehead. "You don't have a temperature or nothin'."

“It’s all normal, then.”

A gentle smile played across León’s face. Although it was bumpy because a great many of his teeth were jagged and broken, it was a warming, infectious smile. It made Esther flash grin in return, if only for a moment. "I ain't sure she's ever been normal, eh Four Eyes?" León looked directly at the other priest and the former's dark eyes twinkled, a gleam of deviltry in them.

But Abel wasn't listening. He stared at the floor with a blank expression.

Esther suddenly found the urge to cry out almost overwhelming, a scream building like bile at the back of her throat. She wanted to let a gut-wrenching howl rip from her chest. She wanted to shout every swear word she’d ever heard León whispering under his breath. Esther would have settled for a cut-off whimper, just so long as it elicited some kind of reaction from Abel.

“I’m sorry… this latest case, perhaps,” Esther heard herself saying. “I never sleep well on assignments. Stress, maybe…” She stopped again. She was babbling uselessly, just to get some response. But she had never seen Abel so numb.

Well... not since Carthage...

León glared sidelong at Father Nightroad. “Yeah, well... the old grumblies reporting to Cardinal Sforza have been ponying up reports of bloody fights in the Oltrarno District, from the Santo Spirito to the Ponte Vecchio, for months now... men and women getting beaten up and the bastards who done it doing a runner 'fore the guards can catch 'em. Guess murder's a step up from back alley scraps, though, 'specially since we’re well within Rome’s jurisdiction. Can’t blame you for getting… you know…”

“Frightened?” Esther’s tone was so vinegary the words were pickled by the time they reached León’s ears.

“I was gonna say rattled… but, yeah.”

Esther rolled her eyes heavenward. Leave it to Father Garcia to worry about murder being too much for her feminine persuasion, yet think nothing of her fighting half a dozen Methuselah before she’d even had her breakfast on the regular.

“I’m all right, Father,” insisted Esther, again. “I’m very sorry for waking you. Please don’t let me keep you.”
León didn’t look too happy about the dismissal but decided not to argue, perhaps aware of Esther’s attempt to salvage whatever remained of her wounded dignity. “Right. We’ll be—“

But Abel, still, made no motion to move.

“I’ll be,” León amended irritably, “right next door. You just holler if you need anything, yeah?”

“Thank you, Father Garcia.”

“Course, kid. G’night. Hey, Four Eyes…?”

Abel looked up from where he stood. He blinked owlishly behind his spectacles.

“Uh, right. I’ll just…” León hooked a thumb over his shoulder, “go then.”

Father Garcia shut the door behind him, muttering something to himself about stubborn ecclesiastical morons and their bleeding hearts.

Esther saw the expression on Abel’s face, and she flushed, deeply, realizing that she hadn’t thrown a robe over her nightdress, or even pulled the sheets up. In her fit, she’d kicked the duvet clear of the bed, and the hem of her clothes had ridden up around her thighs. Esther hugged her knees, frightfully embarrassed, and faced the window, listening to the soft sound of the night wind. She felt as though, in that moment, she and Abel were the only people -- perhaps the only living creatures -- alienated from the lighted windows and the warm hearths of the city, very aware that they were of the world but not a part of the world at that moment. It was a thrilling, almost erotic feeling -- an illicit discovery of self, separated from everyone and everything else.

Esther’s blush deepened, until she reckoned she could have vanished against the crimson brocade wallpaper.

She sat up. She took a deep breath -- in through the nose, a beat of silence, and out through the mouth. León had opened the window by her bedside. The sill had that patina of age over the bronze frame, likewise the surface of the glass was splotched black in places. On the night air drifted a scent of cold stone, moistened soil, the peppery perfume of the cypresses, the burnt-bug buzz of the street light below her window. Esther took a long, appreciative breath. No sulphur. No smoke. No burning.

No blood.

Esther felt the grainy fingerprint of the cool night air spread over her skin, as though she was halfway through undressing. Her body had a strange, dreamlike weightlessness about it. She could be a memory of herself. Conjured by the sleeping city.

The sight of Florence beyond the sill, the cluster of churches and palaces tiered like liveried regiments on either side of the Arno, Santa Maria del Fiore floating on a tide of mist, as inviolate and inaccessible as a private longing, seemed in that moment as familiar as the back of her hand and yet as surreal as her nightmares, the Burning City in the dark, taunting her with its spell of sudden inaccessibility.

Since the advent of her stint with the AX -- well, since a looming, unconscionably lanky priest had somehow managed to bumble and burble and, against all odds, charm his way into her life -- many things had happened to Esther that she could not have possibly imagined. She wondered if the pervasive itch of expectancy was one of the subliminal reasons soldiers waged war, Methuselah preyed on humans, Cardinal Sforza and the AX took in strangers and strays: to increase the daily frequency of surprise and shock, fury and fear. The forerunners of revelation, perhaps.
“What did you dream about?” asked Abel finally, breaking Esther from her reverie.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Yes.”

He didn’t look her way, but stood at the window, counting the cobblestones on the Florentine street four stories below. “Are you lying?”

Esther pursed her lips into a thin, bloodless line, the starchly bedclothes crunching in her fists. She did not have an answer... at least, not one that would absolve her of Abel’s concern. He was not her Father Confessor, she told herself... she was under no obligation to unload her burdens on his shoulders. Abel played his secrets close to the cassock. Esther had half a mind to do the same. He could not fault her for that which he would readily do himself.

But then his winter blue eyes held hers for the barest beat of a moment, some essence of his being conveying itself to her, and all at once Esther’s heart quickened in sympathy for him. She had the horrible feeling of looking into the eyes of a ghost.

There were ghosts in this place...

Esther shuddered.

He murmured, “Are you all right?”

She managed a single syllable: “No.”

Without a word, and quite without her expecting it, Abel put his arms around her and held her. Esther was too startled by the sudden contact to do much more than swallow, thickly.

“You were crying,” he said. “But you didn't wake up.”

The words expressed some imperative deep down in her blood. Like running fingers over the edge of things in pitch darkness.

“I’m sorry.”

Silently, they sat there, Esther sitting back against the headboard, Abel on the edge of the bed, an arm around his novice’s narrow shoulders. Continuing to stare into her pale, damp face, Father Nightroad shook his head with a slight frown, as if finding the sight of her distress distressing in turn. Esther imagined it must have been, on some subconscious level -- Abel was not a man who felt things in halves. Seeming unable to help himself, he reached out and pulled her against him, his arms wrapping around her as he tried to comfort her. There was nothing... illicit in the embrace -- though Esther had no doubt it would have garnered a puerile wolf whistle or three from León, and was part and parcel of the reason he'd left them alone.

Even so, it somehow managed to feel far more intimate than it had any right to be. Abel’s arms were strong, thin and long and corded, holding her steady while his breath fell in moist, hot surges against the top of her head. Strange, she thought, how vulnerable the back of her neck felt as she listened to his breathing. He was so much taller...

Eventually, against her better judgement and dignity both, Esther scooted to her left, settling closer to Abel, snuggling her head into the crook of his shoulder and placing a hand on his chest -- she
tried, for Abel’s pride’s sake, not to giggle when his diaphragm spasmed in a nervous hiccup. Carefully, his hand wandered higher, and he combed his fingers through her untidy shock of scarlet while his other hand pulled the blanket up to her shoulders.

She imagined, for a moment, somewhere other than Florence: them sitting together under a tree by the Tiber, in the shade of the gardens overlooking the Palazzo Corsini, the champagne colored nimbus on the marble façade reflecting the benediction of the sun’s dying rays over the city, just enjoying each other's company, her head on his chest, his arm around her.

Before the nightmares, not long after their return from the Empire, Esther had a recurring dream where she and Abel stood in the Tiber looking around amongst the river stones for something or other -- on some nights, it was Father Nightroad’s security pass, on others, her rosary -- when Cardinal Sforza would strut from Trastevere in that imperious way she often did, drag her mitre through the shallows, and throw it, as though saluting a lover on a departing ship. A sheet of water would come sailing towards them, a veil billowing in the air, and fall down over Abel’s glinting silver hair and Esther’s thatch of red, soaking them both to the bone. Then Caterina would fix her crown back on her head and leave them standing there in the glistening river, shining like the apostles.

Esther and Abel, drenched in the unsolicited ablutions of their souls.

She realized, suddenly, how desperately lonely she had become.

“Go back to sleep, Miss Esther,” whispered Abel.

Esther nodded slowly, while the surge of heartache transformed into a sense of inconceivable comfort. A friend he had been, a confidant he had become, but a companion... the one thing Esther had never let herself hope for, the stipulation her station, while no longer forbidding on moral grounds, ecclesiastical or otherwise, still managed to cast into uncertainty. Surely, their shared illusion of closeness couldn't last -- somehow, someday, it would be taken away from her. The peeling-plaster walls of their Florentine motel formed a boundary that marked a single place, delineated a solitary moment: a fence, a circle of cushions, a stolen half hour. The blaze of a shooting star, burning bright and fast and falling, quickly, to ash.

But, as Esther began to drift off, she thought, until that day came, she would cherish this moment. Beyond all of those other times, in spite of all those other places, they would always have now. She pressed tighter into Abel’s embrace, and Esther was certain the contact had forever in it. Time couldn't end it, nor even the limits of life. Not distance, not duty... not the wastes and shades and shadows of her nightmares.

"Yes," she said, her voice muffled against his cassock. "Goodnight, Father."

“Goodnight Esther.”
He who was living is now dead...

Chapter Summary

I can do all things through him who strengthens me

Philippians 4:13

“Damn Caterina and her cadre of interfering ruffians!”

The Commander of the Vatican Army, Minister of the Inquisition of the Roman Curia, and Duke of Florence, Francesco di Medici, stalked down the Via della Colonna like a bright red bull. Clothed in the full cape and mantle of the scarlet ferraiuolo, the Cardinal stood well over six feet, managing a few inches on his half-sister, Cardinal Caterina Sforza, and positively dwarfing his much younger half-brother, Pope Alessandro. Francesco’s hair under his zucchetto was light, the color of straw, but stricken with silver, so that it glinted like a revolver in the dim light of the snow-muffled evening. Though brushed severely back from his forehead, the occasional lock curled just below his ears. With his sharp, inquisitive brows arching over gray eyes and his broad, high cheekbones, he was attractive, authoritative, and commanded the presence of whatever room he happened to occupy.

But the sneering twist to his full lips had the effect of chilling his otherwise impressive visage. He was an intimidating man.

The pedestrians on the Via della Colonna parted for him, pressing themselves against the walls and ducking into doorways, their haste kindled by equal parts reverence and abject terror. Every time the throngs of people on the narrow Florentine streets grew particularly congested, the Cardinal raised both hands and mimicked a motion not unlike a breaststroke, and the crowd taking their cue and scuttling before him, before Francesco resumed his single-minded march towards the Ospedale degli Innocenti, crossing his arms across his chest, hands disappearing within the folds of his crimson vestments.

Cardinal di Medici’s retinue included three senior enforcers of the Inquisition, as well as the Chief of the Inquisition himself, one quietly frustrated Petros Orsini.

Under different circumstances, the odd call and response number between Cardinal di Medici and the people of Florence would strike Petros as vaguely tiresome. The routine and predictability of the public theatre was of course necessary — the people had to know what their roles in society were, what was expected of them, and how to behave in the presence of a cardinal of the Catholic Church. But the air was chilly, the hour was late, and a murderer was stalking the streets of Florence. Brother Petros had more pressing concerns, and had little interest in reacting to or rankling at his superior’s self-regard.

For a young woman had been killed... butchered. According to sparse eyewitness reports, the girl's jugular had been punctured, but investigators had found not a drop of blood at the crime scene.

A vampire attack in the heart of Florence, thought Petros, during the Noël festivities, right under Cardinal di Medici's nose. It was almost unfathomable.
The post-massacre protocol under the Cardinal's direct supervision was quick and efficient — honed to an art by the Duke's paranoia and perfected by practice. Within an hour, the dead body had been removed to the mortuary in the Ospedale degli Innocenti. The cobbled street was hosed down, washing away the blood-soaked snow. Shops reopened. Normalcy was declared. The Noël markets marshaled their traffic, and for once, Cardinal di Medici welcomed the distraction the exchange of currency and trinkets provided. The holiday blurred the memory, hiding the gruesome details behind the smoke and heat of the people's hearths and Gluwien haze of their heads. In any case, the people hadn't the courage or the desire to whisper the word *vampire*, any more than they had the language to describe sight to a blind man. It was as though the murder had never happened, as though the girl had never died.

Rather, thought Petros, as though the unfortunate wretch had never existed at all.

A body without mourners, and a death without witness.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit," murmured Petros, too quietly for the Cardinal to hear him, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven..."

Innumerable jaunts to Florence on Inquisitorial matters had taught Petros that maneuvering a hover vehicle through the narrow, cobbled streets was a largely wasted effort -- and as he had done since childhood, Cardinal Di Medici preferred to make the journey on foot. They proceeded down the Via della Colonna, skirted the students of the Università, making for the hospital through the Piazza Annunziata. The public square was full to bursting with stalls selling wooden toys and ornaments, cakes and Gluwien, as part of the annual Noël markets. The festivities and fasts were unhinged things, attached to no day, Noël’s precise date rendered nonsensical after the reconfiguration of the calendars half a dozen times over following Armageddon. The holidays observed by the Holy See were heralded, instead, with the tang of snow in the air, or the spring thaw, or the advent of summer. For God permeated these things — as the saying went, for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven — but as the white flakes alighted on Cardinal di Medici’s vestments and Petros’s shock of blue hair, the latter knew all too well how transient these things tended to be.

There was, however, something to be said for Florence in the winter. Petros Orsini was a Roman man, born to a Roman family — raised in the *rione*, he earned his *Sacrae Theologiae Doctoratus* at the Angelicum, an extraterritorial of the Holy See, and had served in the Vatican for most of his life. But Petros's duty as Chief of the Inquisition, and Cardinal di Medici’s position as Minister of the same bureau, had roped Petros into a long and intimate acquaintance with *Firenze*. Florence appeared to Petros as a recurring dream, a place once visited and fixed forever in his memory like images on a photographer’s plate; his frequent returns in Cardinal di Medici's service was akin to turning the leaves of a portfolio: a scene of the flat-bottomed boats punted beneath the Ponte Vecchio; the Arno in twilight, an endless succession of reflections and echoes, a mirroring; the Piazzale Michelangelo, silhouetted against the sky; the great dome of the Santa Maria del Fiore rising over the shimmering, rippling hide of the city, crystalline beneath the small, white winter sun. The streets were unfinished paintings under the snow -- so much of the canvas was still perfectly white, as if waiting for the artist's hand to return.

Hemmed by the facades of the Piazza Annunziata, the snow began to fall heavily, clumps of wet flakes drifting lazily down, the air moist, the cobbles mushy underfoot, rendering the Noël market's beauty chaotically unintentional. Defiant in the face of its patrons, it was almost independent of human intelligences, like a stalagnites rising from a cavern floor. Forms which in of themselves were quite ugly were erected fortuitously, without design, in such incredible surroundings that they sparkled with a sudden wondrous poetry. Even if Petros were to walk with his eyes closed, he could tell at a whiff when he had arrived at any specific shop, intuit it just by its
scent. Anise denoted the start of the counter of mulled wine adjacent to the Palazzo della Crocetta; the smell of freshly baked plum cake landed him opposite the Museum of Archaeology, while the burnt aroma of coffee connoted the two fountains, done in the old Mannerist style that predated Armageddon. The Santissima Annunziata remained, and so had everything old that was cast in brick and stone. Fires guttered in decorative sconces, snowflakes steaming in the heat. There was something almost charming about the slapdash poverty of the piazza, and nothing to suggest a gruesome murder had taken place not two days previously.

The matter of the murdered girl had seemed ostensibly under control, proverbial dirt brushed under proverbial carpets, before Petros's extensive network of informants on the Inquisition payroll had reported the presence of three Vatican envoys in the city: two low-ranking priests and a nun, all of whom asking awkward questions about the vampire attack.

It did not take someone of Petros's intelligence to deduce the nature of their errand... or the identity of the person who had dispatched the three clergymen to Florence...

"I'll have her excommunicated for this," seethed Cardinal di Medici, slate gray eyes flashing, teeth bared. "What is Caterina thinking, sending her rabid dogs to Florence? After her disgraceful conduct in István, no less... if word of this attack reaches those monsters in the Empire, it would be just the assurance they need that the carcass of Vatican land is free for the pickings!"

Five months ago, Petros would have agreed with his superior. There was no love lost between Cardinal Caterina Sforza's AX and Petros's Inquisition. Theirs was a relationship built on soured grounds. Composed of caution and care, fury and fear... but reverence and respect, too.

During the events in István, when Archbishop D'Annunzio had reported to Cardinal di Medici for the day's failings, the Archbishop had blamed Petros's presence for the unfortunate kidnapping of a Vatican nun. It had been Caterina Sforza, not Francesco di Medici, to step in and defend the Inquisition, arguing that Petros's original mission was to guard the Pope, and had, instead, placed the blame on the police under D'Annunzio's supervision. Petros had never forgotten her conduct in the matter, conduct the Chief Inquisitor would hardly call disgraceful.

But where Cardinal Sforza was willing to collaborate with Methuselah Empire, to open official diplomatic channels, even, Cardinal di Medici would sooner see the entirety of vampire kind put to the torch. For Lady Caterina to catch wind of an attack in Francesco's own city put the latter in a very awkward position.

The suspicious mind had a way of conjuring its own demons, and Francesco di Medici’s worldview was a deeply paranoid one in which everything of importance could be traced back to the infinite gradations of mortal sin. Coupled with a philosophy of strikingly frank materialism, he seemed utterly incapable of thinking symbolically or speculatively, and the unseen purgatory beneath the derma of reality, malignant and horrible, complete in its mastery of the human heart had, to the Cardinal, taken the ontological form of a fact.

"His Holiness speaks very well of Cardinal Sforza's AX," said Petros, in some attempt at conciliation.

Francesco looked as though he was gnawing rocks, and when he spoke, his tone was even more astringent than usual. "The Pope speaks very well of everybody."

Petros's frowned deepened a fraction. "Is that so wrong, Your Eminence?"

"Yes. It means you can't trust his judgement."
Petros’s throat went tight, anger stinging his esophagus like pepper. He said nothing, biting his tongue, but to hear a cardinal speak so ill of Pope Alessandro made Petros's hackles stand on end.

Cardinal di Medici was always demanding proof of loyalty from his servants. Petros indulged the Duke of Florence, but dared not say what he was thinking: something had changed irrevocably in the Chief Inquisitor. He supposed the seed had been planted soon after Brother Petros had dropped Brother Abel Nightroad off a cliff in Carthage, watched the priest carve a silver path through the air towards the roiling waves of the Mediterranean, hundreds of feet below. Petros's time in the city was tapestry of tragic, unbelievable memories, which carried from one moment of nausea to another: the intestines of his soldiers splattered across the rubble and sprayed from one dying man to another; the tightly riveted tanks ripped open like the bellies of a sacrificial cow, flaming and groaning; temples and minarets broken into tiny fragments; gaping windows pouring out torrents of billowing sand and dust, dispersing into oblivion all that remained of homes and businesses. Through Carthage, the Iblis crisis, the disgrace of István, the planted seed had grown without pause, without thought or mercy, toward Petros’s throat.

The tree from which to hang himself.

Had the world changed, or had Petros? He still loved the Pope. He still venerated the Roman Curia. He still hated the vampires. But Petros found he could not soon forget the Earl of Memphis’s prevenient grace, the young vampire crowned with an uncommon glory and honor. An honor Brother Petros had not thought possible of Ion’s kind. Nor could Petros soon forget what it had been like to fight side-by-side with the vampire princeling on the hull of the Iron Maiden above Carthage. At the thought, the memories flashed through his mind with sudden brutality, like apparitions, among bursts and bright visions that scarcely seemed imaginable. There had been nothing but the rhythm of explosions, more or less distant, more or less violent, and the cries of the vampire earl and his companion-turned-traitor, to be classified later, according to the outcome of the battle, as the cries of wounded, of the dying, shrieking as they burned to kindling under the unobstructed Mediterranean sky.

Something had burned to kindling inside Petros, too, over recent months...

As the Chief of the Inquisition, his effectiveness was weighed in broken bodies, blood, and confession -- in no particular order. To the public he was Il Ruinante, the Knight of Destruction, but it was Petros’s far less public responsibilities, carried out in the vaults and torture chambers deep under the Vatican, that had taught him that nature was far more merciful than men, providing for those who suffered great pain such blessedness as unconsciousness; but men were vicious and brought their victims out of faints so that the pain might start again... and again... and again. Human beings were hungry, cruel creatures, Cardinal di Medici hungrier and crueler than most. But was Brother Petros any better? Whether torture occurred in the interest of exacting God’s divine justice or accruing political ammunition hardly mattered to the man with his fingernails missing and his teeth scattered on the flagstones. The nail beds still burned, his mouth still bled. The corruptors accused the virtuous of corruption, the murderers accused the innocent of murder, the haters accused the righteous of hate, the warmongers accused the peaceful of war, the lovers of death accused those who love life with cowardice.

There seemed, always, an infinite chain of blame that wound its circuitous route back and forth across the path and under the feet of every man and every nation, so that a people who were the victims of one time became the victimizers a generation later, and newly liberated nations resorted immediately to the means of their former oppressors. The triple contagions of ambition, aggression, and absolutism effervesced within those like Cardinal di Medici into an acid that corroded the moral metal of a man, until he shamelessly and even proudly performed deeds that he would deem vile if they were done by any other.
The Chief of the Inquisition trusted Cardinal di Medici’s intentions. It was the man’s motivations that gave Petros pause. Francesco’s arrogance and ambition threw a rather large shadow over any claims to acting purely in the service of the Lord. According to the priesthood of all believers, the homeless beggar living on the outskirts of Florence ought to be of the same standing before God as the corpulent cardinal in red robes of silk. So far as Petros was concerned, living for God was not about fleeing the work to which God had called one so that one could languish in the plush apartments of the Palazzo Apostolico attempting to incite His Holiness to war against the Empire; rather, living for God was, to Petros, about allowing oneself to be used by God to perform faithfully the work to which He has called one.

Brother Petros had developed an inner strength based on discipline, on duty, and above all on a clear vision of whom he was serving. The Inquisition of the Holy See may have had a hierarchy of command, but Petros knew he was performing for an audience of One.

And that One was not Cardinal Francesco di Medici, Duke of Florence.

The snowflakes stuck in Petros's long eyelashes. They fell and glinted on the pauldrons of his armor. The snow held its shape, became small piles of perfect mandalas and blooms tumbled together in their discrete geometries.

Ospedale degli Innocenti defined the eastern side of the Piazza Santissima Annunziata. The facade was made of nine semicircular arches springing from composite columns. In the spandrels of the arches were glazed terracotta roundels pressed with the reliefs of small children, their faces pockmarked and weathered by the elements. Petros found the distressed likenesses rather... foreboding. What were once smiles were now snarls, teeth bared in grimaces. They reminded Petros of Ion Fortuna: beautiful, cherubic features turned twisted and furious.

Francesco barked an order to the hospital's door guard, the woman dressed in the tricolor uniform and black beret and carrying the traditional halberd of the Pontifical guard. She bowed, deep, to the Cardinal, before waving her badge at the proximity sensor and stepping into the revolving door. She beckoned the Cardinal and his retinue to follow.

The foyer of the ancient Foundling Hospital -- which had been an orphanage, a palace, a museum, and an asylum at points throughout its long history -- had been retrofitted with a large atrium, a beautiful glass-and-concrete interior that looked like the prow of a crystal ship, featuring soaring wooden screens with overlapping arches, reminiscent of cathedral windows. As Francesco di Medici’s retinue reached the lobby on the first floor, a wimpled nurse — wheeling a gurney with a cadaver on it, calmly and with little notice, like a shopping trolley — took one look at the Cardinal and gestured him towards the rear of the central court. The Duke exchanged a few words in the throaty, fricative dialetto fiorentino with the on-duty administrator before storming up the staircase, continuing to mutter abuse at the Duchess of Milan.

The second floor corridor had raised wallpaper in a classic floral design, the walls unadorned, the floors bare. No small tables, no chairs, no pictures in frames, no runners. They passed by maybe a dozen rooms, only two with doors open. Petros noticed that the doors were extra wide... for wheelchairs and stretchers and the like. He peered sidelong into one of the wards. There were so many machines and wires and tubes -- a reminder, albeit a grim one, that the human body was an incredible miracle, its countless autonomic functions a gift when they were operating as intended, and a cumbersome nightmare to have to approximate when they were not.

The mortuary had been arranged in the loggia above the old cloister. A pair of refrigeration units ran along the back wall; they resembled stainless steel filing cabinets, each big enough to hold a body. Petros had never been particularly keen on morgues. Nor cemeteries, anatomy museums,
undertakers’ parlors, funeral chapels, or any of those places where the world of the living percussed against the world of the dead. He had picked up too many bodies from too many battlefields to find death in any way sentimental...

Pausing only briefly in the doorway, Petros and Cardinal di Medici soon found their attention drawn to the center of the chilled room, where a girl lay open on one of the gurneys, pellucid in the half-light, utterly still, eyes open as if admiring the heavens. Her lips were blue, skin gray, eyes black with exploded pupils. She was as lifeless as the snow flakes that gusted around the hospital, though they, at least, got one last dance.

And then Brother Petros made the mistake of looking below the neck, and saw the burns.

Fire had eaten her lower body and swollen the rest, cooking her flesh until the skin split in slivers of lurid red and patches of peeled black. Her long hair had been thrown forward, over the top of her head. Parts of it had kindled, curling into fragile white nests. The rest was motionless, blackened, with hints of reflected blue, like rainbows on oil. The burns appeared, mercifully, to have been done post-mortem. Had the murderer attempted to burn away the evidence? wondered Petros.

Cardinal di Medici glanced down at the body as if it were a rug out of place, tutting his tongue against his teeth.

"Y-Your Eminence! Chief Inquisitor!"

Petros knew that voice.

He tore his gaze away from the girl's corpse and recognized, immediately, two of Cardinal Sforza's AX agents. The first was the upstart pup from the D'Este scandal, a broad, swarthy priest who reminded Petros of a half-finished granite statue. Or a slightly annoyed brown bear. The second, the speaker, was quite significantly smaller, a wiry, blanched creature whose face near about disappeared in a dozen orbits of her scarf. The girl had always reminded Petros of a crumpled envelope — pale and worn, interrupted only by the red wax seal of her hair; the things inside poorly remembered and oft unnoticed, full of equal measures sadness and kindness. There was an openness to her face, an innocence -- a certain kind of niceness.

Petros's scowl could have stripped the paint from the wall, if the mortuary's refrigerated interior had paint. "Sister Esther Blanchett," he muttered. "If you're here... then that means—"

"Ah ah ha! Petros! I mean, Chief Inquisitor and... oh my, is that the Cardinal?"

Oh no.

Not him.

Suppressing a wince, Brother Petros turned to face a very thin, very tall man with precise features, delicate as wing-bones, a lot of fine silver hair tied back in a tail, and thoughtful, winter-blue eyes. He wore a look of wariness, which Petros knew could change if he felt relaxed or happy into a smile of amused friendliness.

Or obfuscating stupidity.

"Nightroad," growled Petros.
Dr. Teresa Lauricella, the medical examiner and coroner at Ospedale degli Innocenti, was a tiny, mousy woman, even shorter than Miss Esther. Her features were small and perfectly related; her nose upturned and interrogative at the tip. Her furrowed, hoary eyebrows gave touches of character and distinction. She was very slender, erect, poised as though she grew against the wind.

"We need to know how she died, Doctor," said Abel, wringing his hands. Though he — along with León and Miss Esther — anticipated the results of Dr. Lauricella's inquest, Caterina wouldn't thank him for proceeding in his investigation without the cooperation of the Florentine authorities. "In this case the how is far more important than the when. What did your autopsy reveal?"

Facts of the murder surrounded Abel, the smell of formaldehyde and dusty air conditioning rising up to sting his nostrils. The poor girl on the L-shaped autopsy table looked to be about Miss Esther's age, which upset Abel to no small degree, though the victim was stronger, less waif-like. Her hair was a delicate, whispy nest of white, her dull eyes staring, her complexion so pale it was near translucent, ice-white, especially around her lips. Dr. Lauricella kept a sheet pulled up to the neck — to preserve the girl's dignity, perhaps, though Abel knew the Vatican envoy would be forced to examine the entirety of the body sooner rather than later. It was not something he was looking forward to.

The girl was a Jane Doe.

Sorrow stuttered Abel's heart. The agony of having to share that small slice of the world with such beautiful, breakable creatures — who were, before most else, just vulnerable bodies walking around spilling their viscera and their words everywhere, not bothering to clean up. It was arrogant of him, but Abel sometimes imagined his whole life that way, as though each of his steps was a stitch, and he was a needle leaving a trail of thread that sewed together the humans and their lives as he went by, crisscrossing others' paths, quilting them in some way that mattered even though it could hardly be traced. A meandering line suturing the world together. He was a smooth punctuation to human parataxis, and Abel had resisted — to no great success — their love out of an impulse for self-preservation. He knew, in his heart of hearts, caring for creatures so brief, so fleeting, would kill him one day.

"The verdict of this coroner's inquest," said Dr. Lauricella, sighing, dragging Abel back from more maudlin thoughts, "is that this young lady expired from severe exsanguination, likely exacerbated by the fact the girl appeared to be at least mildly hemophilic."

"Hemophilic?" parroted León.

Abel provided: "It means her blood doesn't -- didn't -- clot properly."
A scowl. "I know what it means, Four-Eyes. I ain't quite that stupid."

"Please, you two." Miss Esther frowned, then turned her wide eyes to the coroner. "Is it possible the symptoms of hemophilia presented themselves due to the blood loss, and not the other way around?"

"You mean if the lack of clotting was consequent of there being... no blood to clot?"

"Yes, I suppose."

Dr. Lauricella's open face betrayed her skepticism. Though she had summed up her evaluation with considerable brevity and commendable simplicity, her manner, and the way she kept glancing sidelong at the Vatican representatives, suggested that the she regarded the lot of them as more than a little bizarre. Nothing new there, Abel supposed. Still, the priest was thankful, at least, that the coroner knew her duty and performed it even in the teeth of the AX's peculiarities.

"Under normal circumstances, I would say that was impossible, Sister. Although, if Your Reverences are who you say you are, then I suspect this case lies far outside my typical stomping grounds."

"In so many words, Doc," agreed León, sounding apologetic. "Sorry to have to bother ya with this mess."

The old woman snorted. "I am a coroner, Father... a leech, a merchant of misery. Bad things are good for us. We are body collectors, of sorts. But as to your question, Sister, it's true: this young lady exhibited none of the typical symptoms of chronic hemophilia. She was not arthritic. Her joints seemed to be in perfect working order before she died. Rather, what strikes me about this case, and what lead me to suspect hemophilia, was the sheer expediency of the attack."

"You mentioned some of the external trauma was done almost immediately before the woman died," prompted Esther quietly.

"Indeed. After she was injured, she must have expired in less than fifteen seconds. It's extraordinary... it was as though the platelets in her blood lacked thrombin entirely, which, acting on the fibrinogen proteins, typically causes clotting. Either that, or..." Dr. Lauricella trailed off, her pursed lips carving crow's feet into the corners of her eyes.

"Either that," finished Abel, "or she did not merely bleed to death. Rather, she was drained."

León nodded. "Sucked dry."

"How horrible," murmured Esther.

Abel's chest ached, grieving quietly for the poor girl... for every broken body, every snuffed-out life, every festering remnant of the souls whom no one had cared for in life, much less in death, for all those who would never know that someone, a coroner in a white coat, in a cold room, had grieved for them, in the end.

Dr. Lauricella sighed again. "I'm afraid that's not all, your Reverences. Begging all your pardons, but this is rather unpleasant."

A most uncouth snort came from León. "We can handle it, Doc."

"Very well."
She drew the sheet down the rest of the body, folding it near the corpse's feet. Esther let out a horrified gasp, and León muttered a vehement curse under his breath, his bravado sputtering out.

Where the girl's face was pristine, every square inch of her below the neck, from shoulders to shins, had been burned to a crisp, reduced to a black, charred mess interrupted by the occasional blister, swelled ripe, ready to burst.

She smelled of death. Gasoline, singed hair, fingernails. She smelled like cooking meat.

Abel began to go over the body with a practiced eye, leaning close while trying to ignore the stench, and across the table, he saw León do the same. Abel composed an endless litany of terrifying possibilities: he took note of the punctured heart, the chest cavity cleaved open and the ribs pulled apart. The images the wounds hung in the gallery of his mind were like exhibits in the museum of a slaughterhouse.

"A punctured left ventricle," recited Dr. Lauricella, reading from her clipboard, "a severed intestine, spinal separation, a missing foot, and third degree burns over most of her body."

"Yo Four-Eyes, you seein' this?" León indicated a spot near the girl's left clavicle, gesturing towards two deep wounds pierced into the flesh above her breastbone, the punctures about nine inches apart.

"That," provided the coroner, "was the only injury inflicted before the girl died. Even the incredible damage to the chest area was done post-mortem."

"So..." concluded León, "the puncture wounds were what killed her, huh?"

Abel found himself rolling his shoulders, anxious and fidgety. Beside him, Miss Esther had a mug of hot tea pressed against her stomach, but wasn’t drinking. Her fingernails tapped the rim nervously. Abel, like the nun, felt far warier than before, but walked over to hover at the table anyway.

"The burns..." he murmured, troubled. Abel attempted to focus on deciphering the clues posed by the poor girl’s corpse while trying — and failing — to ignore the sense of doom that swept through him like clouds rolling over open water.

Dr. Lauricella drew up beside Abel, barely reaching the height of his elbow. Her tone invoked desperate seriousness, a glimpse of impending disaster. "Forensic pathology of thermal injuries is not my specialty, Father, and unfortunately, the burning of her lower body advanced so far that the autopsy can give only negative results so far as physical evidence is concerned. However, the lack of soot and coal particles in the respiratory tract rules out aspiration, while the diffuse inflammatory and necrotic changes to the body indicate that the burning was also done post-mortem. If I were a more paranoid person, I'd say you're looking for a person with a penchant for starting infernos."

At that moment, two things happened in quick succession: first, Esther went as white as a corpse, her hands shaking so violently Abel was worried her tea was going to slosh over the edge of the porcelain cup. A strange, thin howling tried to rise up from her throat; ferociously, she shook her head in an attempt to bring herself back under control. The noise and the shaking subsided, but not before Abel took careful, considered notice.

"Miss Esther?" he queried.

"Burning..." she wore the expression of a sleepwalker. A spasm convulsed through her, her mouth
contorting as she murmured: "The Burning City... Father Nightroad... I saw a Shadow, one who has hated for so long and with such intensity that in the end the darkness enveloped its whole body until its shape was no longer discernible..."

Abel tried to loosen the sudden tension in his abdomen. There was an unsettling feeling in his gut, as though every one of his organs had shifted two inches to the right. Abel saw, in Esther’s expression, bodies black beneath ash, staring with empty eyes. Then, a memory: soldiers falling like sheaves of wheat before a scythe, a besieged courtyard growing still as corpses piled on the paving. It had been like that for Abel, once: the swift destruction of unleashed immortals, slurping up lives and blood and bones. There had been a time when the prospect of killing humans had sown purpose in Abel's heart. Not peace, perhaps, but contentment, satisfaction at the symmetry of it, the justice: his stolen childhood stolen back in turn.

Now... even the haziest recollection, even the most fleeting glimpse of Abel's past threatened to unravel him like snagged thread, unspooling around and around until it dissolved into desiccated patchwork pieces that soon blew away.

Another memory: every night for 900 years, Abel had dreamt the same dream. In it, a beautiful bird with bright blue eyes and three pairs of white, downy wings drifted slowly back and forth along the shores of the Tiber. Wherever the bird's shadow fell, the grass turned yellow, the leaves fell shocked from the trees, the crops died, the people began to suffocate, clawing at their throats. The shadow of the thrice-winged bird turned Abel’s Rome into a wasteland, full of dead and dying things.

Abel had known a level of fear not unlike Miss Esther’s own, because in every iteration of the dream, an innate desire, a yearning, lay in the bottom reaches of his mind for the very bird that was slowly killing the world... and him along with it. Rome may have been Abel’s home, but the bird did, in some strange way, belong to him, as well. Abel would wake, delirious with despair, huddled into a shivery ball. My bird, he had repeated to himself, long into the night, like a mantra.

I brought it here — I let it out of its cage.

Abel realized with a start that Esther’s own dream from the night before... some fear, some terrible sense of foreboding, continued to torment her. It had sunk its roots into Esther’s worst imaginings and feasted on her memories. She had not deigned to divulge much to him, the sparse details as broken and indistinct as the sounds of a quarrel in a locked room, but the thing that kept her tossing and turning in the middle of the night, the thing that made her scream underneath the cover of darkness, was revealed to him then in the stark clarity of her eyes: a numb, blinding terror that seemed to swell with every intake of breath, all the while, her shell-shocked expression gazing into the nothingness.

Abel slid his hand over her cheek, one finger anchored behind her ear. "Esther..."

Even León began to sense that something was the matter; his expression was overcast but gentle when he asked: "Hey, Red, you all right?"

The second thing to happen was the abrupt and unceremonious arrival of two huge figures, who burst into the mortuary with such force the heavy, insulated doors crashed against the wall, rattling Abel's teeth in his skull and causing Dr. Lauricella to jump several inches into the air.

Managing, as well, to shock Miss Esther out of her strange reverie.

"Y-Your Eminence!" The nun, still unhealthily pale, turned wide, frightened eyes to the newcomers. "Chief Inquisitor!"
Uh oh.

Abel was the tallest of Cardinal Caterina's AX by a not insignificant margin, but he found Brother Petros Orsini, the Chief of the Inquisition, had perhaps a few inches on him; Abel was ill-acustomed to looking up.

"Ah ah ha! Petros!" he managed a nervous titter. "I mean, Chief Inquisitor and... oh my, is that the Cardinal?"

The silver plates of Petros's armor were scratched and tarnished like the scaly hide of a battle weary dragon. A faint impatience narrowed his eyes, his sharp, interrogative face fixed in a perpetual scowl.

"Nightroad," snarled Petros, who suddenly looked as though he'd tasted something bitter, handsome face twisted in a grimace.

"Your Eminence," stuttered Dr. Lauricella, bowing deep and low to Petros's companion, the intimidating Duke of Florence, "I... I was not expecting—"

"Dr. Teresa Lauricella," began Francesco di Medici without preamble, ignoring the AX operatives entirely at first, his expression grave, his tone as chilly as the morgue refrigerators, "I believe my estate made it expressly clear that no one was to have access to the Ospedale degli Innocenti save the Ministry of Vatican Papal Doctrine."

"I understand that, Your Eminence, however these men and women are here from—"

"Arcanum Cella Ex Dono Dei," finished Cardinal di Medici, fixing Abel, León, and Esther each with a scowl.

Where Caterina had eyes like dove feathers, with a hue so soft they could have been pencil drawn — a look of birds flying on sunlit days, the shine and quick movement, yet relaxed, purposeful, at ease — Francesco's gray eyes were fiery and determined: searing hot like tempered steel. Turning that piercing look on Father Nightroad alone, the Duke of Florence's intensity seemed to suck the backbone right out of Abel. "Or, the Papal State Affairs Special Operations Section, if you'd prefer. What I would like to know is how in Heaven's name Caterina caught wind of this whole affair!"

León coughed. "Err... actually, Your Eminence?"

"What."

Abel was torn between amusement at León's daring and irritation because the Cardinal was forcing Father Garcia to muddle through all the awkward explanations.

"Father Nightroad and Sister Esther were already here 'fore the attack, Eminence, making their way back to Rome after the business in István. We caught wind of the attack from folk on the street and called it in to Sister Scott. Cardinal Sforza then ordered us to investigate. I rang the Palazzo Spada several hours ago, but haven't heard a dicky bird from Rome since then."

Francesco's teeth clenched in a hideous parody of a grin. "So you took it upon yourselves to inform your superior, going over the heads of Il Duca di Firenze," he said, the words icy. "This may well come as a surprise to my dear sister, but the Tuscan duchy does not fall under her jurisdiction! The Palazzo Spada is a reactionary sty staffed by trough-fed clods who abuse the tongues in their heads each and every time they open their mouths! They all gabble at once and confuse one another mightily, and when this confusion is committed to action they refer to it as diplomacy."
As Cardinal di Medici ran his mouth, Brother Petros stood silently at his superior's shoulder. The Chief of the Inquisition stared at something across the room, shifting from foot to foot and looking distinctly uncomfortable.

The way Abel figured it, the Cardinal had two choices: he could swallow his interminable pride like a mouthful of wild chicory by accepting both the vulnerability of Florence — as well as his own — as a simple, unfortunate fact, not a sign of personal weakness or a providential judgement of Francesco's character. Alternatively, he could stew in his embarrassment and private shame, consumed by his passions, until it manifested as some brash, wild action. Unfortunately, a carryover from Father Nightroad having spent a great deal of time with Caterina and her half-brother meant that Abel knew Francesco was unlikely to develop patience and discipline in choosing between countermeasures, especially at a time when an impulsive decision seemed, undoubtedly, very attractive.

"Well... now that we're here, Francesco," began Abel, trying to project calm with his soft words, extending a conciliatory hand, "we might as well pool our resources—"

"Spare me your familiarity, Nightroad," di Medici snapped. He lowered his voice. "Since you insist upon interfering, I will tell you that the reputation of this city is not the only one put in danger by this attack. Thanks to that upstart, Caterina, sticking her nose into matters that do not concern her, we can no longer enshrine information dissemination within the specializations of our institutionalized standard! If the results of Dr. Lauricella's inquest leak to the people, or if word of a vampire attack in the heart of Vatican-held territory becomes public knowledge, it would shame the Papacy itself!"

Abel frowned his doubt. Francesco di Medici had long ago severed any real emotional cord between himself and his lineage to escape the stares and whispers that had followed him down the halls of the Palazzo Apostolico ever since he was a boy. Even so, Francesco had never quite managed to rid himself of the feeling that, in being born a bastard, an unintended thing, he had been denied his rightful place on the Throne of Saint Peter. It kept him from being anything but belligerent, and made him unwilling to forget grudges.

It also threw any genuine concern the man held for Pope Alessandro into serious question. And if Abel read the splinterly light in the Chief Inquisitor's gimleted eyes correctly, then Petros had already reached a similar conclusion.

Kicking the murder under the carpet had little to do with saving face in matters of the Holy See's public relations. Abel knew, better than most, that information was controlled because the free flow of truth was not always expedient for those wishing to maintain their power...

"Your Eminence," murmured Dr. Lauricella; she mustered her nerve as she insisted, "we... we must find the culprit, and to do that I must make this autopsy report available to the proper authorities—"

"No. I want you to forget what you've seen here, Dr. Lauricella. This matter is now in the hands of the Inquisition."

"Your Eminence...?" muttered Petros, arching an eyebrow until it disappeared under his low bangs.

"I want your inquest sent directly to my office," Cardinal di Medici stole a glance at the body on the slab, "and this poor unfortunate burned."

There was a long, heart-freezing silence. Abel found himself holding his breath. León had taken a sudden profound interest in his boots, and Miss Esther's eyes darted between Cardinal di Medici
and Brother Petros as if following a game of high-stakes ping pong. When Dr. Lauricella looked up again, her face was mottled, her ears pink.

"If I understand you correctly, Your Eminence, you mean to suggest that I act as though this gruesome… vampire attack never took place!" repeated the coroner in anger she masked as disbelief. "For the singular reason that I conducted the autopsy that established this young lady's death as murder, while also helping your Vatican agents to identify how it was the murder was accomplished!"

"They are not my agents," snarled Cardinal di Medici, patience wearing dangerously thin.

"Regardless, when you say that my report is to be buried, you’re talking about censorship and suppression, specifically and directly. If what you’re saying actually reflects the opinion of the Ministry of Vatican Papal Doctrine and the Department of Inquisition, then we have a problem. A very large problem."

"Are you disobeying my orders?" snapped Cardinal di Medici. His expression, already thunderous, shaded into something more dangerous.

"Maldita sea..." muttered León.

Dr. Lauricella, to Abel's amazement, held her ground. "I merely think the suggestion is ill-considered, Your Eminence. I ask you to think again."

"Or what, Doctor? Just what, exactly, do you intend to do?"

The coroner swallowed. She was getting no help from Caterina's own envoy, but neither were Petros and his inquisitors siding with Francesco. "You may be a cardinal, Your Eminence, as well as the Duke of Florence," she said slowly, "but given the brazen and brutal nature of this attack, and the AX’s specialization in such matters, I believe they have the right, and indeed a holy duty, to continue their investigation into the matter."

Cardinal di Medici cocked his head slightly to one side. "An interesting suggestion," he said quietly, though the words were low and angry, full of implication — a mating dance for poisonous snakes. "And what would you have me do? Return three bumbling clergymen who can’t see the worth of things unless they hit them in the head to the Piazza della Santissima Annunziata, disrupt the peace of the Noël markets, draw unwanted attention to my city, all having wasted time, lost the element of surprise, squandered the Vatican’s advantage? The strength of the Holy See is rotting away, dying piecemeal! Diminished with every concession allotted those blood-sucking monsters by Caterina and her accursed hunting dogs!"

Francesco was one of many in the Vatican, though by far the most vocal of the bunch, who believed the Kudlak Bacillus was simple bloodlust, a berserk savagery that neither knew nor cared what its target was, striking randomly and without warning. But Methuselah were as cold as they were hot, as rational as they were lethal. To embrace the Bacillus was to embrace a certain type of honor, a glory, a denial of all restraint but not of reason. It was pure, elemental purpose, unencumbered by compassion or horror or pity, yet it was far more than mere animal frenzy.

Which told Abel the girl's murder was either a calculated attack, unlikely given her Jane Doe status... or wasn't the work of a Methuselah at all, despite the puncture wounds and the blood loss...

It was Miss Esther who answered Cardinal di Medici before Abel could throw her a look of caution: "We would act with the utmost discretion, Your Eminence. If we do not respond adequately when the time demands it, we show a lack of care and attention that is as dangerous as
deliberately committing a crime of our own. It might be prudent to contact—"

But Francesco cut her off — the look in his gray eyes would have withered fruit on the vine. He rounded on her suddenly, his expression dark even in the harsh, industrial lighting of the mortuary, his voice sharp, addressing Miss Esther with a contempt that bordered on revulsion. “Whatever the relative status of myself and this coroner, you, Lady Saint, are under the direct command of the Holy Roman Curia. And I do not remember asking for your opinion on the matter.”

Miss Esther held Cardinal di Medici’s gaze for a moment. Then she glanced at Abel. Not a word had dropped from his lips, or from Miss Esther’s, and yet some unacknowledged sense of embarrassment made them both shrink from making eye contact. A blush dusted Miss Esther’s cheekbones. “I understand, Eminence,” she said quietly. Then, under her breath: “It appears Bishop Maxwell’s ilk has not aged with grace.”

Abel glanced at Miss Esther sharply. But before he could open his mouth to ask the obvious question, a look of gaping shock flashed across Cardinal di Medici’s face like a thunderclap. Francesco’s perennially angry expression turned pale, only slightly, but still pale; to see him blink away surprise in his chilly, unkind eyes gave Abel pause for thought.

“'I beg your pardon, Sister?’"

To Abel’s alarm, Miss Esther teetered slightly. Her gaze darted about, like a trapped animal, blue eyes filled with shadows. She seemed to shrink under Cardinal di Medici’s suddenly undivided attention. "Eminence? I-I said I understand. I spoke out of turn; it was not my place to contradict—"

"After that, you simpleton!”

"Hey!” León bristled. "Leave her alone, Cardinal."

"You dare—!"

"I dare a lot more than that.” Abel took a deep breath, fast, then let it out over the next five seconds. His face became all even planes and sharp angles as he leveled a winter-lake glare at di Medici, acutely aware, suddenly, of the latent talons beneath his nail beds. "I'm rather annoyed, you see, and I'd thank you not to address Miss Esther in that manner, Eminence.”

"Yes, that's quite enough, Francesco. I won't have you hurling abuse at my agents."

Several pairs of eyes swung towards the corner of the mortuary, where sat a communication console, Albion-designed and Vatican-issued. The hologram of a tall, willowy woman dressed in richly-embroidered red and white vestments dominated the fall wall, glaring imperiously at the assembled officers, doctors, and clergymen. She was beautiful... spellbinding, really — her complexion like silk over glass, tightly-curled blonde hair falling long and loose about her face and down her back, the lights of the projection reflecting across her crown in diffuse bands that changed color, shimmering like rainwater, when she altered her posture. She radiated intelligence, eyes soft and silver behind a gilded monocle.

She certainly knew how to make an entrance, marveled Abel.

"I apologize for my tardiness in responding to your earlier message, Father Garcia,” continued Cardinal Caterina Sforza, Duchess of Milan, smoothly. "Given the circumstances, I attempted to contact the Palazzo Medici Riccardi, only to be told by the staff there that the Duke had gone to the Ospedale degli Innocenti on something of an urgent matter. I have to commend you for this
recent effort of yours at taking the initiative, Brother."

"Dearest Caterina," seethed Cardinal di Medici through rasping molars, Miss Esther all but forgotten, "just the person I wanted to speak to."

"I'm afraid that will have to wait, Francesco. There is someone here who would like a quick word... Holiness? The channel is open."

A pale, freckled face, a full head shorter than Caterina, sidled into the projection frame. He was small and appeared sickly, and had pale hazel eyes, almost yellow in color, which he blinked myopically at them through the hologram. The only defining characters on his otherwise unassuming countenance were the white, peaked cap perched atop his head and the scepter clutched in his hand.

"Most Holy Father!" bellowed Brother Petros, bending one knee to the ground in a show of overearnest — although entirely genuine — servility. The Chief had genuflection down to an art, thought Abel, watching in amazement as all six-foot-five of the man dropped to the floor, as though collapsing under the weight of his armor. Dr. Lauricella, too, looked unsteady on her feet, overwhelmed by the company.

"Hello, Brother," stuttered Pope Alessandro in a tiny, flighty voice, lifting a hand in salutation, "hello Father Nightroad... Sister Esther..."

"Your Holiness," greeted Abel in turn, bowing. Esther and León followed suit.

"I..." For once, Cardinal di Medici appeared caught off-guard. He nodded towards the projection with a look both wary and wry, looping his hands behind his back even as a single slender finger began to tap a rhythm, anxious and atonal, against his knuckles. "This is an unexpected surprise, Holiness," he opined, speaking carefully. "To what do I owe this honor?"

"I h-heard about what happened, you see... to... to that girl, I mean."

A muscle began to fire in Cardinal di Medici's jaw. The poisonous look he threw Caterina was so quick only the Duchess and Abel seemed to take notice. "A most unfortunate incident, Holiness. The child was butchered... bled dry. I will not burden you with the details."

For all his show of reluctance, Abel had a sense that a part of Cardinal di Medici enjoyed introducing Alessandro to these horrors, as seducers took pleasure in the corruption of innocence.

"Sister says she had an idea," explained Alessandro, glancing sidelong at the Duchess of Milan for support. At her nod of encouragement, he swallowed, then went on: "And Father Abel and S-Sister Esther were so nice to me... so nice, in István. I... I know you like to d-do things yourself, Brother, b-b-but... I think they can help you... like they helped me, I mean."

Ah, Caterina, thought Abel wistfully, somewhat forlornly. Though entirely invisible to the Pope, Abel could sense frustration and fury at Caterina radiating from Cardinal di Medici like a bad smell. Age and wisdom had not weathered the Duchess of Milan's jagged, scheming streak. There was something about her way with words. In her expert hands, manipulated deftly, her powers of persuasion were both deceitful and sublime. Abel supposed it ran in the family, though while Francesco wielded his rhetoric like an ax, hacking and slashing, Caterina was like a surgeon with a scalpel, slicing thinly.

"If... that is your will, Holiness," capitulated Cardinal di Medici, backed into a tidy little corner. He swallowed, which clamped his teeth, so his nod was no doubt far stiffer than he'd intended. "My
inquisitors and Brother Petros will work closely with Caterina's agents to rid Florence of this scourge."

"Holiness!" Came Petros's booming baritone, no doubt giving Alessandro a fright; the Chief hefted his enormous high-frequency lance, the Screamer, in one gauntleted fist. "Only God may pass judgement upon the sinful. However... I will proudly set up this monster's appointment with the Almighty!"

"How long did he practice that in the mirror, d'ya think?" muttered León to Abel. Abel bobbed his shoulders in a shrug.

"Thank you for your cooperation in this matter, Francesco," said Caterina brightly, feigning ignorance of her half-brother's rage by resting a hand on Pope Alessandro's shoulder, to the young man's evident relief. "I will recall Father Garcia de Asturias to Rome for the sake of expediency. In the meanwhile, Father Nightroad and Sister Esther will remain in Florence until the investigation is closed. Good evening, Cardinal."

The projection switched off. Teresa Lauricella raised her head from her bow, looking immensely grateful for the Duchess of Milan's timely intervention. An old, familiar fire sparked in Petros's eyes, despite Cardinal di Medici's incensed simmer, and even Abel's heart felt a tad lighter, set free of the prospect of being booted out of Florence and left to shiver in the snow—

"Where are her glasses? What happened to her glasses?"

Abel's breath froze to ice in his throat. He turned to find Miss Esther swaying on the balls of her feet, her gaze still focused on the wall where the Caterina's hologram had been, the nun's jaw slack. Blinking, Esther's eyes glistened, the blue run with cracks like the shadows of boughs against the snow. A memory of blowing cinders suddenly became her red hair moving in front of her face, and Abel thought he saw her burning city, her nightmares, for the first time in his mind's eye.

"Contesă," said Esther Blanchett, in a language Abel thought long dead...

“What happened to your glasses?”
The agony in stony places...

Chapter Summary

For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch

Malachi 4:1

Her breath burned in her chest.

Her clothes clung to her body, sweat-drenched and shivery. The dark landscape of the Burning City tumbled rocks and ledges to make her stumble, glass exploding from windows and brick blasted from their foundations. Her hands bled freely as she climbed a tilted slab of concrete that jerked once beneath her feet, groaning like a thing living. She watched pebbles roll off its edge, heard them clink over cracked plumbing, then splash somewhere in the darkness. She vaulted to a more solid stretch, the stone's fractures mortared with dried blood, like rust. Twisted rebars clutched at her clothes as she hurried past, sure she would fall at any second.

Then the Shadow would catch her.

"Monsters, monsters, big and small," she muttered. "They're gonna come and eat you all."

She chased after a promise of safety like a mad person in search of a reflection of light. She barely suppressed a groan as a spike of pain lanced through her sternum, her heart thundering a frantic staccato.

Something reared up ahead of her, a shape shrouded in darkness. She found she couldn't stop in time, careening full tilt into its muscled surface, cracking her head and letting out a shriek. At first she didn't quite understand what she was seeing. The Shadow — there was no other thing she could think to call it — churned and boiled as it loomed over her, over the whole Burning City, the bodies of animals and people appearing briefly in its flesh before they submerged beneath a roiling, fetid mass of millipedes and beetles.

And then there were the bones.

For a moment she thought they were pieces of bleached driftwood — limbs of trees picked up by the undulating Shadow — but when she saw the skulls, their jaws hanging open in a silent scream, she understood the horror of what it was. The remains of victims were a part of its body, flowing within the multitudes that made up its form.

A shiver ran through her. "Hound, hound, tooth and claw, shadow and bone will eat you raw."

She turned and sprinted in the opposite direction, towards a dark crag, the only promise of shelter, rising up from the stony ground. She caught a flash of smoky luminescence inside it, like a flame reflected in dark glass. There was an opening in the rock — a thick metal panel had been reduced to slag by the heat of the fires. She forced her way through it and into a narrow tunnel, plunging
down into the earth. Behind her, she heard the Shadow doing the same. She didn’t dare look back, running so hard the bones of her feet felt as though they would crumble inside her flesh. Her head was throbbing. Her body was streaming incandescent as she flew through the darkness, melting away like a comet nearing the sun. She flew faster and faster. Her eyes could see only darkness. The black walls opened up like arms to pull her inside, to hold her fast...

"Vampire, vampire, sharp and sly, smile and bite and drink you dry."

Then she felt the Shadow — its limbs too long, too bony — wind around her and crush her tight, trapping her arms against its chest.

She screamed as it began to squeeze her to death. The Shadow dropped its head forward, into the hollow under her habit where her shoulder met her neck.

"Voivode, Voivode, eyes like coal, sing you a song and steal your soul."

"Sunt dărâmat de tot trăitul ăsta..." it purred against her ear.

The Shadow's voice resonated in her skull, pressuring a reply.

The Burning City bent and twisted out of shape, the pressure of the Shadow's embrace turning the space behind her eyes to a dune of snow, bringing the night sky, with its diamond-sized stars, so close to her mouth that she could kiss them, and taste the empty spaces beyond the world...

Elsewhere

Before Armageddon, Saint Peter's Basilica had served as the terminating vista of the Via della Conciliazione, which connected Saint Peter's Square to the Castel Sant'Angelo on the western bank of the Tiber River. Following the ascension of the Naia Sancta and the great war between Terran and Methuselah kind, the Papal Enclave had moved east, to the Rione Monti, where the resurrected basilica, designed to imitate the original della Porta design in every detail, lay cornered by the new Palazzo Apostolico and the Tiber.

Rome, the heart of the Vatican Papal State, was a humble city, tiered and tiled with red terra-cotta, wholly unremarkable save for Saint Peter's; its enormous cross hung over the city like an artificial satellite scaffolded into the sky. The seat of the Vatican was both an architectural chimera and a form of cultish worship -- amusing, if the Catholic Church were one to pay any mind to life's crueler ironies. The monstrous towers of narrow, slitted windows, mysterious crenellations, rising spires surmounted by saints that at night glowed gold, and dizzying steeples rose high into the clouds, set to skewer fallen angels. Saint Peter's Basilica was at home neither on the land nor in the air: a mysterious, levitating place, contravening the materiality of both earth and sky.

Some way along the wide thoroughfare of the Corso Vittorio, hidden between the confounding roundabouts, broad arches of ruin, terraced gardens, gleaming white villas, marble statues, Doric columns and cornices of the Papal Enclave was the Palazzo Spada.

And in the large corner office on the third floor, poised at a window open to the courtyard below, distant from the muted growl of buses and taxis on the Corso Vittorio, sheltered from the rain drumming on the roof, like a stream of fine pebbles striking the shingles, her hands knitted and her gaze fixed on the dome of the basilica, stood Cardinal Caterina Sforza.

"I am the Head of the AX, sworn to protect and defend the Vatican’s interests abroad," she murmured, sounding pressed for patience. "And yet Cardinal di Medici insists on making my job as
extraordinarily difficult as possible."

"That young man needs a hobby," agreed Caterina's companion. "Scrapbooking, perhaps. Or coin collecting. Something to lower the blood pressure."

Caterina allowed herself a tight little smile. "Young man? You're only four years his senior, William."

Dr. William Walter Wordsworth grunted to himself in the way people only tended to do if they believed themselves unobserved. Having just returned from the University of Rome, he had shed his black cassock and mantle for a tweedish, threadbare jacket with patches on the elbows, strung with a large fob watch and damp from the rain. He smelled of cloves and pipe tobacco and had a faraway look about him as though he were at any moment about to toast muffins or read a particularly good story. He grinned to himself, showing his crooked teeth. His smile brightened his face to a ruddy gleam, pale eyes glittering with guile, though the effect was mitigated somewhat by the chalk that dusted the Professor's untidy dark hair and the sopping state of his trouser cuffs.

"It takes a great many more muscles to frown than it does to smile," noted William, going to work on his pipe, lighting and coaxing it. "Give it fifteen years: Cardinal di Medici will be one great wrinkle."

William Wordsworth was a hard-worked rationalist, always trying at framing the world in metrics and ratios, attempting to explain and justify human behavior with logical, plausible reasons — it was little wonder Tres had taken such a shine to the man. During his good times this was not difficult, but, noted Caterina, when William was in one of his whimsical moods, the bright shards on the floor of the world had a trick of turning into shining pools of the hyperbolic and the fantastic.

"What am I to do with him, Professor?" she asked, not really expecting an answer. "Francesco communicates nothing to the Holy See save the contagion of his own obsessions, his aggression, his ego-centered ambitions, his delusions about ends and means. How does someone so intelligent, so passionate, see so much and yet remain so blind?"

"The man lacks some essential qualities in his daily repertoire, Caterina."

"Such as?"

"Empathy. Compassion. A moral compass aligned to true north."

The corner of Cardinal Sforza's cheek pinched into a dimple. "Oh, is that all?"

William's glacial green eyes -- incisive and clear -- twinkled. "He feels disjointed, disgruntled, because he is continually, though I suppose unconsciously, struggling to find out a kind of strategy to understand and deconstruct the cruelties of the world."

"Insensible to the fact that his own faults have sown and reaped the very same cruelties."

"Confining him in woeful unawareness," agreed William, speaking around the stem of his pipe. "I almost pity the man."

"A priest, William, pity a cardinal?"

"He has pity on the weak and the needy..." quoted William solemnly.

"I can always count on you to be ready with some biblical platitude, my friend."
"I can't take all the credit. A habit of Abel's."

"Abel..." Her gaze flickered between the courtyard below the balcony, the regiments of Roman pines and the soft, damp carpet of needles beneath their branches, and the veins in the travertine marble walls. The distraction of talking to the Professor, clearly, had not been enough for her.

"Ah." William may not have been able to intuit every one of her thoughts, disciplined as she was at keeping her expressions and emotions in check, but he had an eye for the ripples of reaction spreading from Caterina’s deeper anxieties. "You're worried about Krusnik. It must be difficult for him, I imagine, hearing Cardinal di Medici's disdain for Methuselah, sitting around a table in an affirmation your half-brother's crusade, only to realize that the antagonist in Francesco's story is none other than Abel himself, and no one present thinks he's a very likable character."

A deep sigh was snatched from the Cardinal's lips by the rainy breeze from the window. "The mere fact that Father Nightroad hasn't yet landed himself in one of Brother's dungeons is a small miracle. The Chief of the Inquisition saw... things in Carthage. If Petros Orsini were so inclined, he could pen an incident report documenting in detail the Krusnik's powers and abilities and place it front and center on Francesco's desk in the Palazzo Riccardi. The AX would be in ruins by Noël matins."

"Paranoia, Caterina? That doesn't sound like the Duchess of Milan I know."

"Caution keeps me sensible, William. It's the way of things: any number of small mistakes and little accidents, a general absence of care, and somewhere, somewhen, a tipping point will be passed and things will begin to go terribly wrong. The history of the Church brims with tragedies built out of incremental blunders. Besides," Caterina removed her monocle and polished the glass between the thumb and forefinger of her pristine white gloves, "I read through Dr. Lauricella's inquest last night, and the details of her autopsy all point towards the very likely possibility of an attack by a creature Francesco would call a "vampire". In light of this, knowledge of Abel's abilities would be a flame to a powder keg."

"And you suppose Petros Orsini is the man holding the proverbial matchstick."

"I don't suppose anything, Father. The Chief Inquisitor saw Abel operating at eighty percent output in Carthage. He witnessed a priest, a man of the Church, transform into one of the very monsters the Inquisition have fought and tortured and killed for hundreds of years. And though he fought alongside Ion Fortuna during the Iblis crisis, Brother Petros was very nearly killed by the efreeti, Radu Barvon, in the process. He knows... a lot. Too much, perhaps, to ensure the safety of the AX and the secrecy of diplomatic talks with the Empire. Fate has flipped a coin of opposing sides, the AX and the Inquisition, and Petros Orsini has yet to call the toss. However, simply standing aside and allowing the coin to fall as it will might very well jeopardize any chance the Holy See has of achieving peaceful resolutions with the Methuselah. The risk is too great, and the cost too steep."

The Professor took a long, inward breath, as if preparing to field a counterargument, then stopped. Finally, he frowned. "I'm sure I don't really know the man, Your Grace. That being said, I value Father Nightroad's counsel to no small degree, and he speaks highly of Orsini's discipline, his honesty. High praise coming from the man whom Brother Petros dropped off a cliff. I believe the Chief Inquisitor is a principled person."

Caterina harrumphed. "If one holds to principle so passionately, so inflexibly, indifferent to the full range of human flaws and foibles might create, a man runs the risk of enthroning principle above rationality. I am not sure I am willing to leave the future of the AX and the Empire both in the hands of Francesco's puppet, one who has abdicated the responsibilities of a thinking person in favor of his ideals."
But who was she to bemoan a man for his principles? Caterina had gone so far as to have Alec intervene on her behalf, to ensure the continuity of her own agenda in Florence, no-doubt enraging Francesco in the process. Each and every one of them, thought Caterina with a sudden bitterness, moved towards faiths they could not possibly know. Each of them struggled against the pain of the world even as they were doomed to join it, to compound it, even. Was she so different from Petros?

From Francesco?

William looked troubled. "What would you have us do, Caterina? I doubt slapping Brother Petros with a gag order will solve more problems than it will invariably create."

Caterina said nothing for a while. The rain, which was snow further north, bore down mercilessly upon the heart of the city, pounding on the tiled rooftops and turning the streets of the Rione Monti into a warren of slick stone and muddy water. Roman winters had a tendency to average their rainy months into long, cold seasons of relentless fog and little color. At such times, Caterina felt, looking out across the spattered balcony, as though the clouds would cry until the very hills dissolved.

"In a perfect world," she said quietly, "Francesco and his lackeys would allow Abel and León to get on with the investigation unencumbered. Cardinal di Medici would return to Rome along with the Chief of the Inquisition, where ecclesiastical concerns would keep the latter from whispering the wrong words in his master's ear."

"In a perfect world," parroted the Professor around his pipe, "young women wouldn't wind up in refrigerated rooms drained of blood."

"But the world is not perfect, and the child is still dead," conceded Caterina. She remembered Dr. Lauricella's images, projected to her monitor from Florence: the dead woman's face, pale and bloodless. The fierce white light of the morgue had showed every detail mercilessly, every last pore and pockmark revealed — the history of a life, reduced to a mere handful of scars. "So... I have elected to recall Father Garcia to Rome."

"May I ask why?"

"León is a good soldier, but he is impetuous, hot-headed. Prone to acting on impulse and instinct. Moreover, following the incident involving my uncle, the Archbishop of Cologne, León's relationship with the Inquisition and my Brother is testy. I will be sending a more mature, more experienced agent to Florence in his stead."

"Oh?"

"I trust you have an overnight bag ready, William."

"Naturally." A broad grin spread across the Professor's face. Usually, Caterina found it quite infectious, but the rain and recent circumstances had dampened her mood.

At that moment a dazzling claw of lightning streaked down the length of the sky. The hedge and the distant trees seemed to leap forward in the brilliance of the flash. Her chest thrummed with the thunder.

"For all his faults," she said, "Brother is justified in his concern for the security of the Vatican Papal State. We must apprehend whomever is attacking people in Florence. Diplomatic negotiations cannot continue so long as a rogue Methuselah is murdering citizens of the Holy See."

William raised an inquiring eyebrow. "Something tells me my responsibilities might be a tad more
involved than simple detective work."

"You assume correctly. I want you to keep an eye on Petros Orsini. I need to know if the man can be trusted."

"And Cardinal di Medici?"

"Follow the usual precautions. Abel is under orders to operate with the utmost discretion where his abilities are concerned, but if Brother shows any signs of suspicion, Father Nightroad is to be recalled to Rome at once. I cannot protect him so long as he is in Florence."

"Understood. I trust Abel and Sister Esther know to expect me?"

William took a contemplative puff of his pipe, not noticing — or, more likely, pretending not to notice — the way Caterina's eyes had narrowed suddenly in defiance. A damp coldness clung to the air around her, the inclemency seeping through vestments and skin, right to her bones.

_Speak of the devil..._

"There is another matter we have yet to discuss," she murmured. "Regarding Miss Blanchett."

William's face creased in concern. "Nothing bad, I hope?"

"That remains to be seen."

Caterina hated the taste of the words in her mouth. She had always been able to press on with her duty in the teeth of Esther Blanchett's interference — invading Ion Fortuna's residence in Carthage, disobeying orders to follow Abel into the Iblis, _very nearly allowing Alec to come to harm in István_ — on account of the fact that there was nothing truly momentous one frail slip of a girl could do to unravel Caterina's plans. It was a glib, comforting bitterness, the protection of knowing that Esther, for all her powers of persuasion, in spite of the crowd of fawning sycophants she surrounded herself with, was quite helpless in the face of the AX's control and influence.

But at that moment, Sister Esther's vulnerability was, to Caterina, a horror rather than a balm. Because she knew, in her heart, that there was one _particular_ sycophant willing to put the girl's welfare and safety before the Vatican's own.

_Damnation, he had done it once before already!_

"I received a call from Father Nightroad very early this morning," admitted Caterina, her chest tight, every muscle in her body stiff. "An addendum, of sorts, to the coroner's inquest, as well as a private message Abel did not want included in his official report."

"Cardinal di Medici isn't giving the young lady a difficult time again, is he?" asked William, faintly alarmed. "I remember he wasn't very impressed with all that Lady Saint business in István..."

Neither was I, thought Caterina tartly. Less due to Esther's unorthodox canonization, and more due to the fact that Abel had never quite forgiven the Duchess of Milan for placing his novice in such a difficult position. The ground between Cardinal Sforza and her oldest, and closest, friend had been irredeemably soured.

"This matter is not Francesco's doing. The girl hasn't... been well. Behaving strangely, murmuring nonsense in her sleep, getting lost in her own head at inopportune times. Abel was cryptic in the details."
"Is she sick?"

"Enough to warrant my concern, evidently. William... you are well-versed in Pre-Armageddon languages, are you not?"

Nonplussed by the apparent change in subject, William nodded slowly. The pipe smoke trailed behind his head like the tail of a sullen comet. "Some," he provided warily.

"The word voivode. Abel mentioned it. Would Sister Esther have any reason to know it?"

"Voivode... interesting." There was, to Caterina's surprise, a slight smile on William's lips. The Cardinal found she had no idea what he was thinking in that moment, what he was feeling, or whether his words were meant as dispassionate, musing, accusing, even playful. Normally, the tiveness was part of Father Wordsworth's charm. Now, it rattled her.

William admitted, after a pause, "It's entirely possible our mutual friend the Earl of Memphis introduced the term to her. Dynastic hierarchies in Methuselan society are hard to ascribe, given the loose traditional definitions of the ruling family, although if I'm remembering correctly, it's a rather archaic title, used by Moldavian rulers in ancient times, well before Armageddon."

"That does little to explain why it should catch Abel's attention, or why the girl has taken to muttering it in the middle of the night," said Caterina resignedly, irritably. "What does the word mean, exactly?" Her eyes stared thoughtfully the city beyond the Palazzo Spada. For a moment, she tapped a finger nervously on the table, drawing William's attention — it seemed to be the first sign of her uncertainty Father Wordsworth had noticed.

"Well... I suppose the closest linguistic equivalent would be the word Hospodar in the Methuselah Cyrillic script."

"And in the Roman common tongue?"

Following Caterina's example, William raised his pale green eyes above the drenched and dreary city, climbing the heights that only angels had scaled. Caterina realized she didn't feel very well herself, and as she waited for her friend to parse through the indexes of his memory, she took three rough breaths, with stomach-clenched silences in between.

"Count, I think," said Father Wordsworth, a strange look on his face that Cardinal Sforza couldn't quite place. The Professor regarded his burning pipe tobacco, which seemed bent, like Caterina's heart, on consuming itself as quickly as possible. "Yes, I believe I've got it right.

"Voivode means 'Count'."

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"Out here in the dark and cold, freezin' my ass off when I should be on my Noël holiday in Sevilla. Man, I hate that guy."

Father Nightroad looked positively scandalized, his mouth pursed into a shocked little 'o'. "Shame on you, León! The Lord does not condone hatred!"

"Yeah, and the Lord don't condone being an asshole either, 'cept someone forget to tell Cardinal di Medici that back at the seminary."

"From Matthew: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.'"
Abel's little smile froze as he saw the scowl flicker across León's features. "From Colossians," quoted Father Garcia scornfully: "For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done... because he's an asshole."

"It's snowing again," murmured Esther into her scarf, sick and tired of the pair of them and trying desperately to change the subject.

The alley was dark, save for the gaunt, purple-cloud light peeking in between the cracks in the buildings. There was no wind and the crust on the snow held in the cold, crunching easily under Abel and León's booted feet but putting up a little more resistance under Esther's own. It had been cold and gray the night before, on the long walk back to the motel from the Ospedale degli Innocenti, and Esther had been in a daze for most of the journey — tired, headachy, feverish, as though she'd been drinking. She hadn't slept at all well... tossing and turning all night, her head full of frets and nightmares, but she had woken to Abel sprawled in an armchair beside her bed, drooling and his glasses askew, with a snow as fine and grainy as sugar covering the windows and sifting off the rooftops towards the street. The relief at having woken up wouldn't last much more than a couple of hours, she knew, but for some small space of time, Esther had forgotten about the nightmares. She had thought only about how amazing it was, the way snow managed to transform things: children scraping a half-inch from walls and bins to compact into snowballs; Noël market shoppers suddenly watching their footing; hovercars leaving a discarded flurry of white in the air. Florence all spires and pinnacles, pale palaces of pearl and opal, the snow softening the crumbled pavements and turning rust-colored rooftops white, cutting silhouettes on buildings and bridges and bushes.

Even in the middle of the night, investigating a murder and condemned to enduring Abel and León’s bickering in the meanwhile, Esther couldn't deny the fact that the sight of snow still created a childish glow inside of her. Noël was a season of peace and goodwill; an oasis of calm in the chaos of life. Maybe that was why snow felt so right; cloaking the world in stillness, matching the season's pace and mood, even if — just like the snow itself — the change was only temporary, and spoke of both soft powder giving way underfoot and the creeping chill of ice in her bones, turning her lips blue and her fingertips black. Of delirious joy and terrible pain both.

The three AX agents reached a junction in the small sidestreet; the open spaces between the unplastered pietra forte seemed to bend away crazily like tunnels dug by some huge and drunken rat. Further along the alley, snagging Esther's attention, something large crunched through the snow. The thin film of ice splintered under the weight, the sound like a bone snapping in half, and Esther's head shot up. The crack was blinding, mineral, shattering the silence of the street — not that León and Abel, still hurling verses at each other, took any notice.

She froze, eyes straining until they began to water. The quiet that followed as Esther peered into the darkness was implacable, lacquered... like transparent death.

Esther blinked.

Something in the shadows blinked back.

A stir of motion, like a swirl of mud in water, disturbed the curtain of falling snow. Esther swallowed down the acidic bile of fear, resisting the subconscious urge to flee. She struggled to rationalize just what, exactly, she was seeing...

The massive creature, wolfish and unnaturally lanky, had known better days. His pitch-black fur was thin and clung to his frame like a windbreaker in a gale. Even from several meters away, Esther could count his ribs. His movements were faltering as if each step pained him, his head sunk low to the ground. Crimson eyes that ought to have been scanning for danger or opportunities
to eat never rose from the snowy cobbles. His tongue lolled out of his mouth, lapping forlornly at the occasional slick mirror of ice.

"Still with us, Miss Esther?"

Abel was looking away from her as he asked it, but not before Esther caught the slight flush on his cheekbones. He was so pale, he could never hide even the least blush.

But Esther didn't move.

"Father..." she breathed, fingers brushing the sleeve of his cassock. "Father..."

The dog — the creature was a dog in the same way Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome was a church — cocked his head, pointed ears tuned to Esther and the priest, though the latter had yet to take notice.

Esther felt a fast, shivery chill of horror. In an instant, the night and the cold swept around her like a dark cloak, eclipsing the memory of the bright sanctuary of the snow with all its light and beauty. "Father Abel..." she whined.

The dog fixated on the sound of her voice, its hackles standing on end, bristling along its back. Esther expected him to growl, to snarl in fear and hunger. But the massive creature appeared instead to smile broadly — violent red, like blood on ice, flashing his ivory-white teeth, the sheer length of the grin tugging at his gristly lips. A musky, damp scent, tinctured with the lather of rancid breath and the coppery sting of an abattoir floor, blasted Esther's face, causing her breath to catch in her throat.

"Miss Esther? Miss Esther!" A white, spidery hand appeared — seemingly out of nowhere — and grabbed hold of Esther's arm. She didn't feel Abel's grip, numb from shock...

"Holy shit," came the plummy, distorted sound of Leon's voice, as though his words were drifting through deep water. "What the hell is that thing!?"

"Help me..." Terror paralyzed Esther's tongue. Her shoulders stiffened until her chest bowed, tight and agonizing, while her knees threatened to give out.

Warm arms gathered her close. “Shh,” Abel whispered against Esther's temple. He stayed right where he was, shielding her with his body, accepting her violent emotions, and running his hands over hair so red the strands were almost bloody in her peripheries, between his fingers... "It's all right, I've got you. I've got you, Miss Esther."

Too late, she noticed the tensed hind legs, the stiff back.

The dog was going to lunge.

The beast howled, the sound glassy, hovering at the upper ranges of hearing, full of the same icy wind that hit the back of Esther's throat. Underneath the glassy edge was the song of flesh being ripped apart, the sweetness of hot blood, the savagery of crunching bones and sharp teeth. In spite of his wasted, emaciated appearance, the dog hurdled effortlessly over the snow and loped towards Abel, claws skittering on the lacquered sheen of the snow-muffled street. Father Nightroad had just enough time to push Esther clear, sending the nun stumbling, before the black monster collided with his chest, teeth bared — eerily incandescent, as sharp as fine diamond swords — as he planted his paws on Abel's shoulders. They both hit the snow and ice with the sound of splintered vacuum tubes, the white ground shattering beneath them. The wind was knocked from Abel's lungs with a low, agonized groan.
"Father!" screamed Esther. In an instant, the terrified fog fled from behind her eyes and she procured her shotgun from under her skirts, acting entirely on instinct. She rushed the pair — two beasts entangled — and was distantly aware of Father Garcia swearing several yards away, of his removing his sharp silver chakrams from his wrists. Esther knew she was in León's line of sight, but she didn't care.

Would Abel transform? she wondered distantly, dimly.

No.

Esther couldn't allow that to happen. Not here...

The animal’s paw was crushing Abel's shoulder. Esther slammed her shotgun into the dog’s head, hoping to break his jaw, but her efforts had all the effect of hitting a brick wall with a switch. Turning his head and spitting, almost in rebuke, the black beast ripped her shotgun from her hands...

And bit the weapon cleanly in half.

"Stop it!" shrieked Esther. "ABEL!"

She could hear Abel's ribs cracking one after the other, under the impossible pressure, like kindling broken across a bent knee. The monster pinning him to the ground had pushed his paw almost entirely through the priest's shoulder, crushing the scapula against the ice. The dog was studying him, pointed canines exposed, blood slavering from his gums, hovering centimeters from Abel's face. The teeth came closer, closer, slow and merciless—

Then Esther caught it... a glint in Abel's eyes, the color once clear blue, turning darker. Redder. She glimpsed in them a shadow of the winged creature that was his sin made flesh, the truth of him she had seen laid bare in the blazing sun months before, shorn of mystery and subterfuge. It was, Esther knew now, the truth behind the unassuming face and the miraculous powers, the truth that was the dead and empty space between the stars, a wasteland peopled by frightened children and forsaken angels.

A truth close to breaking free...

The wrath Esther found in Abel's eyes was world-ending.

"Please," she begged,

"Let him go..."
A chuckle spread from ear to ear...

Chapter Summary

And there came a voice to him: “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.”

Acts 10:13

"You want me to what?"

There was a patient forbearance in his dark eyes — like those of a dead fish. Rather than soothe, they made Susanne von Skorzeny want to hit the man with something heavy. An iron girder, perhaps. Or a tank.

Aside from arching a single slim, perfectly proportioned eyebrow, von Kämpfer didn't so much as twitch.

"Something wedged in the ear canal, Captain?" he asked, smiling long and thinly, a cat with a canary. "I believe I ordered you to alter the Red Baron's heading to forty four degrees north by eleven degrees east. If you'd prefer, I could fetch a pen and paper for your edification?"

Pompous git, thought Captain Skorzeny, hands knuckling at her sides.

Isaak Fernand von Kämpfer was a tall, hawkish man who nevertheless managed to project a sense of slightness, as though he was actively trying to squeeze himself down to Susanne's size, the patronizing sod. He wore his jet-black hair loose, falling thick and straight almost to his waist. His narrow eyes were full of pride and insouciance, the hint of crows-feet around them suggesting an age and a vastness of experience that his lithe movements belied. The creases developing in his face spoke of a versatile and well-exercised mockery. They framed a perilous smile that Susanne knew well to be wary of.

"I heard you well enough the first time, Panzermagier," clarified Captain Skorzeny. She sucked in a breath, trying to muster some patience where at the best of times, there wasn’t much to be found. "What I would like to know is why I'm being asked to alter our course. Towards Tuscany, of all goddamn places!"

"Tuscany is rather lovely this time of year," said von Kämpfer idly, the dry, lavatorial stench of his cigarillo causing Susanne's nose to crinkle. "I've been told the snow on the summit of Alpi Apuane is the cherry on the cake of the region’s rich and variegated beauty."

"Don't take the piss with me on my own bridge, von Kämpfer. Why are we being directed to Florence? What reason could you possibly have to move the Orden's command ship to the heart of Vatican-held territory?"

Despite not serving any official role on the Red Baron's crew — and being a bit of a tosspot pilot in his own right — Isaak was, nevertheless, Skorzeny's master and, for all the pomp and grandeur with which the man carried himself, might as well have been the right hand of God in Heaven Himself. Accordingly, he favored Susanne with a look a debutante might reserve for a wine stain on her ruff.
"Captain," began Isaak, eyes narrowing almost imperceptibly, "is the Red Baron functioning well within acceptable parameters?"

Susanne looked down at her control panel, humoring the man. The engineering station was a laquered wooden console, about a meter and a half in length, covered in pressure gauges for fuel and ballast. The carbon-fiber skeleton of the Red Baron was outfitted with four enormous propeller blades, all suspended from engine cars on the underside of the gondola deck and capable of swiveling up and down to provide vertical thrust, not unlike a tilt-rotor aircraft. The largest dials on the console measured the Blau gas pressure in the dirigible's 12 fuel cells. Captain Skorzeny herself had overseen the inclusion of a supplementary supply of gasoline. The modification was old fashioned, but if the ship became too heavy, Susanne could switch the fuel intake from Blau gas to gasoline, which would lighten the vessel without the need to drop trim ballast.

*Within acceptable parameters*, her arse. The Red Baron was flying flawlessly.

"Yes sir."

"Splendid. And have your engineers encountered any technical difficulties which might hinder our reaching Tuscan airspace in a safe and timely fashion?"

Skorzeny rasped her molars, sure she was one bad day away from grinding her teeth to dust. "No, sir."

"Then I shouldn't think piloting us to Florence will prove much of a trial for your estimable talents, do you? Put your worry out of your mind, Susanne."

"But—"

"Though I suppose I should iterate..." he interrupted, setting his wry mouth in a hard line. His watery black eyes sharpened, as though a mobile of glass shards were turning and catching the sunlight inside his head. Any traces of mirth vanished in an instant, packed away somewhere lead-lined and dark. "The course correction comes directly from Mein Herr. We have reason to believe our... quarry, for lack of a better word, has surfaced in Florence."

A boulder slid into Susanne's stomach. She felt as though her dirigible had dropped a few hundred meters, but etched into the harsh planes of her face was reverence, deference. A long, narrow scar, like a bleached fish bone, twitched on Captain's Skorzeny's face as she muttered, "Zamiel, eh? I understand."

"It would be in your best interests to keep questions to a minimum for the time being, Captain. If it's the prospect of securing flight clearance in Vatican airspace that concerns you, rest assured Pygmalion's experiments with the selective bending of light will render the Red Baron invisible to the Inquisition's radar."

Amidst the infinite gradations of von Kämpfer's vices, his uncanny ability to anticipate the direction of conversation was, admitted Susanne to herself, a sin that ranked fairly low. And indeed, the Vatican's air defenses had been a primary concern of hers, not least of which because that blasted nun, Kate Scott, was still somehow flitting about in her glorified blimps despite Captain Skorzeny and the Orden having put the wretched woman in a coma several years previously. Scott's handle of defensive strategy was formidable, and to top it off, Susanne didn't entirely fancy tangling with the dirigible fleet of the Ministry of Vatican Papal Doctrine, helmed by one Francesco di Medici and his cadre of trigger-happy zealots.

Although, some days, she thought miserably, the sheer volume of enemies the Orden attracted
made Susanne question if perhaps the Contra Mundi's crew was a little too trigger-happy themselves. That maybe they had pissed in too many pots without thinking of the consequences.

But then she remembered that most poor sods couldn’t hold to a unified defensive front against the Rosencreutz Orden if it killed them. And kill them the Orden did.

Surely. Swiftly. Without mercy.

"I will be certain to pass my gratitude on to von Neumann, sir."

"Of course. Now then...?"

Susanne manned her console, where one lever controlled the angle of the two forward propellers, and a nearby pair changed their thrust. A joystick on her left-hand side commanded the rear propellers to pitch the nose up and down or to yaw side-to-side. With a practiced hand and every iota of confidence, Captain Skorzeny brought the Red Baron about to port, causing their shadows to slant across the wall of the bridge.

"Adjusting course... new heading, Florentine airspace."

Isaak smirked down at her, his face a mixture of arrogant benevolence and boyish satisfaction. "Good girl."

Susanne cast around for a suitable expression, some face to mask her anger, and her humiliation, but finding nothing adequate, settled on a tight frown and a quick bob of her head. She kept her hand on the controls to keep from putting a fist through Isaak's teeth.

The dirigible, and home base of the Orden, drifted over the Eastern Alps, surveying territory that had once been the free state of Bavaria, now held by the Kingdom of Germanicus. The slow rolling motion of the gondala deck reminded the Captain of an ocean swell. The skies were so clear, Skorzeny could see the shadow cast by the airship darkening the slopes of the mountains. The Red Baron stood 61 meters high and 745 meters in length, an enormous distention of scarlet canvas that seemed to swallow the sky and eclipse the landscape.

She imagined that many people who took to the air concerned themselves with an unexplained sense of unbounded freedom or metaphors of the soaring spirit. The way the earth below resolved into miniature, the landscape falling into place around the capillaries and arteries of water: mountain slopes bunched and wrinkled, wringing themselves into the furrows of couloir and creek.

But Captain Skorzeny had little patience for the romantic inclinations of the perpetually earthbound. What she loved the most, from the first training flight, was the neatness offered by her higher perspective, the sense of everything in its place. The immortal stillness of a landscape painting.

The airship teased the blinding peak of the Zugspitze as Susanne adjusted their course due south, towards the borders of the Vatican state, navigating with ease the air currents and thermal updrafts. They cleaved through the Wetterstein until the mountains fell away into the wide Ehrwald Basin, brimming with the pristine blue sky but broken by the cracked, scorched earth along the western and southern horizons. During the Dark Times, the upper part of the Oberbayern region had completely disappeared in a spectacular series of blasts that had caused the foothills of the mountains to collapse inward, creating a series of huge, circular holes in the ground — calderas — many miles wide. To Susanne, it was like flying over the surface of the moon.

"She saw the snowy poles of moonless Mars, that marvelous round of milky light below Orion, and
those double stars whereof the one more bright is circled by the other..."

Captain Skorzeny stole a glance over her shoulder as the deserted vastness slid beneath the hull, and all at once, she felt her stomach leap into her throat. Suddenly, her attention was no longer on her flight console, nor on the landscape through the outward-sloping windows.

"Byron, Mein Herr?" asked von Kämpfer, betraying nothing of surprise or shock at the unexpected visitor.

"Tennyson," came the soft, vacant reply.

The newcomer on the Red Baron's bridge was... beautiful. Men weren't Susanne's cup of tea, and she had never been one to wax poetic; in light of her shortcomings, she could think of no more fitting word.

He was more than six feet tall and overly slender for his height. He had a long, straight nose and sharply cut cheekbones, prominent because of his thinness. The piercing rays of the high-altitude sun made his hair gleam with every color against the sky. Delicate blonde wisps fell across his brow, his complexion so pale it rendered him stark. He stared at nothing in particular with a distant, slight smile, his eyes — a deep, dream-spun shade of larimar — pinched against the daylight. He wore no clothes, as ignorant of his nakedness as a toothless baby born into a solemn hush.

Tented over his shoulders were three enormous pairs of ivory-white wings, their lengths folded demurely along his back, the feathers as soft as astrakhan.

The sight bit into Susanne's eyes, sucked the strength from her legs.

*Contra Mundi.*

If there was anything Captain Skorzeny had learned in her many years as a pilot, it was that the stars in the night sky possessed a more humble kind of beauty than the raging and burning centerpiece of the earth. And if there was anything Susanne had learned in her service to the Orden, it was that the man who called himself Cain loved the sound those distant diamonds seemed to make in the black silence, like winking sirens luring lonely men to their deaths, drowning them in the inky sky. He was, she suspected, desperately in love with their distant, empyrean splendor.

Masters of perfection, those tiny spheres of cool light, hanging fixed and strong in their celestial spheres.

Perhaps, thought Susanne, Cain, the Enemy of the World, loved the stars because he was so much like them.

And yet... there was something ineffably... off, about the man, beyond the purely physical. Wings were incidental in a world of blood-suckers and shape-shifters, but Cain radiated more absence and presence, an angel-shaped outline in the world with his moist innards invisible and desolate, like an island in cold waters or a shadow apart from the crowd.

The empty spaces behind Cain's eyes communicated a damning apathy, a belief that little of love or hatred could project itself as an affective experience. That life was a vacuous affair with only the slimmest chemical prestige, and that nothing in the world was either good or bad, desirable or undesirable. As though to live on one's emotions was to live arbitrarily, inaccurately — imparting meaning to that which had none of its own.

A small sound of consideration around a cigarillo snapped Susanne from her reverie. "At the time
of Tennyson's first publication," Isaak beetled on, "Albion had seen the death of Shelley, Byron, Keats, and indeed all of the great Romantic poets except Wordsworth; Tennyson thus filled a lacuna in the literary scene."


Cain had the mind of a soothsayer but the gaze of a lunatic, the glacial patina of blue, like Antenora of the Ninth Circle, frozen over an orgy of dark seraphim twisted in a violent erotic dance. Claws and teeth and wings fused together. Brilliance and madness both warred in the Contra Mundi's soul, the essence of one who had seen too much too soon, who thought thoughts that tended to wander off the edge of the world. He carried behind himself a ball and chain of random associations, incomplete tasks: half-empty phrases, dropped allusions, abandoned poems, increasingly arcane frames of reference. The hard currency of his insights withdrawn from circulation.

Neither Captain Skorzeny nor anyone else in the Orden was surprised by Cain's circuitous lines of reasoning anymore. Though she couldn't begin to unravel them, Susanne knew from experience that the Contra Mundi's tangents tended to become the arcs of their campaigns, the unforeseen correspondences in his strange, brilliant mind sewing connections in a way that made her want to weep at the man's unwonted wisdom or scream at the futility of attempting to decipher it.

Standing at the helm of the Red Baron, listening to their leader murmur to himself, Susanne felt a familiar vexation, the mingled impatience and pleasure at Cain's refusal to surrender his mysteries without a fight.

"From earliest times, people learned that three days was how long one had to wait in the blackness before the sliver of the new moon appeared in the sky," he concluded, his vague smile returning. "For three days every month, when the skies grow dark, we practice resurrection. Tell me, Captain," Susanne near about gave herself whiplash standing to attention, "are we bound for Florence?"

There was so much she wanted to ask him, so much she wanted to say; but somehow, she knew there wasn't time and even if there was, that whatever quibbles she had were all, somehow, beside the point. "Yes, Mein Herr. I've set a course for Zamiel's last known location."

Cain hummed to himself, a gravel-rough rhythm deep in his throat. He began: "Conveniasi a quella pietra scema che guarda il ponte, che Fiorenza fesse vittima nella sua pace postrema... But it behooved the mutilated stone, which guards the bridge, that Florence should provide a victim in her latest hour of peace. With all these families, and others with them, Florence beheld I in so great repose, that no occasion had she whence to weep."

Isaak took another pull on his cigarillo. "Ah... that one I do know. Dante, is it not?"

"From the Paradiso," said Cain, blue gaze glassy. "What did he say of Florence in his Inferno, I wonder?"

"I can't recall, Mein Herr."

He gazed down at them with batting eyes, in them equal measures confusion, vacuity, and sadness. The combination, thought Susanne, was terrifying. Beautiful, too.
Like light shining from a dead star.

"Rejoice, Florence," recited the Contra Mundi, "seeing you are so great that over sea and land you flap your wings..."

"For your name is widely known in Hell."

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**Elsewhere**

"You're hurt, old friend..."

Their diaphanous halo of hair was the color of frozen dew and starlight, a corona at the center of a satin-like darkness. Their strange, achromatic face, like smooth gray stone, was smeared with blood. Their black wings, both fleecy with down and as sharp as razor wire, were shredded, feathers torn asunder and glinting like metal filings as they floated over the snow. The wings spanned the entire width of their back, rooted at their shoulder blades, tops curving up over their trapezius muscles and the pointed tips falling softly at their narrow hips. Glistening red eyes, without white or pupil, as smooth as crimson glass, peered hungrily over the hollow nothingness. They were of one flesh, but separated like the stars.

"Shall we dance, dearest Pater? Shall we dance, my love?"

Near mindless with the pain, he lost the illusion of time and space: the world unfurled its moments simultaneously along a meridian that had no axis. And out of some dark, unstitched wound in Abel's soul, from a cradle of sin and misery where the music of goodness burned to cinders reared, unbidden, a being divided between beauty and ugliness, between light and chaos.

"Go back to sleep," said Abel wearily. "I have no need of you."

"Ave Pater, gratia plena," murmured the Krusnik, whisper-tender against the back of Abel's neck, like a caress. "We miss you so."

"You're unwelcome here."

"She weeps for you, the beautiful one with the crimson hair. We weep for you, too. Est quaedam flere voluptas."

Abel turned to place a hand on their chest, gave a gentle, though firm, push. "Go."

"Love is glass, dearest Pater: just when it gleams brightest, it begins to shatter..."

---

Please... let him go...

Abel's mind grumbled at being dragged from its brief, peaceful rest, but when he fixated on just what, exactly, that solace had portended, his stomach clenched in a mad panic.

But his nail beds were flat and rounded. No fangs pressed against his lower lip. He felt his ribbon tied tight in his hair as well as the damp chill of the snow soaking through the bare, wingless back of his cassock. The tiny monsters in Abel's blood began to fade slowly, ebbing like the tide. The black clouds behind his eyes rolled back, showing a widening strip of blue; the Krusnik was gone, the darkness surging under the growing light as if the fluid in his brain were boiling away, leaving a sharp though brittle clarity.
After a long while that may have lasted only a few seconds, Abel grew wise to the fact that someone was kissing him on the lips. If he didn't feel quite so wretched, it would have been nice. As it was, he just wanted them to go away.

Then they did go away, and Abel became aware of something entirely unexpected: he was breathing. The cold night air seared his tortured lungs. He coughed, rasping through snow and bile and blood. The pain returned like a hoof in the sternum, harder and sharper than before. He felt broken ribs, a collapsed lung, a fractured scapula. Nothing his prodigious powers of regeneration couldn't manage, but by the saints, it certainly hurt. But he was breathing, and he was fairly sure that the last time he had given it serious thought, he hadn't expected to do that ever again.

Abel forced his eyes open, and saw the soft, round — and absolutely terrified — face of Esther Blanchett peering down at him, her red hair tickling his nose.

He had, he supposed, woken up to far worse sights.

"Father! Thank God, you're all right!"

"Hey Red, did it work?"

"Yes! He's awake!"

"Wha——" croaked Abel. He tried to clear his throat and nearly choked. His lungs heaved, his shoulders and spine screaming from having been pressed under the dog's incredible weight — too heavy, Abel rationalized dimly, even for its considerable size. Less like being trapped under a hungry wolf and more like being used by Sister Kate as the Iron Maiden II's landing pad.

Abel began to sit up slowly; his eyes squinted painfully against the shocking white of the snow. He sagged to one side, and felt Miss Esther steady him. She had knelt beside him in the street, slush soaking her stockings. He thought of two trees nearly unrooted and leaning against each other.

Abel realized, abruptly, that he could still taste her breath inside his mouth. He wondered if his heart had stopped...

But before he could ask the obvious question, his gaze snagged on Miss Esther's enormous companion.

The dog sat less than two feet away away from them. Even perched on its haunches, it was as tall as Miss Esther, and Abel had no doubt it could have rested its front paws on the priest's shoulders with little difficulty. Though Father Nightroad could smell the rotten meat in the monster's teeth, the dog was not actually breathing. Its tongue hung out of its grinning mouth and saliva webbed from its black gums, but it wasn't panting; its chest didn't heave.

Then, incredibly, once it seemed satisfied that Abel was fully conscious, the wolfish creature, as black as midnight, with eyes like two burning coals, began to slink around Miss Esther on rigid legs, as servile as a kicked puppy. It looked like it was trying to wag its tail, but the result was a pitiful sway, snowflakes alighting on its fur like dandruff. It managed to lick Esther's palm with a dry tongue, and the poor girl snatched her hand away with a high, terrified whimper. Her gaze darted between Abel and the dog with a mixture of confusion and horror and indignation, all locked up in eyes so vividly blue that Abel could imagine them glowing.

It took him a moment longer than it might have done otherwise to count not one, not two... but seven silver chakrams embedded in the dog's rump, chest, and throat, blood pouring freely from wounds that would have felled a much larger creature. The blood — a tar-like, viscous black —
steamed as it hit the snow, but the dog didn't seem to pay León's handiwork any mind. It was far more concerned with sniffing and snuffling the hem of Miss Esther's habit.

"Are you all right?" asked Abel, his words sounding ravaged as his ribs began to knit back together inside his chest.

Before Esther could mouth a reply, León bellowed: "Hell, Four-Eyes, I outta be askin' you that!"

León looked utterly flummoxed. The terms of Father Garcia's sentence forbade him from carrying a firearm, and being as every single one of his chakrams was lodged in the dog's vital organs, there wasn't a great deal Dandelion could do to rectify the situation.

Fortunately, Abel noted, the dog didn't seem intent on hurting Miss Esther... quite the opposite, in fact, if the enormous canine grin and wagging tail were any indication. It was positively smitten with her.

"I'll heal," muttered Abel, though didn't relish cogitating on the reason why. "Miss Esther...?"

"I'm... I'm fine, Father."

"Are you sure?"

*Shall we dance, my love?*

"Y-Yes... he..." she swallowed a stone in her throat, speaking with a stammer to rival young Alessandro's, "he... doesn't s-seem all that interested in h-hurting me."

"No... he doesn't, does he?"

León bushy eyebrows narrowed shrewdly. "Yeah, sorry if I sound kinda contrary, Red, but that beastie seemed keen on turning Abel here into delicatessen not five minutes ago."

"Indeed," murmured Abel, forehead puckered and eyes narrowing on their strange companion, who merely cocked its head until one ear drooped slightly lower than the other.

The priest's stomach stirred uneasily. As the dog moved, it left in its wake a smokey afterimage, the barest whisper of a shadow, inky and incandescent. Abel was tempted to chalk it up to his blurry vision, but he wasn't entirely sure that was the case...

Abel gritted his teeth and forced his leaden body to stand. Frustration flashed across León's features and concern across Miss Esther's.

"Father, you shouldn't move!" she cried, clutching at one of his hands. Her touch was too stiff to be languid but a mite too hesitant to be casual.

"I'm quite fine, Sister."

"No, you're not! It nearly killed you! You stopped breathing... I thought..." She shook her head violently, red hair flying everywhere. She left the rest unsaid.

"Well, I need to ask our furry friend some questions, Miss Esther."

"Have you gone daft?" demanded León. "It's a rabid dog! Once it gets over the shock of being skewered with a couple silver chalikar it ain't gonna be beggin' for table scraps!"

"Then I had better be concise, hadn't I?" Abel was thankful he still had the presence of mind to
draw his revolver, even if he began to sway on his feet. "Hello Mr. Wolf," he said, aiming the barrel squarely at the dog's head and cocking the hammer. "I'd thank you to step away from Miss Esther, please. Quickly, if you would."

The wolf pushed itself to its paws, almost as wobbly as Abel. For all its snarling displeasure, the beast was bony and stringy. It moved one forepaw gingerly, then the next, one rear paw, then the other. The glare it shot Abel was almost comically baleful as it skulked some distance away from the three AX agents. Sensing an opportunity, Miss Esther slunk towards Abel. As soon as the nun's hand brushed Abel's cassock, however, every hair from the dog's neck to the base of its tail stood on end, and its gums drew back in a savage snarl.

"Christ Almighty, be careful, Four-Eyes!"

Abel didn't realize he'd been holding his breath until he let it out in one huge exhale. The air tasted sour. "Tell me, León, have you ever heard the expression 'catching a wolf by the ears'?"

"No."

"It means we're in trouble whether we hold on or let go." He went to adjust his glasses then found, to his dismay, that they must have fallen off somewhere in the snow. "Now, what does one do with wolves? Play dead? Jump up and down yelling nonsense? Oh dear... or is that bears?"

"Who cares? Just shoot the damn mutt already!"

Abel frowned. He highly doubted the dog, whatever it was, would sit idly by and take a bullet even if Abel were in the mood to kill it.

Staring down the barrel of his percussion revolver, Abel got his first good look at his attacker. Despite its incredible size and weight, the wolf was little more than a scrawny, coarse-haired, sick and sorry-looking mongrel, its long, sharp face scrunched in a snarl that lifted its lip and exposed its teeth. Protruding ribs and bony hindquarters filigreed the shadow on the wall behind it. The dog was old, too... fur furrowed, the skin around its muzzle wrinkled and wizened, sagging. But the eyes — as red as Abel's own, under certain circumstances — were bright and, in some strange way, appeared to transcend the ravages of time and hunger and adversity that otherwise marked the creature. It was a gaze that defied carbon dating, as though someone else was looking out at Abel from somewhere inside the dog's skull, a place where time moved differently.

Its resonating stare fluttered through Abel's memory, and he shivered. Despite the sagacity of its age, he saw no kindness in the monster's eyes.

As Abel watched, the wolf's mouth contorted. The strange twitching of its lips resembled mumbling, marching ancient holy words through Abel's ear and into his skull, where they entered the bloodstream and pounded in concert with his heart. Abel's fingers twitched in the same rhythm and he found himself falling into something like a trance...

He saw Londinium... the city as it was more than a thousand years ago. The streets were burning, bombed-out. It was what ought to have been a warm summer night, but the smoke from the inferno filled the sky, through which the moon shone murkily, a dull and lifeless orb, blood-red and ominous. For a long while, Abel's mind wandered aimlessly, past ruined parks, blasted statuary, vacant, trash-filled lots burning like massive billie fires and collapsed apartment houses with rusted girders poking out of their sides — ribs bursting from cracked sternums. Flames swept through the East End, Canary Wharf, the Houses of Parliament, Tower Bridge, consuming dockyards, oil tanks, factories, overcrowded tenements. There was no articulation in the juncture of storm and shadow, no fixed angle between fuel and flame. The foundations of the city were sunk on ash; the
doors and windows had shattered beneath cinders, the glass splintered.

The vision shifted, dragging Abel in its wake. On a dais in an ancient church, a young woman sat surrounded by a rough crest of candlelight. Alone amidst the cinders of the Burning City, she was as bright as a sunflower in the rime of autumn frost. The lines of her slender body were so long and precise that she made the correct proportions of a normal person appear heavy and awkward by comparison. She wore a plain charcoal suit; the contrast between its tailored severity and her appearance was deliberately exorbitant — and strangely elegant. She had blue-silver eyes behind wire-rim glasses, and radiated an air of cold serenity and an exquisite imperiousness. Her coffee-colored face, her pale golden hair, even her suit seemed to have no color, as though she was bleeding back through the pulped paper of the world.

As the vision hurled him forward, a despairing fondness for the young woman took root within Abel's heart. It was an emotion almost nostalgic — reminiscent of the tenderness, of the friendship, he felt for Caterina, for Astha, for poor, poor Noelle — but it was not his own affection he felt burning in his chest. It was a creation of the vision, an echo of a devotion that projected itself through Abel like sunlight splintered through a prism.

The woman appeared to call to Abel with the voice of someone else’s hopes, moving her mouth but making no sound.

And though Abel could scarcely even feel them, his lips formed the words, and sound emerged, sounding frayed and small and cracked: "The Bird of Hermes is my name," he murmured, "eating my wings to make me tame..."

"Leave him alone."

Then, incredibly, Miss Esther inserted herself between the dog and Abel, as though to shield the priest, even if her head barely reached the height of his rosary. Her tiny, white hand — dwarfed by the wolf's head — strayed on the animal's streamlined skull, rested on its black snout.

"Release him, please." The dog tried to pull its head away. To both León and Abel's surprise, Esther grabbed its lower jaw and shook it gently. "What are you making so much fuss about? Behave yourself, do you hear me? Stop bothering Father Nightroad."

The dog turned its crimson eyes from Esther, to Abel, then back to Esther. Bright pricks from the snow slid on its red pupils. It licked her hand.

"That's better. Be quiet."

Abel opened his mouth. The words were there, just behind his teeth. He was about to release them when a jolt of understanding went through him, the sobering clarity of someone who, wandering in a mist, pauses only to realize that they have stopped inches from a cliff edge. The way Miss Esther was looking at him... she could read what was in his eyes. It must have been written plainly there, like words on the page of a book. There had been no time, no chance, to hide it.

Her nightmares...

Not dreams at all, thought Abel, seeing, again, the unknown woman through the dog's eyes.

They weren't nightmares.

They were memories.
"Well, you understand us well enough," said Abel to the wolfish creature, dazed. "That counts for something, I suppose. My word, what big teeth you have..."

The wolf's voice, when it came, was cool, drawling and insolent.

But not entirely unexpected.

"All the better to eat you with, Priest."
Chapter Summary

Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place

Ephesians 6:14

Chapter Notes

As a head's up, these updates will be coming a lot less frequently because grad school is starting up again, my d00ds

Sleep deprivation may have been cognitively cathartic, but it was, decided Francesco di Medici, physically miserable.

His head thrummed with a particularly wretched, itching type of insomnia, a vertiginous lucidity which seemed to expose the raw fretwork of his nerves to the chill of the night air.

The snow, the sleeping city, the thoughts too turgid to sleep — turning around and around all night and becoming obsessions — were his sole companions, and on some deeply sentimental level, it seemed sufficient. Almost apt. Francesco aligned himself with the likes of Machiavelli and Donatello. There was some small comfort in a shared kinship with the tattered edges of other exhausted minds. At least, that was what Francesco told himself on the lonely nights when insomnia played on his fears and the howling wind pierced through his soul.

The sky outside Francesco's office window was dark and low, the air so cold it hurt to breathe. Already the toothed roof-edge of the Palazzo Riccardi was laid white with frost and a fresh coating of snow; on the Via Camillo Cavour below the balcony, any water churned to slush under the feet of the Noël crowds had become ice overnight.

No one had ever told him that restlessness felt so much like fear. Francesco was not afraid, watching the snowflakes flutter slowly through the air, rendering Florence smooth and white and quiet and beautiful, but the sensation was not unlike being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same agitation, the yawning hollow in his chest, as though his body were begging for something to strike it. As Caterina had so delighted in reminding him when they were young, the line between dedication and neurosis began to blur when any activity transmuted into compulsion. Perhaps it was obligation, obsession even, that kept the Duke of Florence awake long into the night and left him waking up with his cheek plastered to his desk more times than he cared to admit, but Francesco had found that the necessities of duty — or perhaps the worry of betrayal or negligence — was no great respecter of age. Indeed, if anything, he thought getting older simply made it worse; he felt more vulnerable now than ever before.

The tenacity with which Francesco adhered to any inquisitorial responsibility was, to him, a sure indication that his ethic fulfilled functions which were indispensable to the framework of the
Vatican's very functioning.

A thought that comforted during the day, but irritated during the unconscionable hours of the morning.

Francesco's half-dozen questions in his mind were halved again as he turned his thoughts to the past day's events... the hospital, the body, Caterina's God-Damned impudence... then the strange episode in the mortuary, the red-headed nun muttering a name Francesco had heard only once before... and who no one, save him, as Minister of the Inquisition, and his predecessors before him knew anything about.

The girl's remark had tunneled into Francesco so deeply that it had found more force of presence in its aftermath than in its occurrence. Francesco couldn't stop thinking about it, assuring himself that Yes, that was what she said and Yes, the name had been Maxwell.

Bishop Maxwell...

Dipping into the archives of the Vatican was, to Francesco, an interesting, if something of an unsettling, proposition. But ultimately the process was a little like tapping into a collective unconscious, bringing with it the ambivalent gratification of rediscovering forgotten lives, past selves. Due to his unique position as head of the Inquisition, Francesco had access to the vaults that housed the Vatican's more... disagreeable personal records, much of it never seen by His Holiness or College of Cardinals, much less the general public. Indeed, substantial evidence indicated that at some point in the past, the people working in the Vatican's central repository for intelligence and archival documentation had intentionally destroyed their files on prominent ecclesiastical figures, especially those associated with the events leading up to Armageddon. To refine the Holy See's image as the saviors of mankind during the Dark Times, no doubt.

But Francesco was a smart man. He knew where to look.

Maxwell, the girl had said.

Enrico Maxwell, in all likelihood. A man out of ancient history, from the twilight years of the human civilization that proceeded Armageddon... leader of the Vatican's Special Section XIII. Also known as the Iscariot Organization... and the Inquisition's progenitor, in many ways.

Now why, wondered Francesco, would the Blanchett girl have reason to know about Iscariot? The answers might lie with Caterina and her AX. Francesco supposed he could raise all the truth of Iscariot to the surface like a shipwrecked boat dredged up from the sea floor, but what sort of martyr would cooperate with his judases? Disclosure of Iscariot's doings, a dissemination of the classified information among the College of Cardinals, would give Caterina's hatred of the Inquisition — what Francesco regarded as the fracture in her better sense — a shape, a dimension... not to mention a definite perimeter to her perception of her own moral superiority.

The Duke of Florence crunched his knuckles. He took a deep breath, inhaling patience with air. That was just Caterina's style; feigning outrage and vouchsafing swift reparations, while using knowledge of Iscariot to flatten the Inquisition's influence underneath the chariot wheels of her own agenda. Nevermind the AX had transcribed more than a few pages from Bishop Maxwell's book themselves...! They were an orgy of heretics and ruffians and blasphemers, little better than the monsters they put down!

There was Nightroad, for one. Abel was the sort of man to spontaneously jump out of an airplane and not realize that he has forgotten something until about five seconds before impact. He was an
obfuscating idiot, had been ever since Francesco and Caterina were young. Whatever the rights or
wrongs of the affection between Nightroad and the Duchess of Milan, in the teeth of danger and
political maneuvering, love and loyalty should not be entitled to speak its mind; it ought to remain
blind or deaf. Caterina was too sentimental by nature to be trusted for her impartiality in delicate
matters, and too self-entitled to sacrifice her own people when necessary. Unlike Cardinal
Sforza and her salivating ilk, the loyalty given Francesco by his subordinates was strictly
unidirectional. If one of his own men went from guarding the gate to storming it, Francesco would
put a bullet between his eyes and hang his body from the balustrades without losing a wink of
sleep.

To Caterina, Man Created God, even if God Created Man; it all existed in the hubris and
apotheosis of her own narcissistic soul.

No, Francesco decided. Playing his knowledge close to the vest was a far more subtle cruelty.
Caterina's nauseating odor of sanctity threatened the safety of the Vatican. And if the AX sticking
their noses into Iscariot after a millennia spelled danger for the Inquisition, then Francesco would
do whatever it took leash the hounds.

And while Caterina ran around in ever diminishing circles, he had every intention of puzzling out
the connection himself.

Everything hinged on Esther Blanchett, mused Francesco. Kind by all accounts, pretty enough,
preternaturally serene in temperament, as if she were gifted with a madness that left her ignorant of
worry.

Madness... or something else entirely? The question left Francesco feeling uneasy, his head
muddled. The girl presented an unknown quantity, and Cardinal di Medici was becoming
increasingly and aggravatingly aware of the fact that he could not abide unknown quantities.

How was it that this girl, this child from a backwater diocese in a destitute, diseased city had
managed, with a few words and an occasional smile, to conscript dozens, perhaps hundreds, to give
or sacrifice their faith without so much as a minuscule query about her chosen beliefs or particular
ideology. When she spoke, her voice sang as if a thousand different religions had crawled into her
throat to die. All faiths scrambled to rewrite their holy books, recomposing them to abet her every
whim. All words she pronounced became gospel, every tremble of her voice a great crusade
against non-believers.

It wasn't natural.

Even Brother Petros hadn’t been immune, realized Francesco with a discomforting twist of the gut.
Ever since Miss Blanchett’s speech in István, that silly little publicity stunt before the D’Annunzio
debacle, Orsini had been... different. Still dutiful and dedicated and obscenely loud, but less
unwieldy. Less... vicious. As though the passions and fervors he had cultivated with so much care
for so many years had faded away on the spot. Il Ruinante, rightfully regarded as the most violent
man in the Vatican, the steaknifed fang in the teeth of the Church, brought to heel by a girl half his
size, half his age, and barely holding a candle to the man’s strength of will.

She knew something, that little nun from István. And knowledge, to Francesco, was entirely
congruent with the search for power. It was a matter of necessity, as sure as fire needed oxygen to
burn and vampires some poor unfortunate’s jugular to savage. Francesco had no illusions about the
transitory nature of authority, was intimately acquainted with the constant, feverish flurry
of restatement and retrenchment and redrawing of proverbial lines in blood-soaked sand. The
balance of power pivoted on the fulcrum of information, of intelligence. The merest whisper could
set the whole thing aslant. And Francesco di Medici had certainly whispered in the ears of enough
cardinals and ordered enough executions and tortured enough heretics to know that even those donning sackcloth and ashes would always, given the faintest whiff of opportunity, end up sacrificing their beloved Abner to advance their own ends.

Francesco had never been credulous enough to believe in the old adage of 'honor amongst thieves.' Or amongst the papistry, for that matter. Betrayal clothed itself in promises of allegiance, in oaths of fealty, in love and loyalty, almost regal under the drapery of good intentions. And Francesco’s refusal to be seduced had come, in the end, not from a sureness of securing his power by its skinny neck but from a knowledge of the immeasurable cost — to the Inquisition, to the Pope, to the Papal State itself — of scurrying for shelter through fake retractions and disowned truths. It was a question, in the end, of self-respect, of pride, in the face of the vampiric leeches that sought to drain the Vatican dry.

Power held no loyalties, neither to pope nor king nor countryman. It was an unapologetic, prodigal whoreson, a bastard, born bitter and bred nasty.

And Francesco firmly believed that it took one to know one.

"You sent for me, Your Eminence?"

Francesco turned from the window, more at ease than he had been the entire night. The priest standing in the doorway was a small man with a pale, rather dangerous-looking countenance, his mean rat trap of a mouth fixed in a tiny, guileful smile. As was the current style among the Inquisitorial Bureau, his black hair hung in a cut so straight and regimented it resembled a helmet, bangs forming a horizon over eyes pinched in a perpetual squint.

"Yes, I did. I apologize for having woken you, Brother Matthaios," Francesco added with a wry glance at the far shorter man.

"Mashi moshkil, Eminence," said Matthaios, still smiling. Standing in Francesco's opulent office, the second of the Inquisition's two Deputy Chiefs, the Moroccan Demon, appeared very plainly dressed, wearing his black jerkin and breeches beneath the Inquisition's standard crimson cloak. "But may I inquire as to the nature of this summons?"

Because Francesco could no longer ignore the evidence in front of his very eyes. Because Petros could not be trusted with a secret assignment — in fact, he never should have been chosen for the job of guarding His Holiness in István in the first place, given the spectacular self-implosion of the man’s career in Carthage! Because the Chief of the Inquisition had likely already been bewitched by those proselytizers of the AX, ensnared by the very object of Francesco's immediate concern...

The case had suddenly become far bigger, and far more dangerous, than one dead body.

"I have a task for you, Brother Matthaios. I trust what I am about to say will not leave this office..."

Elsewhere

"Oh, but he's full of the devil, this son of the church."

Abel took a long, deep breath. At that moment, he would have welcomed rats nibbling at his toes or the Krušnik rearing its ugly head in the middle of a conclave about as much as the prospect of chatting with their... guest, but needs must, he supposed.

Abel stood, dragged a chair over to the window and sat down in it, huddling in his cassock against the bitter winter air, the wind seeping through the screed and stringing icy fibres through his
already frigid skin. It was almost the Noël holiday, and Abel could smell the hawkers and merchants in the market preparing all the delicacies Florentines favored at the festival: roast eels, goose, fancy cakes with marzipan frills, and a kind of minced pie they called Torta di Lasagna, stuffed with meats and raisins and nuts. Through the thin curtains of his motel room, in the places where the material did not fall in folds, Abel could see the city, the brightest points of which were the Duomo’s copper doors, catching the glare of the snowfall until they reflected light like a massive pair of mirrors.

Tuscany had been temperate once, remembered Abel distantly, the Ligurian Alps and Apennines protecting Florence from the icy winds of the north. But the Apennines had been all but leveled during the Dark Times, and far greater destructive forces had shifted the axes of the world to such degrees that the Alps beckoned the harsh winters far more often than they warded them away. The world was a colder place, now.

Whose fault is that, I wonder?

Abel blinked the memories away, aware of the scrutiny of his company. An unappeased yearning for regret, he decided, was a destructive exercise, a jab at a still-tender wound, stitched up poorly. He breathed heavily for a long while, and gripped the arms of his chair to control his trembling hands — partially from cold, partially from nervousness, mostly from the upsetting harbinger of battle adrenaline.

Feigning ignorance of the priest's disquiet, the massive dog opposite the table from Abel stretched, front paws splayed out, legs thin to the point of emaciation, tail little more than a wisp of shadow, his head long and oval, like a squashed egg. He yawned, open-mouth, flaunting teeth so sharp they would have given Ion and his little needle-like incisors pause for thought.

"Full of the devil," repeated Abel.

"You're not human."

"I am human—"

"I can taste fear, and deceit, on a man's skin, Priest, just as I can smell those microorganisms in your blood, like a disease-carrying bacteria," confided the Wolf, watching the pulse on Abel's throat beat like a caged thing begging for release. "Don't lie to me."

"If you had let me finish, Mr. Wolf," grumbled Abel; while he possessed Cain’s viciousness and Lilith’s tact, he was not as good as the other two at either, much less when it came to explaining that which he’d rather leave unspoken. "I am human, but... with a few modifications that I would prefer not become a thing of public knowledge."

"Why ever not? Afraid the congregation might choke on their communion wafers if they learned their beloved Father was the same monster they beg Him to protect them from?"

Abel's mind flashed back to the night before, to the manifest cruelty that had very nearly returned: the fury that frightened him twice as much as it frightened everything and everyone around him. The Krusnik had been dormant for weeks, for months, following the business in Carthage and the Empire, and then all at once it had nearly awoken, bursting forth and — once the crisis was over — leaving Abel in mortal terror of himself.

Again.

"My being..." he chose his words carefully, "what I am, does not preclude my being perfectly able
to minister to a believing congregation. Miracles depend on the faith of the believer, not that of the officiant. Like crimes, they hinge on consensus, on judgement."

"Are you not then likening saints to criminals?"

"Well... not intentionally, I suppose. But then again, one martyr's miracle might be another man's massacre, no?"

The Wolf's face displayed contempt frankly, expressing it with a truly prodigious simplicity that didn't translate well to the countenance of a canine. "Faith is a viewpoint? That sounds strange coming from the lips of a priest."

"Says the talking dog."

"Touché. Tell me," the Wolf rested his head on the surface of the table, crimson eyes blinking up at Abel with a mock innocence that wouldn't have fooled the most benign apostle, "wherever are your companions? You've left yourself very vulnerable. If I wanted to murder somebody, would it really be in my victim's best interest to make sure I'm alone with him?"

Abel's pale eyes recovered their frosty twinkle as he looked across the table. He only said: "If you want to murder somebody, I would strongly advise against it. Or," he corrected himself, "should I say, if you want to murder any more somebodies. But regarding León and Miss Esther, I sent them to the Biblioteca Nazionale, where your victim's body was recovered. I thought with them out of the way, we might be able to talk freely, without interruption."

The dog's eyes narrowed in a way that was eerily human. "My victim..."

"Oh yes, I know you're the one who killed that poor girl, Mr. Wolf, and to be perfectly frank, bearing in mind your slaughter coupled with your continued torment of Miss Esther, I'm running out of reasons not to do away with you here and now. I'm not in the most charitable of moods, you see."

The Wolf cocked his head. "What else would you have a starving animal do, Priest? It was nothing personal... the girl was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and I was hungry."

"That line of reasoning would be all very well and good, Mr. Wolf, provided you were a simple stray dog. But we both know you're not, so that makes you the Church's problem."

"You've figured it out, then."

"The puncture wounds on the girl's neck were nine inches apart... about the width of your mouth, I'd say. But rather than ripping her throat out, as is typical of Canis lupus, you drank the girl's blood, every drop and dribble. There are those in the Holy Curia who say Methuselah shape-shifters mock and mimic humanity with the enthusiasm of animals — provided they don't devour them with the enthusiasm of animals first.

"But you're no Methuselah, Mr. Wolf. Yes, you're a shape-shifter and a blood-drinker, but you're something different... something far older."
you mentioned a man named Maxwell — referring, I suspect, to the Archbishop who lead the the Knights of the Sagely Brethren, the Knights of the Order of Calatrava La Nueva, the Knights of the Military Order of Santo Stefano di Toscana, and the Knights of Malta in the battles the half century before Armageddon. Furthermore, when faced with a projection of Miss Caterina, Esther asked *where are her glasses*... no doubt mistaking the Duchess of Milan for that austere young woman featuring prominently in your own memories. How am I doing, Mr. Wolf?"

"Clever boy, Priest."

"Then there's your treatment of that girl's body... after you drained her dry, you used your incredible strength to gouge a hole in her sternum, right through her heart. A precautionary measure, I think, to keep your, ah..." Abel coughed, tried to think of a tactful word, failed, and went on, crimson-cheeked, "*coitized* victim, evidently, from transmuting into something horrendous, and thus blowing your cover."

Long before the Methuselah, vampiric entities had been recorded in most cultures across the planet; the term was popularized after mass hysteria that in some cases resulted in corpses being staked. So the legends went, only virgins of the opposite sex — whatever that meant, thought Abel, faintly vexed — could be turned into vampires. All the rest became flesh-eating zombies or some such. Abel was half-tempted to dismiss the entire thing as trite nonsense, but the Wolf was giving him a look that stopped Abel's tongue.

"*No ghoul outbreaks guarantees discretion,*" he said, upsettingly sincere. "*Besides, I don't as a general rule like to shit where I eat.*"

Abel stared at the Wolf with keen eyes, looking right through him, and then he blinked once, heavily, as if waking from a dream. Abel felt awareness, then incomprehension, and then fear rising in his belly.

"How are you here?" asked Abel quietly. Unease blossomed from within him, as brilliantly as the reflection of the snow on the Duomo doors. "You're supposed to be dead... a thousand years dead. After the Letzte Bataillon, the Ninth Crusade, the downfall of London... all in the year 1999, 89 years before I was born. How are you here..."

"*You're far older than you look, Priest.*"

"Son of the Dragon, Zamiel, The No-Life King, the Bird of Hermes..." Abel's pulse had gone erratic. He swallowed, skinny throat bobbing. "You know, the scientists used to tell stories about you, when I was young, to frighten me into behaving..."

The Wolf smiled, blood on his gums, cold winter light glinting off his teeth. Such a brute should, by rights, underneath all his braggart tricks, his viciousness, his vileness, be a coward. But Abel had the awful suspicion that he was anything but. Even cowardice requires a certain degree of sensitivity, and a certain value for life.

And the Wolf had none.

Sickly-sweet smoke began to curl through the dog's thin fur, billowing in dense clouds that smelled to Abel of wilted flowers and rotten fruit. Tendrils of mist swirled up into Father Nightroad's lungs as he breathed in deeply, burning invisible holes in his foreshadowed horror and unease.

When the smoke cleared, the Wolf was gone. And while the animal had been all bones and ribs and snarling mouth, the human iteration didn't look any healthier. Or friendlier, thought Abel warily.
The man dropped his cheek into an open palm and rubbed fingers into one closed eye. He leaned back against the chair, his body straight lines and sharp angles, curves fractured into planes. He sat rigid, with one of his hands — though both were gloved, noted Abel — tapping intermittently on the tabletop. He wore a charcoal suit in a style many centuries out of fashion, leather riding boots, an intricately knotted red cravat, and a crimson duster that reached his ankles... no small feat, as the monster must have been Petros's size, though far lankier, mostly arms and legs. He was shaped like an inverted triangle, with narrow hips, a small waist, but impossibly wide shoulders and arms. His fingers were abnormally long and sinuous, and like the rest of him, they seemed to possess too many joints, like the legs of a translucent cellar spider.

He was beautiful, noted Abel, surprising himself — handsome in a wild, windswept way. Father Nightroad hadn't anticipated that. He'd always thought Zamiel, the horror of myth and old stories, the Scourge of Albion, would look, well... *horrific*. Tentacles, or fangs. Something to underscore just how breathtakingly dangerous he was.

Something like the Krusnik, Abel thought sadly.

Instead, the man before him — Vampire, Abel corrected himself, in every classical sense of the word, right down to the peaky pallor and strange clothes — was nothing but long, smooth lines and shadows, and the only truly dangerous things about him were his eyes, which glittered with some strange species of dark humor that made Abel deeply uneasy.

He had the posture of one standing armed, peering over the ramparts of his own remote, archaic world in ceaseless vigilance, more so in an anticipation than an expectation of danger. His face caught in a wedge of light streaming from between a rend in the threadbare curtains, and something flashed in the Vampire's eyes, something beneath his immediate disdain. Frustration, thought Abel; perhaps transforming back into a creature that was very clearly Methuselah-like constituted an unnecessary risk. But there was anger there too. Pure animosity. Abel could smell it seeping out of the Vampire's pores.

"Alucard," he offered at Abel's unspoken question, in a poor effort at conciliation.

"Oh! Oh, yes, I thought so."

"And you are?"

"Abel. Abel Nightroad."

"Nightroad?" Alucard tittered. "A bit on the nose, don't you think?"

Abel scowled. "It's not my real name."

"How terribly interesting. Neither is mine."

"What do you want with Miss Esther?"

Alucard cracked open a coronal crimson eye. The pouting tension of his mouth communicated to Abel that he had been expecting a non sequitur, but was hoping he could hold off the inevitable for a few moments longer. "A clever boy with a one-track mind, it seems. How tiresome."

The priest looked askance, color highlighting his cheekbones. "Don't dodge the question, and pray I like your answer."

"Is that a threat?"
"That depends entirely on you."

"Your concern is misplaced... the girl is stronger than she looks."

"I know that." Abel startled himself with his own vehemence.

"Roses have both petals and thorns. You needn't believe something weak because it appears delicate."

"Alucard."

The Vampire picked... something, Abel daren't think what, from between his teeth, examining the detritus distastefully. His grin could have gone on for a mile if it could, ostensibly affable, flawless save for the abnormally long canines. The red eyes gleamed, the pupil exploding suddenly in a way that forced Abel to fight every impulse to run.

"Are you afraid I'll turn her?"

Abel flinched as something cool and grainy slithered over what little bare skin was allowed by his cassock. The termite-tortured table between him and Alucard felt like laughably flimsy protection. Abel looked down and found, to his horror, shadowy tendrils coiling around his legs, his forearms. The slender, threadlike appendages were chilly and whisper-soft and, he realized with no small amount of alarm, terribly strong. The shadows didn't give an inch when Abel attempted to jerk himself free. They flexed instead, adjusting to Abel's strength, coiling further up his skin.

"Well, you needn't worry about that, Priest." The shadows retracted under Alucard's duster as suddenly as they had appeared, and Abel's rigid body went boneless. "Besides, she's no longer a virgin, and as I said before, I'm not in the habit of making ghouls."

No longer a...

Abel's face blanched as white as the room's unpainted walls. Some nameless feeling gathered in his stomach, burning like the acid-bite of bile. His throat released the little air he had been trying to hold in, his chest spasming, an appetizer before the main course of heartache he had a feeling was going to be served at some point soon. Abel began to turn and till the possibilities and very quickly wished he hadn't — every candidate made the nascent claws strain under his fingernails.

He hated that his mind landed immediately on Dietrich Von Lohengrin... that monster and his infernal strings. He had known Miss Esther the longest, had been her close friend and confidant for many years, before his gut-churning betrayal. Abel's mouth went sour with nausea at the thought.

Although... there was also the Earl of Memphis. Ion had been very keen on Esther remaining with him in Byzantium. But... would not Miss Esther have said something?

To Abel's speculation and despair was added a philosophical dejection. Did his own sense of prerogative render him deaf to the fact that Miss Esther might not want to share these things with him? She was entitled to her privacy... what right did he—

"Does that bother you, Priest, the prospect of her choosing one monster over another?"

It took Abel a moment to realize he had been insulted twice in a matter of seconds. He clenched his fists and trembled like some anxious breed of small dog. "You didn't answer my question," he managed, changing the subject more for his own peace of mind than in the interest of interrogating Alucard. Abel was fast growing tired of the ancient Vampire. "Why Miss Esther? Why here? Why now?"
Alucard waved a hand. "I exist solely thanks to a quantum paradox, my body a collection of phases in superposition, encoding truths and memories, imagination and irrationality in opposing, contradictory states that exist — and don't exist — at the same time. A long story."

Abel crossed his arms. "I have time."

"Very well... due to an unfortunate encounter with a particular member of the Letzte Bataillon, I populate a place by moving backwards and forwards in time until there are hundreds of iterations of me, then thousands and millions, all interacting with the worlds demarcated by my own timeline. But I need other entities, at least in the beginning, to steady the quantum superposition, to anchor myself to a single space–time location. For the wavefunction, in essence, to collapse."

"So... Miss Esther is that anchor."

"Indeed."

"Why her?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Priest. I doubt the girl herself knows. I was a negative, a dark absence, a clump of cells crying to come together. A pause in the flickering before consciousness. And then the atoms swirled, and the skies yawned, and she called me forth, so I answered. But I ought to warn you... that sort of power comes at a price."

"What power?"

Alucard's smirk was irritatingly smug. "All power. The power to summon me, to rule, to kill, or, in your case this fine morning, the power to incite the wrath of that dour-faced cardinal."

"I have no desire to incite wrath in anyone." Abel paused, thinking. "Much less Francesco."

Alucard turned to him with a quizzical expression, his grin suddenly genuine. "Then I'm afraid you're in for a world of disappointment, Priest."

Before Abel could open his mouth, the communicator latched to his earlobe began to chirp. After a second, the buzzer of the emergency frequency went off like an annoyed rattlesnake. The air around Abel, once cold, suddenly felt too muggy and oppressive, bloated with the potential for danger and destruction. A terrible sense of foreboding settled on his shoulders as Abel held the tiny receiver.

"León?"

"God dammit, Four-Eyes," came a shout that made the device whine and Abel wince, "I've been trying to get you on the horn for ten minutes! I need you down here, now. Shit, I shoulda seen those bastards comin', if I had been more careful... Caterina's gonna have my collar for this—"

"León! Slow down... what's the matter?"

"Abel..." Father Garcia took a deep, apprehensive breath. Abel's anxieties came rushing back to him in a torrent, like he was drowning, and with them the awful pressure of gut-wrenching fear. "They took her, Abel."

"They took Esther. She's gone."
Those are pearls that were his eyes...

Chapter Summary

Do not drag me away with the wicked,
with those who do evil, who speak cordially
with their neighbors but harbor malice in their hearts.

Psalm 28:3

"Will he be all right?"

Father Garcia grinned, though Esther couldn't help but notice that it didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Hell, Red, you know Four-Eyes. He can be a right moron when the mood strikes him, but he can handle himself."

León wore false assurance poorly, and rather than bolster her confidence, it just made her more nervous. She squirmed, her mittened hands turning over each other. "Do you think it's possible that..." she coughed quietly. "Well, you know..."

"That the oversized magpie will make an appearance?"

Magpie...! "Yes, that," harrumphed Esther. A magpie with a spiked scythe and a fancy for Methuselah blood...

"Kid, the only thing we'd have to worry about in that case would be losing our security deposit on the motel room because that mangy mutt pissed itself in terror. You've seen Abel in action... ain't nothing on God's green earth can stop him when somethin' gets his dander up!"

"Oh, how very reassuring." Esther thanked him, trying and failing to keep the sarcasm down to short measures.

León eyed her curiously, trying to penetrate her mask of introspection; he tugged at the sleeve of her jacket, unwilling to allow her absentmindedness much slack. "Cheer up, Red. If that dog's what's been causin' your problems, it's probably for the best that you spend some time away from it while Abel susses it out. He'd do anything to keep you safe. You know that."

Esther said nothing at first as they crossed the Piazza dei Cavalleggeri towards the Central Library. The building was in the Santa Croce quarter of the city, situated along the Arno. Esther shimmied deeper into her scarf as the wind blew bitter from the river. She couldn't tell where the Terzo Giardino on the opposite shore ended and where the water began, both buried several inches under the snow. What little of the Arno wasn't frozen over — the rapids under the Ponte alle Grazie where the currents roiled together — was brackish, black with cold. What had been a picturesque snowfall in the early morning had turned to something wet like rain and stinging like ice and far less pleasant than both. A damp, keen draft blew down the cross streets leading from the river. The gray of the clouds seemed to fall with the sleet. Ice seized the buildings, glazing the walls and rooftops until Florence looked like it was wearing hundreds of silver-sequined collars. The roadway was sloppy, the pavement greasy, the lamps burned dimly. The city, teeming with the
hustle and bustle of the Nöel festivities, in a season that was supposed to be bright and cheerful and colorful, seemed to Esther insurmountably gloomy.

"That's what I'm worried about," she admitted. She hunched her shoulders, face bright pink and stinging where it peaked over the lip of her scarf. She mumbled into the wool: 'I wish I could help him..."

Esther started when she felt her damp mitten engulfed by Father Garcia's warm, easy grasp, his hand dwarfing hers.

"You do help him, Red," said León quietly. Esther didn't know what was more surprising — the admission, or Father's Garcia's uncharacteristic gentleness, as though he were handling a glass vase, or talking to a distraught child. Though he didn't sound condescending at all, she realized — just terribly wistful.

"But..." The word broke free from her, but she caged it quickly, battling an unwarranted sense of foreboding. Esther could never forgive herself for appearing a hand-wringing crepehanger in front of the other AX agents.

León didn't seem to notice. "He ain't ever gonna say so, 'cause he's an idiot, but he's had a rough time of it, Abel has, and I reckon his world is a bit better, and a bit brighter, for your bein' in it."

Esther's winter-raw face began to burn in earnest, and she didn't think it was due to the wind.

León flashed his teeth, his eyes pinching closed in a beaming smile, the expression far more like his old self. "Red, you're so cute when you're embarrassed that you're embarrassin' me."

"Father Garcia!"

"Aw, hell, don't call me that." Leon planted a hand on Esther's head and ruffled her hair, dislodging snow from her cornet and sending it slithering down the back of her habit. "You're makin' me feel my age."

Esther glared her annoyance, tempering it with a curl of the mouth, and tucked a hand under each arm. She was sure her cheeks were as red as the locks currently tangled in León's fingers. "And you're making a scene...!"

Esther swatted León's arm and finally, finally, he took his hairy paw off her head. She adjusted her cornet with a flustered huff.

She knew Father Garcia was only trying to cheer her up. His crassness and shoddy manners and big, burly bear hugs were familiar things, intended to distract her from more maudlin thoughts.

Despite Leon's best efforts, however, worry sawed at Esther's insides relentlessly. She sensed a nervous tremor beginning in her throat and barely arrested it before it became a sigh.

She was worried sick about Abel. She couldn't help it: the Father had such a terrible habit of courting danger. With any luck, though, the dog would turn out to be nothing more than one of the myriad mutants and monstrosities wandering the word, something like Elis Wasmayer. With even more luck, together with León, Esther would find that poor girl's killer, pen her report to Lady Caterina, leave Florence, and be shut of the whole affair before the nun's feelings exposed her to scrutiny she was not yet ready for.

Sure, she was Abel's novice, and he had been charged by the Church with ensuring her well-being following Archbishop D'Annunzio's attempt on her life. Circumstances had forced their proximity,
but she ought to have been otherwise inconsequential to a man of his considerable status and power — a mere hiccup in his life. But a current seemed to run between Esther and Father Nightroad. She’d felt for the first time one night, many months ago, when she had given a young priest her trust in the shadows of a burning cathedral, on the shore of the Danube. Esther had felt the tug — and had decided to tug back.

It was very hard for her to admit it to herself, but having Abel around brought her a strange sort of comfort. The infuriating man could unveil her deepest anxieties and most irrational fears without the slightest glance back over his shoulder. But his kindness, his blind, stupid kindness — attained not through self-gratification but through fidelity to a worthy purpose — stilled her to the point of distraction, like the wonder of a stroke of sunlight on a bitter winter day, and Esther had no idea why. Just thinking about the possible reasons put a boulder in her gut and made her head ache. Not a day or an hour passed where Esther had any idea what Abel had in mind for her, or whether he had her in mind at all. And the uncertainty was a sore under the surface of Esther’s skin, erupting again and again, then subsiding, but never quite healing. The whole thing didn’t go anywhere, though it never went away, either. It just sat there, untouched, like a cup of tea with thirteen sugars, long gone cold.

He was a beautiful person. A good person, selfless and compassionate. It was in his smile, his blue eyes, his solitude. All strength and grace and loneliness and longing. And hope. His indomitable belief that things could change in a heartbeat, that the world could be made entirely anew, just because someone was kind.

Abel’s need for redemption drove him to endure the terrible weight of his greatest catastrophes unaided, alone, by virtue of his own strength. The thought of his private anguish gave Esther such continual heartache that she could no more banish Abel from her thoughts than she could Bishop Vitez or poor, poor Shara. It was involuntary, hopeless, compulsive, her need to bleed his suffering from him. Sometimes, the emotions streamed out of her and she didn’t really know where they come from or why. They were like falling stars tumbling through the universe; bright, burning things. It was strange, thought Esther: when she reduced even a fledgling love affair to its essentials — that she loved him, that he maybe loved her, that she was foolish for hoping, that he suffered for yearning — it became vacuous and trite, meaningless to anyone else. In the end, they resurrected whatever it was between them from the memories they shared: the rare kiss on the forehead, the shared giggle at a cardinal’s expense, a scolding over squandered dinars, or the joint wonder at the infinitude of stars constellating the night sky.

Only moments.

Esther prayed for their time together to cure Abel of himself — absolve him of his past and his mistakes, failures and wrong turns that had stacked such unbearable regret upon his shoulders and had turned this man she loved so dearly, so completely, into someone so, so sad.

There was a desperate edge to the certainty, sudden and striking, that Esther could not live without him. Watching Shara die had damaged her beyond hope of repair, but watching Abel die would destroy her utterly.

At that moment, wrenching her violently from the black borehole of her thoughts, something hard and cold and wet bulleted into Esther’s back. "Ouch!"

Rubbing the sore spot, she spun around and could hardly believe her eyes: León was standing in the middle of the Piazza, a cocky grin plastered on his irritatingly smug face.

Tossing a snowball from one hand to the other.
"Father Garcia!"

"Yeah?" he drawled with an arch look. "Problem, Red?"

If she wasn’t so worried about skidding and teetering along the slick cobbles, or looking like some pert-nosed matron about to take a switch to his knuckles, Esther would have stomped over to the priest and stabbed a finger in his chest. "You—"

With a deft flick of the wrist, another snowball sailed at Esther's shoulder, missing only because she stumbled when trying to get out of the way. Spluttering and indignant, Esther had only enough time to reach down and scoop some snow of her own before León hurled another volley, pelting her in the head and nearly knocking her cornet back towards the Arno. The ammunition from the fresh fallen flakes burst open on impact, showering crystalline fragments over her habit that glinted in the silvery light and chilled Esther to the bone.

The few pedestrians brave enough to venture out in the weather were beginning to stare, peering curiously at the two Vatican agents, a nun and a priest, tearing through the snow of the Piazza dei Cavalleggeri like kiddies in the garden on a winter morning, shouting and swearing and shrieking.

But Esther, uncharacteristically unmindful of their scrutiny, hiked up her petticoats and launched herself at Father Garcia, cupping a lumpy slug of snow in one mitten, eyes blazing blue murder.

Before León managed to back the few feet towards the Biblioteca Nazionale, Esther's snowball sailed through the air and hit him smack bang on the nose. He took after Esther with a roar that was answered by giggles. León was stronger and more sure in the snow, but Esther was agile and quick and managed to get off a few volleys while he was in pursuit. She ran around the Piazza, taking a few snowballs in the back and retaliating in turn. But the chase ended when Esther launched a projectile blindly over her shoulder, skidding to a hault when she heard the wet whump of impact and an affronted yelp that was most definitely not Father Garcia.

Esther skidded to a halt, turning around... and wilting on the spot. She clapped her mittens — now soaked through — over her mouth. "Brother Petros!"

The Chief Inquisitor's glare was glacial. "What," he said, enunciating the word with icy precision; Esther, mortified, tracked the trickle of snow down the long, narrow bridge of his nose, "are... you... doing?"

Esther went crimson with humiliation, while some ways away, León howled with laughter.

Petros parted his lips as though he were going to scold her, but, after a moment of standing with his mouth agape like a fish, thought the better of it. To Esther's chagrin, the Chief Inquisitor's face had gone bright red from being pelted with an icy slushball.

"I was laboring under the impression you, Garcia de Asturias," Petros bellowed, trying to make himself heard over León's guffaws, "had been recalled to the Vatican!"

León, tears in his eyes, opened the palm of one hand and gestured towards the empty slate-gray sky. "Eres un puto gilipollas... oh yeah, sure, Tin Man, lemme just hop on the nonexistent airship hanging over our heads at this very moment."

"Sister Kate is set to arrive tomorrow," explained Esther hurriedly, gaze darting between the two priests. To her dismay, Petros's Screamer was clutched in one rigid fist, and though León's mirth lingered in the confines of the Piazza, she knew from experience he could launch his chakrams at the drop of a hat. "Father Wordsworth will be taking Father Garcia's place here."
León smirked. "Or was your head too far up di Medici’s ass to hear that part of the briefing, Iron Sides?"

*Lord grant her patience,* thought Esther despairingly as Petros steamed like an armor-plated kettle. The Chief Inquisitor may not have been the most tact or judicious soul in the Vatican Papal State — nor herself, for that matter — but asking León to defuse a tense situation was like replacing a jeweler’s screwdriver with a jackhammer. Esther made a private mental resolution to have a quiet word with Father Garcia at some later time... that is, if the two men didn't tear each other to pieces in the interim.

"Reverences, please," she begged, grinding a boot into the snow in a display of impatience; her interjection had been made in frustration, though it came out, to her irritation, sounding petulant. "May I respectfully request that we shelve the bickering for a later date? We have a murder to investigate."

"Our party is one short," snarled Petros, though, to Esther's relief, seemed on the verge of cooling down. Inhaling, he crossed himself and adjusted his gauntlets. If prayer was the discipline of Brother Petros's meditations, thought Esther grudgingly, then discipline was the focus of his actions. "Where, pray tell, is Father Nightroad?"

Oh dear. "F-Father Nightroad?"

"No, Sister, the other silver-haired simpleton on Cardinal Sforza's payroll. Yes, Father Nightroad!"

Esther had never been very adept at lying: her pale complexion betrayed every blush and her small voice every stammer. But telling Petros the truth meant revealing information about that black dog, not to mention her nightmares, her strange behavior, Abel being attacked... all of which would invariably find its way to Cardinal di Medici's desk in the form of an official inquest. She couldn't take the risk. "Brother Petros" she began. "I should have explained. Father Nightroad, he..." She thought furiously for a moment. "He said he had other things to look in to relating to, err... relating to the case, you see."

Her eyes flicked over to Father Garcia, who had crossed his arms and was staring at the sky, mouth pursed as though to mime a whistle.

*Load of good you are!* she thought angrily.

Esther glanced up at her chilly companion, who did nothing to hide his skepticism. Petros’s bangs were low, the kind of low where Esther couldn’t really tell where his eyebrows ended and the actual hair began. For a while, relief at not having to deal with Father Nightroad warred with professional suspicion.

Relief won out.

"Very well," decided the Chief Inquisitor. He rested his Screamer against one shoulder and turned towards the library. The lance was more than twice Esther's height, but Petros hefted it in one hand as though it weighed little more than a walking stick. "Then, Lady Saint, let us proceed!"

Not wanting to tempt the man's spiky temper any more — and keen to get out of the cold — Esther followed at the Inquisitor's heels. Petros scowled as she drew alongside him, which she supposed was the closest to an acknowledgement she was likely to get. Esther hitched up her skirts as she climbed from the Piazza to the library, silent and soft-footed where Petros clanked like a someone banging bin lids together.
Behind them, Father Garcia let out an impertinent snort. "Not to begrudge you your choice of threads there, Chief, but your boss wanted to keep this whole investigation quiet. Subtle, you know? Now how're we supposed to that with you traipsin' across Florence soundin' like someone throwing a refrigerator down a flight of steps?"

"I must remain continually watchful!" thundered Brother Petros, pulling open the library's massive front doors and stomping into the antechamber. "Prepared with the whole armor of God if I wish to combat the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil!"

Esther couldn't see him, but she knew León was rolling his eyes. "I hate to burst your bubble, Petey, but large men in full plate mail carrying high-frequency lances don't tend to "sneak" worth a damn."

Petros's mouth twitched in a sneer. "Unlike you AX dogs," he said sniffily, "I do not make a habit of scampering about rooftops and skulking in alleyways. Vampires, heretics, and highwaymen sneak." He cracked his lance against the marble floor and declared: "But I will look a man in the eye and give him the honor of a fair fight before I send him to meet his Creator!"

"Shhhhhhhhhhh!" came the command from a beleaguered librarian. Petros's mouth snapped shut with an audible click of teeth.

"Don't tend to use their inside voices worth a damn, either," grumbled León. Esther shot him a black look.

"Time isn't on our side," she insisted. "We can't afford the in-fighting right now. Because the Duke of Florence didn't cordon off the area, the whole scene risks being compromised by the crowds. With every passing hour, more evidence will be lost."

"His Eminence did not wish to turn this unfortunate incident into a public spectacle," muttered Petros, crossing his arms and looking... well, cross.

"Chief Inquisitor," said Esther, keeping her voice low, "does the Ministry of Papal Doctrine have any leads as yet on the person or persons responsible for the girl's murder?"

"Cardinal di Medici only reopened the case at the behest of His Holiness Pope Alessandro," admitted Petros guardedly. "As I understood it, he had resolved for the joint task force of the AX and the Inquisitorial Bureau to undertake a careful and methodical search for the clues hinting at the inceptions and consummation of this most heinous crime."

*Careful and methodical search...* Esther, frowning, couldn't help but suspect Cardinal di Medici hadn't *quite* phrased it that way.

"Right, then. Red?" León pointed towards the stacks. "Canvas the place. Go talk to the book warms. Ask 'em if they've seen any suspicious characters hangin' around lately... folks wearin' UV protective gear or stickin' to evening hours."

Esther nodded. "Right."

"The Human Tank here'll find the guy runnin' the place. Wave your inquisitorial clearance — or, if he gives you shit, your Screamer — in his face and he should talk. God knows you're terrifyin' enough."

"I'd thank you not to speak the Lord's name in vain!" warned Petros severely, his nostrils flaring. "And I do not take orders from—"
"And I'll swing by the security office," concluded León, ignoring Petros entirely. "Florence is shit when it comes to lost technology ever since di Medici levied that tax on imported Albion goods, but it's possible the library has a few feeds overlooking the Piazza." He hazarded a guess: "Maybe the techies and bean counters picked something up."

"Should we meet back here in an hour?"

"It's a date, Red. Happy huntin', you two!" Grinning at Esther, and flashing a mock salute at Petros, who glared with grim impatience, León bounded for the stairs. Right before he turned the corner on the landing, however, he stabbed a finger at the Chief Inquisitor's forehead. "And keep your paws off Esther, Petey. I dunno about you, but I reckon deflowering the Lady Saint's a quick way to cut the ground out from under those pious feet of yours, eh?"

Poor Petros. Esther had grown accustomed to León's perverse sense of humor, but the Chief Inquisitor looked as though someone had just ordered him to kick Pope Alessandro in the kneecaps. His face flashed all manner of shades of crimson, his mouth opening and closing in slackjawed mortification, not entirely sure whether to defend his honor or Esther's or that of the Inquisition proper. She knew Abel would have been on the ground in hysterics. As it was, Esther merely scowled at León — who was grinning cheekily.

"Can't you ever act your age?" she hissed, properly annoyed.

"It's difficult," León admitted, waving a farewell. Then, louder, earning him another shush from the librarian. "There's so little in life that's worth it!"

The Lady Saint and Il Ruinante stood side by side for a few long, loaded moments, made even more awkward by León's parting jabs. Esther knew they looked an odd pair, one short and slim and indiscrete, the other the height of a one-story house and swathed in the scarlet robes and battle armor of the Inquisition — they couldn't have looked more different if they were born separate species. It was similar to how Esther felt when she stood in Abel's shadow, if Abel were stronger and shinier and a whole lot shoutier.

"The insolence of that man!" seethed the Chief Inquisitor, ablaze with contempt; his righteous indignation made his pauldrons vibrate. "He has no grasp of the honor it is to serve His Holiness...!"

In spite of his sincerity, or perhaps because of it, the inquisitor was an unambiguous, uncompromising person when it came to his faith. An opportunist, affirmed Esther... but not necessarily a selfish one.

"He lacks discipline," Petros went on, hissing the words between clenched teeth, "not to mention self-respect, pride in his soldiers and the Holy See, and any high sense of duty and obligation towards his superiors and Almighty God! Arrogant dog!"

Esther sighed, visibly deflating. "When I was young," she began, talking more in the Chief's general direction than at the man himself, "I asked Bishop Laura how to go to heaven while still protecting myself from all the evil in the world. She told me what God told His children; 'You are sheep among wolves, be as wise as the serpent, yet as innocent as the dove.' But she also warned me that when wolves stalk the flock, it’s best not to chain the dogs."

She spoke so resentfully that the Chief Inquisitor was lifted from his own thoughts and turned to examine hers. It was one of Esther's many recent lapses into bitterness and she endured it staunchly, as if it comprised no stain to her dignity. It was, though, a glaring chink in her flimsy armor of virtuous strength and aristocratic tenacity. Lady Saint, indeed. Her eyes dwelt on the
floor, averted from Petros’s scrutiny.

The Chief Inquisitor said nothing for a spell, despite his study. Talking to him, thought Esther, was like hurling rocks into a deep, dark hole. When a pebble fell down a well, it was gratifying to hear the eventual plink. If, however, the pebble only slipped into darkness and vanished without a sound, the effect was disquieting. So, too, was talking to Petros, and being rewarded with obstinate silence for her efforts.

"I shall find the man in charge," he announced suddenly, without preamble, stomping through the antechamber and leaving Esther alone near the entrance to the stacks. The sound of Petros's steel-capped boots on the marble floors made her head ring.

León was an incorrigible child, but he was quite right on one account: Petros Orsini was about as subtle as a snowball in the small of one's back.

There was a set of double doors leading out of the library's vestibule. Removing her soaking mittens, flashing one of the glowering librarians an apologetic smile on behalf of her colleagues, Esther proceeded through the doors and delved into the vast warren of shelves.

The snow from the morning had spun its lace across the windowpanes, so the canyon-like couloirs running between the multileveled labyrinth of iron shelving, once gloomy, seemed to glow a misty, coronal white. Esther wandered through the narrow-aisled stacks, pressing herself between the thousands of books, inhaling the musty odor of cloth and dry paper and crumbling leather as if it were an exotic incense. Florence, due mostly in part to Cardinal di Medici's innate distrust of anything that wasn't invented, patented, and manufactured by the Holy See, was a largely analogue city. There wasn't a data tape or projection screen in sight. One of the largest libraries in the Papal State — second only to the Vatican's private collection in Rome — was all card files and old-fashioned indexing systems. Ladders dangled from the upper tiers of the stacks. Books rested and reposed on floor-to-ceiling shelves or trooped along the narrow floorspace like soldiers. Every color and texture clashed in a haphazard yet somehow intricate decorating scheme.

Though her curiosity nibbled at her concentration, Esther forced herself to stay focused on the task at hand. She soon came to the end of the L-shaped aisle and, conscious of a whisper of motion ahead, peaked around the blind corner...

And gawped, helplessly, as her heart dropped into her stomach.

Esther felt physically sick. The amalgamated horror and anger was a tight feeling in her chest. For a long moment, Esther couldn't formulate a single rational thought or draw a deep enough breath. More than that, the longer she lingered, watching, the more uncomfortably conscious of her whole body she grew, from the awkward way the shafts of her red hair were thrusting out from underneath her cornet to her feet, which felt swollen and uncomfortable inside her boots. Esther's flesh was suddenly too sensitive, her habit too scratchy, her rosary too heavy, like a loadstone around her throat.

At the terminus of the stacks, a young man had claimed a chair at one of the reading tables, lounging in a manner unbearably familiar to Esther. He slouched where he sat, his head tipped back, looking into the middle distance from beneath lowered lids. Despite his apparent state of repose, the man was poised almost to rigidity, deep in thought. Calculating. He sat deliberately, with a hand resting on his hip, as if nothing in the world could catch him off guard. The snowy light fired his profile. He had auburn hair that hung loose about his face and shoulders and a lean, athletic build. He blinked languidly, impossibly long eyelashes brushing his cheeks. He wore dark denim trousers and a black shirt. His uniform jacket was slung over the back of his chair.
Esther clapped a hand over her mouth and pressed herself hard against the bookshelves, hiding behind the L-bend of the aisle. Her heart was pounding hard enough for her head to throb. Her breath came in short, ragged gasps, which she desperately tried to smother in the palm of her hand.

The man sitting at the table was Dietrich Von Lohengrin.

The Orden! she thought, trying not to panic. What on earth were they doing in Florence?

"I heard you the first time, Panzermagier," said Dietrich, slow and languid. Esther's heart nearly stopped until she realized he wasn't speaking to her. He held his hand to his ear... a comm link, most likely. "And I'm telling you, I'm pretty sure di Medici beat us to the draw on this one. The body's already been spirited away by the Inquisition. The Duke's got the entire city by the balls: no one knows anything and those who do aren't talking."

Dietrich went quiet as whomever he was speaking to muttered a response. Esther was too far away to catch the reply.

After a few minutes, Dietrich rested a foot against the table and slowly began to tip back in his chair, until he was balanced precariously on the two hind legs. "Or the Cardinal's paranoia," he countered; Esther, though scared witless, bemoaned her not being able to hear the other half of the conversation. "The man loathes Methuselah... this may very well be how he reacts to any and all activity in his city. Sweeping the affair under the rug doesn't prove Zamiel is in Florence, Isaak. It proves di Medici is a paranoid little git."

Zamiel...

Esther's head pounded, the blood rushing in her ears. She squeezed her eyes shut, nausea causing her to teeter. Sibilant, whispering laughter echoed in her head. The confines of a dark citadel, the Burning City, were illuminated momentarily in the space behind her eyes. The harder she pressed her palms to her temples, the more concrete and definite the sinister shadow of the creature clawing at her unconscious became, towering over her until he eclipsed everything else, his shape wolfish, and then human, and then a size and dimension Esther couldn't seem to fix...

"Run, Little Nun," ordered the Shadow, as clear as a church bell, pealing between Esther's ears. Unlike her nightmares, his voice wasn't mocking. His words were not cruel, but Esther heard the low hum of warning in his voice. "You cannot stay there. Run."

Esther's eyes flew open. She gripped the bookshelf. Behind the bend in the stacks, Dietrich was still talking.

"Both? Well, why didn't you tell me that in the first place?" Esther could hear his cold, reptilian smile. "If they're cooperating, then their quarry is bigger than one rabid Methuselah. The circumstances indeed... the prospect of Cardinals di Medici and Sforza working along a unified front is positively stimulating. Wouldn't you agree, Esther?"

She felt a crawl and wrench in the pit of her stomach. When she looked around the L-bend, Dietrich was staring right at her, eyes glassy. Never was cruelty so visibly and disturbingly drawn in the lines of such a beautiful face.

"Spying, Esther?" he asked in Ugric, the language of István, his accent roughening his voice. He always pronounced his r's too low in his throat, so that when he spoke, everything came across as a soft purr that caused goose-pimples to errupt on Esther's arms. "Dreading what I'll say... or do?" His hazel eyes, almost yellow, glittered in shards, like sun on the surface of a lake. "No need. I'll be the perfect gentleman."
"How long have you known I was here?" asked Esther, surprising herself by how calm she sounded. So long as she could keep her distance, out of range of Dietrich's strings, she could retreat towards the library's antechamber, alert Petros and León...

"Ah, long enough." He smiled like a python. "I could smell you, you know... fragrant with lavender, sweet honeysuckle, and snow. Your scent lured me... a butterfly to your pistil."

Terror seized Esther's throat. "You aren't exactly the picture of subterfuge yourself," she noted with as much mock bravado as she could muster. "If you're acting as the Orden's errand boy, you could at least put a little effort into going undercover."

"How observant of you," he murmured, feigning a pout. "Oh, but I worked so hard to foster the image of the recluse. When did you figure out that my scholarly distraction was serving as my diversion?"

"As I was walking in here," replied Esther just as politely, trying to calm the hammer-blows of her heart. "Recent events have precluded my having the luxury of wasting time."

"Recent events... you know, Isaak said something very similar to me just now." Though Esther's stomach snarled, Dietrich looked as pleased as punch; a less refined creature would have smirked. Still, his was a cruel, cold, gloating smile. He turned to the nun and, with a mockingly courteous gesture, said, "I fault no one for the efficacy of their intuition. One of the many reasons I'm so smitten with you, Esther. Did you know, Mein Herr is terribly fond of you, as well. He finds your ignorant optimism refreshing, and your passions amusing."

Who...? "So glad he thinks so," said Esther tartly. She took a step back. "But I must ask him to continue being refreshed and amused... at a distance."

"Oh, I don't think so, dear Esther. You see," Dietrich pushed his chair out from under the table, the legs screeching on the marble; he began to tap towards her, matching Esther step for step, "we're looking for something, the Orden and I. Or rather, someone. Someone very old."

She considered for as long as she dared. "Cardinal di Medici lives at the Palazzo Riccardi," Esther deadpanned, her leg muscles tensing, ready to sprint.

There was a gentle tremor to Dietrich's lip, like the presage of an impending earthquake. "As endearing as your attempts at scorn may be, the fact that the Inquisition and the AX are working together means that they will likely find what we are looking for before we do. We can't have that, now can we?"

"The AX is in Florence to solve a murder. We want nothing to do with the Orden! Haven't you caused enough pain already?"

"Pain..." There was something gut-churning about the way Dietrich's eyes roamed, lingering and greedy, from head to hips to feet, taking from Esther what he wanted. "Your life has been so very tragic, hasn't it?" he said quietly, as though in a daze, muttering drunkenly in a way that screamed danger. "One would expect of you some humble, meek existence, rather... delicate in your sorrow, in its sense of proportion. In other words, we in the Orden expected from you invisibility. For you to simply disappear. But you refused, dear Esther... or rather, you never even considered the possibility of fading into insignificance. You continue to hold your head high, iron in your purpose, imperial in your poise. It's little wonder you caught Mein Herr's eye. And so long as the Inquisition and the AX have what the Orden want, the Orden will have to take someone they want. You do understand, don't you?"
"What..."

"They would do anything to get their precious Lady Saint back. Wouldn't they, Esther? Wouldn't your beloved Father scorch the earth to save you?"

"Stop it!"

"Wouldn't he become a monster again, just for you?"

_Run, little Nun_, urged the Creature in her head.

So Esther ran.

She didn't manage ten feet along the aisle before she froze.

It happened so quickly: someone caught her shoulder, holding her in place. The grip wasn't particularly tight, but the weight behind the hand was enormous, the downward press of fingers into Esther's clavicle making her abdomen grind together, eliciting sharp, staccato bursts of pain from her ribs until she couldn't breathe properly.

Strong hands pushed her into the bookcase, face-first, the shelf bruising her nose. It stung, sending swells of pain between her eyes. A chin rested on Esther's shoulder, her attacker breathing into her ear.

They withdrew a white cloth and pressed it over her face, bracing the back of her head and forcing her to breath the fumes. A muffled scream escaped her, but she knew, dimly, that it wasn't loud enough to attract anyone from the hall. The attacker wrapped their arms around her to keep her still as the drug took effect. Esther's body went weak and rubbery; she thought she heard someone shouting, calling her name... as she listened, Esther felt a dull numbness saturating her skull, a slow, percolating submersion, as though her head were swathed in cotton.

"Father Nightroad..." she whimpered, "Abel..."

A fist tightened around her collar, kneading knuckles into her throat to stop her from speaking.

"Close your eyes, Lady Saint," a man said, almost gently.

_Dietrich...? No... who..._

It was like driving at high speed into a dark tunnel. Esther's head fell back. The light dimmed, and the world faded to black...
I was neither Living nor dead...

Chapter Summary

Do not gloat over me, my enemy!
Though I have fallen, I will rise.
Though I sit in darkness, the Lord will be my light.

Micah 7:8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Father William Walter Wordsworth — the one member of the AX, thought Petros, the Inquisition still regarded with a marginal degree of respect — chewed at his unlit pipe, his face ashen.

"Just so I have all the facts in order," began the Professor solemnly, eyes sweeping over the assembled company, "the Vatican's István contingent were passing through Florence en route to Rome when the Carabinieri discovered a body... that of a young woman who appeared to have been murdered by a vampire, whereupon Lady Caterina ordered all available AX agents to look into the matter."

"Yeah, that's right," grumbled Garcia de Asturias.

"Immediately thereafter, and in light of Cardinal di Medici's obstinacy, the Duchess of Milan ordered me to Florence to assist in the investigation. Before I left, Caterina shared with me a private communiqué from Abel detailing strange and potentially disruptive behavior on the part of Sister Esther. Correct?"

It was as though his vocal cords had lost their function, but by using all his body's strength, Nightroad managed to move his tongue. "Yes," he whispered hoarsely.

"Strange behavior that, it seems, we can lay at your feet." A spark that was neither anger nor repulsion brightened the Professor's green eyes. He whittled the pipe stem between his teeth, his gaze growing unduly nonchalant as he mused, "Isn't that right, Vampire?"

Petros Orsini felt every hair on the back of his neck stand on end. He pressed his fingernails into the palms of his hands so hard they began to sting, all gazes turning to the man leaning against the Iron Maiden II's railing. He stared out the window, straining his eyes against the infinite blackness, seemingly oblivious to everyone and everything save the silver pinprick stars.

"You're referring to me, then," the Creature muttered, chin in hand, sounding bored. The tension in the room rose in spades, everyone discomfited by the monster's seemingly deliberate quietude

Like Petros, he had shoulder-length hair, worn loose, tangled and matted where the Chief Inquisitor's was as smooth as plate glass. He had claret-colored eyes, brows prominent and arched beneath his bangs. He was so pale, a part of Petros wondered if he would burn in close proximity to a matchstick. The dangerous, rakish appearance was topped off by a long leather duster that could have come straight from one of Sister Paula's trashy novels of swashbuckling, shootings,
spaceships, and narrow escapes she insisted she didn't read.

The look in the creature's eyes — the soulless, malicious gleam, evident despite the pair of circular, wire-framed welding glasses he'd seemingly produced from thin air — resembled no creature Petros knew. But there was just enough *vampire* in there to stir the Chief Inquisitor's heart, to overwhelm his senses and make his muscles quake with a surge of battle adrenaline. Petros's face had gone florid, his fingertips solder-hot. He felt positively *naked* without his armor, his black, Curia-issued shirt tacked to his back with sweat, causing every square inch of skin to prickle. He could feel his heart breaking down, particulating piece by piece into the rolling boil of his stomach. Every splash sent up clouds of toxic steam, choking his throat. He was sure that if he were to open his mouth, he would breath fire.

Suddenly, the Professor's face — which had been the portrait of sincerity coupled with concern — transformed into something entirely different, beginning with his thin lips, which warped into a peculiar, atypical smirk. "A vampire who also happens to be a shape-shifting monstrosity whose soul has been fractured across an infinite expanse of time and space due to an accident with a quantum superposition some one thousand years ago." Wordsworth paused. "Is that about the long and short of it, Abel?"

Nightroad managed a weak nod of his head.

"And now Sister Esther has gone missing," concluded the Professor, growing dour again. He blinked once, twice, and then stared at the Vampire, his gaze hardening. "This is... well... I confess, I'm not entirely sure what I'm meant to tell Lady Caterina."

In light of his lack of an answer, Petros decided to take stock of his situation.

The *Iron Maiden II*, along with her captain and one Father Wordsworth, had arrived the evening following Sister Esther's disappearance. Garcia de Asturias and Petros, after contacting Nightroad, had spent hours canvassing the city, turning over every stone, inspecting every doorjamb, sweeping through every loggia and *osteria* from the Piazza di Santa Croce across the Arno to the Santo Spirito. The Chief Inquisitor had wanted to put out a BOLO for the girl by means of the inquisitorial offices in the Palazzo Riccardi, but Father Garcia had been adamant — alarmingly so — about keeping His Eminence Cardinal di Medici out of the picture. The Hispanian agent's foggy, incipient intentions had caused Petros at the time to drift patently down into doubt and mistrust. It had been easy, he supposed to pin suspicion on people he disliked anyway.

But then Nightroad had joined them — with a tall, thin creature who was most definitely *not* human in tow — and Petros's darker intuitions had crystallized into certainties.

The longer Petros was forced to endure the AX's vague explanations and unconvincing excuses, the more he felt his patience wearing dangerously thin. Nightroad ought to know better than anyone: *Il Ruinante*’s anger could make a barbed retort resound like a seismic fracture. The thing that kept Petros's temper in check, the one and only reason he had elected to bite his tongue and kept his own council for the past seven hours, had been the role he played in the girl's disappearance. He had been careless... his attention had wavered, his guard had gone down, and now a Vatican nun was missing. Deep inside, in some uncharted territory of his soul, Petros knew the blame rested on his shoulders. So he had resigned himself to the fact that he had forfeited the right to question the AX's handling of the situation... or to protest the company they had elected to keep.

Hiding his upset, Petros instead focused his energy on clenching his abdomen to keep his stomach from doing cartwheels. He wasn't a good flyer at the best of times, and Sister Kate Scott was far
from the most accommodating of pilots. He could tell the airship, cruising over the Foresta di Vallombrosa on the outskirts of Florence, was on a steady ascent. Petros could feel it in his ears. He could also feel the abrupt turns and jolts as the massive vessel, far larger than the Inquisition's own flagship, the Raquel, careened over buoyant air. Scott had been Albion military, once upon a time, so she was using the rudder, which made the whole dirigible slew like a skidding car.

Petros averted his gaze to the ceiling, blowing out an impatient breath before Wordsworth's head snapped up.

"You're Zamiel, aren't you?" asked the Professor suddenly, the ivory mouthpiece of his pipe still fixed between his teeth, directing the question to Nightroad's companion. "Son of the Dragon. The creature they once called Alucard."

The words meant nothing to Petros, but Nightroad flinched, looking over at Wordsworth in evident alarm. "How...?"

"I read a lot," said the Professor drily, earning him a scowl which, much to Nightroad's irritation, Wordsworth merely shrugged off. Then, pointedly ignoring the lot of them, began to muse to himself: "Alucard... a vampiric hive consciousness, millions of undead souls all slaved to a single, once-human mind, one who can turn himself into shadows, insects, bats or mist, who can levitate, pass through walls, telepathically manipulate people, heal himself from little more than ashes, and manifest his hellhound familiar as an extension of his body. You once worked for the Royal Order of Protestant Knights, a secret organization of ancient Albion whose singular purpose was to combat the increasing vampire threat against the country, monarchy, and church. Unlike the Vatican, the Knights used any means necessary to combat evil and threats against the crown... often employing those very threats to do so." Wordsworth arched an inquiring eyebrow to fill the stunned silence. "Isn't that right, Vampire?"

For a few unsettling moments, emotions flickered across the monster — Alucard's — face in small jerks and twitches: his lips curling back over his teeth then pressing to a thin line; his eyes narrowing, closing, the skin around them crinkling; the muscles of his jaw tensing and dancing beneath his skin. To his distinct displeasure, Petros couldn't interpret a single expression.

Eventually, Alucard bared his teeth in something approximating a smile, the upper half of his face not shifting in the slightest, his eyes glaring daggers at the Professor. He stretched, cracking his shoulders, his long, narrow limbs reminding Petros, strangely, of a wading bird. "You're uncommonly perceptive," the ancient Vampire groused.

Petros's could have sworn he felt his blood congealing. "You're one of the Empire's dogs, then," he spat. The Chief Inquisitor shot Garcia de Asturias a look of such white-hot fury that the latter visibly cringed. "It's little wonder you didn't want to go to Cardinal di Medici, Father."

The Professor canted his head, looking askance at Petros's volatile temper. "No, Inquisitor. He's no Methuselah. It's fascinating, in fact: we call the citizens of the Empire vampires because they so resemble the ancient demons of Alucard's stripe."

"Professor," asked Abel hoarsely, his throat sounding suddenly bone dry, "how do you know all this?"

"I'm from Albion, Abel," he said simply. "We grew up hearing the stories, and I can't imagine much has changed in a thousand-odd years. If our friend here feels that we are an obstacle baring his way to the main objective, well... let's just say history has made clear his favorite tactics for dealing with obstacles."
"So gratifying to hear that after so many centuries, I still make for interesting dinner conversation," drawled the Vampire. His crimson eyes glittered. "Wouldn't you like to know how I survived for so long?"

Wordsworth didn't rise to the bait. "Don't trouble yourself. During the 1999 Battle of Londinium, then London, you were... scattered, I suppose, for lack of a better word."

"You're takin' this all really well, Prof," muttered Father Garcia, crossing his arms.

"Panicking or pointing fingers will not find young Esther any faster, León. And in any case," Wordsworth took a contemplative turn about the deck, lost behind the haze of his own thoughts, "I don't find Alucard's presence here a terribly difficult pill to swallow. The calcium of bones, the keratin of fingernails, the exhalations of our bodies, oxygen in, carbon dioxide out — all these things are reconstituted as carbon atoms, used to make the world anew: the earth, the oleander by the Tiber, the ink of my books, the girders and pistons of the great airships. Humans and vampires. Thermodynamics, León. Chaos. Just like Alucard here, what is, can never cease to be." It was evident to Petros that Father Wordsworth found some profound comfort in those strange scientific precepts, touching them again and again like rosary beads. "We are all stars," he murmured, "and to the stars we shall return."

"A nice sermon, Father... William, did you say your name was?"

"No, I did not, and yes, it is."

"Like the poet."

"The music in my heart I bore," he recited by way of an answer, "Long after it was heard no more."

"Top marks, Professor." Alucard snickered, though looked thoughtful, appraising. "You reside in the girl's memories. She likes you. Though not as much as she likes you, Priest." The Vampire inclined his head towards Nightroad, whose throat hitched, eyes going wide. "The Spaniard irritates her," he said to Garcia, "and you," he fixed his fiery gaze on Petros, "you frighten her."

Petros bristled. Raising himself to his full height, the Chief Inquisitor growled, "If what Father Wordsworth says is true, am I to understand that you had something to do with Sister Esther's vanishing? Be wary of how you answer, creature!"

Alucard's toothy expression soured. He glowered at Petros. "No," he said. "I was with the silver-haired priest during your little jaunt, although I sensed her movements from afar. She was scared, but focused. I suspect she might have recognized her abductor. I felt her heartbeat spike and plateau... and then nothing. A long, frozen stillness." Alucard considered, tilting his head to one side as though listening to music only he could hear. "She is still silent."

Nightroad closed his eyes, a truly wretched expression on his face. Petros's chilly mien thawed a fraction of a degree under a swell of pity for the man... and under a swift, stifling guilt.

"We gotta save her, Prof," insisted Garcia de Asturias.

"We're in Tuscan airspace, León," he said gently, but firmly. "We must tread carefully. If we show the slightest hint of aggression, Cardinal di Medici will have his lackeys shoot us out of the sky, provided he doesn't reserve the pleasure for himself. Besides, we don't even know who took her, or where she might be."

"We gotta do somethin'!"
"The decision to careen hell for leather into battle does not rise from reason, León, but rashness. While it is true that our being AX agents grants us a little more latitude than your average man of the cloth, our oaths do not command us to be reckless; they command us to be wise."

"Screw wisdom! She's Esther. We can't just... we can't give up on her. William, I couldn't face my little girl if we abandoned Red."

Garcia de Asturias sounded so convincing, so earnest, so sure, that Petros found himself wanting to believe him. But testing prods at his insistence would just make him more impatient, and long years in the Inquisition's service had taught Petros that angry, impassioned people shared the unfortunate habit of being wrong a vast majority of the time.

He counted himself among that company.

It occurred to the Chief Inquisitor, then, that Nightroad hadn't said a word for a long while. At a glance, the priest looked about as miserable as Petros felt, the former's bleeding heart fixed firmly upon his sleeve.

This isn't fair.

The thought buoyed, unbidden, to the turbulent surface of Petros's mind.

Of all people, Sister Esther did not deserve this.

Petros's natural tendency, and the instinct inculcated by the Inquisition over the past ten years, was to judge others and in so doing, condemn them. But those like Esther Blanchett chose instead to humble themselves and walk among those who erred, even if they had sinned in some way that was very terrible. It was compassion, not righteous anger, that drove her to grieve for human hurt, a humble sense of impermanence, not arrogance, that moved her to give so much of herself, and an absolute valuation of justice, not vengeance, that impelled her to try to assuage the suffering of all God's creatures.

To question is to honor creation with curiosity, she had said, once. The loss of blind faith may sadden you... but if you persist in your searching, you will arrive at certainty. You will arrive at true faith...

Petros found himself remembering her speech in István. She had insinuated herself into the Chief Inquisitor's life that day in a gentle, measured way, through small acts of kindness and intelligent, respectful reflections. Her attention was never overbearing, nor disturbingly selfless, but wise and reserved. Compassionate and peace-loving, she always seemed to have the right words to encourage a troubled soul.

The very first evidence of sublime faith, thought Petros, was dissatisfaction with a cruel, capricious world, a longing for deliverance from the chains of sin that had bound the soul — the souls of others, though not the self. For Esther Blanchett to own, frankly, that she had been lost and guilty during the events in István had communicated to Petros a prelude to grace. It was not a question of a certain depth of grief and sorrow, but simply the recognition and acknowledgment of a desire to heal, to guide. To do good.

This isn't fair.

And now she was gone, taken from them.

And it was Petros's fault.
Without a word of warning, all six foot five of the Chief Inquisitor dropped to one knee, causing Wordsworth to raise an eyebrow, Garcia de Asturias to frown, and the Vampire, Alucard, to sneer. Fortunately, the sudden motion also caught Nighthroad’s attention. Petros bowed his head, long hair curtaining his expression.

"The fault is mine, Reverences."

The words were quiet and humble, at odds with the incredible breadth of his shoulders and the deep thrum of his voice. Petros averted his eyes, gaze sinking low. He shook his head back and forth slowly. "I am the Inquisition's fury and Cardinal di Medici's right hand. I took up the shield of faith, wherewith I sought to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. I donned the helmet of salvation, and raised the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of the Lord. I wear the armor of God, and yet... I could not protect one of His children."

Father Garcia made a strangled sound in his throat. "Hey, Iron Sides... we're both at fault here. Don't go shoulderin' all the blame—"

"I have failed in my mission," insisted Petros. His voice came out rougher than he'd intended, as if there were far more words behind it, words he couldn't bear to speak. "And upon our return to Rome, I will submit myself to a full inquest. But for now, Father Nighthroad..." Finally, Petros's gaze rose to find Nighthroad — Abel — where he slouched near Father Garcia. "I ask that you allow me to serve the AX in bringing the Lady Saint home. I offer you my lance and my life."

Abel's gaze seemed darker, more direct... and very much pitiless. His expression was stony, but the hurt behind his blue eyes was clear. He stepped towards Petros's kneeling form, towering over the Chief Inquisitor for perhaps the first time. Petros's chin was tilted up by firm but feathery-soft fingers. He felt Abel's other palm on his forehead, as though in blessing — an Alter Christus laying hands on his flock in order that he might minister to them.

"Oh, Petros," murmured the tall, grieving priest. "I welcome your help, but... but I cannot accept your contrition. Not yet."

The Chief Inquisitor intuited that which went unsaid. He worked out, by virtue of instinct, the meaning behind Abel's words.

*Your life is not worth hers.*

No. Of course, it wasn't.

Nighthroad released him, taking a few stuttering steps backwards until Petros was worried the man would trip on his mantle. But Abel merely reclined against the wall, his pale eyes going glassy again. He tucked his head close to his chest, as though to shield himself from their scrutiny. His slouch was more pronounced, noted Petros, his shoulders hunched under the weight of shock and anguish and fear. Petros recognized the feelings well enough: the Chief Inquisitor felt them himself. But drowning out the other sensations was a tidal surge encompassing sorrow and revulsion far beyond mere sympathy: a sick, drenching nausea, perceptible as a roiling in Petros's stomach.

He thought it had been the airship's turbulence. Perhaps he was mistaken.

The slow burn of shame, which had flared in the inquisitor's mind and body since the library, had transmuted into an agony very much physical at the sight of Nighthroad's grief, the devastation and bleak despondency stamped across the priest's thin face.
Desperate to repent, Petros had tried many times over the past several hours to pray, but his entreaties sounded to his ears pitiful and pathetic — less like petitions and more like apologies — as if the last invocation had already been uttered, the last hymn already sung, with the guilt persisting regardless. There was remorse even in breathing. Each sigh tasted sour, coppery, on his tongue.

The inquisitor's glaring failure to protect the Lady Saint, the awful emptiness and sorrow rising like a mist in Nightroad's blue eyes, stirred in Petros's heart a feeling more complicated, curdled, and primeval than any he had known before — an emotion that eschewed bright lies or the thick dust of forgetfulness, whose chief characteristic was a helpless, suffocating acceptance that nothing could be done to rectify his mistakes: too much time had passed, too much damage had been done, for amends to be made.

But perhaps worst of all was the damning certainty that, if Esther Blanchett died, Abel Nightroad would never forgive him.

Six months ago, he wouldn't have cared what an AX agent thought of him.

But now...

_This isn't fair._

Petros believed that the gospel mattered for God's pursuit of the restoration, redemption, and reconciliation of men, a guidance that saved as well as served, that sought to restore all things back unto the One that ushered forth all that was good and beautiful in the world, that preserved the dignity of humanity — even in the midst of their brokenness and depravity.

But, he also knew that God permitted suffering; He left them all wanting of certain truths, in a manner often painful, burdened them with a desperate yearning for those things judged indispensable in the eyes of the world. But while the gospel was a vehicle for God's mercy, it cared not for Petros Orsini's personal salvation and blessing. The Chief Inquisitor's faith had turned him into a thief, an interloper, smashing through other people's lives, leaving agony and loss behind. The aloofness of his role, the necessary separation to safeguard himself from their pain, built his guilt. He could proclaim himself to the masses as a servant of the Lord, and in his power he could pass judgements that ruined them, with no wounds of his own to show in solidarity. He was the professional, a surgeon, slicing through their existences before retreating back to the safety of his own sacrosanct life.

So Petros made his peace with the certainty that he would bear the consequences for what he had done to Esther, to Abel, to atone for his sin and for the sin that ruled the world, which were one and the same. Jesus forgave the thief, but he did not take him down from the cross.

"In leaning upon His Cross, let me not refuse my own," murmured Petros, "yet in bearing mine, let me bear it by the strength of His."

Petros intended for the prayer to be private, but someone overheard him...

"If the old adage is right, and bastards and cream really do rise to the top, your peers will be calling you Cardinal Orsini before we know it."

Petros's skin went clammy. At the sight of the Chief Inquisitor's hackles standing on end, a high, cold cackle rippled across the otherwise silent room, a grinding, gravelly sound full of teeth.

"Not so much has changed from my time," said the Vampire, his voice a low, dulcet purr. "The
Catholic Church... that Saint of yours, who has come to see the turmoil and conflict that has convulsed the world as symptoms of a deep moral malaise that is afflicting society... but not herself, of course. This feels almost nostalgic."

Petros's heart ratcheted to a thunderous beat. "Watch your tongue!" he seethed. "Esther Blanchett is a holy woman of the Church, and you defile her with your blasphemous mockery!"

Sensing Abel go rigid, Petros wished he could retract his choice of words. But the Vampire's infernal grin remained fixed in place, slithering across his crooked lips, until it was wide enough for Petros to see back to the second molars.

"She is nothing," said the Vampire. "She is no one important."

"Shut your damn mouth, *demonio,*" snarled Father Garcia.

"The only reason she may have made herself a target was her association with me."

"An association Miss Esther neither courted nor deserved...!" hissed Abel, voice dangerously soft, eyes flashing.

"I can not only share her memories," the Vampire went on, undeterred... as though the foul creature was enjoying his torment of them, "I can control them. I can keep the link intact as her thoughts move through time from the past to the present. We are one, an ecstatic and indivisible whole. We enjoy a richer, fuller interrelationship than anything the Church can offer her. You mendicants supported by your alms, who she would slave for, fight for, die for... even when the parcel of usurping little monarchs and nobles in the College of Cardinals actively reviles her. Oh yes, *Inquisitor,*" said the Vampire with his evil chuckle, fixing crimson eyes on Petros, "that di Medici of yours would tear out her throat as soon as any vampire.

*Vineam Domini,* affirmed Petros to himself. *The transgressors must be rejected and condemned as heretical by all the faithful of Christ.* Blood for honor. That was the price then, as it was the price now. It was always the price of honor and defense of the faith. Always blood. Always pain.

"If you blaspheme again, Monster," thundered Petros, "I will be forced to act. To forgive you is up to God, but to send you to Him is up to me!"

The Vampire threw back his head in mirth. "You remind me so much of an old enemy of mine," he mused. "He was an uncompromising zealot, too. In my time, him and his Catholics believed the Protestants were doomed to Hell simply because they did not prostrate themselves at Rome's every whim. Tell me, Inquisitor, is there a difference between the Protestants and the Catholics... and between humans and vampires? A beetle will chase after an opening of light, while a cockroach will scatter at a crack of it. How are we different from insects? Nobody is purely good or purely evil. There are moths that explore the day and butterflies that play at night. Polarity is an integral part of nature — human or not human.

"I've seen Esther Blanchett's mind... as she has seen mine. And I know there isn't a man among the Inquisition who doesn't think more on the vampire scourge than on his own soul, who doesn't haul the threat further from beneath the Vatican's bones with his every waking breath. Never mind that Orden and their hive of half-rate heretics; the Inquisition is the most devout den of worshippers Satan has, all that fear and shame and righteous fury swirling together in a miasma of reverence any monster would envy."

"How dare you...!"
"Brother Petros, calm yourself!"

"He's rilin' you up, Iron Sides, don't give 'em the satisfaction!"

"Serve the Lord with fear," sneered Alucard, "and rejoice with trembling."

The pulsing at the back of his head made Petros see red. He could not use the Screamer in the airship's interior — the high frequency voltage stress on the iron Maiden II's insulation would spell perdition for the lot of them. Instead, Petros stalked forward as if sliding, moving only the lower half of his body while thrusting out his arms.

"Blessed be the Lord my strength," snarled Il Ruinante, "which teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight!"

He twisted his wrists, blading his palms, and then aimed a deathblow capable of piercing an iron plate towards the bridge of Vampire's nose, hoping to shatter his glasses and blind him.

"Cast forth lightning, and scatter them!"

Though partially obscured in his peripheries, Petros caught a glimpse of Wordsworth's face going white. "Inquisitor, stop! He'll—"

Alucard's head rose at the last minute, glaring over the rim of his spectacles, but the blade of Petros's fingers that came sailing at jaw level still managed to snap his skull to one side.

Alucard's surprise was brief. The Vampire's thin lips twisted in a feral smile and, erupting from his recline against the rail, requited Petros's attack with the vicious crack of a gloved fist on the Chief Inquisitor's cheek, loud enough to split the ears of the angels and cause the breath to catch in Petros's chest like a wild thing caged. Alucard made a grab for the Chief's throat. A moment later, Petros was flat on his back, black spots dancing in his field of vision, with Alucard planting a knee in his sternum. The Vampire took Petros's face in his hand and squeezed, crunching the man's angular features together, sharp and serrated like grinding glass. It was nearly impossible to breathe, and Petros began to pant shallowly.

It had happened in seconds.

The Vampire leaned in close until their noses touched, until Petros could smell the brimstone on his skin. "Is that all you've got, Knight Templar?" he asked, smirking infuriatingly.

Petros bellowed in anger and threw his head forward, relishing the crack of bone as blood exploded from Alucard's nostrils.

Through the eruption of pain in his skull, the Chief Inquisitor was only dimly aware of Garcia writhing near the aft of the deck, whereas Petros and the Vampire fought at the bow.

Wordsworth held Garcia back with a strength surprising for the milquetoast frame of an academic, clutching León to keep the far larger Hispanian from rushing the combatants.

"Git off me, Professor!" he roared.

"I can't do that, León," hissed Wordsworth, with his usual rational mien, despite the circumstances. "They'll tear you apart."

But neither the noise nor the audience nor the throbbing pain in Petros's skull and throat stopped him from raining more blows on the Vampire's head... though his adversary made no attempt to
shield himself with his forearms. Alucard refused to retaliate and only staggered backwards into the railing while Petros continued on autopilot, unleashing every drop of wrath and ferocity his body possessed until he was close to empty.

Too late, Petros came to his senses, and realized Alucard had not stopped smirking throughout the assault. Though the monster's face was beaten to a bloody pulp, the smile remained fixed in place, a long, narrow rictus grin of masochistic delight.

"Tell me, Brother... do you see them, when you sleep? They're all dead. Every last soul dead. In service to you and to your promises. For your prayers! For your paradise! For your God! ALL WERE SACRIFICED! Enemies and allies! The people you swore to protect! The Church you would serve! Men! Women! Old and young! Even... yourself, Petros Orsini."

The bottom of the Vampire's duster, where his trouser cuffs brushed the floor, ignited with a vast, bloody glow that spread beneath his feet; the light slid under Petros's boots and lit his bony face from below, as though he were standing over a fire pit. Illuminated by the crimson corona, Petros saw three enormous tentacles of shadow, twice as tall as he was, erupt from Alucard's body and writhe hideously in the air. Peering from behind the Vampire's head was a second, misshapen face, like a frame burn on overexposed film, composed of absolute darkness and riddled with more eyes of liquid amber than Petros could count, the entire heaving, fetid mass rising above the consoles and fixing the Chief Inquisitor with a look so blood-freezingly malicious, that it took every modicum of Petros's willpower not to drop to his knees and pray.

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The shadows hugged Alucard, rearing above his head like a helmet of black bone. The Vampire took small steps, practically walking on air, and stopped where Petros was crouched. "Anderson never learned, either," he rumbled, his voice vast, like the magma chamber of a volcano, deep and filled entirely with molten rock. "Though, like him, you have earned yourself a proper battle, Il Ruinante..."

"Releasing Control Art Restriction Systems... ability restrictions lifted for limited use until the enemy has been rendered—"

And then...

"Krusnik 02 Loading. Limitation at eighty percent... acknowledged."

A wall of black feathers, their edges glinting like razorblades yet hovering on the air like dead leaves, erupted between Alucard and Petros, driving them apart and slicing off the former's incantation. The wings, sprouting from their owner's bony shoulder blades and reducing the cassock beneath to ribbons, were enormous, cascading to the floor and spanning the width of the deck. Corded, ropey muscle rippled beneath smooth ebony down; a recognizable skinniness, realized Petros, his spine turning to ice — but an undeniable strength.

The winged monstrosity was a sight that Petros had seen once before and had never, ever wanted to see again.

"You will not harm him, Zamiel," came a deep, strangely quiescent voice that was — and most definitely wasn't — Abel Nightroad's.

An arm extended out, across the Chief Inquisitor's chest. The Black Angel shielded Petros with his wings, with his hands, claws sprouting from the nail beds, black as obsidian and far sharper.

Petros couldn't see the priest's face, as Nightroad was facing Alucard, but he could hear the tell-tale lathery, keratin-on-flesh sound that came from speaking through too many sharp teeth. Alucard,
meanwhile, tried to pull the fangs from Nightroad's challenge by turning it into an opportunity, as though the Black Angel's wrath were a wanted thing.

"Those who dare impersonate the Fallen," mocked the Vampire, "are judged to join their ranks! I haven't had this much fun in ages, Father... and the evening is still so young. You're... magnificent. It's little wonder you hold the girl in your thrall... a scrap of miracle to a beggar. A flame to a moth. We ruin the lives we protect and the people in our care. We slaughter our enemies and sacrifice our allies. We'll keep killing until there is nothing left to destroy but ourselves. It will never be enough."

Nightroad's muscles twisted and crawled, stretching and snapping, his taloned fingers curling into fists. Somewhere at Petro's back, Wordsworth let out a little moan of despair.

_For God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment..._

Forgive him, oh Lord, thought Petro.

But before the two monstrosities, blood red and pitch black, could clash, a shrill shriek split the air...

"What in GOD'S NAME are you doing BRAWLING on my AIRSHIP! Krusnik... ABEL! Get a hold of yourself!"

The winged creature protecting Petro trembled, wings shivering. He seemed stunned for a moment, but then he shook his crown of silver hair. "Yes... I'm... I'm all right, Kate."

"How curious."

For once, Alucard looked properly surprised at the sight of the newcomer. Much to Petro's relief, the Vampire retracted his repulsive shadows, his myriad eyes all blinking shut. Likewise, Nightroad's wings folded and vanished by some mechanism Petro did not understand, leaving a thin, knock-kneed priest in what remained of his cassock and mantel. Both men stared at the figure floating imperiously above their heads.

She was a poised, matronly woman with sharp eyes and a pouting mouth, though her kind, open face looked to Petro properly cross. Her long blond hair cascaded about her shoulders and a mole twitched on her cheek as she glared at them. She was wearing the white habit and cornet of a Catholic nun, but if Petro concentrated, he could discern that her vestments, as well as the skin of her face and hands, were ever so slightly transparent...

"Honestly," huffed the hologram of Sister Kate Scott, Captain of the _Iron Maiden II_, "Father León comes rushing onto the bridge near hysterical, shouting nonsense and going on and on and what do I find?! You utter morons about to rip each other's throats out... on my gondola deck! Here I am pushing my navigational systems to their limit trying to scan for Sister Esther while you all seem determined to kill one another before we've had a chance to find the poor girl! William!" she barked, and Wordsworth leapt a foot in the air as though he'd been electrocuted. "To what destination did Lady Caterina dispatch the other Vatican airship?" Scott's nose crinkled as she sniffed, "She neglected to share that information with me, meanwhile I've got a thoroughly annoyed ATC on hold!"

To Petro's unease, Wordsworth frowned, his expression troubled. "Other airship, Kate?"

"Don't try me, William, I am not in the mood." Scott's projection glitched, as though to mimic her
anger. "I just received a strongly-worded message from air traffic control at the Torre della Zecca. They've been fielding a number of troubling eyewitness reports coming out of the village of Vinci."

It was Petros's turn to look bemused, "Vinci, Captain?"

"Yes, Brother Petros, Vinci! Apparently, the townspeople claim they've caught glimpses of a large dirigible stationary over the hills of Montalbano, between Prato and Florence. However, Zecca can find nothing on their radar and there's been no response on all the standard hailing channels. They're demanding that I identify the craft!"

Wordsworth's pipe dropped from his lip, but he managed to catch it before it hit the ground. "Kate," he said slowly, deliberately, eyes wide, "Caterina didn't authorize any other air support from Rome. The *Iron Maiden II* is the only Vatican ship in the area."

"Then... whose craft is over Montalbano? I've already scanned Vinci airspace and have turned up nothing, but the villagers are near-frantic! They keep describing a massive crimson battleship... just like the Vatican cruisers!"

Petros heard soft dripping sounds, little plips like water slipping over the edges of a bathtub and onto the floor. The hairs on the back of his neck rose as he realized it was Nightroad... and he was *crying*.

The tears were bright red... the color of blood.

No.

Petros's brows drew close together as he caught the scent. The tears *were* blood.

Even Alucard frowned. Despite the Vampire's apparent nonchalance, he had been watching Nightroad closely, and he stiffened, sensing instinctively that the priest was suddenly and inexplicably more unstable than before.

Abel gave a great shudder of revulsion and he doubled over, as though fighting against the urge to vomit.

When Nightroad spoke, his voice twitched and spasmed almost as much as his body; he seemed frightened beyond his wits.

"Sister Kate," he gasped, clutching his chest, "you have to find that airship... oh God..."

"Hey Four-Eyes," Garcia de Asturias hesitated to touch Nightroad's shoulder, "what's goin' on..."

"He took her," seethed Abel, his voice dropping several octaves and his elongated teeth scraping against his bottom lip, trembling not with fear or sickness, realized Petros... but with molten, murderous fury. "That monster..."

Somehow, Petros knew what Abel was about to say before he choked the words out. *Il Ruinante*'s battle-hardened senses began to thrum, slowly at first, and then with a sickening plummet.

"It's the Orden... they have Esther."

Chapter End Notes
"Hi my name is Petros Orsini and I gave up my impulse control for lent, Hallelujah praise the Lord."
London Bridge is falling down falling down...

Chapter Summary

Judge not, and you will not be judged;
condemn not, and you will not be condemned;
forgive, and you will be forgiven.

Luke 6:37

Chapter Notes

oh my goodness, this was so late
so sorry for the delay!

They were arguing. Again.

It was believed by many that the work of a Vatican operative was full of adventure and excitement. In truth, Kate Scott's life more often than not consisted of long periods of routine, even boredom. Her spell with the AX had taught her that rogue vampires were seldom in the habit of seeking out their opponents. Mission successes were far more often achieved by a confluence of small things: stray facts, unwary or overheard conversations, logistical vectors. Kate was all too aware, however, of how the more hot-headed of her underlings tended to grow weary of long and arduous pursuits, broken only the briefest intervals of challenge and danger. She only wished they didn't have to be so bloody annoying in the interim.

They were a volatile bunch, and Kate knew she would be forced to intervene — again — sooner rather than later. In the meantime, she watched the scenery for a little while longer. Through Kate's windows, tendrils of iridescent cloud crept over the white-fanged mountains, which rose starkly, enormously, across her line of sight. The sky was dark — an oily midnight blue, the stars piercingly bright. From her altitude, Kate could distinguish the distant Alpine peaks, row after row of them, endless columns glimmering in their silvery livery.

The trip hadn't taken the Iron Maiden long, Vinci being a little less than fifty kilometers west of Florence.

The landscape glittered beneath her. Kate watched her shadow hastening over the fields and fences and terraced plateaus in the valley below, the land ruched like a ball gown. She threw her gibbous silhouette over the cypresses lined in regiments along the roads and across the frozen canals, darkening the jagged slivers of mirror-like ice. Copses of frosted trees glittered like crystal in the clean, cold air. Their black branches stretched hysterically in every direction, reminding Kate of a central nervous system racked by disease — studies of human suffering anatomized against the winter sky. She flew low, parallel to the lowermost peaks of the now-shattered Apennine mountains and well within radar range of Zecca, so none in Florence would mistake her flight path for an offensive swoop or a stealth maneuver. She had known His Eminence since before her
accident, and was all too aware of the fact that Francesco needed no help in finding excuses to shoot her out of the sky.

The snow had passed earlier that day, the storm that had occluded the sky dissipating. A great vault of clear stars hung over Tuscany with an intent, luxurious brilliance. Sitting amidst the hills, Vinci was a small village, rising above the naked vineyards in terraces of terra-cotta rooftops and circuitous streets. The sharp white steeple of the Chiesa di Santa Croce stuck up through the leafless trees like an admonishing finger.

She didn't see in the same way humans did. Kate didn't have optic nerves anymore: her vision was part radar routed back as visual feedback data and part topological mapping courtesy of the Iron Maiden II's satellite positioning systems. Her consciousness straddled a blurred, fragmented mandala of data patterns and navigational vectors and perceptual-processing modules, an integration matrix organized into a configuration that was optimal for computation.

Iron Maiden... it was almost excessively quaint.

Kate's haptic model, textured to resemble her old self, phased through the bulkhead. The view of the mountains folded and collapsed as her projection shimmered into existence among her passengers, materializing between William and the tall, sneering creature who'd very nearly managed to leave a Petros-shaped grease spot on her nice clean floors. The Vampire's long, bony face rose out of his turned-up collar, the ridge of his cheek-bone, well defined under the slightly hollow temple, throwing spectral shadows across his sallow complexion. His eyes, the color of a bloody sunrise, smoldered behind his spectacles. Kate noted the subtle tensing of his shoulders, the frayed edge of his breathing.

"This is a waste of time," he grumbled in that strange, pre-Armageddon Albionian accent, sounding more than mildly annoyed,

"It seems we have a problem, Kate darling," said William, sensing Kate's unvoiced question. The Professor ignored Alucard completely, much to the latter's snarling displeasure.

Kate wasn't exactly thrilled herself. "Don't darling me, Father Wordsworth," she said tartly, tucking an arm under the other and resting her weight squarely on one hip. "I've already warned you against fighting on my airship—"

"Oh, nothing so exhausting, my dear. Look... even León and Petros are getting along..."

She scowled her irritation. "Only because they found snacks."

The two priests in question looked up from Kate's meager supply of foodstuffs; Brother Petros, she noted, was nibbling half-heartedly on a stale bagel and doing his damndest to glare a hole through her fuselage.

"How can you both eat at a time like this?" she wondered aloud, exasperated.

"If this Knight is to go into battle," muttered Petros sulkily, "then he must replenish his strength."

León snorted; Kate spotted crumbs in Dandelion's stubble, clinging to his jaw like cigarette ash. "Or you're just a nervous eater, Iron Sides."

"I am not nervous!" bellowed the Inquisitor, brandishing half a bagel. Then, quieter: "The Lord does not condone gluttony. I will take only what is necessary to sustain myself."

"This comin' from the guy who managed to stuff a whole loaf of bread, five dried apples, and a
wedge of cheese down his pie-hole before we'd even reached Artimino. Whatever happened to fastin' twice in the week and giving tithes of all that you possess?"

"If ye be willing and obedient," recited Petros as a rejoinder, "ye shall eat the good of the land."

"I dunno if stale bagels and dry cheese count, Gearhead."

León's name formed a curse on Petros's lips. As the two morons continued to hurl abuse at one another, Kate spotted a slight, silver shadow hunched at her promenade windows. She noted, with a twinge of something far more acute than mere pity, that Abel hadn't touched a bite of Petros and León's stash. Other than to turn down her earlier offer of a warm cup of tea, Abel hadn't uttered a word since condemning the Orden for Esther's disappearance.

Illuminated by the starlight streaming through the windows, Abel looked beautiful and dissolute, his gaze fixed firmly on the skies around the airship, seeking movement in the air currents — contrails or updrafts or turbulent whorls of cloud. There was no possibility of Krusnik detecting trouble before the Iron Maiden's avionic multifunction displays, but Kate didn't have the heart to tell Abel that. His self-imposed surveillance was probably all he could do to keep himself from going mad with worry. His was not the grief and fear and terrible anger that roiled suddenly, like a squall, and just as suddenly abated. It was, once the initial shock of pain was over, a calculated thing that grew in a quiet, bloodless way. As though Abel had swept every one of his futile impulses under his cassock, folded them into his flesh like a pair of black, razor-edged wings.

Unable to respond to the immediate emergency while clouded by his emotions, his mind had withdrawn. Still and silent, there was a profound solemnity about Abel. Not the spectacular solitude she had anticipated from a creature of his age, nor the captivating martyrdom of an ancient warrior or even the passionately raw, wrenchingly incandescent haughtiness of his Krusnik alter-ego.

Just... sadness. Loneliness. Kate had almost expected something geological, earth-shaking, like vertigo in a shelving canyon, but Abel's misery managed its profundity because it was so... ordinary.

Just a lonely old man with a broken heart.

A lonely old man who missed his friend.

Abel absorbed the pain of Esther's loss like a sponge, took it into himself, as though in an attempt to bleed the collective suffering from the air. So Kate didn't attempt to reassure him with false, saccharine sentiments. She granted him the dignity of his own process. She had long ago realized that people were liable to retreat to the haven they had constructed through the distorted lens of guilt and shame, whether they deserved it or not.

Abel's capacity for kindness swelled with the fervor of a creature who had once grieved for a woman for longer than most races lived, who loved with the inviolable, unquestioned certainty found only in myth and memory and old fairy tales. But like a religious passion, Abel's love cultivated in equal measures adoration and desperation. It both wounded and healed him, it fascinated and frightened him, it lured him with promise even as it repulsed him with its potential for yet another inconceivable loss. There could be nothing more terrible or wonderful, thought Kate, than to be stricken with love so deeply that one's whole being went out in a pained adoration of the other person, a fierce protectiveness that disturbed and disconcerted as much as it purged and satisfied one's deepest, innermost yearnings.

But Kate knew, all too damnably well, that when a man'd had his soul burned and broken one too
many times, any promise of salvation became the enemy. A man could not be dashed to earth unless he had first been lifted. Having tasted love without the pain of destruction perpetually burning him from within, Abel would sooner choose death over the return to the solitude of a soldier. He'd make that choice in an instant. Life as a killer was unspeakable; life as a killer who had briefly known love was unthinkable.

Abel would bring Esther Blanchett home, or he would die in the attempt.

"Sister Kate? Are you still with us?"

She shook her holographic head, the projection growing momentarily staticky. She was suddenly self-conscious of the fact that everyone was gawping at her... well, everyone except Abel, of course. "I'm sorry. I was... making a small course correction. What were you saying, William?"

"Well..." Father Wordsworth frowned before deliberately lowering his voice a notch for added emphasis: "I thought it would be in our best interests to take some precautions so far as Alucard is concerned."

"Frecţie la picior de lemn," muttered the Vampire, the unfamiliar language filtering away to a low, gutteral gargle between his scimitar-like teeth.

"Deem the effort useless all you like," retorted William, fixing Alucard with a look that smarted like a switch of willow. "I'm not prepared to gamble our lives on the chance you've decided to grow a conscience in a thousand odd years."

Kate's prominent, heavy-lidded eyes rolled sideways languidly. "The effort?"

"Yes, Kate. Alucard has none of the Methuselah's fine situational discriminations, nor does he share Abel's admirable self-control. And given his history of slipping his detail and running amok, I am willing to ensure our safety by any means necessary."

"How do you expect to find that girl if you sink all your energies into collaring me, Professor?"

There was a definite hint of impatience in Alucard's deep, growling voice.

"Collaring him... William, what—"

"I will give you my word that I will not harm any of you so long as the girl remains missing."

Father Wordsworth blew a breath from his nose. "That's not going to wash, Alucard."

"You doubt my word?"

"Yes, I do. Because I'm not an idiot. When you attacked Abel in Florence, Esther managed to hold you in check, but Esther is gone, now. None of us can guarantee your good behavior in her absence." William flattened his hands, palms up. "Without Esther to hold your leash, the best we can manage is finding you a minder who won't get himself turned into a brainless, blood-thirsty monster on the off chance you get peckish."

Alucard's face darkened with anger, but he said nothing as he used his cravat to scrub at a pristine white fang.

Kate cleared her throat. "You mean... someone who isn't... who hasn't..."

"Someone who hasn't been shagged," said León simply, arms crossed, sounding bored. "Someone who hasn't had a good fu—"
Kate clapped her hands over her ears. "FATHER GARCIA!" she shrieked.

"You scoundrel!" gasped Petros, trying to appear fierce despite going pink to the tips of his ears.

"Oh dear, oh dear... in so many words, León," Father Wordsworth sighed, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. "Out with it, gentlemen. Remember the briefing... you all know very well what the... conditions, are. This is no time to be coy."

From what little William had divulged, ancient Nosferatu like Alucard were quite distinct from Methuselah. They were powerful demons created from human virgins drained dry then transfused with the blood of the vampire progenitor, which resurrected the body as a newborn among the undead and perpetuated a lineage.

If the victim had been coitized beforehand, the Nosferatu created instead a ghoul... a walking corpse with a taste for human flesh.

So, Kate reasoned, if the AX assigned an agent to monitor Alucard, whoever they chose would have to be someone who wouldn't be turned into a mindless zombie in the event the ancient Vampire went wild.

Which meant...

Alucard scowled. When he spoke, his voice was muddy. Dark and brown and dirty like tilled soil, filled with wriggling things. "It appears as though you might have to expand your field of candidates, Professor," he snapped, "because none of you are—"

He froze, then, his nostrils dilating, before a tiny, wry smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. The expression had friendly written all over it the same way a plague rat had Give me a cuddle emblazoned on its fur.

"Oh?... I stand corrected. It appears one of you papists still takes his Corinthians seriously."

Kate's hologram had the world's worst poker face: her thoughts floated across it like reflections on a still pond. Her projection glitched, and if she still had blood vessels, she would have blushed.

Who...

León was a notorious rake who also happened to have a daughter. Kate had learned enough of Abel's past to know he had loved someone, once, and William... well. It wasn't William. It wasn't Kate either, for that matter, although her current physical state — or lack of it — rendered the point rather moot.

Which left...

It was absurd how everyone seemed to reach the same conclusion at once. Their heads turned simultaneously to the enormous man resting against the rail.

"Not... a... word," hissed the Chief of the Inquisition, platinum eyes flashing. His beaky, keen-edged face registered a somber and impatient annoyance.

Alucard snickered while León's cheek twitched. "No way. Really?"

Poor Petros went even pinker, which, beneath his head of fine, silver-blue hair, made him look like the world's angriest bushel of candy floss. His voice dropped to a low, grating grumble, and his eyes closed, his forehead scored with furrows of pained concentration. "The body is not for
fornication, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body."

"Shiiiiit, Iron Sides, I really hope this fight don't kill ya before you've even had the chance to—"

If she wasn't sure her hand would pass right through Father Garcia's thick skull, Kate would have smacked him.

The Bureau Director stabbed a finger at León. "I am not having this discussion with you!"

"Me dio vergüenza ajena... how celibate are we talkin' here, Petey? Not even—"

"ENOUGH."

William inserted himself deftly into the conversation before León could run his mouth. "I believe a vow of chastity is expected of all members of the Inquisitorial Bureau."

Father Garcia, the absolute idiot, raised a hand. "Wait... I have a question."

The Chief's nostrils flared like a fire-breathing dragon. "WHAT."

"... Does that include Sister Paula?"

"Yes, it does!" seethed Petros, grinding his teeth together. "And even if it didn't, the Vice Deputy Chief would sooner watch Brother Philippos run the 1,000 meter event than entertain an advance from the likes of you."

León gave a long, low whistle. "This sure explains a lot. Cardinal Francesco and the Blue Ball Brigade."

"Garcia de Asturias, I swear by My Lord God, if you so much as whisper another syllable..."

Father Wordsworth cleared his throat conspicuously. "Kate, darling, may I have a moment? In your office. Alone."

_Thank God and all His angels._ "Yes, William. You may."

Her projection followed Father Wordsworth to a small conference room adjacent to the gondola deck, the walls thick and the doors soundproof. William said nothing for a long while, going to work instead on his ivory pipe, although from where he procured his seemingly inexhaustible supply of tobacco, Kate could only guess. She watched him in silence, her head tilted towards one shoulder as she waited for him to gather his thoughts.

They had known each other for more than ten years, and William had never seemed to her particularly young. He was a man with the folded, faded creases of old post cards and ticket stubs found in a shoebox in the attic. But in that moment, his sad eyes were touched with the shadow of an inevitable grief that waited in the hidden darkness of future time. Kate saw in them the ancient tunes that held the tides in their cadences; sorrows that drew the heart from the body; grief that froze the soul like the distant glitter of snow in the dark of a winter night.

It was, Kate realized, a thousand-year-old stare that rivaled Abel's own.

"This you must believe," began William without preamble, snapping Kate back to attention. He held her gaze with an intent and profound expression. "Katelyn, this you must absolutely believe if you ever believe anything I shall ever tell you. Alucard and Abel must be kept apart."

She frowned. "That may well be easier said than done, William. That Vampire has taken to
following Father Nightroad around like a goat on a halter."

"Kate... blood, to Alucard, is like a currency, bodies, monetary accounts. When he drains his victims, he is, in effect, paying down their ledgers... drinking blood allows Alucard to store a soul inside himself and then resummon it as a... familiar, I suppose you might say. A creature to fight on his side. Until all of his tortured brethren are gone, Alucard can and will regenerate from nearly any injury, and with every death, his strength compounds exponentially."

"You've already made it abundantly clear to all of us that you have no interest in explaining how you know these things, William." She couldn't help it if her tone sounded a little tired. This was becoming farcical, and her patience was fraying. "What is your point?"

"What were to happen if—" he rushed to speak, then composed himself, looked around, and stepped closer to her projection, lowering his voice. "What do you suppose would happen if Alucard were to drink Abel's blood?"

Kate's bowed eyes widened. "You mean... the Krusnik..."

William nodded. "The inferno that has raged in Abel's heart for centuries... the power that has ravaged him and beaten him down and burned away his humanity, would manifest in Alucard as an unstoppable juggernaut of evil, a cruel and ruthless horror bound on a path of destruction and conquest from which none could steer him."

Kate met the shock of William's revelation with an awful, vacant stare, rooted suddenly to the spot. The prospect of such ferocity was so absurd as to be incomprehensible, inexplicable, almost unthinkable. But Kate understood the wisdom in William's words. She knew well enough the ruination of which Abel was capable. Father Nightroad maintained control of his demons through an impressive inner cohesion. Though he led a fragmented, scattershot life, his mind was consistent and his heart was dependable. Keeping the Krusnik under control required from their host a certain humility, restraint, reticence, and temperance, qualities utterly incompatible with the passionate violence of someone like Alucard. The parasites would sooner consume the Vampire than the other way around, and then what would they create?

William was right: if the need arose, Alucard could not be allowed to consume Abel, for their own sakes as well as those of every innocent soul in the Vatican Papal State.

"May I ask you something, William?"

"Anything."

"Is everything you've just told me... everything that you've just told León and Petros and Abel... is it the truth?"

"I would never lie to you," he said piously. Still, Kate couldn't help but notice he acted surprisingly unoffended by the question.

"Then answer me this, Father Wordsworth... Frecţie la picior de lemn. What does that mean?"

He blinked. "Oh... it's a figure of speech. An idiom."

"I heard Alucard say it. Even now, I don't understand the words, despite my having access to every translation software in existence. But you clearly do. How?"

"The language is Romanian," he grunted, though didn't actually answer the question. "It hasn't been spoken since before Armageddon. The first thing that alerted me to the possibility that we may be
dealing with Zamiel, or Alucard, was that Esther was muttering Romanian in her sleep."

"This coming from the report Abel sent Caterina?"

"Correct."

Kate shook her head. "If it had been me, William, I wouldn't have left the Palazzo Spada until I'd wrung every last cryptic detail from Abel Nightroad's skinny neck."

"I wasn't strong enough for that," he confessed. "My curiosity got the better of me."

"A dead body in Florence, a vampire on the prowl, Sister Esther having strange visions and speaking in tongues... at what point does curiosity become concern, Father Wordsworth? You didn't want to find out what was really going on?"

"That's exactly what I wanted, Kate." William stared at his hands where they rested on the top of his cane, careful in choosing his next words, his voice heavy with irony: "And therein lies the problem. Despite the delicious mystery of it all, I think... a part of me was afraid of pursuing it, of having to face whatever facts might come of light. Whatever the truth was, I didn't think it would make the forthcoming conversations any less difficult. I'm not sure why, but I was certain of it."

"And you're certain of it now?"

"I don't know," admitted William. "But I was then."

"So you caught a ride on my airship, closed your eyes, and plugged your fingers in your ears."

He winced. "You could say that, yes."

"It's all just another experiment to you, isn't it?"

"Kate..."

"A girl is dead, William! Another is missing... a sister of the Church, no less! And you're a bigger bloody fool than I thought if you haven't realized by now that both instances are connected to Alucard!"

"Oh Kate... of course I know that. I know Alucard killed that poor Florentine girl — whether out of hunger or malice or sport, I couldn't say. I also know Sister Esther's connection to him is likely the reason she's been taken from us."

For a moment, Kate felt as though she had been sucked into an aileron roll, clenching against a vertiginous lurch in a stomach she no longer had.

"I ought to toss that fanged brute off my ship," she breathed, voice quivering.

"Abel won't let you. Nor will I, for that matter."

"And why not!"

"Because fate and foul luck both have thrown a line between Alucard and Esther. Their minds, their hearts, and their souls are laid bare for the other's perusal. Alucard's memories, Esther's dreams, are the bricks on the bridge connecting the Vampire's life to the girl's consciousness, uniting his body to her thoughts, and hers to his. Abel needs him—"

"To find Sister Esther," finished Kate, her words small.
"Yes."

"And even if the Vampire isn't able to sense her whereabouts..."

William exhaled. "The AX can use him to bargain for Esther's life, should Abel's worst fears prove true, and we're forced to confront Rosenkreutz."

His hands were clenched into fists, his cane clutched in a white-knuckled stranglehold.

"Are you alright?" she asked, gently.

"Yes." He raked his fingers through his hair, disheveling the already messy brown thatch even further, then, at her silence, changed his mind. "No. No, dearest Kate, I don't think I am."

"There's more, isn't there? Something you're not telling us... telling me. What's wrong, William?"

It took a while for him to get the words out. Kate could see the forces warring within him: the one that wanted to be open and the one that hated to tell her things she wouldn't like. When he spoke, it was hurried, almost feverish. "I'm sorry... I can't..."

"It's something about Alucard, isn't it? You know, you've been a little off ever since we brought him aboard. William, what's going on?"

"I can't tell you."

"Or you won't."

"Kate—"

"You're hiding something, Father Wordsworth. If you won't tell me, then at least tell Abel and León, before they put their lives on the line. Tell Caterina."

"I can't," he said again, eyes downcast.

The room fell quiet, a long heavy silence that roared in Kate's not-ears, drowning out the thrum of her engines. Questions wriggled and writhed in her mind like terrified bait minnows in a bucket.

"Don't you trust me?"

"Of course I do," he said, firmly. "But I am not so selfish that I would think to heap more worries upon your shoulders. I won't ruin your life more than I already have."

"William. William, look at me."

She raised her eyes to his, slow and sincere, bracing herself for indignation or coldness — but Father Wordsworth was already rapt, his glacial green gaze somber beneath their thick black lashes, stripped of all their usual aloof, academic distance. They were as clear as seafoam glass and full of something not unlike Abel's own unspoken apology and grief and yearning — as well as a tenderness Kate had never seen in them before.

"You are not a burden, you silly, stupid man. Not to me. I only want to help you."

A strange look crossed William's face, his breath leaving his throat in unsteady surges.

Kate wished she could take his hand. She wished she could smooth her thumb over the cracked, dry surface of his knuckles. She wished she could know again the clean, salty, evergreen scent of
him.

Her situation was, she supposed, an erstwhile unimagined interactivity between technology and consciousness. She was 57 meters tall and weighed 550 tons. She could level a city or raze an empire or obliterate hundreds of lives. She flew close to the sun but felt no warmth on her face, brushed snow-capped mountains and raced storms, but felt no wind in her hair. Compared to the capacity to eat, to drink, to see, to touch, to smell, to hear, to make love... without her mouth, her eyes, her fingertips, her nose, her ears, her existence was... difficult, at times. It wasn't just the disembodiment: it was a cognizance of her own omniscience coupled with a suffocating isolation. All she perceived was the raw data, the algorithmic outlines of forms and figures devoid of their human sensoria. Kate's consciousness had become periphery hardware, the interface of a virtual world that extended far beyond the scope of a single mind.

If sheer volume accounted for anything, then she was, technically, even more machine than Father Tres.

But Kate did not despair. She acknowledged her difficulties, took them into her heart, but she did not pity herself.

It had been William who made her into what she was.

And it had been William who had, in doing so, given her the chance to *live* again.

She had long ago repented of her ingratitude. Kate Scott wasn't sure what she had done to deserve such a profound gift, and though it was insolent of her, she had stopped thanking God for her second chance.

Because William Wordsworth had given her everything that was best in him, everything he was.

The only remorse she had was that she'd wanted to give him the same thing in return, but, of course... couldn't.

Not anymore.

"I suppose I ought to get back to the wheelhouse," she said, when several minutes had passed, and their shared silence grew uncomfortable.

In response, William tipped his head back, looking like a man in the throes of some deep, internal battle. "Kate..." he murmured, still in that odd posture. His voice saying her name in the darkness made her projection jolt almost as much as the odd way he was staring at her across the distance that separated them.

But Kate shook her head. *Silly, stupid...* "Your secrets are your own, William," she said coolly. "If you have nothing else to say, then I must prepare to face Rosenkreuz."

"I..." he hesitated, then: "No. No, I won't keep you, Kate."

A nod.

But before her projection could rematerialize on the bridge, alarms began to blare throughout the ship. A static charge saturated the air, causing Kate's hologram to glitch. It was as though a searchlight had caught the dirigible, freezing the *Iron Maiden* in place, feedback biting into the ship's sensors and by extension, Kate's own eyes and ears. Her monitors were awash with searing blue brightness, as if a revelation were about to take place. For a moment, Kate couldn't read her own instruments. The incoming signal held the aircraft in its grip, keeping Kate suspended above
the small village.

A memory surged, then, unbidden...

*She thinks, at first, that one of the Orden's rounds has punctured the hydraulic system in the rear of the cockpit, causing crimson-colored fluid to spew from the severed cables, spraying all over her arm and leg from behind her head. Kate reaches up to locate the source of the leak and feels, to her muted, detached surprise, something soft and folded resting on her shoulder.*

*Touching the thing, its texture like a slick piece of putty, stirs the hardened sediment of her soul, chafes against layers of horror and panic.*

*It's her ear.*

*Kate's fingers skate higher... over hair, mangled flesh, lengths of a stringy, twine-like substance she thinks is a ligament, the shattered edge of her orbital socket, the tapioca-like texture of a minced eyeball...*

*A good portion of her face is hanging from her skull, the skin sloughing off the bone like braised meat. She is stunned to realize that what she thought was hydraulic fluid spraying under the pressure is really her own blood, more than she ever thought possible. Her face is sliced open from eye to ear. The bullet exited only a quarter of an inch from her spine. She probes at the back of her neck and her fingers find the ragged exit hole...*

*Her nails are blunt and dirty with oil and grease and burning and — the airplane is on fire. Canvas curls and fuel ignites, the console sparks with exploding circuitry. There is smoke in her throat, thick and black, and she can't breathe. Flesh withers in her nose and she realizes it's coming from her... she's cooking, boiling alive in her seat. Dancing embers blacken skin and roast bone. Kate howls and no sound comes out because her face is gone and she writhes and she is dying, dead, and—*

"*Kate! Oh, Christ, no no no no... Katelyn, dear, answer me! Come in, Kate!*"

*Someone is screaming her name, weeping...*

Kate shook her head.

"*Cap? Yo, Kate, what's goin' on?*" León moved towards her projection. "*You just fuzzed real bad on us.*"

Interfaced with the airship, only Captain Scott could sense the interference coming through...

"*Someone is flooding my communications array.*" She said nothing of the memory.

"*Rome?*" queried William, worry writ large on his features.

"*No. Lady Caterina uses a very specific call sign. This signal is far too aggressive to be coming from the Palazzo Spada.*"

Brother Petros sucked air through his teeth. "*Damnation,*" he muttered, which troubled Kate almost as much as the override of her integrated command and control systems.

Curses carried weight to a man as pious as Petros. Something was wrong.

Right on cue, one of the terminal screens flashed to life, revealing the furious face of a tall, silver-blonde man, robed and statuesque. Francesco di Medici, Duke of Florence, straightened as he
surveyed Kate's company before his piercing gray gaze, as cold as hoarfrost, landed on Kate herself. He stared at her with the barely suppressed wrath of a man to whom entirely too much had happened in entirely too short a time.

Kate wished she were a swooning sort. It seemed the only way to wriggle free of the situation. Unfortunately, no matter how hard she tried to summon a faint, *Iron Maiden II*'s computer kept her mind intractably conscious.

"My Lord Cardinal!" she squeaked. If she had a heart, it would have dropped into the pit of her stomach.

The Duke of Florence slanted a look at her — his gaze was filigreed with red from where his eyes caught his vestments. He spoke with a menacing sneer while his large frame shook with fury. "*Captain Scott,*" snarled Francesco. "*Rome, I think you'll find, is in the other direction.*"

Before Kate could say a word, she sensed a figure draw alongside her. "Ah, Cardinal di Medici," mused William, the greeting rendered amiable by the *flaneur* flippancy of speaking around the stem of his pipe, "have you any news for us from Florence?"

"*Professor Wordsworth...*" Francesco's tone was dry, but not *quite* as sneering. "*How long as it been since last we had the chance to speak? It seems like only yesterday we discussed the dreadful business concerning that traitor, Havel.*"

"Oh, it's been a couple of rather uneventful months on my side of the divide," riposted William.

"*Odd... for a sensible man such as yourself to ingratiate yourself with Caterina and her cavalcade of meddlesome dalcops. Even more surprising that an agent of your reputation is here mopping up the AX's mess instead of cutting the problem off at the head.*"

"Decapitation isn't my style, Your Eminence," he answered, his tone grim and hardened, dangerously calm. "If you've really been keeping such excellent tabs on the AX's activities, as you boasted when last we met, you'd realize that."

"*You really are rather remiss when it comes to that part of your calling, Professor,*" tutted the Duke of Florence cruelly. "*Haven't the stomach for killing, have you? One can't help but question your conviction.*"

Kate sensed a sadness stirring in William at Francesco's comment, deep, deep down. A sadness that had no immediate reason, that just was.

"*So make yourself useful, Professor: put your estimable scientific mind to the task and give me one good reason why I shouldn't have the military base at Castello di Signa blast you all out of the sky!*"

"*Because the Minister of the Doctrine ordering the execution of four of Lady Cardinal Sforza's AX agents would irreparably sour relations between the Inquisition and the Ministry of Holy Affairs, landing the Vatican in an unpleasant and quite likely violent contention for power which would rend the Concistoro in twain.*" William considered. "*Not to mention it would ruin my day.*"

Kate realized the Professor's mistake at the same time as Francesco. She shrugged her shoulders, conquering the urge to shudder. *Four AX agents,* William had said. The Cardinal's gaze bounced from the Professor, to Abel, to León, and, finally, to Kate. Thankfully, Alucard had had the good sense to move out of range of the terminal cameras.

Francesco was quiet for a long moment. He began to breathe heavily. "*Where is Sister Blanchett?*"
he demanded.

Kate sensed how loathsome it was for him to ask, but God help her, it was infinitely worse to have to answer. The Duke of Florence didn't care a fig for the girl, and even he knew that the child had all the guile of a lamb, but Francesco's natural irritability had ripened into the fruits of suspicion and paranoia, and for all the man's irrational delusions of persecution, he was quite right.

Esther Blanchett was, conspicuously, absent.

"She's restin', Eminence," interjected León, raising his voice and giving a wave. "Down in the berths. Been a tough couple a days on the little lady, and Cardinal Caterina wants us all in peak shape, ya know? Demands nothin' but the best, that one."

León's face held a carefully-neutral expression that, below the surface, was a mixture of genuine earnestness, uncharacteristic professionalism and, most unusually, the suggestion that his intention had not been to scupper Francesco's inquiry into Esther's whereabouts. Where half an hour ago Kate had had to keep herself from strangling the Hispanian agent, now she fought the urge to kiss him.

Wanting the Cardinal's mind on other matters, León had deliberately invoked Caterina's name, bringing the Duke of Florence's half-sister and his fiercest rival back to the fore of Francesco's attention.

"That Caterina..." he seethed. "This isn't Milan! She has no authority to order air maneuvers of combat-capable dirigibles in Tuscan airspace!"

William's knuckles crunched on the head of his walking stick, but only Kate noticed. "You'll find that Lady Cardinal Sforza is acting on orders from His Holiness the Pope, Eminence."

"And I know she was behind that little stunt, too!" raged Francesco, his face almost as red as his robes. "She is an arch manipulator who plans for all contingencies, even the demise of her own people... her skewed, fraudulent belief system has taken root like a rotting fungus within the heart of the Vatican! The AX's very faith has been pinned down by Caterina's ill-intentioned motivations, her incongruent and disputable forethoughts, as she entices her people to devious machinations that gnaw at the very foundations of the Holy See's power!"

Kate trembled with righteous indignation, her hologram growing snowy. What insanity would lead him to believe that Caterina possessed the power, much less the motivation, to commit such evil! As if the AX's own distresses were not enough, the very nature of their work called for them to take upon themselves the suffering of others...! How could Francesco fail to see that? The agents of the AX had an irresistible compassion for the down-trodden, the sick, the wretched, the wronged, the outcast. They went out and sought all who were enmeshed in the toils of vice and guilt. No distress was too great, no sin too appalling for the AX's pity. If any creature fell into disgrace, the Lady Cardinal's agents would sacrifice their own honor to shield him, and take his shame upon themselves.

But extremism of Francesco's stripe blinded him to such facts. His outlook was a detriment to everything but war, tribalism, and the consolidation of the Minister of the Doctrine's own personal power. He strove only for the narcissistic vindication of his ego and will. He destroyed what he could not convert. He annihilated those he could not control. Men like Francesco di Medici would find no peace in life, no love, and so inflicted their own pain and misery and malignant stupidity on the rest of the world. His rhetoric bound people together, but only by stirring the darkest excesses of their souls; his was a language of hate and intolerance, fear and conspiracy, and the need, always, for vengeance.
Cardinal di Medici could talk about casualties and collateral all he bloody well pleased, but it was Kate's deep-seated opinion that violence itself was a crime; that the killing of one child, the burning of one village, the dropping of one bomb sunk them to such depths of depravity that there was little use bickering over the particulars.

"Please... do not to speak of Cardinal Sforza in such a way, Francesco."

Kate felt a chill run down her spine. She clenched her teeth, forcing her eyes to the tall, imperious priest with the silver hair. Abel Nightroad squared his shoulders and straightened his back as he faced the Duke of Florence, carrying himself with an air of loyalty and paradoxically serene self-assurance, startling Kate with the implicit need for some form of retaliation in his expression. There was a hard gleam in the priest's eye as Abel went on:

"We are on the same side, Your Eminence," he said, a little hoarsely, though only those who knew him well would be liable to notice, and Kate doubted Francesco cared enough to make the effort. "Obedience to the Lady Cardinal does not imply, as you seem to suggest, the abdication of our autonomy or the acceptance of a foreign will or judgment in place of our own. Our holy duty is not an act of submission, but one of affirmation, a sanction of our faith. The AX's convictions and judgments are your own, Cardinal. We serve the same God."

Francesco's expression changed slowly from suspicious to sneering to a thorny, murderous kind of fury. He steepled his long fingers in front of his mouth. "The problem with sycophants," he began, his usually booming baritone growing thin and poisonous, "is that they don't know where to put their tongues. Here is a suggestion, Father Nightroad: try behind your teeth. With your mouth shut."

They regarded each other with a hostility so well disguised it was plainly visible. Despite the Cardinal's strong jaw, aristocratic nose and palpable aura of charisma, Kate could sense the rabidly foul beast lurking within, awaiting the opportunity to lunge for Abel's throat.

"We are following a lead on the Florence homicide case, Eminence," she recited, having practiced the fib a number of times inside her head. "For the sake of expediency, Lady Cardinal Sforza ordered the Iron Maiden II to Tuscany to ferry—"

"Such poor excuses ill-become the Vatican's best pilot," the Duke interjected archly. "Why have you crossed the Montalbano, Captain Scott? Is it to rendezvous with Caterina's undercover ship, perhaps... her secret left hand in her treachery?"

"Cardinal Sforza dispatched no other aerial support craft from Rome," she protested. "I confirmed the induction order with the Palazzo Spada not an hour ago."

"Induction orders can be falsified."

"If I may speak, Eminence..."

Petros's words resonated like a weighty bell in a sepulcher. Something in the timber of his voice, an almost diplomatic insolence, gave the Cardinal cause to examine Il Ruinante's gaunt face searchingly, perhaps even desperately. Kate pressed one corner of her mouth together in hesitation.

The Chief Inquisitor brandished his high-frequency carbine lance like a boar spear, saluting his superior before bowing deeply, lowering his forehead until it was almost in contact with his knees — no small feat, considering his height. His long blue locks curtained his face as he intoned:
"Captain Scott has given me no reason to doubt her loyalty to the Church and His Holiness, Eminence. Her words are true, and her covenant is trustworthy."

Kate blinked owlishly. "P-Petros...?"

The Cardinal looked down at his Knight with an expression too scornful to be pity. "Zecca air traffic control contacts the Palazzo Riccardi with reports of an unregistered, radio-silent cruiser in Vinci airspace, and then Caterina's blimp just so happens to turn up in the same area? Forgive me my suspicions, Brother Petros."

An odd discomfort settled over the Chief's face. "It is not my place to forgive my betters their trespasses, Eminence... merely to love and obey the Lord my God and keep His requirements, His decrees, His laws and His commands, always."

An unpleasant bark of laughter. "Do you really think the AX shares your convictions, Bureau Director?" The Cardinal's viscerally deep voice caressed the ear like warm blood and honey, a sensation at once captivating and repulsive.

"I know only what I know, My Lord... that is to say, I know nothing of evil respecting their characters — nothing that can be substantiated, at least, and until lying tongues can prove their slanderous accusations, I will not believe them. And I know this... that if these men and women have committed errors, they are only such as are common to all those who have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

Kate's company exchanged glances, stunned.

"Crazy bastard sure holds fast to the hill he's dyin' on..." muttered León, to whom the obvious was worthy of comment. Kate's appraisal was far more sobering: Petros Orsini wore his honor much like his armor. As much as it protected him, it weighed him down in equal measure, and made it hard for him to maneuver.

"Therefore, allow me to return to Florence," boomed Petros. "With Father Wordsworth."

William arched an eyebrow. "Oh?"

She didn't miss the look of suspicion that came into Francesco's eyes, or even the speculative gleam in Alucard's, observing from a shadowy corner of the gondola deck. It made Kate's vision dim.

The Chief ignored them all. "We will apprise Your Eminence in person of the state of the investigation. And if Sister Kate's crew makes a move against Your Eminence's person..." Petros's pale, high-cheekboned face, his proud nose, thin lips, silvery eyes, betrayed nothing of his thoughts when he intoned, with an almost obscene degree of calm, "then may I respectfully suggest eliminating Father Wordsworth."

"Hey hey hey, what gives, Gearhead—!" demanded León, but William held up a hand for silence. The latter's gaze slid over the former's bewildered expression, his mouth curving a little, before he settled into the role of cordial gentleman with an insolent familiarity that temporarily robbed Kate of coherent thought.

"I accept the Inquisitor's proposal," said the Professor benignly. "And you, Cardinal?"

That rabid beast glared out of Francesco's eyes, loose... but, at least, muzzled. "I have no objections," he snarled, looping his hands behind his back.

Kate was so overcome with nerves that she thought she could actually feel her skin shrinking,
pulling against bone and muscle, slowly suffocating her, which was patently ridiculous. Still, the mere suggestion of using human lives as insurance was repugnant to her. Perhaps it was because she no longer had a body of her own, and overcompensated for the fact, but Francesco's callous disregard for life scratched at her brain like a hot needle.

Nevertheless, she saw the logic in Petros's proposal: William offering his life to Duke of Florence as collateral would guarantee the AX's freedom in investigating Rosenkreutz's connection to Sister Esther, and get Francesco off their tail in the meanwhile. Kate hated the sophistry and fastidious algebra of the Inquisition's negotiations, but she recognized a purpose in it, and accepted Petros's unspoken promise that he would keep William safe in Florence.

With one last, lingering sneer, Francesco's astringent expression faded from the viewscreen. William took a deep breath, and exchanged a glance with Petros which Sister Scott could not decipher.

"Darling Kate," said the Professor, "would you be so good as to set myself and Brother Petros down near Empoli?"

"William," murmured Abel, swaying on his feet, half in a daze, "you don't have to do this…"

"Nonsense, my friend. I have *Il Ruinante* to look after me. And besides…" William Wordsworth's young-old eyes glittered with an inner light as his gaze swung towards the shadowy figure by the promenade windows, wrapped in his crimson broadcloth coat…

"Alucard will be coming with us."
Each confirms a prison...

Chapter Summary

But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.”

Peter 3:14

White.

Cold and dry, as brilliant as the heart of a nuclear blast, and as soulless. The kind of white she remembered from when she stood up too quickly and the blood drained from her head, blotting out her vision. The white of coward's feathers, of a nascent pre-dawn, of fresh snow. Of Ion Fortuna’s hair…

The air was murky, the light like a raw wound in the grimy flesh of a beggar, the rags of the clouds clotted with creamy foam. She stood upon a flat expanse as limitless as the night was long, with only the occasional burst of pain behind her eyes to provide a distraction from the bleak and lonely landscape. Everything was the color of filthy snow and the gray cement of prison walls — water stains, like giant ink spills, eating into them — an ashy patina enveloping her body. Her head hurt terribly.

Esther Blanchett wondered if she was dead.

On the one hand, she certainly felt dead.

On the other hand, this couldn’t be heaven, on several counts. For one, Esther didn’t think she deserved it. For another, despite the white, featureless void, it didn’t look it. And for a third, she doubted that the rewards of the blessed included a drunk, groggy feeling in one's head, any more than those of the damned.

The white nothingness began to recede. The gradual reappearance of normal daylight, tepid and watery though it was, blinded Esther like a lance of sunlight after an eclipse. She shut her eyes tight, seeing spots. She sensed the restoration of gravity: the impression of lying flat on her back quickly established itself as she felt her weight drop towards her spine, pooling in the trough of her ribcage. Slowly, Esther reopened her eyes, blinking through the crustiness on her lashes. Hazy impressions coalesced into a view of a dark stone ceiling, high above her head, the scenery framed by an oblong rectangle, the width narrow near her feet and wide to accommodate her shoulders. A container of some sort, she rationalized blearily, with the lid off. Tilting her aching head, she looked to one side, and then to the other. It took several moments of sluggish assessment before the truth struck her, morgue-cold.

"Oh God," Esther gasped, heart drumming its dread, "I’m in a coffin."

She fisted her hands, her fingernails rasping against the grainy texture of cold stone. She couldn't move her arms and legs more than a little, leather straps fastening her wrists and ankles to the sides
of her casket-like prison. The slabs, like pavers, were freezing on her bare back.

_Bare back…_

"Where," asked Esther, speaking into the silence, hurling terror into the shadows, "is my habit…"

Panic soon siphoned out the memories — the dreams, the Black Dog, Petros and León, the library… _Dietrich!_

A moment of sudden, uncontrollable fear flapped through the hollow corridors of her mind as erratically as a bat, Esther’s pallor growing pale and damp with sweat. Her hands tightened around the edges of her restraints. For several long, horrifying seconds, terror roiled nauseously in her belly at the thought of Dietrich’s damnable strings fastening her in place, but the harnesses smelled of tanning agent and wet velum, with none of the slicing keenness of garroting wire. In an effort to remain calm, to ground herself, Esther tried to think about how, even after she let go, her palms would still smell like leather and salt. She concentrated on imagining the scent — it was far easier than paying heed to the terrible sense of foreboding threading to blot out any and all rational thought.

Even without his strings, the memory of the Puppet Master's perfectly-white teeth and hawk-like eyes, watching her with their characteristically lascivious intent, as though he had been feeding on her and was trying, and failing, to hide how pleased he was at the taste, made her heartbeat quicken.

Esther attempted to lift herself out of the coffin, but the leather buckles held her fast. Instead, her eyes darted around in erratic little zig-zags, taking stock of her environment and immediately regretting it: she was in a shallow-vaulted chamber, like an inverted cathedral or basilica.

No… less like an inverted basilica, Esther corrected herself, and more like a crypt: the room was surrounded by vaulted stone arches that penetrated the floor of the apse and rose within the presbytery to the height of several Abel Nightroads standing on each other’s shoulders. Crepuscular rays of dim, gray light illuminated the chamber's interior, shining through long, low windows high above her head, no wider than the slits in a castle turret. With little in the way of fresh air, the stagnant aroma rendered the huge room dungeonesque. The rectangular space was equipped with a speaker’s stand in the center that served as both lectern and pulpit, aisles around an elevated central nave and an apse at one end. Esther's box rested in the nave... like a coffin on a communion table.

Aumbries honeycombed the walls — sets of recessed cabinets which housed horrors that made Esther's toes curl. Torches illuminated shackles, iron baskets, various prods and knives and whips and other instruments whose purpose Esther didn’t know — and didn’t want to know. Body-cages, iron maidens, roasting-seats, racks, boxes like the beds of wagons, windlasses fixed at each end, not to mention tangles of chains intended to fasten the wrists and ankles of the damned to the walls. A score of other, more elaborate torture devices reposed in the aumbries around two great stained and scored tabletops.

Esther was a voyeur to an equivocal glimpse of diabolic machinery, rendered in the chiaroscuro.

She was flat on her back in a stone coffin.

She was restrained.

She was alone.

Esther canted her eyes down.
She was completely naked.

Cold coiled through her, lacing each breath with clouded wisps of frost.

"Oh, no..."

Not good. Not good, not good.

Esther didn’t know how long she lay there wriggling, attempting every Houdini-esque trick in Abel Nightroad’s not inconsiderable repertoire. After a while, she grew wise to furtive little sounds coming from the far end of the chamber. Nothing loud — no more than the occasional scuff of a heel on stone, the occasional grunt of soft, thoughtful consideration, what Esther thought was the breathy whisk of pages fanning open.

She looked up, but saw little beyond a circle of light shining through from between the arches. She called out, with far more bravado than she felt: "Dietrich? Dietrich! Honestly, stop skulking in the shadows like a little cockroach..."

Someone — not Dietrich — chuckled ruefully.

"Oh dear... were you expecting someone else? If so, I'm sorry to disappoint you."

Esther heard a book snap shut. She couldn't see the speaker, but she apprehended the immediate stillness of his form drawing close to hers.

"On the third terrace of Dante's Mount Purgatory," continued the quiet, reedy voice, "the souls purging themselves of their wrathful dispositions are forced to walk through a thick, acrid smoke that is darker than night. Unable to see the outside world, the penitents experience hallucinatory visions in which they perceive the virtue of patience. I wonder... did Haman the Agagite, crucified upon the third terrace, dream of Queen Esther? Agnus Dei... Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis... dona nobis pacem..."

There was something vitally important fossilized inside the man's words, some nugget of truth which Esther tried, and failed, to sift from all the literary musings. Some wound that had been kept dressed for too long and had started to fester and grow fetid.

She managed to raise her head, ignoring the throbbing ache in her skull. It was though a mist had lifted its curtain off the floor; stepping into the circle of light was the robed figure of a monk, a man slight but muscular, short but well-postured. His cassock was a flame shade of pomegranate, the ripeness of a blood sacrifice on the brink of decay. The dim sunlight scaled the prison's back walls, curving up from the east, tracing the man's bobbed black hair. His dark eyes were the color of a sewer rat's, beetle-like and glistening, but slack lidded, his expression so serene it was almost bored.

He... wasn't what Esther had been expecting. He wasn't some muscle-bound behemoth wearing a hood and a bespattered blackweave apron or carrying half a dozen pincers and brands about his person.

"Dante subsumed everything, and so, in a sense, secularized nothing," he went on, his voice lowering with a conspiratorial furtiveness. "Did you know, the Church redacted Dante's vision of Hell to give the faithful something to fear? Before La Commedia, the dew of repentance washed clean the stain of sin. Now, it's all languishing in boiling pitch, roasting inside flaming sepulchers, and tearing naked bodies apart piecemeal with one's teeth."

The mere mention of nakedness enflamed Esther's cheeks, acutely aware of the man's unimpeded
line of sight. Mortified and acting on instinct, she went to shield herself, but the restraints held firm. The best Esther could manage was an awkward turn onto her hip, pointing her elbows inwards so as to cover as much of herself as possible.

Shame washed over her, piping hot and pulsating, as the air touched her bare breasts and the dip in the small of her back. She closed her eyes. An instant later, she opened them again, terrified of what the stranger might do when she wasn’t watching. A sob caught in Esther's throat at the thought.

The man eyed her in an odd, detached way, as if she were an interesting piece of furniture. Esther didn't know what to make of it, but she felt awkward and embarrassed and so terribly vulnerable. He allowed her her squirming without comment, the crimson of his robes glinting in his eyes, like red lanterns strung along the dark border of his thoughts. Esther thought she might wither away on the spot. She began to breathe heavily, tense and coiled, her chest heaving like a pair of bellows. Her legs and arms began to tingle from being held in that one position for so long, but Esther ignored it — or at least, tried to. The irritating shiver of frayed nerves started at her ankles and began working its way up her shins and to her knees, causing them to knock together.

The monk's glance down was far too swift to be a leer. "Unlike most of my brothers and sisters, who have abstained their entire lives from the indulgences of the flesh," he cocked his head, "I am a recent convert, and I can say quite truthfully that you are nothing I haven't seen before, Esther Blanchett."

"What is this place?" she demanded, stoking the meager stirrings of her courage with indignation.

"We are close to the city of Florence, at an installation whose exact location I am not at liberty to disclose at this time."

"Who are you?"

"Is this an existential question?" He gave a small shrug. "I know you don't mean to upset me by appearing to be rude but, honestly, you didn't think I would be offended by your inability to recognize a familiar face?"

"I've never..."

"Think hard, Sister."

His expression was arresting, sensitive... balancing ferocity with calm and courtesy in some strange, inexplicable way...

Like...

Almost like Brother Petros...

Then Esther began to remember.

She remembered blood on her ravished hands, none of it her own, kneeling above an awkward rend in the ground, a part of her wanting so much to bury herself under the dirt, where she belonged. A broken rib had been digging into a lung, making breathing difficult. She barely had the sense to clutch her friend's dead body to her breast before her limbs buckled with weary finality, leaving Esther curled upon the snowy sod, whispering wretched nonsense to the girl cradled in her arms. Esther remembered letting herself topple backwards. She had welcomed the blunt thud of her head striking the icy earth, welcomed the precise pain of the broken things digging indifferently into her back, welcomed the cold of the gray flakes landing on her face and freezing her tears to her cheeks,
welcomed any agony that momentarily distracted her attention from the gnawing cancer of her helplessness and grief.

Snow had covered everything, but had cleaned nothing…

“Are you all right?” a man had asked.

A man… a man dressed as an inquisitor…

Esther was assailed with a squirming sensation in her stomach that made her want to turn her head sharply to the side and vomit. Perhaps the body had its own memory system, like the invisible meridian lines León always talked about during their combat training. Perhaps the flesh was unforgiving, and every cell, every muscle and fragment of bone remembered each and every assault and attack. Maybe the pain of memory was encoded into her marrow and suffering swam in her bloodstream like a torrent of hard, black pebbles. Esther lay motionless in her coffin, paralyzed temporarily by the trauma of having to relive the death of her beloved friend, Shahrazad al-Rahman, the Countess of Babylon. At last, she managed to galvanize herself into action and fumbled for the leather clasps, trying to work loose the complicated folds and buckles.

"None of that now, Miss Blanchett," the monk admonished. He dipped his head until they were staring directly into each other's eyes. "So tell me, Lady Saint... is it coming back to you now?"

"Yes." Esther wet her lips, dread building like a lead weight in her belly. "You work for the Department of Inquisition."

"Very good. My name is Brother Matthaios."

Matthaios... disregarding their brief encounter in István, Esther was familiar with the man in the worst possible respects. He had been the Inquisition officer who arrested Lady Caterina on the suspicion of being allied with the New Vatican. He had captained the Jahoel and came dangerously close to reducing the Iron Maiden — along with Abel, Tres, and Cardinal Antonio Borgia — into a fiery ball of wreckage over innocent Roman citizens. He had led the assault on Tallinn which very nearly caused the deaths of three thousand innocent Estonians. Before entering the Church's service, he had slaughtered thousands of civilians at Gibraltar during the Siege of Morocco.

The man was a maniac.

"The Moroccan Demon," she breathed.

Esther seemed to have hit on a sore point for Matthaios. His voice hardened a fraction of a degree. "I don't like that name. I am but a soldier of God, working for His will." He sounded like a missionary, explaining the wisdom of the Lord to the infidels.

Esther decided then and there that she preferred Petros's shouting.

"It wasn't the Orden, after all," was all she said, muttering to herself, her words barely audible. Unfortunately, Matthaios heard her.

"Is this the Dietrich to whom you were referring? Dietrich von Lohengrin, no? Also known as Marionettenspieler of Rosenkreuz Orden... and a childhood acquaintance of yours, unless I'm much mistaken. You keep interesting company, Miss Blanchett."

Esther countered his queries with one of her own: "If you're an inquisitor, then am I to understand
you're acting on Cardinal di Medici's directive, Brother Matthaios?"

She had heard the Duke of Florence's name frequently of late. The Inquisitorial Bureau fell under his direction as Minister of the Doctrine. She remembered with wretched clarity what it had been like to be the sole focus of the man's attention back at the Ospedale degli Innocenti, and it had terrified her. The Cardinal's notions of negotiation revolved around the conviction that the best route to justice lay in the grinding of one's enemies into the ground so thoroughly that the very fact of their ever having existed would be forgotten upon the first gust of winter wind.

But Matthaios merely looked off to the right and said, again, "I am not at liberty to say."

She scoffed. "Of course you aren't."

"And I'm not sure I like you asking the questions, Sister." He folded his arms over his chest and returned his gaze to her. "This is an inquisition, after all."

"Father Nightroad... Lady Caterina... they don't know I'm here..."

His lips twitched. "That would rather defeat the purpose, Sister. Besides, the AX have an irritating habit of sticking their noses into matters that more often than not do not concern them. There is no love lost between me and your agents, you see." He gestured to the scar on his forehead, peeking out from under his level hairline. "León Garcia de Asturias gave this to me, you know, during the Occupation of Tangiers. I still rather resent him for that."

"What do you want with me?"

"With you? Nothing. From you? Why... a confession, of course."

Alarm knifed through Esther. "Confession..."

He must have inferred her agitation at his request because he cocked his head to the side, his gaze thoughtful.

"Well, I would prefer you confess either right now, at this very moment, or in, say... a week? A week and a half? A fortnight approaches the threshold of my boredom, and you're unlikely to survive any longer than that."

Esther could barely breathe for the thunderous beat of her heart, but Matthaios pressed on with all the dignified seriousness of a man discussing his favorite lasagna al Forno recipe:

"Miss Blanchett, I’ve been asked to extract your confession by any means necessary, and while those means might be far from pleasant, none can fault them for lacking in effectiveness."

"You’re going to torture me."

"I don’t like the word torture."

"Neither do I."

He laughed: a not-unpleasant sound, rich and throaty like rocks in a tumbler, his rattish nose twitching. "Completely understandable. Do you prefer interrogation?"

"I’d prefer if you let me go."

"Luke 12:15, Miss Blanchett: Take heed, and beware of covetousness. Let us not get greedy. The Inquisition has, apart from the methods and severity of results, remained a live institution for
centuries, since before Armageddon. The remedial aims of interrogation persist ad hoc in polite society, and not even as a matter of shadowy subterfuge confined to the dungeons beneath Castillo San Angelo. However, to assume that, due to our far more public face, we no longer employ the more… objectionable techniques, is an outright fallacy.

"In short, young lady, if you don’t cooperative within the next few minutes, the next few days are going to be rather difficult for you."

Esther harrumphed, tone acidic in an effort to mask her incredible fear. "Is this the part where you say it will wound you as much as it does me?"

Matthaios blinked. "Why would I say that? This won’t hurt me at all."

"Torture requires empathy, too, you know," said Esther testily. "How do you intend to inflict pain without realizing what is painful?"

"Practice, Miss Blanchett. A sizable amount of practice."

Her head snapped back from the slap before she’d even realized Matthaios had moved across the room. The pain was enervating, the purely physical sensation of his knuckles biting into her skin, flesh crunching between bone. Blinking to hold back the tears that threatened to fall, Esther lifted her chin and ignored the throbbing in her cheek as the inquisitor retreated across the platform and immediately took to staring at her, sleepy-eyed.

"Your mentor hit you like that once, did he not?"

Esther’s face burned from the strike and shame both. "That's none of your business," she said in a small voice.

"Did you enjoy it?"

The words drove a rod of ice through Esther's chest. "What?"

"Do you enjoy pain, Miss Blanchett?" he reiterated.

"I don't—"

"It's a simple enough question." Matthaios's taciturnity was too obviously thoughtful to be sincere. He knuckled a hand and rested it under his chin. "It does well to get these things right. Contrariwise to common opinion, the subject does possess tremendous power in certain respects, particularly in regards to the stimuli. One's reaction can render an experience either miserable or joyous, a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. An interrogation can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal.

"Let us say," his gaze drifted somewhere past Esther’s shoulder, towards the… implements, hanging from the honeycombs in the walls, “hypothetically, of course, that when the Father struck you in Carthage, you liked it. Oh, it hurt, of course... but it also felt rather nice. Cathartic, you might say. Did you know, both Carthage the city and catharsis the noun share similar linguistic roots... kathartikos and karkhēdónios. A newness... a purification, a purging, a release." He shrugged his bony shoulders. "As I said, pure hypothesis."

Esther swallowed. "Of course."

"But then again..." he mused with great patience, "my doctoral degree is in the theological dimensions of textual and exegetical study, and I believe all hypotheses must be subject to
examination. Academia is nothing without a little lively debate, no?" He looked at her and tilted his head very slightly in amusement, before pointing to the wall. "Do you know what that one is, Miss Blanchett?"

Fighting against the restraints, she turned her head. "A collar," she murmured, her tongue going dry.

"Correct. A circle of iron — we use silver for vampires, of course — and on the inside a hundred points as sharp as needles. This clever contrivance is fastened about the neck of the heretic. She cannot walk, nor sit down, nor stir without the neck being punctured by the collar's spikes. The throat, by virtue of infection, begins to swell, and suffocation soon ends the agonies of the subject. And what about that one?"

Esther's eyes seemed to move under the energy of their own morbid curiosity. A set of nine knotted thongs of cotton cord hung from one end of a cudgel. It made a limp birch branch look as soft as silk by comparison. "It's a whip," she whispered. Her own voice horrified her — a jagged, rasping sound, like she was speaking through shards of broken glass.

"A cat o' nine tails, to be precise, though it is not oft used, I'm afraid," said Matthaios. "You'll find flagellation is the practice of a bygone time. More’s the pity. Flogging, beating, whipping... the dissolving, uniting forces combine what to us have been otherwise incompatible: attraction with repulsion, darkness with light, the erotic with the destructive, pain with pleasure. Divine humiliation and suffering conjoined with an arrogant triumphalism. If we allow these opposites to meet, they raise our inner resonances to a fever pitch, move us towards a sublimity we cannot name." He blinked at her. Despite their black color and blank texture, his eyes were as bright as brass doorknobs. She had never realized Esther, seen such burnished light in such dark eyes. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"I... I don't enjoy pain."

Matthaios smiled. "To be frank, you didn't really strike me as the type, but I have been wrong before. And forgive me for saying so, Sister, but you have such a tendency to court danger and despair that one can't help but wonder to what degree, if any, a certain carnal attraction has to do with it. You are an AX agent, after all. Lady Cardinal Sforza's department was built, no... designed, to glory in destruction, when it is considered appropriate. You have no doubt found, as you are rightly and properly supposed to by virtue of your station, an awful beauty in both the weaponry of war and the violence and devastation which that weaponry is capable of inflicting, and yet you understand that the attractiveness therein stems from a kind of insecurity, an unappeased yearning for catharsis. The perfectly articulated purity of the AX's purpose throws into sharp relief the paucity of the moral vision such a purpose implies."

"You're wrong! It is the sacred duty of the Ministry of Holy Affairs to resolve international situations through peaceful means!"

"These so-called peaceful means are, I suppose, the reason you have taken to keeping a sawed-off shotgun hidden under your petticoats, Sister." Matthaios released an indulgent sigh, prolonged enough to be patronizing. "Nothing in this world operates the way you think it does, Miss Blanchett, because the Lord hath made all things for himself... even the wicked for the day of evil. Governments are not empowered to protect you, military forces are not there to serve you, institutions of higher learning, colleges and and seminaries, are not there to educate you. The entire superstructure of civilization in our world is a combination of brilliantly put together and well-planned schemes to direct the minds of the people in such a way as to serve their masters. The Inquisition conquers, the Church conquers, we conquer, because faith conquers. But the victory
belongs not to the Inquisition, the Church, or ourselves, but to God. And God's victory means defeat, humiliation; it means God's derision and wrath at all human pretensions of might. The thorns that God sent to curse the earth’s rebellion twist around our brows — without the suffering of moral remorse, there would be no catharsis."

Esther drew in a breath, refusing to allow Matthaios the satisfaction of her terror, and waited until he’d run out of words before she lifted her chin another notch. "Why are you doing this?" she demanded, her voice quiet, though not as ravaged as before.

"I am trying," he said with great care, "to ascertain what your place is in the events about to transpire, and to act accordingly. And... I want to learn more about you, Miss Blanchett. Call it a professional curiosity."

The world seemed to tilt crazily on its axis. Events about to transpire... Esther tensed inwardly as she reflected that the monk never would have made the glib comment had he known already the details of Esther's strange dreams, the terrible headaches, that Black Dog...

"My dear colleague, Brother Petros, with whom I believe you are familiar, is the old-fashioned sort, far more partial to shouting and snarling and breaking bones... not to mention making good use of our mutual friend, the cat o' nine tails, on the wall over there. But for one such as you, Sister, for whom pain constitutes kathartikos, catharsis, and is shackled as a matter of course to morality, to guilt, to the slow working of the hormones in the moist midnight of your innards, Petros's methods would waste time I do not, at present, have in abundance."

Catching her suddenly by the chin, his hand hinging out with alarming speed, Matthaios tipped Esther's head back and feathered his thumb across her quivering bottom lip.

"What, then, of pleasure... the release you seek? The exquisite restitution you crave? The satisfaction at having the Father strike you across the jaw? Even if I, at this moment, elected to break my vows of abstention, even if I regained a modicum of my old stamina, and I engaged again in what was once my greatest delight — to be felledated by one such as yourself — what then? Do I feel shame? Do you? Is it humiliation enough to force you to talk? And if so, how long must the caper continue before I'm assured of your sincerity?"

As the insinuation behind the words seeped into her brain, Esther's stomach dropped. Blinking alert like a feral cat, she went silent as she searched for words to poison the arrow of her outrage and indignation.

Matthaios gave her an indulgent tilt of the head. "You needn't look at me so, Miss Blanchett... I take my oaths very seriously. Far more seriously than you, I suspect."

"You're wrong," she hissed.

"Am I? How easy it would be for a lamb to lose herself in the eyes of a wolf that first time," mused Matthaios. "She would be unprepared. She would be frightened. Her little heart would pound. Blood would flow to her limbs. Her breathing would catch... and quicken. Perhaps the wolf would consume her. I think in most cases, he would. Yes." His chuckle exited Esther's hindbrain in an unpleasantly reptilian way. "But this lamb possesses something that arouses the wolf's curiosity... and makes him hunger for something more than meat..."

Matthaios wasn't very tall, shorter even than Father Tres, but peering up at him from the floor of the coffin-like container, Esther thought he was the biggest man in the world. He tilted her chin so that the dim daylight shone on her wet face. She felt his fingers trail along the bruising on her cheek, continue their slow journey along her throat, over the harsh contours of her clavicle, seeking
to arouse those things locked in the back of her mind and buried deep in the depths of her soul. Esther's shivers reached such a fever pitch that it was as though the very stone beneath her were trembling, aching under her nervous weight.

Then Matthaios ventured lower, seeking any loose thread he could pull on…

Esther strangled her urge to scream as her hand was crushed in his. She dredged up the scattershot memories of her AX training and in so doing forced the wail back into the darkness from whence it had slithered, denying the manifestation of the pain. Instead she blinked, just once, a simple staccato slap of her eyelids.

Esther glanced at her hand, saw her pinkie finger bent and twisted ninety degrees in the wrong direction, palm slick and sticky with her own blood.

_Blood on her hands… Matthaios… Oh, Shara…_

"I've found that recalcitrant people have thin, hollow bones, Miss Blanchett. They can be broken in half without issue. They snap as easily as those of birds and children." He drew alongside her container, resting a hand on its edge. "Do you know what this is?"

"A... a coffin."

It was enough to elicit a dry titter of amusement. "How very droll. No, my dear, the soul of the Inquisitorial Bureau is comprised of many things, but poetry is not one of them. This is a flotation tank, a device which is commonly used for restricted environmental stimulation therapy. They've been known to relieve stress and ease muscle tension. They can also help improve your mood."

Esther frowned slightly. Though the pain in her finger was agonizing, she forced the air out through her nose, slowly, trying to stifle the urge to sob. "That sounds—"

"Pleasant?"

"I was going to say disarmingly benign."

"Oh, they are. I've used the tank myself. However..." Matthaios clasped his hands behind his back, and Esther saw the barest shift in his demeanor. Though his eyes lost none of their cruel gleam, they took on a weight that chilled her to the bone. "We will not be using the tank for therapy today. Let us, instead, examine another hypothesis... human consciousness, I believe, is the process of continually forming a model of the world. In particular, the brain receives sensations from the eyes and inner ear to triangulate where we are at any given moment in space and time. However, when the signals from our eyes and ears are in contradiction, we become confused about our location. Indeed, the line between perceiving and hallucinating is not as crisp as we like to think. In a sense, when we look at the world, we are hallucinating all the time. One could almost regard perception as the act of choosing the hallucination that best fits the incoming data, which is often fragmentary and fleeting. Both hallucinations and real perceptions emerge from the same set of processes. The crucial difference is that when we are perceiving, the stability of external objects and events helps anchor them. When we hallucinate, as when we dream or float in, say, a sensory deprivation tank, objects and events are liable to wander off in any direction.

"And I am very curious to see where your mind may wander, Miss Blanchett."

Shock and anger registered on Esther's face as he closed the distance another tight inch, until their noses were almost touching and she could smell something akin to wilting roses on his skin.

"Confess, Sister Esther," he ordered her calmly, almost gently, "to being a witch, to conspiring
with the Tsala Methsaluth, to scheming with your vampire masters and the Rosenkreuz Orden — with your old friend, Ibn Lohengrin — to bring ruin to the Vatican." With a slow, deliberate movement, he pushed his hand into the fall of her hair, wrapping a thick strand around an index finger and wrist. His voice dropped, deepening. "You know… I've always adored your hair, Sister. The color of blood at its most fragrant and powerful. But… regarding the matter of your confession…?"

"I've done none of those things!" she protested, trying to wrench her face free and failing, her words foundering and drowning in the tide of Matthaios's indifference. "I am a Deputy Enforcer of the Ministry of Holy Affairs, sworn to protect the Holy See! I don't even know what I'm supposed to be guilty of!"

"Conspiracy, high treason, witchcraft, sedition... I could go on."

"Treason—! Brother Matthaios, call Cardinal Sforza, please... she can explain everything! I swear in God's name, I'm innocent!"

"Ah, my dear, but God is omnipotent. If you are not guilty, He will perform a miracle and save you. But until such a time, perhaps a different topic of conversation might jog that shaky memory of yours. Tell me what you know of Vatican Section XIII, also known as the Iscariot Organization."

"I..." She blinked.

_Blood and tongues of fire above the oil-slick river and the Burning City... an infinite scream passing through the world... a Shadow with arms like long ivory ropes frayed into hands, leading her down to the water, where they sat together and shared the nightmare's silence..._

_The fires raged, painted the sky black with ash and exhaust. The streets were reddened with the blood of the men and the women and the children. The sun rose behind a sky filled with plumes of dark smoke._

_And at dawn, three birds rose from the Burning City. When they opened their eyes they could see the stars clearly, though they could not see the ground below..._

Esther's sudden, terrible migraine made her head feel far heavier than it was, the fiery shadows of her old nightmare burning behind her eyeballs like smoking coals. The pain was, for a moment, so severe, it felt as if she were going blind...

"I don't... I don't know what Iscariot is."

Matthaios merely tutted. He seemed not to notice her sudden fit. "Some would consider the refutations of a heretic madness. The same words, spoken in sanity: treason. Yet, with you imprisoned within this cell, I find it hard to discern the difference. What is truth? What is lie? God alone knows, for by my soul, I do not. Still, I have my ways of making an educated guess."

“If you’re really from the Inquisition,” said Esther, her quiet, trembling voice more violent than any scream of rage, "then I demand to speak to Brother Petros. He will vouch for my innocence."

Her dogged demand provoked something like a faint smile on Matthaios's face. "The Bureau Director? Really? Do you know, you must be the first person in the history of this institution to request the ministrations of Il Ruinante. He doesn’t tend to be very popular among our subjects, you see."

“At least he’s not a psychopath like you!” she snarled in a hollow whisper.
“No?” asked Matthaios innocently, his voice shifting location to somewhere behind Esther’s head. “Even by my standards, Miss Blanchett, that man’s methods are cold and often needlessly messy. Did you know that it's said the stain of innocent blood can never be removed?” His tone was light, that of an old friend talking away the hours. “It's not true, of course. I've tested the theory many times, and blood is blood, innocent or otherwise. And let me assure you, Petros Orsini has spilled so much of it here, in this room, than your vampire associates could never hope to glut themselves on it. So, no... for our purposes, I think it best if Brother Petros were not involved. Now then... your confession?”

"I've done nothing wrong!"

"Very well. You'll be pleased to know that the water has already been heated to skin temperature and saturated with magnesium sulfate, which will allow you to float. Though your restraints will, of course, keep you from moving."

Esther squirmed. "Wait, what water—"

Without warning, very nearly severing the tip of Esther's nose, the lid of the tank slammed shut, trapping her in utter blackness. The smell of salt and lathed brass burned her nose. Temporary panic and permanent desperation struck her all at once and flared in her mind in such an ashen, desolate light that her eyes began to ache. She tried to get up, but her lack of strength and the extreme push being exerted against her body caused her to collapse. The leather harnesses held her fast.

And then, Esther heard the unmistakable sound of running water...
Among the lowest of the dead...

Chapter Summary

To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence;  
their foot shall slide in due time:  
for the day of their calamity is at hand,  
and the things that shall come upon them make haste.

Deuteronomy 32:35

The whole world closed around her, like an iris. Everything went pitch black in the few moments before her eyes adjusted.

Esther tipped her head back, until the waterline rested just above her eyebrows. Her hair fanned out like auburn-rusted anchor chains. The restraints had just enough give to them to keep her from drowning, allowing her to bob serenely on the water's surface... a brain in a vat of formaldehyde. The weightlessness was disconcerting, but not entirely unpleasant; the ties fastening her wrists and ankles to the sides of the tank reminded Esther of hands holding her to earth, a child's fist clutching the string of a runaway balloon. She wanted to rise, to float higher and higher until she bumped against the lid of the tank, rise up like a cloud and float away, melt into the damp air and dissolve.

"Matthaios," she whispered, breathing into the darkness.

Though the water was warm, a chill settled into Esther's bones, and her teeth began to chatter. She wanted to huddle into a fetal position, to pull her knees close to her chest, but all she managed was an awkward, jerking motion like a beached fish. She let out a sigh, the sound stuttering. With every slap and splash of cold salt, a stifling numbness began to stiffen her neck and arms.

She supposed her habit and petticoats, even a swimming costume, would have disrupted the density of her float. Still, Esther hated how exposed she felt, even with the lid of the tank closed. The water, agitated by every tiny movement, beat against her ribs at irregular intervals, with no end in sight. It lapped in tides of tiny waves, like a broken watch, a large black clock with a white face and a silver second hand, carving up the hours in awkward, misshapen slices. Each second floated away slowly, until the passing hours had been evacuated from her confinement along with all the light and sound and color. Matthaios must have administered vitamins and stimulant while she was unconscious, because Esther didn't feel tired or hungry. Aside from the dull ache of her finger, the taste of copper and salt and sweat on her tongue, the slight chafing of the restraints, she felt...

Nothing.

Just a gloomy, glassy gravity coupled with a shallowness slow and smooth, like water off a warm pebble, polished by the tides.

A memory surfaced, suddenly, of a summer day spent by the Danube, the river a pale ribbon tossed across the hazy, humid landscape of István, bifurcating the hilly Buda district from the flat Pest. Swarms of fat, green blowflies, orbiting at the edges of the water, had harassed the novices to the point of insanity, biting at their skinny ankles through the fabric of their stockings. Esther, too afraid of drowning to venture into the water, had been skipping pebbles and watching the currents
carve tiny tributaries around a large black boulder. The current carried a piece of driftwood, its journey interrupted as it jammed against the stone. Dead leaves, logs, and branches caked with mud coagulated around the log, damming the river; weeds began to settle, and soon the birds were making nests among the blossoming water plants. Then, after the rain, the Danube rose and the floodwaters washed the wood away. The birds departed, the flowers withered, the branches broke free and drifted downstream.

And all that remained in the river was...

"The stone," murmured Esther. *Stone.* Perhaps it was the specter of Matthaios’s presence, an echo of the circumstances surrounding their past encounter during the D'Annunzio scandal, or even her memories of safer, happier times spent by the Danube, but Esther pictured, for a moment, Shara’s soft jaw and pert nose, a perfectly-proportioned face that looked as though it had been carved from obsidian, still and serene. Diaphanous on the edge of dreaming, the memory radiated an enormous dignity, an uncanny seriousness — a warmth, like sunlight on shale.

*Be the stone.* It sounded like something Shara might say.

Esther was struck with the impression that she was in the presence of apparitions which were not at all related to her world — the driftwood and weeds and wading birds choking the river around her. The rush of blood in her ears became, after a while, the buzzing of the botflies, their steady hum a noise straight out of Hell itself. The stagnant air and still water of the tank exuded an aura of dissipation, of pollution; Esther's fear of drowning, of suffocation and being swept away, returned to her in a sudden, stifling surge. A part of her knew she was losing track of herself, infinite fractions of solitude and silence splintering in a crystalline regression. Some instinct, a tiny voice that sounded like Shahrazad al-Raman’s and Bishop Vitez’s and Abel Nightroad’s warned her to fight the impulse, but in the end Esther could not help herself.

She looked up.

Her eyes were playing tricks on her, but on the low ceiling of the tank slithered what appeared to be a mass of wormlike bugs, scuttling upon an uncountable number of hairlike cilia. Each was the width of her broken finger. There were so many that they swarmed over each other until it was hard to tell if the lid of the tank was solid at all, the stone itself hardly anywhere visible. Hundreds of wriggling, writhing shapes twisted in hellish contortions of agony, swarming as thick as maggots on a week-old carcass.

Esther groaned, squeezing her eyes tight against the hallucination, shivering frightened and miserable. She clenched her teeth and tried to focus on floating, trying not to think about the chitinous insects pouring in tar-like rivulets onto her heaving chest, trying not to imagine a tangle of clammy, clicking legs crawling en masse into her mouth and gnawing at the soft flesh of her throat and suffocating her…

The pressure increased, stealing over her, a sense of envelopment, a shift in perception. Esther swore she could feel the air thicken. Pain lanced along her temple from where Matthaios had struck her. She tried to move, but couldn't. Her limbs were frozen, trapped in her nightmare. She shuddered as she thought she felt a ghost of a sigh caress her cheek. Cold air wafted through the tank as faces flashed before her eyes — some she recognized, like Brother Matthaios and Cardinal di Medici and Dietrich Von Lohengrin, grinning out at her as though their mouths and eyes would discharge a swarming, fetid mass of insects of their own.

Other faces were strange and unfamiliar — one of them belonged to a long, slender man with a crown of fine, champagne-gold hair and eyes so blue they made her own look dull by comparison.
Esther knew that strangely vacant face, but the recollection refused to manifest. There was about him a curious, almost godlike air of simplicity and stillness. He reminded her of an apparition, Hermes with his winged feet. The stranger inhaled deeply and his eyes were suddenly half-lidded with some ambiguous emotion, caught halfway between disinterest and desire.

A small part of Esther's mind — her last and only refuge in the feverish welter of her thoughts — went on insisting that it was all an illusion, consequent of the sensory deprivation: that if she could only endure for long enough, she was bound to wake up.

But when a pearl of water, condensation from the humidity, landed on her cheek, Esther fought to stifle a shriek.

"Be the stone," she murmured to herself, voice trembling. "Be the stone."

*Promise me we'll stay together, dear one.* Shara’s eyes had been the clear silver-purple of a perfectly transparent pool. They were eyes to swim in, to float in, forever. *You and me, Esther.*

*Be the stone.*

"I promise," Esther heard herself say.

And the words dropped and drowned, dead weights, in the heavy humidity of the air...

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**Three Days Later**

"No."

Cardinal Sforza took up the cord of her monocle and fixed the glass rigidly in her eye. She tried to muster resolve, but she knew frustration was evident in the cement clench of her jaw, impatience clear in the intermittent tap of a fingernail against her lacquered console. The Duchess of Milan sat in silence for a time, allowing her anger to steep until she was well and properly saturated.

"No?" she parroted, daring her subordinate to repeat himself.

Abel Nightroad's face on the monitor had a grayish cast. Quietly defiant, he intoned: *"I'm afraid I can't return to Rome at this time, Caterina."*

Her eyes wandered: to Abel's left, León stood tight-lipped, his arms folded over his chest, his face tense and angry. Hovering at the edge of the screen, Kate's holographic projection flickered in stunned bewilderment, draped eyes passing from Abel to Caterina and back again like she was watching the world's highest-stakes game of table tennis.

Fortunately for them both, they knew well to keep any opinions to themselves.

"It's been three days, Abel," reiterated Caterina, rallying her dwindling forbearance. "Unless I can furnish the Concistoro with a satisfactory explanation for the *Iron Maiden II*'s presence in Tuscany, then I fear my peers will move to decommission service and ground Kate indefinitely."

"An AX agent is missing. Surely that is reason enough."

"You know that alone won't be sufficient to assuage my brother." Caterina's waspish retort came on a rush of rising bitterness.

"Then apprise His Holiness of the situation."
"I will not drag Alec into this, Abel," she spoke with a slow, steady emphasis on each word, "I have already done everything within my generous good sense to stall an assembly on the matter, but the fact remains that Iron Maiden is a warship, armed to the teeth, with every weapons system on standby. Francesco's voting bloc would be justified in reading the AX's expedition as an indication of aggressive intent."

"You will not drag Alec into this..." repeated Abel quietly. Behind his spectacles, his eyes shone cold. "I seem to recall you harboring no such reservations when you had His Holiness intercede on your behalf at the mortuary, Caterina."

The monstrosity of Abel's accusation left Caterina momentarily speechless. She took a deep breath and looked away from the monitor, drawing strength from the pale pink blaze of Rome's setting sun. The season was dark, the hour late, the sky a cold gunmetal gray awash with rose from the fading daylight.

Caterina tried to remind herself that Abel was anxious and hurt and very likely beside himself with worry for his protégée, but that didn't keep her seething frustration from stirring a maelstrom of irrational emotions, the most notable of which being a bitter, resentful anger.

"If you wish to remain in Florence, Abel," she said at great length, her fingernail now digging into the console with enough force to scratch the varnish, "then you need to give me a reason, one that will assure the College of Cardinals of the AX's good intentions. I need more information. What happened? Has Esther been kidnapped, held to ransom? Are you being threatened by someone?"

Abel's face appeared to grow paler with each question. A panicked mania flared almost imperceptibly on his lips, a feral little curling of his mouth; in the azure of his eyes there lurked the insanity of grief.

But he remained ominously silent.

Caterina spoke slowly, finding the words with difficulty, "Abel... you know who took the girl." It was not a question.

The priest bowed his head. "Caterina, please... don't make me lie to you."

"Lie..." breathed the Duchess. Then she continued, ice cold: "I see. I'll wager you have your reasons, Father Nightroad, albeit ones you do not find me worthy of knowing."

"I can't tell you," he said softly but bluntly, his words waterlogged with self-contempt.

Caterina's knuckles had gone bone white. "You can, at times, be terribly heartless."

"You've only just noticed?" murmured Abel. He pushed his spectacles up his nose. His fingers were trembling a little, his face flushing, like a delicate vessel of alabaster filled to the brim with molten slag. Caterina wondered if the reddish tinge to her friend's eyes was simply the reflection of Kate's bridge controls...

Or something... someone else.

"Of course not... I know you too well," chided Caterina softly, her words pained. "Abel, I know the way you move, the way you fidget when you're nervous, the sound of your laughter. I know the way you try to pretend that something doesn't bother you when you're very bothered indeed. Please, my old friend... let me help you."

He looked as though he wanted to cry. "Don't. Don't, Caterina. Don't implore me to tell you the
*truth when it will be a mercy to hide it from you.*

Caterina said nothing, going as rigid as her crosier.

There was such anguish in Abel's expression, such acute feeling in the beautiful eyes of the young man she had once adored, that Caterina felt as though her innards were pressing on her ribcage and twisting her middle into reef knots.

Abel's arrogance rankled her. Worse, he suggested that his falsehoods were a considerate move for the sake of her security, conveniently disguising his overemotional, irrational, *dangerous* fear for that wretched Sister with a thin veneer of gallantry that was, as its best, irritating, and at its worst, insulting.

He was protecting her... *they all were.* The only reason León and Kate as well as Abel had held their tongues was to allow Caterina her plausible deniability, so that when Cardinal di Medici confronted her in the Apostolic Palace, she could very truthfully deny knowledge of any damnable actions committed by her agents.

She fought the urge to put a paperweight through the console.

*I am no longer that frightened child seeking shelter in Lilith's crypt, Abel.*

But Caterina knew, deep in her heart, that she would always be *exactly* that to him — just a scared, lonely little girl, someone he barely knew yet felt the responsibility to protect.

No... Abel had never been hers to lose. Still, the sense of despair remained, a lanced boil on her soul.

"Return to Rome, Father Nightroad," she ordered him quietly. "The AX will regroup at the Palazzo Spada, where we will decide how to proceed with our investigation into Sister Esther's disappearance."

Caterina spoke as if her intentions were as clear-cut as the prayers prescribed for the morning's matins, but hers was only the barest palm reading of a plan, a desperate gambit to maneuver Abel back into her orbit. She knew it.

Abel knew it, too.

His lips twisted and his eyes closed. "I'm sorry," he said again, his words a whisper, "*but she's my partner, Caterina. I can't leave until she's been recovered.*"

Whatever benevolent, sympathetic emotions Caterina might have felt for Sister Esther simply came and went without gaining a foothold. Kindness required nerves, connections, sensory input, where she was as numb as frost on a cold metal surface. And tired.

Terribly, terribly tired.

Caterina sucked in a breath, trying to quell the sandpapery cough that threatened to skitter up her diaphragm.

It was impossible for her to be indifferent to Abel Nightroad. The moment she ceased to pull against him she felt a tug towards him. The moment she ceased to shout him down she began again to listen to him with warmth and tenderness. The moment she tried to be fair with him she began to grow uncommonly fond of him.
But when that affection had passed a certain point, Caterina couldn't help but think it took on the tragic and menacing grandeur of an illicit love affair. She brought upon herself the unhappy restlessness of longing, ever straining after the unattainable, doomed to never know the end of all her earthly hopes and wishes.

How despicable she was. How cruel.

"Abel Nightroad, look at me."

Caterina only had cause to use her friend's full name every so often, and now was definitely one of those occasions. He seemed to know it, too, for he obeyed immediately, winter-blue eyes falling open.

"You have diverted the Iron Maiden from her preapproved heading, inciting the wrath of His Eminence Cardinal di Medici and the entire Ministry of the Doctrine. You have patrolled the skies over Tuscany for three days with nothing to show for it save wasted fuel, frightened villagers, tense clerical officials, and an enraged College. You have forced Father Wordsworth into a position which might very well compromise his safety. You have wasted the time of both Father León and Sister Kate when their energy and efforts would have been far better spent searching for the murderer in Florence."

Kate's eyes went wide. "Eminence...!"

"I am not finished, Sister Kate." She turned again to Abel, her words seeping between clenched teeth. "Because of your blatant disregard for your own life and the lives of your fellow agents, you have become nothing but a puppet to your passions, a court jester who believes that he has no choice other than to jerk and twitch to every martyrish impulse that crosses his mind." Caterina spoke with freezing clarity, each word like a dousing from a bucket of ice water. "You are selfish, Father Nightroad, and because of your vanity, you have grown blind to your duty to the Church."

And your duty to me, Caterina did not say.

"An AX agent who will not obey a direct order is but a blunted blade, Abel... purposed to be whetted or else substituted with something sharper. Father Wordsworth will continue the investigation in your stead. In the meantime, I expect you to report to me in the Palazzo Spada by tomorrow, or there will be steep consequences."

Caterina didn't give Abel time to respond. She switched off her monitor, and was left staring at her reflection in black screen, her voluminous head of blond curls and immaculate crimson vestments belying her wan expression, stricken with the off-gray, sickly pallor of the chronically ill.

After taking a moment to collect herself, Caterina turned to face the audience on her second monitor, a man who had been watching the preceding conversation in clinical, cold silence. It was doubtful Abel knew their exchange had been monitored.

"He is bold, but reckless," said Caterina aloud, knowing the figure on the screen would not interrupt her. "Brave, but impetuous. A person who, against his better instincts, holds grudges and keeps promises far beyond the point of reasonable resolution." Pausing, she finished at a whisper, "He would risk his life to save that girl, without sparing even a second thought for himself or his colleagues. Stupid... stupid..."

The diminutive man on the screen cocked his head a fraction of degree, something akin to interest growing in his scope-like eyes. "Positive. Abel Nightroad is unpredictably overhasty in matters which jeopardize the health and safety of Esther Blanchett."
"He is noble," said Caterina with a small, sad smile, "but I made no suggestions as to his common sense. Desperate persons share an affinity for flirting with danger: an infectious case of morbidity fetters them to self-destruction."

"Your descriptors do not analyze, but I understand My Lady's meaning. Answer: what does My Lady intend to do next?"

"Me? Nothing... I have too many responsibilities that demand my immediate attention. You, however, are going to retrieve Abel."

"Please clarify... 127.89 seconds ago, you ordered Father Nightroad to return to Rome with Dandelion and Iron Maiden."

"I didn't attain my current position by being a fool," she murmured. She covered her eyes with a hand and sighed heavily. "I commanded Abel to return to Rome against his wishes, so, naturally he will turn his back on me and head straight for the proverbial door... just as he did when Noelle was killed. God's truth, he is the only man alive I never wish to make my enemy. That is why I'm asking you to do this... as my friend, and as his." Her skin prickled. Pressure built in her head. Her pulse beat in her ears. "Do you understand me, Tres?"

"Positive," intoned the copper-haired android, one Father Tres Iquis — the Gunslinger. "New orders acknowledged, My Lady. I will return to Rome with Father Nightroad. And if he resists?"

"Do not kill him," was the only condition she gave. Caterina's lips pursed, pulled taught by the same tender sadness that seemed to trail behind her as doggedly as her gratitude and her guilt.

"Please, Tres... bring him back to me."

Elsewhere

There were times when William Walter Wordsworth really felt his age.

Though he did well to hide it, the terrible excitement of the last few days was beginning to take its toll. His nerves were shattered, and his legs shook incessantly, weak and tired. He'd been forced to rest a good portion of his weight on his ivory-headed walking stick to keep from having to sit on the slushy steps.

What was worse, there had been no word from Kate regarding the whereabouts of Sister Esther, and the Professor had no doubt Abel was working himself to near-catatonia trying to find her. The Father had mourned his murdered lover for 900 years — so far as vices went, while he certainly wasn't lacking in patience, he was, perhaps, in precious want of some perspective.

The boy loved far too fiercely, affirmed William. Like lighting a matchstick with a supernova...

As though to commiserate with his foul mood, the afternoon had broken gray and dull, the sky pleated with airy ribbons of cloud that hovered lightly over the city, making everything look ancient and murky, the chilling air thick with mystery.

There was one positive, thought William grudgingly. All things considered, the briefing with Cardinal di Medici that morning had been surprisingly cordial, if a bit frosty. The Duke of Florence had, naturally, demanded to know the reason for the Iron Maiden's jaunt to Vinci, to which William had provided an ostensibly truthful — if heavily redrafted — account of "following tips" and "going where the evidence led" and "exhausting all avenues of inquiry" and other such investigative platitudes. He had said nothing of poor Esther's vanishment or Alucard's unfortunate
involvement in the entire mess, the latter making himself mercifully scarce during the tense meeting at the Palazzo Riccardi.

Being the far more verbally deft of the two, William had done the vast majority of the talking, with Brother Petros offering the occasional grunt of noncommittal affirmation. The Chief's head could have been in an anxious fog and his stomach reduced to a knot of coiled eels and neither William nor hot-headed Francesco would have been any the wiser — Petros's superior got nothing from the inquisitor's face and less from his words.

Il Ruinante seemed to respect the Minister of the Doctrine's authority but tolerated the man's less than agreeable attitude as just one of Francesco's more unfortunate foibles, and indeed, the Duke of Florence's professional connection to his own Inquisitorial Bureau sometimes struck William as being like a piece of ancient kitchen soap worn to the shape of Francesco's hand, but which had been dropped on the floor so many times it was never quite free of the dirt and detritus of the Cardinal's shoes — a thing molded by disciplined use but sullied by slippery disregard.

Speaking of the Inquisition...

"He's been in there praying for half an hour, now," came the low snarl from William's right.

Alucard, disguised as a black, bristling deerhound, radiated a salty fetor of fear so strong it hung heavy in the air. Combined with the Vampire's natural stench — some nauseating cross pollination of sulfer, an abattoir floor, and wilted, acid-dripping flowers — he left in his wake a foul miasma of dead bodies and rotting meat, crumbling courage and ill intentions.

"He said he needed to seek guidance."

"Either the Lord isn't answering him, or the Knight Templar won't shut up long enough for God to tell him to go fu—"

"Well! Look on the bright side... at least it stopped snowing."

Alucard growled.

The Professor glanced up at the basilica. Compared to the polychrome marble panels and massive dome of the Santa Maria del Fiore and the intricate frescoes adorning the Basilica di Santa Croce, the austere stucco of the Santo Spirito was relatively unremarkable in appearance. The walls were a rough, off-white plaster, the front of the church interrupted only by an untraceried oculus just under the eaves. There were no sharply pointed spires, intricate sculptures, or ribbed vaults. The large wooden door at William’s back, the middle of the three marking the entrance, was propped slightly ajar — a sign of open worship. Though William had elected to remain outside to mind Alucard, he couldn't resist a peak inside.

A marked juxtaposition to the exterior, the interior of the Santo Spirito swelled with hypnotically rhythmic arches and columns. The dark pietra sera contrasted sharply with the light stucco. Across the apse and nave, the smooth, cold, neo-classical faces of saints and apostles stared down like a gallery of solemn magistrates presiding over the Underworld. The gray daylight streaming through the oculus haloed one of the altarpieces, an image of the Madonna del Soccors: the sight of Mary’s beatific serenity, even as she lifted a bloodied cudgel over her head, drove the breath from William’s chest even as the Virgin drove the devil from the innocent child.

Somewhere out of the Professor's line of sight, a small choir was singing Salonen's Dona nobis pacem with no sense of performance or judgment, their tones mournfully forlorn.
And there, crouched before one of the empty benches, his forehead pressed to his hands, was Brother Petros. The huge man had, evidently, struggled to wedge himself between the pews, for he knelt at a cater-cornered angle to the baldacchino. William could see the inquisitor’s lips moving, but the enormity of the nave, the melancholia of the choir, swallowed the Chief’s words.

He looked strangely tranquil — a profound humility in his prostration, a gentle peace in his prayers.

William marveled at the studied elegance of it all. No motion occurred which did not quietly contribute to the dignity and overpowering beauty of the scene.

"Aren’t you going to retrieve him?"

"Ah…” William stood very still as the query settled like silt to the floor of his veins. “I think it best not to leave you unsupervised. Unless you’re willing to cross the threshold with me?"

"Churches give me a headache."

"I can’t imagine why."

"If he really wanted to make himself useful, he would get off his knees and pour his commendable energies into searching for that girl."

"I could say the same of you. From what little I was able to extract from Abel, you seem rather attached to Sister Esther."

Alucard’s lip curled. "If I knew where she was..." he admitted at great length, "then we wouldn’t be in our current predicament. Although, the Winged Priest seemed to think she would be in the hands of those Orden dullards."

"And yet three days have passed with no positive updates from Kate," countered William patiently. "I suspect Vinci was a false lead. We were too hasty to leap to a wild conjecture from so inferior a springboard. Abel allowed old grievances to get the better of him."

"They have history, then... him and the Orden."

William coughed. "That would be soft-pedaling the matter." Then, not keen on rehashing old hurts, went on: "No... Esther was last seen in Florence, and Florence, I suspect, is where we’ll find her."

Alucard snuffled his nose into the cracks and crevices of the pavings, nostrils flaring. "Tell me, Professor... who is this Orden?" he asked — far too casually, William noted.

"Trouble."

"I like trouble."

"I know you do. But I don't. I'm a little too old for fisticuffs."

"Then you expect a fight."

"The Orden has rarely given us a choice in the matter."

"Sounds fun."

You would say that, thought William, growing suddenly chilled. A disquietude vaster and sourer than mere foreboding swept through him, gnawing away at his innards like indigestion. An ancient
ache, some primordial thing deep in the marrow of William's bones, sapped the air from his lungs and pressed against the insides of his eyeballs.

The ashes of time seemed to carry backwards and forwards on the wind. All the unhappiness, all the cruelty, gathered like fog in the air, growing dark and cold and heavy until it fell like gray snow.

Somewhere over William's head, the bells of the Baccio d'Agnolo tower began to toll, marking the hour.

That his life, which fled so fast, in purity were such that not an image of the past should fear a pencil's touch.

Wordsworth, affirmed William.

Old lives, former selves... the specters of the past did not disappear without a trace. Human beings left a wake that never quite disappeared, a rend in time like the tail of a sullen comet burning across the sky.

It had taken William so long to grow into his weary, ornery old soul. But now that he had, he felt as though he no longer fit properly.

Desperate for something to do, he packed a pinch of tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. He scratched absently at one cheek, as though some crumb of existence has been creased into his skin.

That was the problem with repressed memories, he thought, a profound tiredness hanging like a millstone around his throat: one's mind tended to suppress certain traumas for reasons of pure survival, and at the same time a desperate longing for atonement, perhaps punishment, forced one to continually pick the scab, uncover the parts, relive the traumas. The contradiction was almost too much for the mind to comprehend, too painful for the heart and soul to endure. Quite without realizing it, a tortured spirit might fight to keep the two instincts separated. Without ever knowing why, he would make sure, whenever possible, that nothing was allowed to pass between the disparate hemispheres of his being.

It was a truth Abel Nightroad understood better than most.

The Professor had thought that the passage of time would ultimately obliterate any sign of his own two worlds having ever been in communication, that the faint light of their crossing would disappear entirely in the ebb and flow of the sprawling sea of perpetuity.

But the tide had gone out; the memory, no longer an undertow of odd impressions and vague recollections but the unobstructed shipwreck of an old, familiar anguish, had been raised, suddenly and violently, from the depths by Alucard's presence.

William was no foreigner to the world of such emotions, yet he remained largely ignorant of their language. With every puff on his pipe, he marveled more at the extent of his own self-deception.

He wondered, when the time came, how he might manage to say to Alucard what he knew he had to, now that he had begun once again to ponder the elements of his old faith, to blend them with his new convictions, until he had recovered a consciousness of unity between his past and present selves.

Life was such a tiring business, at times.

William laughed abruptly, overcome with a sudden benign pity for himself. He wasn't so different
from Alucard, he supposed: he had been torn into tiny pieces and scattered throughout the years.

He went to work coaxing the embers of his brier. They needed constant attention, pipes.

Much like human hearts.

He filled his cheeks with the pungent smoke as, in the second row of pews, Brother Petros rose to his feet and crossed himself.

William Walter Wordsworth heaved a heavy sigh. He realized, lost in thought, he had lost track of the clock chimes.

"Why the hell did it have to be Italy..."

The Professor put the pipe into his mouth before tilting his head back and taking a contented puff, breathing deeply of the smoke. Rather than warm his innards, the tobacco just made the Professor feel thin and papery. "What makes you say that?"

The Vampire snarled his displeasure, claws screeching off the pavings like clashing broadswords. "Chattering tourists, sunshine, garlic in every tablescape and religious iconography in every window. Just being in this country makes my skin itch."

William wiped his mouth to hide an involuntary smile. He managed to appear thoughtful after a moment. "Symbols have power. There's a very good reason the Vatican Papal State remains the natural enemies of Methuselah kind. It's a polity fraught with faith, a mighty ecclesiastical fortress... the Vatican is the colporteur of the theological evangelization and catechesis that has buttressed the Church since time immemorial."

"Spare me the sermon, Priest. Nothing has changed... your Church still stoops to kill from its high moral eminence, just like that blundering, misguided fool in there..." Alucard inclined his shaggy head towards the Chief Inquisitor. "He would have gotten on well with Alexander Anderson and his miserable cavalcade of Judas priests. Mindria merge înaintea pieirii, și trufia merge înainte căderii," he quoted distastefully in a language that hadn't been spoken since long before Armageddon.

"Naturally, the Church possesses a certain pride," admitted William, translating the Romanian almost unconsciously. "The Inquisition even more so."

"Arrogance, some might call it. Arrogance and avarice and lust for power. Your di Medici carries with him that whiff of unearned self-importance that seems to cling to those who crave authority for the sheer sake of domination." Alucard grunted. "My own Master would have cut him down to size..."

Likely at the ankles, thought William, with reluctant fondness, using a briquet saber.

"But arrogance is hardly unusual, Alucard. The longer I live, the more I come to suspect that it might be the natural state of the human mind. You're quite correct in saying that there are those like Cardinal di Medici who will strive to defend the sanctity of their authority and then expect you to be impressed with their efforts."

The Vampire inclined his head — his scruffy canine countenance registered both impatience and annoyance. "Don't presume to lecture me on the intricacies of human nature, Priest. I am older than your current civilization."

“Ah, you're right, of course.” William mused, "If we cannot have our prosperity with pride, we
should reject such prosperity. It seems the ancient world was fairly modern for its time. *You are all that hath been, and is, and shall be; your veil no mortal has hitherto raised. Am I right?*

A sneer. "*Quoting Plutarch might very well impress your pimpled understudies, Professor, but not me.*"

"No, creatures of your disposition don't strike me as the most ardent of Neoplatonists, I must say."

"*You academic types are exceedingly irritating. No, Papist... Suns burn out, planets perish and scatter across the wastes of the sky; other stars are kindled, new worlds form to make their revolutions and describe new orbits, and yet your Church, an infinitely minute part of a globe which itself is only an imperceptible point in the immense whole, believes that the universe exists for its own affirmation.*"

"Faith has been a cornerstone and foundation of the hominidae taxonomy for millions of years," countered William. "It is one of the foundations of human civilization, and even has its uses in the *scientific* discerning of truth."

Despite being a dog, Alucard mimed arching an eyebrow with surprising efficacy. "*Strange sentiments for a man of God.*"

William's eyes, a glacial green-gray, came alight with the scholarly exuberance of one straightening out a region of academic confusion. "Gregor Mendel was an Augustinian friar in St. Thomas' Abbey in Brno. Georges Lemaître was a Roman Catholic Priest. Even Her Holiness, the *Naia Sancta*, was a medical doctor. Science interprets all phenomena by the same language. It attests to the unity and simplicity of God's plan, and makes still more evident that unchangeable order which presides over all natural causes."

"*Nevertheless, scientists and priests make for strange bedfellows, Professor.*"

"Not at all... we are both engaged in an honest inquiry into the nature of the universe. If one possesses a faith that withers in the face of observation, then one ought to reframe one's faith."

In truth, despite his conviction in talking to Alucard, William wasn't entirely sure his colleagues would agree with him... Vaclav Havel certainly hadn't. But the Professor had found it increasingly difficult to sing hymns that celebrated a hierarchical heavenly realm, to recite creeds that felt profoundly disconnected from life, to pray liturgies that emphasized salvation through blood but confined him to a hard pew in a building whose people participated in sacraments that excluded the natural world. It had little to do with avoiding sin or with merely talking or teaching or believing theological tenets. It had everything to do with *living*. His creed did not merely require his talk, but his mind and body, too. The church building, William believed, was not the only sacred space; the realms of scientific discovery and invention were profoundly sacred as well.

Not that such sentiments had any noticeable effect on *Il Ruinante*, who appeared to like hard pews plenty well, thank you very much.

"Those like Petros keep the faith," opined William.

"A misplaced faith in a hypocritical institution with a paranoid megalomaniac in its wheelhouse. *Power does not confer wisdom, nor rightful authority, nor belief in either of the two.*"

"Yes, perhaps," he admitted, "but still, he keeps faith. He can be difficult, that boy, but he is a true knight of the Church. A defender."

"A turnspit."
"And what does that make you, Alucard?" queried William mildly, but with ice glazing the words. "You were little more than a weapon yourself, once upon a time."

Alucard snorted as Petros emerged from the Santo Spirito and made his way towards the pair. "Did the old stories tell you that, too?"

Father Wordsworth grinned faintly. "I suppose in one sense," he said, "it's a matter of special knowledge. Think of me as an information magpie, always interested in shiny bits of intelligence."

Alucard waggled his tail. "I really must hear these stories. They sound edifying."

William chuckled. "A trece a gâsca prin apâ. You wouldn't enjoy them."

"Oh?"

"Legend is a merciless judge, Alucard. It lays bare all tragic blunders and foolish missteps and in so doing exposes society's most intimate secrets, wielding the power of hindsight like a surgical scalpel. And hindsight, needless to say, has not been not kind to you."

"Weaponized judgement. How very Catholic." Alucard cocked his head, one ear folding. "At the risk of changing the subject and sounding tasteless by drawing attention to the fact... I suspect the girl is in very grave danger."

The pipe smoke seemed to form a glutinous sludge in William's lungs. "How do you know?"

"The same way you know so much about me... about the Battle of London and the world of long ago." Alucard's eyes smoldered red, a burning flame he turned with sniper-like intensity on the Professor. "About the Hellsing Organization."

William kept his expression carefully neutral. He whittled at his pipe stem. "I see."

"We occupy a center. All the world rotates about us, and for us, and because of us. We see further afield than most."

Father Wordsworth sighed. "Not really. Everything and everyone moves ahead in one fashion or another. Even people like you."

"And you."

Time continued to slip by irrecoverably, but for that single second, the stillness, the silent understanding, that passed between the Professor and the old Vampire recorded its passage like the sooty negatives of objects and people scorched onto the facades of bombed-out buildings. They had ceased to interact with the world, trapped in their own little carpaccio of time, two leaves of the past pulled into the present.

But they were both broken from their reverie by a shadow falling over them, blotting out the sky with a wall of silver and blue and crimson. Brother Petros crossed his arms, armor clanking, scowling fiercely at nothing.

"Well?" he demanded, sounding short on patience. William wondered how long the inquisitor had been standing there without their noticing...

"Did you find the answers you were looking for, Chief?"

"That is a matter between me and my Lord God."
"Ah, well... naturally." For a moment a bleak amusement colored William's voice. Then it was gone: "Shall we get on, then?"

"Gladly."

"After all, it's not as though we've been waiting out here for nearly an hour."

"Monster," snarled Petros, the Chief's resolution returning. "Hold your tongue."

Alucard's growl softened to a few faint snickers. William's brows drew together; he wasn't sure he had ever heard the Vampire giggle before. It wasn't a pleasant sound.

Petros's nostrils flared in indignation, but Alucard let out a contented hum, almost a purr, bounding alongside the inquisitor. The massive animal went so far as to rub his neck and shoulder against Petros's hip, as though petitioning for a scratch behind the ears. The Chief merely scowled, and Alucard reciprocated by showing his teeth, a wolfish grin filled with malice.

William commended Petros for his good sense — the Vampire was not some puppy dog with doe eyes and a wagging tail. It was an enormous graveyard grim with the morals of a psychopath and the teeth and appetite of a great white shark.

Still, the sight of them together would have chilled the blood of the stoutest Methuselah. And indeed, as William, Petros, and Alucard proceeded down the steps of the Santo Spirito, Florentines loitering in the piazza gave the three a wide birth. William couldn't blame them for the scare: Petros stood well over six feet tall, closer to seven, with massive shoulders and arms as long and sinewy as saplings, clad head to foot in silver armor — helmet, chainmail, greaves, and cuirassier emblazoned with the crimson Vineam Domini of the Inquisition. So grandly was he attired that William wouldn't have been at all surprised if a townsperson mistook the Chief for a prelate.

Alucard, meanwhile, was the size of a small car, with thirty centimeter claws, blood matted, briar-like fur, saliva-slathered incisors that held a serrated edge, and eyes as big and red as boxing gloves.

A demon and a paladin, marveled William. What a pair they made.

"A dinar for your thoughts, Brother?" asked the Professor benignly.

Petros harrumphed. "I would bankrupt you."

William chuckled. "Unlike Abel Nightroad, I haven't taken a vow of poverty." He pinched his smoldering pipe in his left hand while holding out his right as a sort of peace offering. "I don't believe we've ever had the pleasure of a formal introduction. William Walter Wordsworth... but you can call me Professor."

Alucard let out a huff of hot air. His breath smelled entirely what William expected it to smell like... although mental preparation did little to mitigate the potency. "Subtle," he woofed, the sound almost sarcastic.

The two clergymen paused for a moment. Then Petros lofted a skeptical eyebrow, scowling with enough concentrated intensity to melt snow. Making a noncommittal grunt, the Chief reached over and shook William's hand. The Professor eyeballed Petros's gauntlets warily in the split second before contact, half-expecting his fingers to get splintered in a bone-crushing vice-grip. But though Petros, indeed, had a firm handshake, it was only strong enough to convey confidence, clarity, a strength of intention.
Up close, the Chief Inquisitor's eyes shone platinum, the color of blue-scattered smoke.

"My most trusted subordinate speaks highly of you, Professor," said Petros solemnly. His brow had an air of severity that began to fade with the ready appearance of a slightly softer, slightly subdued expression. "Sister Paula remembers you well from Cardinal Sforza's trial at the Lateran. I have heard it said that you are a good, honest man, and a true servant of God. I, Brother Petros, Chief of the Inquisitorial Bureau, am honored to formally make your acquaintance."

_Dog of the Church. Your good blade carves the casques of men, your lance thrusteth sure. Your strength is as the strength of ten, because your heart is pure._

William shook his head. The spell passed in a moment, and Petros dropped the handshake.

"If you two are quite finished fiddling while Rome burns," muttered Alucard, "I have a question..."

Petros's cheek twitched. "If you must, mutt."

"Where the hell has everyone gone?"

"To be honest, old chap, we're not the friendliest looking bunch. They probably—"

"No," snapped Petros, eyes going wide, suddenly serious. "The Vampire is right."

"So nice of you to say so."

"Shut up. Something is amiss."

William ignored his simmering companions and looked around. Despite being the height of the afternoon, the Piazza Santo Spirito, lined with skeletal winter trees and centered around an icy fountain, did appear, suddenly, very quiet. To anyone else, the empty, winter-hushed square might have seemed solemn, peaceful. To the AX agent, the Chief Inquisitor, and the ancient Vampire, it felt distinctly sinister. William could taste the danger in the air; he suspected someone was watching them, as if the vague impression of wrongness had an intelligence. In the ensuing silence, the dripping icicles hanging from the eaves seemed to snap like pistol shots.

Then, steady footfalls like sarcastic applause began to sound on the cobbles of the surrounding street. Hard shoes, two pairs. Alucard stiffened suddenly and his neck scruff stood on end, matted fur bristling all along his spine. Huge ears swiveled and tipped, seeking an enemy. William stepped forward, but Petros held out his arm, stopping the older man. All the grumpy dissatisfaction had vanished from his face. He looked altered — not angry nor distracted, but stony. Taller, and his armor and vestments seemed to prickle like a wild cat's hindquarters. With a speed and dexterity honed by many years of practice, the Chief slipped the two halves of his Screamer from the holsters at his hips and snapped the lance together at the shaft.

"I don’t like this," growled Petros. "That scent..."

_"The musty aroma of old stogies," agreed Alucard. "Cigar smoke... a robusto, chocolate buttressed by coffee beans and a hint of coconut. I know it well. She smoked them since she was fifteen..."

William's scalp crawled, his weight shifting as he shuffled his feet in nervous, mincing steps.

A shadow shifted at the far end of the piazza. It poured like oil from the neck of the alleyway and flowed across the silt-speckled snow, lengthening into the middle of the square. The terracotta rooftops seem to bend towards it, spellbound.
Then the Professor saw him, one of night’s dark creatures, and Father Wordsworth fought to keep himself from falling to his knees as the hard casement inside him splintered. He screwed his eyes shut, before blinking them open again, but his face didn't go away. The features blurred, looming, threatening, blocking their escape with a dark, slight smile. Terror and fury like that William had known only a few times before in his life consumed him.

The two newcomers were colleagues, the matching uniforms were proof enough of that, but no words passed between them. The taller man was legendarily averse to small talk. Although he was, per usual, immaculately dressed, there were signs of dishevelment that lured William's attention... the short forelocks of his jet-black hair, the sable filaments thick and gleaming, falling over his forehead, the loosened knot of his silk cravat. His foul cigarillo was clamped firmly between his elongated canines at the point where filter met tobacco.

"Well well," murmured Isaak Fernand von Kämpfer, the act of smoking fully integrated into his breath and speech such that there was no discernible pause, only an ashy film that seemed to be a natural by-product of his slithering voice: "This is a pleasant surprise. You look healthy, Professor Wordsworth."

William went as white as a sheet while beside him, Petros drew himself to his full height; his eyes were narrowed and his hair seemed to crackle with electricity.

"You," the Chief snarled, his voice quivering in anger, "I recognize your face from the Vatican archives. You're an Orden operative, yes?"

"Good evening, Inquisitor," drawled von Kämpfer's associate, a boy about Esther's age, who arched the slender wings of his brows batted the heavy fringe of his lashes with mock innocence. His puckish, malicious expression seemed to feed on the fading daylight, glowing with incandescent heat. "I'm rather surprised to see you all in one piece following that nasty business in Carthage. And here I thought the late Radu Barvon had turned you into paste with a tank gun."

"SILENCE, HERETIC!" thundered Il Ruinante at a volume to shatter icicles, bringing his high-frequency lance to bear across his chest.

"And here I thought the dead couldn't be rebuilt so easily." The boy's voice was bright and breezy, but with a hint of insidiousness that set William immediately on edge. "Not the human dead anyway; luck of the draw, Brother Petros."

While Petros bristled and the boy, Dietrich von Lohengrin, sneered, the charcoal-suited von Kämpfer stood at the center of the piazza, unmoving, a somber black figure in startling contrast to the stark lack of color around him, the winter sun dazzling on his waist-length hair, like a film on an oil slick. There was no laughter in his face, and his eyes were not searching the housefronts for diversion — instead, he was staring intently in William's direction.

"Enough, Dietrich," he chastised, taking a delicate pull of his cigarillo. "I apologize for my subordinate's rudeness, William. This is all entirely unexpected, you understand. I thought you were in Rome still." His lips twitched, amusement luring the monster into his eyes. "Did our friend Kate give you a lift?"

The Professor felt his fear and resentment and fury no longer as a pain but as a tide. It rose in his being, across time and darkness, surging through the years. Polluting his brain with an anger so base that it would have made him vomit had he felt he had any possession of his own body. The rage was a vacuum, an endless vortex that consumed every thought, every impulse of who and what he was. He wanted to scream but all he muttered was a weak, watery: "Where is she?"
"I’ve obviously been underestimating you, dear William,” allowed Isaak, ignoring the question, circling them, wolflike, with a chilling hunger in his hawkish face. “You were so bookish during our university days, I had initially thought you little threat, but the more I’ve learned about you, the more I realize you are indeed more than a simple academic. And though foolish in its motivation, you show tenacity that would in itself be worrisome even if it weren’t connected with the crusade of that hypocritical AX you worship so."

He shrugged, still circling, long, ebony hair billowing behind him like a contrail. “Still, that’s all for another time, another confrontation, and that is a challenge I shall look forward to.”

"You talk a great deal but say very little," remarked William quietly, remaining motionless. "Where is the girl, Isaak."

"I beg your pardon?"

"What have you done with Esther Blanchett?"

The freezing air turned syrupy, slow, flecked with snowflakes. The still seconds before the battle were broken only by the piercing purr of Petros’s Screamer, a whirring, chaotic clatter of gears that made William’s teeth ache and his skull throb.

Rather than answer, von Kämpfer’s gimleted eyes darted towards the far shorter, suddenly stone-faced Marionettenspieler. William looked back and forth between them, feeling the heat of their anger even at a distance, the unspoken words swelling in the air like Isaak’s cigarillo smoke.

After a worryingly long pause, Dietrich sneered, although the boy’s expression was grave, if not guilty. “I… we, don’t have her.”

“YOU LIE,” snarled Petros, holding his lance at port, the high-frequency engine leveled square at Von Lohengrin’s chest.

“Would that I wish we were,” sighed Isaak, pinching the bridge of his nose. "We were, indeed, instructed to apprehend your young associate and we did, indeed, manage to corner her at the Piazza dei Cavalleggeri, but the reasons for the Orden’s failure are entirely Marionettenspieler's own."

The boy's knuckles crunched.

“They’re telling the truth,” growled Alucard. “I can’t smell her on them.”

A muscle fired in Petros's jaw; he had the distant, dangerous look of someone for whom all life was couched in hard disappointments. William couldn't help the sudden swell of panic — if not with the Orden, where on Earth was Esther? His eyes stung with silent rage and frustration that he was trying not to show. He wouldn't give Isaak the satisfaction.

But before William could say a word, terrible shadow fell over von Kämpfer's face, his gaze straying to the massive deerhound flanking Brother Petros.

"Ah..." Isaak's eyes glittered with serrated cruelty. "There you are, Zamiel. You've led us on quite a merry chase."

Dietrich grinned... seeing in the situation some way to rectify his failure to capture Esther and salvage his good standing. "When Captain Skorzeny landed us in Florence, we anticipated a long and protracted search. We didn't expect the morons in the AX — some offense, Chief Inquisitor — to hand you over like a lost stray."
"I’ve heard wonderful stories about you," whispered Isaak, words warm and spicy, "Such tantalizing rumors, fragments of oral history, primitive legends, the odd artifact, all scattered through time and space."

"The world has a long memory," said Alucard after a moment, "as well as a tendency to over-exaggerate."

"Then shall we sort the truths from the fictions, then?" sneered Dietrich. His long fingers, pale and thin like the legs of a house centipede, flexed sinuously, flashing filaments of razor-sharp garroting wire, a deadly tremolo in the strings.

William's stomach summersaulted, intimately acquainted with Marionettenspieler's infamous strings, but far more alarming was Alucard's look of abject shock — the deerhound stared blankly at Von Lohengrin, an alarmingly uncharacteristic tragedy evident in the Vampire's eyes, more reeling misery than William had ever seen in them before... an abject, crushing realization, a comet burst of pain, of betrayal, of open-mouthed incredulity at the unlikely ways the world could crush a creature, man or vampire.

"Those wires..." he murmured. "Înger de Moarte..."

Alucard began to pad away from William. On impulse, the latter reached over to close his hand on the Vampire's coarse, matted fur. The dog yelped in shock but didn't pull away. As William held him the scent of wilderness, of sickness, began to grow. Alucard stared at the Professor, the whites of his eyes showing brightly while his irises narrowed to small bands around his red pupils.

Petros raised his lance, seemingly oblivious to the strange, silent exchange between his compatriots. "Arise, O Lord," he murmured, "save me, O my God: for thou hast smitten all mine enemies... salvation belongeth unto the Lord: thy blessing is upon thy people. Amen."

And then the Piazza Santo Spirito erupted.
"I may have uncovered something, Your Eminence."

"You certainly took your time," snarled the Duke of Florence vehemently. The man who called himself Brother Matthaios noted the angry grimace on Francesco di Medici’s face and the wedge of metal clutched in a white-knuckled fist — a letter opener, perhaps — and Matthaios realized that the forthcoming conversation was going to be even more nettlesome than he had envisaged.

"Anā el-masʾūl... the process has been more protracted than I anticipated."

"Did you extract a confession?"

"Not exactly, My Lord. She was resistant to the interrogation in ways which might deserve deep respect and approval under more favorable circumstances."

"Respect be damned!" The man's eyes were suddenly ablaze with such contempt that it would have taken all the resolve of a far lesser man not to quail beneath it. "Rip her fingernails out if you have to! If it were Paula or Petros heading this inquisition we wouldn't be having this conversation! You're a hyena picking a carcass from a tree, Matthaios... strewing vital organs about the place like so many children's toys. Stop playing with your food and start getting results."

Matthaios’s even-tempered smile faltered a fraction. All metaphors aside, he didn't find it worth pointing out to his superior that if Brother Petros had been put in charge, the girl would most likely be missing a few fingers, or even an eye, at that juncture, and if the matter were left to Sister Paula, well... it was highly unlikely Miss Blanchett would have survived the arrest, much less the interrogation. While the Chief and Vice Chief gave a lot of importance to penance and punishment in the execution of their duty, where motivation was concerned, their aims were far less aesthetic and far more practical than his own. Unlike the terror tactics perfected by his superiors, Matthaios’s entire demeanor was a carefully formulated combination of shrewdness and mild-mannered indifference that was considerably more adept at unnerving than intimidating.

Still...

"Brutal consistency is the key to credibility," evangelized Matthaios.

"But not expediency!" hissed Cardinal di Medici on a long, deep breath, the sound part frustration and part resignation. The man looked tired, observed Matthaios: the frown-lines of his face made two bowed bars around the sides of his mouth like parentheses, as if everything he might say would be very quiet and incidental. Which, being Francesco di Medici, was clearly ridiculous and circumstantially ironic. "Nevermind that now. What is it you’ve uncovered?"

"As it happens, some troubling information concerning the Orden, My Lord."
That got his attention — the man appeared suddenly rapt. Just cogitating on the Rosenkreutz Orden made Matthaios's blood burn… fallen angels and monsters and scoundrels and mortal fiends all. The Devil's minions who worked Lucifer’s treacherous plots through the hearts of men and vampires alike, possessing them, ruling them. Hounds of hell running wild through their human hosts, working greater and greater abominations. The entity the hive of demons called Contra Mundi was sin incarnate, a manifestation garlanded in perpetual darkness which not only rushed to embrace the Vatican’s oblivion, but sought the ruination and destruction of everything God-fearing that resided in the world.

Nolite arbitrari quia venerim mittere pacem in terram non veni pacem mittere sed gladium, affirmed Matthaios to himself, an animal lurch of hatred and fear building in his breast.

Time and God willing, the Inquisition would proclaim the Orden’s sentence with an awful majesty and dreadful wrath — every word and syllable, envisioned Matthaios, resounding like the most wondrous thunder, piercing and seering their souls like the fiercest lightning. What horror and amazement the Lord’s judgement would strike into the hearts of the wicked on whom they would be pronounced!

"Go on," muttered the Duke balefully, shaking Matthaios from his reverie.

The inquisitor looked thoughtful for a moment, then answered honestly: "It's quite fascinating, Eminence... it appears the Orden intend to use the girl to summon an archangel from ancient times."

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Earlier

Euntes autem praedicate dicentes quia adpropinquavit regnum caelorum...

It was hot.

She lay there prostrate, as if she was being garrotted by invisible wires, floundering in anguish and dread, tormented by nightmares. Monsters swarmed in the shadows, coming to life amid draughts of sulphur and phosphorus like an animated fresco painted on the moving wall of sleep. Past memories strobed behind her eyes, flashes of the present blackened by history. Reality teased, then beckoned, lured.

It seemed ages before she could find anything in the chaos of disorganized sensations to which she could anchor herself steady for a moment, and think...

This could end. Would end.

In one of two ways.

"Hide here with me, dear one, and he'll never find us. His kindness is only meant to make later torments crueler."

The vertigo of the abyss took hold of her again; images scintillated in sudden color, with the brightness and intensity that leapt out of the black night when lightning flashed. Wind rushed through the space between her ears, and thunder cracked. The dark clouds inside her head burst, and something gray like rain but hot like embers pelted down in sheets. Out of the shadows loped a huge black wolf with multiple heads and dozens of legs. As he ran, the powerful body contorted, stretched, shape-shifted into a tall, leering man with wide shoulders, long dark hair, and slashing red eyes.
Oh, mercy, it was so horribly hot.

An immense inferno danced between worlds both visible and invisible, undoing matter one collapsed molecule at a time, wreaking utter destruction with a touch softer than breath. The sky was the color of camphor and salt. Under more stars than the imagination could ever conjure, the nocturnal somnambulance enflamed by the smoke and cinders licked and lapped at the coppices. Great expanses of fire had stripped the trees of their virescence and left their gaunt, skeletal remains rooted to the barren soil. They seemed to reach out to the sky like pallid, gnarled hands, mottled by shadows.

"The nostalgia of a moment's love is a precipice from which the soul casts itself; in heartbreak, in pain, what we escape to in the past is what tortures us in the present. It is memory without witness or corroboration."

The voice was beautiful, with a singsong cadence — compelling, soothing even, yet it commanded. It was a voice so hypnotic, so mesmerizing, that she was drawn down, down, deeper into its power...

Infirmos curate mortuos suscitate daemones eicite gratis accepistis gratis date...

There were those of his colleagues who believed that the surest route to an honest confession was one tunneled by ice picks through the brain, dredged by dangerous medicines administered in large dosages, or flayed from the flesh like so many layers of skin. And then there were others who believed it came about through a candid reckoning of one's relationship with God.

Brother Matthaios had other working theories.

He grasped the girl's chin, digging his fingers and thumb into her cheeks as he held her face above the water.

It was not unlike touching a naked power line — the girl's pulse was more a fluttering vibration than a steady beat beneath his fingertips. He felt her whole body seize in a fight-or-fly spasm.

"Well?" he queried in a placid manner, without danger or severity. "Three days in isolation, Miss Blanchett. I can't imagine this has been a terribly pleasant experience for you."

Instinctively, she thrashed and squirmed in his grip, trying to throw herself away from him. Sighing with strained patience, Matthaios held her fast with one arm hooked through her elbows while tipping her deeper in the water, until it hit her chin high. The girl froze in terror, but not before a convulsive shudder ran down the length of her.

"I would prefer not to have to submerge you again, Sister. You've already soaked me to the bone. I'm liable to catch a chill in these bitter winter months."

"I..."

"Yes?"

"I... hungry." She swallowed. "I'm hungry."

Matthaios smiled in faint amusement. "Yes, I daresay you are. As it happens, one of the few material goods I brought with me from my old life in Tangier-Assilah was a delightful recipe for tajine stew with lamb and vegetables." He inclined his head. "Would you like some, Miss
Blanchett? I'm sure I could have something arranged... in exchange for the information we previously discussed."

The girl pulled her shoulders back in what ought to have been a chest-puffing show of defiance; alas, it was a weak, thin gesture, the fact that she resembled, more than anything, a drowned kitten slung on the snout of a water pump somewhat mitigating the intended effect. "I don't... I don't know... what I'm meant to..."

"You're meant to tell me what I want to know, Sister."

If the quivering of her chin was any indication, the girl was trying very hard not burst into tears. "I can't give you information I don't have."

Her own naivety contoured her words like a flicker of madness. How he sometimes despaired of the idealistic. "Oh, Miss Blanchett... yes, you can. It doesn't matter if the information you tell me is true: the fact of your telling me is, in itself, enough. Which reminds me... I recently came upon a fat dossier concerning the late Shahrazad al-Rahman and the incident in István. It seems she had a difficult time holding a conversation, as well."

The name had its intended effect, judging from the way the Sister's capricious resentment evaporated, leaving her pallor ghastly and her eyes glaring, a look of awful anger frozen on her face. He heard her cry out, a quick gasp of escaping sound, before she could muster the wherewithal to smother it.

"Shall I tell you what happened to the girl, Miss Blanchett? Would you like to know what Archbishop D'Annunzio did to her, how he broke her, in the end?"

_Quod dico vobis in tenebris dicite in lumine et quod in aure auditis praedicate super tecta..._

Esther lay in the girl's arms, cradled. Her friend's dark skin shimmered in the starlight, her skin petal-soft. Her upper lip was nearly as full as the lower, the curves as delicate and smooth as a ripe persimmon.

Esther's scalp tingled, and an ache began at the base of her spine. From fear or... or something else. She didn't know. "What would you ask of me?" Esther was asking, although she did not remember why.

The figure's eyes, like cut sapphires, found hers. "I would ask the impossible."

Esther struggled to let the girl hold her gaze as heat stained the former's cheeks. "I am no saint," she said weakly; "I cannot work miracles."

"Then I would ask for your friendship. And that is a miracle enough."

"I never claimed to be the Lady Saint... That was... that was a lie. Even the AX doesn't believe it. So why should you?"

"Because I think you believe it yourself," said Shahrazad al-Rahman simply. "I think you know in your heart that you’re meant for something extraordinary."

“And you? What does your heart tell you you’re meant for?"

“Infinite sadness,” she said, even while smiling, in a tone tinged with melancholy. The language of her grief was old and did not belong to any world, known or unknown.
Esther looked up, and in the darkness there seemed a faint light emitted from Shara, as if she were visitor from on High. Esther reached up, touching her with unsure, shy fingers, over her face, her violet eyes, the impossibly soft, rounded orbits of her nostrils, over her brows and her ears, to her throat, as though to gather her by touch alone. Shara's cheeks radiated heat, the dark texture and appearance not unlike that of a sailor who had spent her life in the sun. A lovely, warm color that made Esther want to hold Shara's face between her hands like a scintilla of dancing candlelight and slowly, gently, coax the flicker into a flame.

As Esther stared in wonder and frozen disbelief, she saw in equal measures adoration and yearning and joy in the face smiling back at her.

Esther opened her mouth to say something, but to her mortification, the only sound she managed was a sort of miserable croak. Her self-control shattered, and she began to cry. She shook her head and choked on more sobs; the more she tried to stop them, the worse they became. She sobbed against Shara's neck, eyes streaming and burning, throat raw and sore, chest aching.

The appalling storm of tears didn't seem to bother Shara at all. She took one of Esther's hands and flattened it against her heart, until Esther could feel the strong, steady beat in her friend's chest. In a world that was disintegrating, Shara felt solid and real.

"It's all right," she murmured. "Hush, now. I've got you, dear one."

To Esther's ears, there was a reverential quality to that single, soft endearment. The feeling that came over her then was indescribable. Profound peace, profound awe, and profound gratitude coalesced into something so transcendent as to make tenderness an entirely inadequate description. Esther bade her eyes go dry, praying for her embarrassment to burn away her tears. Understanding and sympathy and desperate, earnest kindness registered on Shara's face, but an ache of anguish, too, for the doom of all innocent things.

Et siquidem fuerit domus digna veniat pax vestra super eam si autem non fuerit digna pax vestra ad vos revertatur...

The house on the hill was a torch that could be seen even across the Thames, the fumes from flue liners billowing thickly into the sky. In the dawn light, the enormous estate was a pool of hot ash, no more sound than a thousand year old ruin. Nothing left but blackened walls and mounting stones.

Ash began to fall, burning where it alighted on her hair and shoulders; she tried to pull herself back from the threshold of the house because she felt on the verge of understanding something large and important: prayers for the dead, words spoken in a strange language, a blasphemous litany, wanderings without name or end. It seemed to her that this moment — the light and wind, the sweep of devastation, the fire, the screaming crows, the shadow and silhouette of the smoke as it twisted to one side and then the other — captured a sort of order and harsh beauty, neither lost nor ruined but a power to be shared, as the grass shares its power with the living things that devour it, and the fire with the furrow and the seed.

Et eritis odio omnibus propter nomen meum qui autem perseveraverit in finem hic salvus erit...

Sister Esther's face clouded over. "How can you be so cruel?" There was an earnestness to the girl's expression, an honest desire to know.

"Cruelty is in all of us," said Matthaios simply. "I am one of God's creatures, like you... quiet and
melancholy, tender and barbaric, full of mirth and despair. Dear Esther, remember catharsis. The offer of reward and the threat of punishment, the carrot and the stick. Not unlike the parable of the wheat and the tares... they must grow together, Jesus said, until the harvest. Inherent contradictions mark us as part of nature, which is neither fiendish nor fair, reliable nor predictable. This world cares not for you or me or our opinions of each other. Do you think, truly, that the Lord God of Creation desires the saccharine adoration of children, that He can be swayed by their prayers and their flattery? Good at the wrong place and time becomes evil; evil in the right place and time becomes good. The moral gyroscopes of the world defy human understanding. Do not mistake me... there will a reckoning. A reckoning. A final Judgement, but one which will fall far beyond the paltry compasses of our own comprehension. For you and I, there is simply silence."

Matthaios seized her by the hair and pulled her violently towards him, filaments of red falling between his fingers with a dry, tearing sound, like ripping string from limp velum canvas. Unfortunately, the girl didn’t seem at all receptive to their sudden nearness and immediately began fighting him with kicking legs and hooked fingers, which had Matthaios tightening his grip. She winced as pain needled over her scalp. The girl began to cry.

"God exists, Esther Blanchett," he intoned, smiling grimly. "But He doesn’t love you."

He understood well enough that desire and duty could rival each other... moreover, that they most often did. Accordingly, it took a certain degree of discipline to do what one ought to do whether one wanted to or not.

Fortunately for Matthaios, what he ought to do in that moment wasn't at all at odds with what he enjoyed doing.

By its vigilance, by coordinating its efforts throughout the Vatican Papal State, and by virtue of its violent renown, the Department of the Inquisition, the fangs of the Church, checked the seeds of heresy before they could be sown. But Matthaios had to admit, a small part of him was pleased when carelessness or coincidence permitted isolated patches of earth to germinate — it made the reaping all the more interesting.

Matthaios possessed, beneath the surface-level satisfaction, an immutable sense of self-assurance, but in addition to that, he was a man ensnared by his duty as God's weapon on Earth. His allegiance to the Church effervesced inside of him impatiently, dry at the mouth, shaking feverishly, holding its breath in anticipation for the fruits of his efforts, however distant they may have seemed. His every aim, from morning matins to evening payers, boiled down to satiating his thirst in as few moves as possible, instilling each action with an almost implied necessity for having a motive by which it must exist. Nothing Brother Matthaios did was wasted for anything; his every breath was rooted in his definable and clear-cut purpose.

He was a violent man only insofar as clerical sanction allowed, of course, but the vicious efficiency and expertise with which Matthaios executed his commissions far antedated his taking up holy orders, and indeed, a part of him missed the manifold savageries concomitant with mercenary work. Though Brother Matthaios obtained a great deal of sustenance from the seemingly inexhaustible supply of penitents, in accordance with the obeisance due his Christian ordination, he was obligated to guard himself vigilantly against addiction, fearful of becoming fodder for the sadistic allure of torture which was so paradoxically generous to those who took from it and so destructively cruel to those who gave.

No... there was, naturally, a well-founded wisdom in never mixing one's business with pleasure. Still, as Matthaios pushed the girl's head underwater for a third time, an echo of his old diversions stirred the indulgent slants of his soul.
Carrot, meet stick.

Sufficit discipulo ut sit sicut magister eius et servus sicut dominus eius si patrem familias Beelzebub vocaverunt quanto magis domesticos eius...

The burned and gutted mansion was still smoking; she could see the faintest glow of embers as she maneuvered around the creaking threshold. Black dust hung in the air and invaded her lungs as she walked through what had once been the foyer. Nothing had escaped the fire — cascades of fused glass littered the floor where the windows had broken and the metal base of a grand chandelier lay blackened and twisted on the ground.

There was a fine powder, like snow, on a window ledge, and Esther started as she spotted a woman reclining against the wall opposite — her figure tall and willowy, carefully-cut, the lines of her face, her cheekbones and jaw, sharp and precise. She stepped through the detritus and destruction, the ashes delivering her as though she were in some way native to their element. Her hair was the color of clover honey, her expression proud and weary. Her umber-hued complexion glowed like a coal fire. She was beautiful, in the way a sword could be beautiful.

Smoke from her cigar danced on the inbound breeze, layering the tongue with a woody fragrance.

The blonde woman regarded Esther with something akin to pity, the closest her severe exterior managed to genuine sympathy.

"The dead are never truly gone, young lady," she said solemnly, tipping her head in emphasis until her cold blue eyes peered over the rims of her spectacles. She sighed through her teeth. "They linger in our minds and hearts and torture us with their absence. It is nature's keenest cruelty."

She sank slightly on her stoop, her eyes peering into the distance, at something Esther couldn’t imagine, and let out a resigned breath. She saw the years growing on the woman's face.

Her gaze was so intense, it made the back of Esther's neck burn, as though she was looking right through her. As though Esther was the only person in the universe she trusted with this secret information.

The night passed in ashes.

This was not Esther Blanchett's memory.

Ne ergo timueritis eos nihil enim opertum quod non revelabitur et occultum quod non scietur...

"I’m sorry I made you cry."

Esther sniffed. "It's... no, it's not..."

"Yes." Shara brushed a thatch of red hair with the pad of her thumb. "Yes, it is. I have brought you such heartache. I am so selfish, Esther. So incredibly selfish."

"It isn’t fair." Esther's voice sounded brittle. Toneless. Suddenly, her forehead was against Shara's. "It isn’t fair."

"No. No, it's not."

Their shared heartache surged with their every breath. Esther could almost measure the swell
between each peak. It never seemed sufficiently soothed by their long intakes of air, the heat of their shared proximity.

"Was it worth it?" murmured Esther. "You could have just done as the Archbishop asked. You could have just killed me, Shara, and then your friends would have been..."

Shara stared at her fixedly for some moments.

Then the Methuselah woman leaned forward and kissed her, with slow, luxurious intent, lingering on her mouth.

Esther's face thrummed, glowing with a fire that burned in all her joints.

"This is worth everything," said Shara as they separated, in a strange, penetrating voice, her expression inscrutable, as though a lathe had carved it from the night sky. "You have nothing to be sorry for, Esther. Nothing."

Her touch sent a fierce jolt through Esther's bones, and she knew, then, that she was to be complicit in this exquisite, aching absolution, and as her shaking fingers skated over the sinewy lines of Shara's back, Esther saw the skin under her friend's eyes quiver. With a kind of muted horror, Esther wondered when was the last time someone had put their hands on her, had touched her, in kindness.

Shara bent her head, her lips lingering below the line of Esther's jaw. Then, hot-breathed, she began kissing the nun in earnest: her ear, her cheek, the cupid's bow beside her mouth. Esther trembled, her eyes watering again, a coltish quaking in her legs that made her immensely grateful she wasn't standing up.

Shara smelled of flowers, the kind that reminded Esther of scraps of silk, soft and supple.

"I..." So close, Shara's freckles glinted like wet sand, like golden flowers bejeweled with the dew of first light. Esther's face grew heated, a tiny solitaire of shame gleaming in the velvet folds of her anticipation. "I don't know how..."

"I know, dear one. I know." Shara traced the arch of Esther's cheekbone with her fingers. "Would you like me to show you?"

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*Cum autem tradent vos nolite cogitare quomodo aut quid loquamini dabitur enim vobis in illa hora quid loquamini...*

Baptism... a serious sacrament, indeed. A symbolic recapitulation of the waters of the Great Flood, the judgment of God which sought to cleanse the Earth from abomination.

She tried to surface, her sternum jerking forward, but the inquisitor, holding her by the throat, pressed her to the bottom of the tank. Her eyes were saucer wide beneath the water, filled with panic, filled with revelation. Her ankles and wrists, fighting against her restraints, thrashed with such force the water slopped onto the flagstones. The child was screaming for her life; the fluid muffled the sound but not the fury. Matthaios derived a pleasure from the sight that, it had to be said, was more than a touch malicious in nature — even if she *was* getting his freshly-laundered cassock terribly wet.

It was only when he felt the muscles in the girl's throat distending, spasming as she inhaled the tank's epsom salts, that Matthaios lessened his pressure, allowing her to surface. She heaved against his palm with inhuman, brutish strength, desperate to draw breath. She was rewarded for
her efforts with a bout of exhausted, miserable retching, vomiting clear liquid and stomach bile all over herself, the excess water sluicing out onto her chin and running into her hair. She sucked in a whine of air.

"Miss Blanchett..." Matthaios wasted no time: "Tell me what you know about Vatican Section XIII. What intelligence have you uncovered regarding Bishop Enrico Maxwell, and to what foreign agents have you divulged the information?"

"I... I don't know... who that is."

"You said his name at the Ospedale degli Innocenti, no?" Matthaios made a show of studying his fingernails. "It appears Bishop Maxwell's ilk has not aged with grace... those were your exact words, Sister."

"That wasn't..." she croaked. There were tiny quivers running through her, as though huge bursts of movement were being held just under her surface. If she was a block of marble, then she was one in short order of shattering from its own internal stresses. "That wasn't me, Brother Matthaios."

"Who, then? The Orden, perhaps... that Lohengrin boy with whom you spent a significant portion of your childhood."

She blinked — her lids were bruised and purple against the translucent paleness of her face. "I saw Dietrich at the National Central Library, y-yes, but—"

"And his purpose in being there?"

"He was looking for something."

"Well... that is hardly unprecedented. Everyone is looking for something, Miss Blanchett. Some pursue security, others pleasure or power. Yet others look for purpose or, in your case, I suspect, things they know not what. I suppose I could offer you some platitude on how a shepherd leads even the most mislaid of his flock, but under the current circumstances, it might sound disingenuous."

Matthaios's gaze canted some twenty degrees south, towards a pair of slim, slightly-bowed legs, like two pliant stalks of bamboo, which had gone limp under the water save for the occasional shiver. The girl's head fell towards her chest, leaving him to contemplate a mass of tangled auburn curls, matted deep red against the stone of the tank, the reflection on the water almost crimson.

"What was your Orden contact looking for?" he pressed.

She half laughed, the sound sodden. The bile and the blood and the silent screams were all colliding in her — her fists clenched as though she wanted to hit the tank, hit Matthaios, bury her face in her hands and sob.

"A name. He said a name," she whispered hoarsely.

"Good girl. Names are useful."

"Zamiel."

Matthaios paused, considering. It sounded vaguely familiar, a product of his seminary days and his extensive exegetical studies. In ancient literary materials, the devil was said to appear under the moniker of the archangel Samael... the Germanic disambiguation of which was, in fact, Zamiel. The Orden was rumored to be Germanic in origin. The girl's information had merit... alas, it lacked
context.

“Who is Zamiel?”

She opened and closed her mouth. Those wide, liquid eyes flickered over the tank, looked up at Matthaios, then turned back to the water. Save for the slow undulations of lips and cheek, the articulate movements of tongue and jaw, the glow of the girl’s alabaster skin, her expression was carefully blank.

"I don't know."

She was lying.

Matthaios closed his eyes. He let out a chest-deep sigh.

"Tell me, and this will end. Besmillah, this all will end."

"I don't know!"

"You are an operative working for the Tsala Methsaluth."

"I am not."

He looked at her, long and hard, his brow slightly creased, his mouth slightly pursed. "You are affiliated with the Rosenkreuz Orden."

"I'm not," she pleaded, begging to be believed. "I'm not I'm not I'm not..."

Qui invenit animam suam perdet illam...

She heard the crack and splinter of burning timber, felt the waves of hot air blow over her. As it burned, she thought she heard the piercing shrieks of spiritual things, the wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Esther understood at that moment that while the cleansing of water ordained salvation, the cleansing of fire ordained judgment.

Cast against the desolate scenery, propped on spectral crags and livid mountains of ash, sheltered by the rafters of her own pyre, the blonde woman personified the spirit of the Burning City. Grave and grim, with extenuated grace and infinite imperiousness, she seemed to carry the burden of a dignified beauty, a nacreous gleam in her blue eyes.

"Of course, it's easy for them to claim they mete out punishment to those who are an abomination in God's eyes," scoffed the cigar-chomping Albionian. "But it's more than that, isn't it, young lady? To torture someone is to take control of death, to be the master of it, even for a short time. Inflicting pain becomes a means of excising the fear we all have of the great Hereafter. Done, remember, in the name of civilization; in the name of law and order; in the name of mercy; in the name of religion; in the name of Christ."

It was a violent, pointless voyage, contingent and brutal and without meaning, carving an aimless trajectory through an ocean of blood. Esther felt sick with the roiling, churning turbulence of it. There seemed nothing to learn from it. No ecstatic forgetting, no redemption in her suffering.

"Save me..." she murmured.
The blonde woman shook her head. "I have been dead a thousand years. I can't help you. But there is someone who can..."

...et qui perdiderit animam suam propter me inveniet eam.

Esther closed her eyes, and in the darkness behind her lids she saw beautiful, blooming things... flowers spinning like snowflakes, hummingbirds beating the same rhythm as her heart. Shara's hand pushed Esther's hair back from her face, and she could feel the impression of fingers as burning, bright things; she thought of stars streaking through the sky and leaving luminous trails behind them, and in that moment — however long it lasted, seconds, minutes, days — with Shara saying her name, Esther realized it was only the third time she had ever felt so cherished...

"Yes."

The girl's eyes drifted downwards and Esther could see that her lashes were heavy with unshed tears, her dark hair tipped forward until it glinted in the starlight like a diadem above her eyes. Shara bit her lip, her chin dimpling.

Esther frowned, frustrated by her inability to mend the hurt she worried she may had caused. "Sha—"

"I love you, Esther."

She felt a coronal burst of warmth in her chest as Shara tilted her chin and ghosted her mouth over Esther's for just a moment. With an almost resigned sigh, Shara let her lips touch hers, and Esther felt the sun enter her bloodstream — a feeling radiant, resplendent, as if kissing Shara somehow made her beautiful.

The caress of Shara's fingertips under her chin made Esther's pulse catch, her throat flushing, shoulders tightening. She became uncertain whose breath was whose. Shara smelled like jasmine and salt and sweet wine and she was everywhere, shifting closer across the leaves, her arms snaking around Esther's waist and back, her palm pressed flat between her shoulder blades. The mysterious contours of her murmurs in the pearlescent, mellow midnight were like the sound of nature, the call of beauty. Fingertips fanned across her face, then gone, nowhere. A light touch along the curve of her hip, just barely. A stone skipping the surface of the water.

They moved with a rhythm that was as old as God's creation, and uniquely and utterly their own.

Was it possible, wondered Esther, to love two people with all her heart. Was it thoughtless and miserly of her to long for two selves, two lives, because she felt as though her single soul couldn't come close to containing it all...

Shara's fingers worked with great care, rising vertical over a small, neglected place. She angled into her, the hard plane of her stomach running flush with Esther's hip, while her right knee coaxed her open. Esther offered a muted scream into the nothingness, into everything. Shara smothered it with her mouth, warm tongue working until Esther's lips bruised and her thighs glistened.

Esther clawed fistfuls of earth.

Motionless night all around them. Two bodies sweating.

"Esther," Shara sighed.

"Abel," she replied.
Desperate times.

Matthaios leaned close to her ear and said softly, "Archbishop D'Annunzio had the Carabinieri rape and torture your vampiric friend, you know."

The girl said nothing, but she stared milkily at the motes of dust hanging in a dim shaft of daylight, whirling like a cloud of memories, just out of reach, trapped between the sun and the ponderance of personal annihilation.

"After a week or so of continuous beatings, the Archbishop had extracted a number of broken confessions regarding conspiracy to murder, sedition, treason, kidnapping, and a half dozen other things — not entirely dissimilar to the situation in which you currently find yourself, Sister. What is important to note, however, is that Sayida al-Rahman's truths did not much resemble each other, as if she had committed the same sins in many different ways. Different people appearing in each confession, phantoms without names or faces. Guilt and innocence are not fixed marks, Miss Blanchett... truth and mistruth are not easily disambiguated. And pain has been proven to turn anyone into a prolific storyteller."

In the pause that followed, Matthaios understood, perhaps better in that moment than ever before, all those weak metaphors of strong emotions people tended to invoke when they spoke of broken hearts and shattered minds. He imagined the girl could feel each shard of shrapnel stabbing at her stomach and lungs, the gray matter of her brain, his words lodging and festering in her tissue.

"If you violate the laws of God, you're a sinner." No emotion, no reaction, simply bland observation registered on his features. The girl, naked and white, silently held out her hands, a penitent waiting for the pastor to anoint her head with consecrated oil and balsam and drive her demons away. "If you violate the laws of men, you're a criminal."

"The water held up her body, weightless, the waves embracing her with their own benediction. Matthaios would set her mind free... to dream as the water dreamed. "But to violate the laws of trust, of friendship, of love, even, Miss Blanchett... that makes you faithless."

The tank closed once again. The girl vanished beneath the lid. Brother Matthaios turned on his heel, and left the room.

Later

"This Zamiel..."

"After a long afternoon in the archives, I have my working theories, Eminence, but would, of course, value your council. You have access to classified information which I do not."

The Cardinal, to Matthaios’s muted incredulity, appeared to grow rather green about the gills. "There are... rumors, related to the forbidden histories. Rumors regarding that name, and what entity it was reputed to represent."

"Pertinent to the matter of Iscariot and Bishop Maxwell, if I intuit your meaning correctly, My Lord."

"Yes, although the information is so archaic, so hyperbolic, that it might as well be the fits and spasms of a mad poet carving rites into riverstone. Superstitions from unenlightened times..."
complete and utter nonsense. However, the girl’s connection to the Orden is valuable." The man’s expression soured considerably. "That being said, I would have much preferred a signed confession."

"The girl is an AX agent," acknowledged Matthaios benignly, his tone a mixture of disinterested and wearily indulgent. "She has had extensive training in these matters. Training overseen by the Inquisition itself, I seem to recall."

Though Matthaios's words stayed Cardinal di Medici's polemic, his expression — with its burning eyes and clenched teeth — contained such contempt that the inquisitor felt no sense of relief or gratitude, but merely mild annoyance at having to throw down the proverbial sponge in the face of Francesco's bloody-minded malice.

"Yes, she's AX," muttered the Cardinal poisonously, grinding his molars. "I'll admit, watching her colleagues grope with excuses to explain away her absence was amusing in of itself, but her obstinacy in refusing to confess is fast becoming a concern. If Caterina were to catch wind of this, much less His Holiness, the consequences could be catastrophic. The longer she's in the Inquisition's custody, the greater the risk of exposure. Mark me, Brother Matthaios, if my sister uncovers the merest scrap of incriminating information, the AX will be forcing a steady stream of favors and payments and behaviors from the Bureau until the next Papal Election. And let me promise you, Caterina will most assuredly guarantee that the name of Francesco di Medici is not among the list of candidates."

"Vipers are measured by the pit-full for a reason," mused Matthaios, running a finger contemplatively under his lower lip.

His levelheaded, serene exterior had a calculated effect; Matthaios carried himself with an easy confidence, with eyes — near-sighted, perpetually pinched — that knew a lot more than they were telling, his bearing betraying none of the furtiveness or fear or discomposure which so many of the clergy wore around the Duke of Florence. And indeed, the inquisitor could intuit well enough the Cardinal's vexation at having to converse with a man whose inscrutability resided in his personal equanimity.

The tension was in no way alleviated by the fact that Matthaios could infer a certain degree of grudging reluctance on the part of his superior, a reluctance with which Matthaios sympathized, even if he didn’t quite share.

The inquisitor truly doubted the Duke of Florence harbored any real hostility towards the Blanchett girl. She was but an unfortunate Iphigenia, sacrificed to calm the roiling seas: Cardinal di Medici simply needed a way to implicate his estimable half-sister while sowing dissent between the AX and the rest of the Holy Roman Curia, consolidating the Ministry of the Doctrine's power by accusing its greatest rival of collusion with vampires and terrorists. However, while the Cardinal had had the foresight to assign Matthaios to the interrogation in place of Petros — who was indeed far too close to Lady Sforza’s agents to be trusted — Matthaios couldn’t help but feel the whole maneuver had been politically naive. While the inquisitor surmised the Duke’s intention had been to incriminate a specific target within the AX, while leaving Esther Blanchett's guilt ambiguous enough to suggest that the entire organization might have been involved in a sundry of treasonous schemes, thereby creating a much wider field of suspicion, electing to go after such a widely-venerated and highly-public figure demonstrated a distinct lack of judgement.

Sister Esther would be missed… was already being missed, if Cardinal di Medici’s sour mood was any indication.

"On a related note, Eminence," queried Matthaios, "how ought I to proceed in getting rid of
her? Her current condition leads me to think I may have to make that decision sooner rather than later."

The Minister of the Doctrine frowned. "Getting rid—what in God's name have you done to the wretched girl... it's only been three days."

"Hadha sahih. That’s as well as may be, but I must confess... it is rather unusual for one to last this long in the tanks."

"You needn’t furnish me with the details," he growled, waving a hand. "So long as the authorities can't trace her remains to the Inquisition, the particulars are no concern of mine. Use that estimable imagination of yours."

Matthaios considered for a moment. "You would have me martyr her, then? Recall, Eminence: the girl has been canonized."

Cardinal di Medici looked gravely reproving, as though the very word gave him dyspepsia. "Then make sure the body isn't found, Matthaios," he enunciated — the solution, to him, patently obvious. "Missing in action would be more appropriate for someone of her station, in any case."

"She is well-liked. Word of Esther Blanchett's disappearance under mysterious circumstances, much less her death, might very well obviate any charge the Inquisition levies that accuses Lady Cardinal Sforza of colluding with the Orden."

"I am aware of that."

"And yet," continued Matthaios, undeterred; typically, the girl’s behavior would fall within the executive purview of the Ministry of Holy Affairs, but since she had not been indicted or even legally accused, she was entirely the Inquisition’s liability, "if we elect instead go public with the fact we conducted a clandestine inquisition of one of the Vatican’s own clergy, we run the risk of losing credibility altogether."

"Then might I suggest—"

The door to His Eminence's office jerked suddenly open, cutting their conversation unceremoniously short. The metal surface hit the wall with enough force to make Matthaios's ears ring, admitting a blast of frigid air and a wide-eyed tenente of the Carabinieri. He stared at Cardinal di Medici in dazed horror as he stooped to catch his breath.

In a strange way, Matthaios both knew and didn't know what had happened, the whip of disquiet laying a keen lash about the inquisitor's heart.

The tenente gave the Duke of Florence a slapdash salute.

"Eminence!" he announced, gasping for air; it was as if all the man's words had formed a logjam in his throat, right below his high collar. "There's been a report of a major public disturbance in the Oltrarno district. Security in the area confirms the use of forbidden Albionian technologies."

Cardinal di Medici cast a regal glance over the officer that communicated at once commanding competence and dangerous forewarning. "Where, exactly." Not a question, noted Matthaios. An order.

"The Piazza Santo Spirito, Eminence. His Reverence the Bureau Director has already arrived on the scene and is currently engaged with the aggressors. Requesting permission to send reinforcements, My Lord Cardinal."
To the Duke's credit, he hid any surprise with martial resolve. Aside from the faint splash of red high on his cheekbones, Francesco radiated calm, collected control. It was entirely possible, of course, that a few townspeople had simply imbibed too much mulled wine and Petros Orsini was gritting his teeth, shouting a great deal, and doing his damndest to keep the peace, but given recent circumstances, not to mention the tenente's evident distress, Matthaios had his doubts.

"Permission granted," snapped the Cardinal. "Do the reports detail who these aggressors are, or how many?"

"Four in all, not counting the Bureau Director, My Lord. A cassocked man with a large attack dog—"

Matthaios started, eyes widening in alarm. He didn't like dogs — a rabid mongrel on the streets of Agadir had very nearly taken his ear off...

"— and two men in military-grade uniforms. Black, with armbands. They are the ones using the Old World technologies."

The tenente bowed and, his report made and his business concluded, strode from the room at pace. Turning to his superior, Matthaios decided he did not like the thoughtful expression that had suddenly appeared on His Eminence's face, his cheeks creasing under a close-lipped smile, his cold, slick brain at work behind hungry gray eyes. Such an expression, the inquisitor knew, did not bode well for his future peace of mind.

"Matthaios, as the senior cleric in the city, I want you to head the Carabinieri task force."

Well, he had been expecting that. "I assume the cassocked man in Brother Petros's company is this Wordsworth character who accompanied the Bureau Director back to Florence?"

"You assume rightfully. Tread carefully, Matthaios... the Professor may appear guileless, but he is as conniving as he is clever."

"Affirmative, My Lord." Matthaios hesitated for a fraction of a second. "Forgive me for saying so, Eminence, but you have the look of a man who has gazed upon the Merkabah."

The Cardinal's tiny smile vanished in an instant. Rather than respond to Matthaios's comment, however, he merely intoned, the words short and chilly: "Those two uniformed individuals... get them out of my city, but if you wish to avoid joining Miss Blanchett then you will not kill them. Is that quite clear?"

Matthaios was mildly surprised by his vehemence. "As crystal, My Lord. And I will, of course, take any and all precautions to make certain of my discretion regarding the AX's misplaced Sister."

"I should hope that you do." The Duke of Florence's gaze was steady and silver-eyed and inscrutable. "Having that in mind, this unfortunate fracas in the Piazza may present an opportunity for remedying the Inquisition's other problem."

"Oh?"

The Cardinal's shoulders rose as he inhaled through his nose. "Go with God, Matthaios. I pray for your success."

"I, in the meanwhile, have a memorandum to prepare..."
Fulfilled all the desert with inviolable voice...

Chapter Summary

He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.

Psalm 147:3

Chapter Notes

Oh my God this took so long to get finished — sorry about that, my friends. Grad school is really kicking me in the posterior, this term.

It was happening again.

Midnight-dark feathers, their symmetries perfectly fledged, fanned out from his slender shoulders — a sheet of black fire sweeping the rime-gray of the heavens.

The wind coursed across his plumage like water around the arches of a bridge. He swooped down and to the right in a large, lazy semicircle, navigating the lashes and gouts of gusty air. He moved at speed, winging westward, over the slopes of Mount Falterona, across the blasted foothills of the Apennines in Casentino, following the sinuous windings of the Arno as it curved near Arezzo, towards Florence. He cut through the sky with the terminal empathy of a hawk, inserting himself effortlessly into the umwelt of his prey. Every now and again he — or rather, they — buffeted the updrafts to generate lift and thrust; the slots at the end of his wings, between the primaries, reduced drag, allowing him to maneuver the thermals and rising air currents with far more efficiency than the Vatican's fleetest battleships.

His mind felt fractured, swollen and feverish, as the megakaryocyte-like Krusnik tipped him back into a disconnected dream state with neither causality nor continuity: the consciousness of Abel Nightroad was a vaporous, remote presence shunted to the back of his own brain. The transference always happened instantaneously, a painless departure, quicker than thought. He would feel the flesh and bone reality of his own body one last time: the taste of air in his lungs, the blood surging in his veins, the steady percussion of his heart, before he allowed the creatures to metastasize in every capillary and chromosome of his physiognomy. The Krusnik's black momentum, a viscous silt, flowed and coagulated into splinters that sliced through Abel's mind and body like harpoons in whale blubber, dragging his carcass behind the stern of a schooner.

The bacilli portended destruction and damage; it was difficult to a remember a time when it had not been so — in a way, Abel had always been powerful, half mad, even if he kept quiet about it. The two halves of his being rioted rarely, chained in place and snarling in protest of the other’s presence. The bondage allowed them just enough latitude to drive each other to venomous rebellion, yet Abel never allowed them the chance to make contact, to fight. There would be no battle, and thus, no closure. No resolution.

The end result sounded more and more like insanity.
Abel was conscious enough to know that there would be no hope, even of death, in the perdition of his transformed state, only more of the same awful suffering. It stood apart from loss, injury, or perhaps even his terrible grief.

_It's happening again._

No. Perhaps not grief.

Grief was too sharp and immediate; sadness, too ephemeral, like something that came and went, a response to an immediate cause which would pass in a little while as another cause made itself known. Mourning seemed in some ways preemptive. He had mourned for Lilith — alone and silent during those dark-swathed centuries, closeting himself away from the world, turning towards a suffocating inner darkness.

No... sorrow felt appropriate for the time being. Sorrow resonated large and inhabitable, an interior season whose vaulted sky seemed a suitable match for the gray firmament which arched over Tuscany.

Abel snapped out his wings to slow his descent towards the city. The battered afternoon light radiated off the pristine white landscape, raking his cheekbones and scarlet eyes. The snowflakes bobbed like wax candles above the deserted streets. The ice silvered the glassy rooftops and changed the old neighborhoods of Florence into something fleshless, bloodless, a huge sepulcher in which men struggled to earn a decent death.

_It's happening again._

Abel felt his helplessness as a heady vertigo, a drunken teeter on the edge of something immense. The Krusnik boiling in his bloodstream responded in kind, forcing Abel's mouth wide and yowling their upset into the sky.

_It's happening again._

"Abel... Abel Abel Abel, my dear," whined the Krusnik, the wind snatching away the words. "Humanity will owe her a debt of flesh for every drop of blood she sheds for them!"

Abel screwed his eyes shut and heaved against the suffocating tightness in his chest, trying to smother an older, more necrotic memory...

_Lilith's head hadn't even been attached, had it? To what, then, had he given his breath?_

Abel should have died that day. Perhaps, in a way, he had.

There was some firm place in Abel's heart that knew what had happened to Lilith had portended a strange sort of mercy. There was something in the texture of the weave that felt bittersweet: the echo of memories so far down in his soul they were all emotion, bursts of color and warmth, adrift from time and place. Abel supposed, in a way, he had been more fortunate than most; so many deaths were anything but dignified. So many died abandoned, unseen, their stories unheard, their selfhood violated, their human worth ignored.

The absolution of Lilith's death, the loving recognition surrounding her, made it possible for Abel
to witness what circumstance sought to obscure. He knew, as surely as he knew anything, that Lilith wouldn't want him to grieve anymore.

And yet.

And yet she was gone, and hers was an absence so forceful it had been an hourly presence for the past 900 years.

And yet...

"It is happening again. Oh, pater peccavi, it is happening again!" wept the Krusnik with crimson tears.

Someone precious to him was in danger, and there seemed nothing Abel could do to steer fate from its appointed course, to catch the stone loosed from its sling.

"Sicut qui mittit lapidem in acervum Mercurii ita qui tribuit insipienti honorem..." murmured Abel Nightroad, Krusnik 02.

Elsewhere

Gawkish.

Graceless.

He conducted himself with the abrasiveness of a carpenter building coffins with a nail gun.

What a dreadfully boorish man...

Isaak Fernand von Kämpfer knew Il Ruinante by reputation from the man's exploits during Battle of Bohemia — the Orden having lent their modest assistance in catalyzing hostilities, naturally.

As Isaak recalled, the Vatican army, under Orsini's command, had launched a two-pronged attack targeting the weaker Moravian and Silesian armies protecting the city of Brno. The Bohemian forces on the flanks were overrun by the Inquisition and subsequently trapped in the area around the Svitava and Svratka rivers, which were in turn heavily blockaded on Orsini's authority. Heavy fighting continued for several months in and around Brno; the Vatican's attrition tactics eventually drove the Duchy of Bohemia to the brink of starvation. The day came when the only thing standing between the sizable Inquisition forces and the city was a heavily fortified stronghold held by the remaining Moravians. Orsini had, according to eyewitnesses, abandoned his post to dash across the open ground where, having out-distanced the rest of his soldiers, he decimated the remaining Bohemian forces before continuing to fight his way down the trenches towards Brno, armed with only a lance.

Il Ruinante either killed or forced the surrender of hundreds of Bohemian soldiers. He single-handedly annihilated two companies of the enemy — along with a company of his own men, who, unable to keep pace with their leader, had been mowed down in the wake of Orsini's charge.

The Director of the Department of the Inquisition, thought Isaak, was not a man to trifle with. Ferocity for Orsini was not a rare occurrence, but something he meted out every day, to allies and enemies alike.

Hell is empty and all the devils are here...
Still, his opponent's barbarity did not preclude Isaak's ability to sense the rhythm and pattern of the Chief Inquisitor's assaults before they fell. He was volatile and possessed of a vicious temper; blind passion rendered him careless. It was like fighting a willful — albeit uncommonly large — teenager.

And indeed, for all the torrid details of his history, Orsini was quite young, surprisingly so — no older than, perhaps, his early thirties. He had fair hair, the color of seawater, maimed into one of those severe cuts that appeared to be all the rage among those of an ecclesiastical persuasion. Pale eyes, very pale... almost white. His voice was rich and bitter, like wine. Besides which, he was physically big — as tall as a budding tree, lithe, immensely strong.

But strength, Isaak reasoned, was not as important as balance, and balance was not as important as anticipation. The stiff arches of Orsini's armor coupled with the man's natural bulk made him less fleet-footed and far more leaden in his movements — a terrifying prospect in the event of a direct, hostile assault of an enemy force, as had been the case in Brno, but far less effective in cutting a rug with a smaller, nimbler opponent.

Isaak's quick eyes predicted with ease the man's attacks by the slight shifts in his stance and the tightening of his shoulders. He could forecast the trajectory of the shrieking lance by the angle of his opponent's elbows. The way he stood, the set of his shoulders; every muscle in his body indicated a barely-restrained tension.

Fighting, Isaak mused, had a grammar all its own, just as war had its syntax.

"Reverences," he said in a reasonable tone, sounding relaxed even as he blocked one gauntleted fist with his forearm. He savored the look of confounded surprise that flashed across Orsini's face when Isaak's ulna didn't snap in half like a carrot stick. "I'm afraid you'll both have to stop this now, or I'll be forced to—"

He broke off and dodged to the side just as the Chief Inquisitor swung his lance towards the pavings. The engine left a crater in the spot Isaak had been standing a split second before.

Panziermagier frowned.

"Reverences, surely you must know" — he struggled to make himself heard over the clatter of the high-frequency wheel as well as the inchoate bellowing of its owner — "that violence" — he dove beneath a right hook — "never solves anything."

Orsini lifted his ponderous weapon over his head, bracing the heavy shaft against his shoulder before sweeping the engine in a swift arc towards Isaak's head.

But Panziermagier's reflexes were honed to perfection. He ducked beneath the lance, dodging Orsini's killing thrusts with preternatural speed.

Isaak noticed, across the piazza, William doing his damndest to keep Zamiel from launching itself at Dietrich's throat. His dear Professor had his hands tangled in the beast's fur, knuckling in its scruff. They weren’t shaking. Somehow, Isaak understood that William's desperate attempt to avoid a fight came from more than naive pacifism: it was a part of the defense mechanism, the internal barbed wire and moat he’d lavishly built within himself to keep the full effect of recent circumstances from drowning him. But the fear was real enough; Isaak could see William grimacing at the taste of it, like a copper penny placed on his tongue.

Isaak smiled grimly.
In his mind's eye — the memories partially his own, partially the Krusnik's — Abel saw them: the rolling armies and the flames of battle; the graves and pits and dying cries of innumerable souls; the spreading darkness, a black plumage cresting over the Earth; flies and carrion feasting on butchered flesh; the horizon silhouetted against the great conflagration of the sky. The world became a geometric configuration of flame, each dot a pyre lit by the hand of Contra Mundi. From where the Ark hung in its geostationary orbit, those millions of lights had seemed to pulse in perfect harmony, constantly flickering, as if coding a cryptic message to God.

When the fires, at last, burned to embers, and all the lights went dark, all that remained were the empty cities, becalmed by the silence of centuries and a hundred million deaths.

The taint of them in Abel's head sickened him. He once thought himself so powerful...

But more than a thousand years acquaintance with the world had forced Abel to acknowledge that he was but an orphan of creation, a waif of the wide spaces, caught helpless amid a whirl of forces too great to comprehend. That onward through time roared an immense and sightless wave, leaving in its wake generations, cities, civilizations.

The lives of loved ones.

Perhaps the worst thing about Abel's long life was his ability to recognize a structure in and behind events, a history that was reiterative, with variations that ultimately failed to alter the course of things, no matter how much thought and labor went into the making of them. Oceans receded, coastlines withered and cracked. Mountains crumbled to dust, rains vanished into the sea, and every city humankind built had a jumble of bones for their foundations. Storms calmed, death claimed, and life crawled ever on. For all his many years, for all his many sorrows, Abel had yet to decode the pattern underpinning it all, to affect a change that might, at least, mean something.

"When the last star winks out," Lilith had told him, once, a long time ago, "perhaps none of it will have mattered. In ten billion years, we will be nothing — and equal to God."

Abel found himself wondering, not for the first time, if life were really worth the effort; if it had ever been. By uniting himself with the dead, he had cut himself off from the touch and tenderness of the living. Stripped of all earthly hopes, bereft of every consolation, Abel was as alone as a man could possibly be while still breathing. A crisis of continuity, he suspected, was one which came to all creatures at one juncture or another, but Abel somehow doubted it drowned them in quite the same tidal surge.

He took a bleak pleasure in the consideration that in the long run of things, acts of mercy, of forgiveness, were futile, empty gestures, subsumed into the same nothingness they failed to alter. It was dreadfully ironic, in a way.

Not that such sentiments had stopped him from constructing for himself a world in a pretense of understanding. He papered over the voids of his comprehension with his friendships and his faith, and made believe that order had been imposed.

Though it was in itself a motivation without equal, Lilith’s love for humankind was only a part of the reason why Abel found himself taking holy orders. Perhaps, in his loss and fear and terrible sadness, he had craved the precision of a liturgy that allowed him to admit his own helplessness, to alleviate some of the immeasurable weight upon his shoulders by admitting a dependence on those great forces he neither understood nor controlled. The guilt and shame remained, of course, but they were comprehensible, conquerable things, their perimeters defined by virtues and vices and
confessions and repentances and Hail Marys in a way that was almost metrical, forecastable. The Church had given Abel a means by which to frame his apocalyptic grief, and so he had given himself willingly, surrendered body and soul, to the caprices of a faith he could not govern, yet without which the conduct of his daily life came to a grinding standstill.

There was, he decided, a prevenient comfort in putting oneself at the mercy of other people.

And, for the most of it, the fiction worked. Abel's playacting of complacency allowed him to skim across the surface of the world, heedless of the depths below. A kingfisher flitting over a lake, miles deep, pursuing an erratic path to a pointless end.

Until that moment when something from the cold unknown reached up to swallow him.

Until that moment when he remembered how humans passed in front of his eyes like so many motes of dust caught in a scantling of sunlight, souls of a brief season. They were brave, proud, beautiful, clever... and they died. He hated them for it — he always had. They got hurt and felt pain and grew old and died so soon that his heart was continually wracked with grief at their passing.

In Lilith, there had been mercy; in Caterina, redemption; in Esther, compassion. But in the world there were none of those things, for nature and life moved on as if unaware of good or evil, of human sorrow or human pain. The universe was a faithless place.

No... Miss Esther would probably tell him that no one was truly faithless. She would say, instead, that they simply had faith in the wrong things.

Miss Esther...

Abel gritted his teeth so hard his jaw ached.

For the past three days, it had been her image alone that had presided in his mind, waking or sleeping. It was her smile for which he yearned, the sound of her voice he desired again to hear. It was Esther he wanted by his side once more. It was that brave, kind girl, with her grace and gentleness, whom he missed to the point of pain.

On the shore of the Danube, in the shadow of a burning church, all those months ago, Abel had felt as though after centuries of numb, miserable loneliness, with only the occasional cruel, lucid interval poking up like a rock shoal, the world had started to turn about him again.

No, not about him.

About her.

Esther Blanchett had entered his life like an epiphany. She had him shedding his phlegmatic apathy like extra layers in midsummer heat. Abel didn't know for sure whether his feelings came from his fierce urge to protect or his overwhelming need to atone. He didn't know whether hers came from loneliness or a pariahlike pining for the lost, miserable wretches of the world. She loved him and pitied him. And he loved her and endangered her.

It was all so pathetic.

After Abel learned of her disappearance, after Father León and Mr. Petros had returned to the Iron Maiden empty-handed, and after three days and three nights of profitless searching for Skorzeny's Red Baron, the Orden's flagship, Abel had wanted to — he didn't know. Shatter his glasses in his fists. Break windows. Snarl obscenities at Caterina. Crash the airship. Sink his fangs into León and
Petros both.

Burn down the world.

In the end he had done none of those things; while he knew the shapes and forms of rage, he had, in truth, nothing more than quiet sorrow inside to sustain him.

So he had deserted the Iron Maiden, abandoned himself to the Krusnik.

So he flew over the world, hating them all, and himself most of all.

Abel was so tired... so tired from spinning the scales of pain and despair until the whole ensemble threatened to collapse like the carbon core of a dying star. He was not afraid of his own death. He was afraid of Esther's, and the fear raised in Abel a feeling of leaden, bloated foreboding, like a corpse winched from a river. He had forced himself to cling to the hope of rescuing her — a petrified cat over water, for whom to fall was to be swept away... to drown.

"Surrender is a frame of mind. A belief. A yielding to inevitability. It is a despair for the future. It is the death of hope."

Lilith... thought Abel, florets of grief crystallizing on his soul, leaving a wreath of frost. He pushed his knuckles against his eyes, trying to spark bright pressure-smears and bring a little color to the darkness of his thoughts.

Trying to keep himself from weeping.

I couldn't save you.

What if I can't save her?

Elsewhere

The hair suddenly stood up on the back of Isaak's neck. His heart pulsed in the hollow of his throat.

"I wouldn't split your focus if I were you, heathen!!"

Ah... not paying attention—

Isaak felt something not unlike a spike maul driving into his chest, cracking ribs and crushing his pleural cavities. He careened into the building at his back, leaving an impression in the pulverized plaster. The engine of the Inquisition brute's little toy was spinning like a supersonic gyroscope, emitting doughnut-shaped blasts of air strong enough to fracture the pavingstones — and Isaak's ribs, besides.

The more he attempted to steady himself against the accursed man’s onslaught, the more Isaak felt the pain. Most of it had resolved itself into a dull, persistent ache — in his abdomen, his ribcage, his neck and spine, the cluster of nerves just below his left clavicle. That probably meant the collarbone was cracked. Ah, well.

"A high-frequency engine which emits toroidal vortices," muttered Isaak wetly, his broken bones knitting back together beneath his shattered sternum. "Very clever, Chief Inquisitor." He coughed blood, grimaced as it stained the starched white shirt under his uniform. "Very painful too, I might add."
The man's jaw hinged open in astonishment. "How in the blazes are you still standing?" he demanded, blotchy scarlet rushing his complexion.

"My dear Brother, I'm rather more difficult to kill than one's common or garden apostate."

Orsini's fury imparted a ruddy glow to his glare. "Another vampire, then?" He hissed the word like a curse.

"Ah… not quite, Chief Inquisitor. But being as you just smashed my ribcage to splinters, I have neither the energy nor the breath to explain such things at a level you could understand."

"WHAT WAS THAT?!"

Crimson saliva gathered at the corners of Isaak's mouth. Each breath sounded moist. "Himmeldonnerwetter, must you feel the need to shout everything?"

Isaak staggered, off-balance, before dropping to one knee; he half expected to collapse under another vortex of compressed air, this time aimed at the base of his spine or the back of his skull.

But Brother Petros's chivalric nature kept him from pressing an advantage over an injured opponent, a fact for which a part of Isaak was grateful, even if another, far larger part found it highly amusing. The Inquisitor was a man who feared no evil save disgrace, full of blood and iron, familiar with the sight of smashed faces and lopped-off limbs — him being the cause of a vast majority of them. At the same time, he was, during those short, blessed moments when he wasn't bellowing at volumes to raise the dead, a demure, unobtrusive sort. Honor, Isaak supposed, was a balancing act of retribution and mercy — so speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty... for he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment. All very virtuous.

"The fool doth think he is wise," croaked Isaak, "but the wise man knows himself to be a fool. As You Like It, act five, scene one. Your sense of honor does you credit; alas, you are currently the hindmost of my priorities, Brother Petros."

The prime concern in question, Isaak noted through gimleted eyes, paced not twenty feet away from him. Isaak had seen its likeness in his research, but the Zamiel whispered on spliced newsreels and painted on mudbrick and stone and scratched in crowded parchment margins was nothing like the behemoth that stood before him in the flesh.

The wolfish creature circled them, crimson eyes slitted with lethal hostility. It had a great, lashing tail, its fur so matted and its skin so dry it was almost scaly, screeching on the pavingstones like the winching line on a cable reel. The ancient Vampire was still weak — half-formed, not unlike Isaak's own Master — evidenced in the questing tendrils of dark smoke dripping from its hide and the way it stained the street with an obsidian ichor, like boiling black wax, that hissed as it burned through the travertine.

Zamiel flexed its claws as it took another sniff of the air, inhaling through its snout, almost crocodilian in its length. Its nostrils were half decayed, flesh and muscle flapping whenever the creature took a sniff… the animal was not, in fact, breathing, merely snuffling the air in the way dogs were liable to do when scavenging after half-rancid scraps.

It was vermin. But, as legend would have it, the creature was far more powerful than even Isaak's versatile imagination could reckon. And indeed, as the Magician watched the mangy mongrel stalk towards him, he couldn't help but indulge a certain thrill of anticipation. To see the being by whom and for whom so much blood had been spilt excited him. The vapor of violence which emanated
from Zamiel felt truly intoxicating; its combined hatred and aggression flared bright and succulent. Isaak's entire being felt elevated as he savored the realization that the things he was seeing and feeling were but the tiniest morsel of the destruction Zamiel, in the Orden's service, could unleash. The litany of possibilities swarmed through Isaak's head like a revelation.

The wolf let out a staccato series of barks. The muscles of its haunches bunched as though preparing to pounce.

"Marionenttenspieler," muttered Isaak, speaking through the pain in his ravaged abdomen, an injury which was fast becoming a nuisance: "secure the beast. The Paladin and the Professor are mine."

Marionenttenspieler's eyes glistened; his gaze became unsettlingly beatific. "Let us dance, then, Alucard," he said, smiling obscenely.

The boy flicked his wrist, and in an instant, Zamiel froze. A thread snapped and quivered; a translucent fiber, like an exposed nerve, twisted. The dog's head dropped forward listlessly, as though all the bones of its cervical vertebrae had lost cohesion.

The creature's musk reached Isaak; it was ripe with the thorny scents of danger and confusion and, remarkably… fear. Zamiel growled, low and deep in its massive chest. The fur on its back and shoulders bristled like razorwire. It jerked and twitched beneath Dietrich's masterly hands, stumbling in tangled two-steps and mad pirouettes crossed by the boy's strings.

An animal trapped in a snare. Zamiel raised the growl a few decibels, panting like a parched mongrel on a sweltering day.

Dietrich eyed the monster narrowly, curling his wires in a warning twitch. "Do stop complaining," he advised, squinting down his elfish nose. Marionenttenspieler hooked one foot over the other, poised as though to pass the time of day indefinitely. The wan light washed his face with pearly gray, making him look like one of the chilly marble statues from the alcoves of the Uffizi. He paused as if debating something, then noted, in what struck Isaak as a discordant note of humor, "You smell like wet dog, monster."

"Alucard!" William drew that beloved sword-cane of his, topped with its carved falcon's head. "You've broken strings like those before… free yourself, damn you!"

"You're wasting your breath, old man," sneered Marionenttenspieler. "It's not the wires which are keeping it muzzled. I'd wager it's the fact I'm currently stimulating its nervous system with 300,000,000 volts of electricity."

The huge animal shuddered, sinking to its belly and slinking forward, releasing a plaintive whine of agitation, tail low and wavering. Its ruff bristled and its lips curled, pupils contracting to tiny islands in an ocean of red.

Isaak acknowledged a tiny mote of disappointment — he had anticipated a more enthusiastic show of resistance from the legendary monster. He supposed, bereft of a master and thus trapped by the incantations of its ancient restriction protocols, it really was just a beast with its chain pulled too tight.

No matter. Dietrich would pull it tighter.

There was, for a long moment, a subdued tension in the air, as if the awaited explosion required the advent of some utterly minute spark to set the entire powder keg aflame. Isaak grew wise again to
Orsini's presence, whose wrath had him a brilliant shade of red. Isaak wondered vaguely if the large vein in the man's neck might rupture.

The engine of his lance began again to spin, only this time leveled at Dietrich's entirely vulnerable, entirely human head, which only reached to elbow-height on the Chief Inquisitor. "Release that creature this instant, heretic!"

So damnably loud...

A dark shadow began to smother the angels of Isaak's better nature. The Magician closed his eyes and breathed through his nose, forcing the chill air deep into his chest. He held it for a count of five, then shaped his lips into an O and blew it out again, puncturing a tiny hole in the snow. Isaak's hand strayed to a loop on his belt, his hands blur of movement.

"I wouldn’t split your focus if I were you, Inquisitor," he said quietly.

Before Il Ruinante could raise his infernal plaything, Isaak's weapon, a whip, snatched the air with a loud crack, lashing across the intervening space and catching Orisini across one pauldron. The force of impact took him entirely by surprise. He shuddered under the contact, the thick plate of his armor splitting like the stomach of a bloated cadaver. The inquisitor dropped to his knees as his copious musculature convulsed, the skin of his arm burned and blistered. "What in God's name...!"

"And Gideon said, Therefore when the Lord hath delivered Zebah and Zalmunna into mine hand, then I will tear your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness... a piece of Old World technology, Chief Inquisitor. The Lash of Gideon is a whip made from a coherent toroid of superheated plasma. It will slice through your armor like a laser torch through fat."

Then, smiling thinly, Isaak surged forward, his whip singing past the inquisitor's upraised hand and biting, again, into his exposed forearm. The arc of plasma scalded him, striping a great swathe of metal and flesh from Orsini's elbow to his wrist. Like scaling a fish, thought Isaak, amused. The man's lips drew back from his teeth, but he endured the pain and humiliation with martial discipline, his jaw clenched and his muscles taut, suppressing the urge to howl in what no doubt must have been crippling agony.

Isaak admitted to himself a private, grudging surprise — in most other humans, the Lash of Gideon ought to have cleaved the arm in twain. The Chief Inquisitor was indeed made of sterner stuff, although Isaak doubted even someone of Orsini's constitution could withstand a third lashing.

"Brother Petros!" cried William, his face going ashen. Poor old man... he looked utterly helpless.

"One fire burns out another's burning. One pain is lessened by another’s anguish." Isaak smiled, dark eyes glittering with exhilaration. He ran his tongue behind his teeth, coiling the Lash of Gideon around his thumb and elbow. "Romeo and Juliet, act one, scene two."

Ironic, thought Isaak suddenly, for such sentiments to come from Benvolio, Verona's resident pacifist...

If looks could kill, the one William shot him ought to have flayed the skin from his bones. "Leave him alone, Isaak!"

The skin of Orsini’s forearm was constellated with distended blisters and angry red welts, the heat of the plasma coil causing the skin to simply slough off. The limb looked like the exoskeleton of some monstrous crustacean, knobby and calloused under wounds old and new. But the man's eyes blazed, the fire all rage and contempt. He bit back a grimace as he used his lance to haul himself
back to his feet, his injured arm tucked close to his chest.

"You think I can't fight through pain!" he snarled, his voice thundering through the piazza. "You think I haven't done it a thousand times before!"

"You heard the estimable inquisitor, William," said Isaak reasonably. "Don’t insult his pride by protecting him."

William leveled his slender sword at Isaak's chest. As rapiers went, it was the runt of the litter — a matte gray blade which appeared to dull the longer Isaak looked at it. But even the most unimpressive sword could leave an impressive wound when in the hands of a practiced master. Fighting with the thin blade was not an offense that required a heavy hand; in fact, it was best done with the gentlest of touches, something to which the bookish, clever Professor with his fine motor skills was well suited.

Despite the scholarly facade, the hostility William exuded would have made most men run in the other direction. But Isaak was not most men.

"If you hurt them, Butler," he said lowly, dangerously, using Isaak's pseudonym in an effort, in all likelihood, to irritate, "I swear on everything that is holy, I will track you to the ends of the earth, destroying any and everything you hold dear. I will take everything from you and leave you alive to suffer through it. I will bestow upon you the same misery you have given me."

Oh, Isaak didn't doubt the man would certainly try. Their friendship at the University of Londinium had planted itself as a small, unobtrusive seed; over time, it had grown thick roots and copious boughs, ensnaring both their hearts. Years afterwards, Isaak suspected Professor Wordsworth was still pulling the dry brown fibers from his chest.

A rather cruel little smile settled on Isaak's thin lips, then. His dear William — alone, betrayed, cast aside by the University and the universe both — hoping continuously and without end for a formal release from his sin. How utterly wretched the poor man was: the death which at first tormented William had been numbed by time and in turn replaced by another order of longings more painful still if left unsatisfied: the longings for recompense, for revenge, for retribution exacted. In one moment, William believed fervently in concepts such as truth, mercy, and the like. In the next — in fact, each time William caught the merest whiff of Isaak Fernand von Kämpfer and the Orden — the injustices done to him floated to the fore of his memories. The Professor cauterized his conscience and thought not of his precious Church's far nobler injunctions.

Never was there a fouler blasphemer of God’s mercy than William Walter Wordsworth.

Isaak pitied the man.

"And how will your revenge come to pass, old friend?" Panziermagier paused and lowered his voice. "In the same way all violence comes to pass, I suppose... by destruction and upheaval, by flame and by fury, for no retribution ever came calmly over the world. Tell me something, William, for I've always wondered..." He looked at Professor Wordsworth, head tilted in a mocking approximation of childlike curiosity. "Did you want to fuck Miss Scott before or after I killed your fiancé?"

Isaak swore he could hear the little shriek of madness in the back of William’s brain. Ten years ago, Isaak had played him like a cat weaving between his legs, pretending to be tame, friendly, before sinking his claws into soft, vulnerable flesh.

Nothing had changed.
"Hallo there! In the name of the His Eminence the Duke of Florence, the Holy Roman Inquisition, and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, I demand you cease hostilities at once!"

All at once, the ground began to tremble; the walls of the tightly-knit buildings vibrated under a sudden grinding pressure, like that which preceded an earthquake, or a fracturing glacier. It built to a roar that penetrated the sinuses and finally into the gray matter of those hearing it. Isaak made the mistake of breathing through his nose — an odor like that from a belching munitions factory fell in a peasoup fog over the piazza; he could taste it at the back of his throat.

While the blood drained from Petros Orsini's face, Zamiel's red eyes held a glint of triumph.

Then, remarkably, the monster muttered, "Found you," under its breath.

Elsewhere

The air tasted different in Abel's lungs as the Krusnik stooped towards Oltrarno, the bacilli drawn to the southwestern side of the Arno.

Abel could picture in his mind's eye the Krusnik smiling indulgently at the prospect of carnage and wonton butchery. He had felt that toothy, feral grin on his face any number of times, two barbed contact-points where his fangs pressed against his lower lip.

He despised it.

As he descended, the wind trailed circles on his wings, the ruffle of keen-edged feathers a dalliance of whispers. Below him, the lamp poles cast dim nimbuses of light on the snow as it fell in veils over the city, the flakes beading on Abel's eyelashes and in brackish slush puddles both.

It wasn't a peaceful snow — it was a miserable one, thin and cold and wet. Almost a drizzle, weeping for the inevitable, beating in the air like wings and, unlike Abel, reluctant to touch the ground. It made him feel, in some strange way, even more lost, as though the shadowy events of the past week were as invisible to the wide, white wastes as the sky behind the gray and leaden clouds, the evening cloaked in anonymity and the remorse of an aging year.

Abel knew that when he got Miss Esther out of this alive — and he would, because he did not allow himself, for the sake of his self-preservation, much less his sanity, to entertain the alternative — the cuts on their lives had already been made, and the blood of consequence would continue to pool beneath their feet as the days dragged on. Whichever way this went, the scars would remain, evident in the things that could not be spoken, in the wounds that would not heal.

How he hated it... that draining, hollowing helplessness that genuine love for another person produced in his heart. He was in awe of the mystery of human compassion, all while sorrowing for the inability of love to make the distance between souls any more bearable.

Morose almost beyond sense, he perched on a stoop somewhere along the Via delle Caldaie, his shoe touching a snowbank with a slight scrunch. He took a mincing step forward, shuddering.

"Go to sleep," he murmured. Under his gaze, the crests of his wings became a semé of black feathers, the wind scattering them upward and away in a salutary swoop, leaving only his ragged cassock hanging off his back, his skin smarting in air so thin and crisp he could snap it with his fingers.
Abel shivered, forlorn and cold in the shadows, the wind whistling through the branches of a few leafless trees, looking as though they were holding hands and bowing their heads in prayer, weighted heavily under a fine varnish of ice. The wind rose from the Arno, lashing Abel's mantel, ripping at the waves of silver hair so that it streamed about his face, even after he tied it back.

Snatching his attention, Abel heard a large blast and felt the earth shake beneath him. All of his senses strained ahead — the sound came from somewhere beyond the junction of the Via Sant'Agostino and the Via Mazzetta, in the direction of the Santo Spirito basilica, but it registered to Abel as muted and distant, muffled by the falling snow. He swiveled his ears forward to hear it better, half-floating and half-striding over the snow towards the piazza, weightless and ethereal, like a creature underwater.

He turned onto the thoroughfare and walked east in the direction of the Arno. The cobblestones crunched under his boots, while the roofs of the houses steamed softly. Abel passed a fountain, the stone crusted in ice. The fine gray light filtering through the snow briefly illuminated the basin's depths, and as Abel leaned over, he could make out the orange and gold glints of fish. There, beneath the cover of the ice, their flickering lives went on. A part of him wanted to know how they did it, how they withstood the slowing of their hearts, the chilling of their blood, through the long darkness of winter.

"Hallo there!" a voice burst the bubble of Abel's thoughts and the world rushed in, reverberating around the Piazza Santo Spirito like the mournful tolling of an antique brass bell.

Abel realized, abruptly, that he recognized the voice... he ducked behind a pillar, its trunk overgrown in stalks of what had once been pale ivy, now dead.

Peering around the curve of the stone, Abel recognized his friends — Mr. Alucard, oddly motionless, shivering as though with fever; Mr. Petros, leaning heavily on his Screamer; William, his cane unsheathed and leveled at...

The color washed out of Abel's face. He wished all at once that the column at his back would open up and swallow him.

There were two of them: an extremely attractive boy around Miss Esther's age, with shoulder-length brown hair and glittering, honey-colored eyes, and a tall, thin figure smoking a noxious cigarette.

Abel's gaze took in the height and build of the older man: the jet black hair, long enough to brush his hips; the old-fashioned clothes that were out of keeping with the current styles of the Holy See; the crimson insignia emblazoned across an armband, like that worn by a military officer.

Anger, sudden and insistent, twisted the muscles of Abel's mouth. His hand tightened around the stone pillar; he couldn't stop a swell of fury, like bile, rising in his throat, almost slashing the air as a snarl.

"In the name of the His Eminence the Duke of Florence, the Holy Roman Inquisition, and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, I demand you cease hostilities at once!"

Abel's gaze jackknifed away from von Lohengrin and von Kämpfer towards the basilica at the mouth of the piazza. He had heard the announcement clearly enough, but there was something at once impressive and unnerving in the way the soldiers had emerged in their dozens quite without Abel's noticing. A sense of quiet deadliness was suggested by their immaculate black and red uniforms, the low-slung belts, their holsters tied down, their pistols positioned for a quick draw. The Carabinieri’s movements had an ease about them, giving the impression of a squadron who
A sudden blast of dust and snow made Abel cough. He buried his face in the crook of his arm to muffle the noise. But behind all the commotion, Abel probably could play the 1812 Overture with real cannons and nobody would be any the wiser.

The source of the commotion quickly made itself known, marching into the square at a bone-rattling rhythm that forced Abel's heart to beat along in concert.

The fusion-powered ballistic mech suit — the *Uriel*, Abel believed it had been christened — was enormous: 15-feet tall, black and bulbous, with barbed arms and legs and a pilot cab engineered to mimic a dome-shaped helmet. Its hull gleamed like the polished carapace of a centipede, armored flamethrower and cannon leveled squarely at Isaak and Dietrich. Abel could see the former scowling fiercely as the suit lumbered into the piazza, its march slow and unhurried, every step considered and solemn. The actuators in the power armor hissed; steam from the suit’s fusion engine vented through a series of filters and released as a vapor above the small servitor cab mounted on its frontal section. Its breastplate was formed from thick sheets of tungsten reinforced steel, bent and fashioned into shape; every piece of the warrior's armor, from the greaves to the vambrace, cuissart and gorget was emblazoned with the lightning and cross of the *Vineam Domini*.

The Inquisition had arrived.

The speakers mounted to the *Uriel's* cab crackled with static.

"*Mark me, heretics.*"

Despite the enormous size and girth of the suit, the pilot had a thin, disagreeable voice, like the breaking of dry reeds. Abel had heard it several times before. He remembered this particular officer from Estonia — a wiry man with a sharp-nosed face, round, prominent ears and a razor-edged hairline that combined to give him a rodentlike appearance.

Which, incidentally, was probably the least unpleasant thing about him.

"*My name is Brother Matthaios. I am God's weapon on Earth, and a killer of creatures like you.*" The pilot, Matthaios, spoke with the sort of casual menace that only people with supreme authority ought to manage. "*This district of Florence is mine to ward. I offer those who would wish to challenge me an ignominious heretic's death, but I beg an indulgence of those willing to accept my offer of a ceasefire.*" Two additional cannons fitted to circular pintle mounts swiveled to aim at the Orden officers, leaving Matthaios’s intentions blatantly unambiguous.

"*Unless you leave this city posthaste, I will slaughter you all.*"

Abel, from his hiding place, took stock of the suit’s technical specifications within a matter of seconds: the armor was fitted with a back-mounted fusion reactor which generated an output power exceeding 60,000 Watts, capable of powering the hydraulic systems built into the frame of the suit, which in turn could absorb 2500 Joules of kinetic impact. The thick tungsten ablative coating could reflect plasma weapons and other radiation emissions without damaging the composite subsurface, and the servitor cab in the suit’s helmet was likely made of bulletproof glass to protect the pilot from any projectiles.

Abel caught a glance of a question in Dietrich’s bellicose brown eyes; the AX priest knew it would irk the boy to give ground, even when it would be suicide to stand and fight. Fortunately, Abel also knew Isaak didn’t much care for Dietrich’s thoughts on the matter.
The Magician's pallor had gone ghastly, and faced with the Inquisitorial force, his thin face donned a dreadful expression; though he had kept his distance from the Carabinieri and had not spoken to Matthaios, something emanating from Isaak's still, silent presence communicated itself to Abel so strongly that the latter felt an indescribable and yet nauseatingly familiar lurch of repulsion and fear, forcing him to mask the anguish that writhed just under the surface of his face. Painful memories took root behind his eyes. Thinking back to Barcelona was like mishandling a kitchen knife; over the past few years, the blade had dulled, and the cuts were not quite as sharp. But the contours of Noelle's death were always there, resting in the cabinet of his thoughts, drawing blood whenever Abel ran an errant finger along their edges.

His next breath came as a shuddering, desperate thing, as though his lungs had forgotten their function. Abel had to concentrate on forcing the air through his body.

And then, without pomp or ceremony, Isaak steered Dietrich away with a disconcerting lack of effort. The boy — reluctantly — twitched his fingers, freeing Alucard. By some mechanism Abel didn't understand, some magic at Isaak's command, the pair dematerialized from the piazza in a way that surely no real, living, mortal thing could possibly manage to do.

Rather than lick his proverbial wounds, once released from Dietrich's strings, Alucard immediately took to snarling at the Uriel. Tension thickened the air as the enormous wolf watched the power armor with the narrowed eyes of a jungle cat, one waiting for the first flinch to attack, his hindquarters in the air and every hair on his shoulders standing on end.

Matthaios lowered his cannons — although, Abel noted, he neither opened the windows of the cab nor made a move to power-down the Uriel. In fact, faced with Alucard's spitting, the power armor took a few mincing steps back.

Meanwhile, one of the Carabinieri, a porcine man with brown teeth, swung his face towards the very obviously shaken Professor Wordsworth. The carabiniere carried the traditional halberd of the Vatican gendarmerie in one hand. He carried an assault rifle in the other. With Alucard so clearly agitated, he didn't try to get close. Smart man, thought Abel grudgingly.

"What's your business here?" he demanded.

"Oh, this and that," said William benignly, patting the snarling Alucard on the head as though he were little more than a misbehaved poodle. "Slugs and snails and puppy dogs' tails. String and sealing wax and other fancy stuff. Just passing the time of day, really. I'm an inveterate gabbler, you see. Always have been and always will be."

"Don't try my patience," seethed the officer.

"I wouldn't dream of it," riposted the Professor.

"Father Wordsworth is a servant of the Holy Mother Church, you addle-witted twit!" bellowed Mr. Petros, the sneer that usually accompanied any mention of the AXmissing from his voice; instead, his pale eyes glinted witheringly, a look he had once or twice directed at Abel during their more unfortunate encounters and one which Abel wouldn't wish on his worse enemy. *Il Ruinante* brandished his Screamer and loomed over the carabiniere until the poor man was cast entirely in shadow. "You disgrace him with your impudence!"

"B-b-but Chief… that d-dog… the t-terrorist agents…"

"This creature is an animal brought in by the AX and the Inquisition on *my* express authority! It is trained to locate and subdue suspects, and to attack vampires, heretics, *and disrespectful, poorly*
"disciplined halfwits like you!"

"Don't be reckless, old boy," Abel heard the Professor mutter, albeit to little avail.

"You have my sincerest apologies, Father Wordsworth," said Brother Matthaios demurely, acknowledging the carabiniere’s offense; it shouldn't have been possible for power armor to genuflect, but Uriel managed it with remarkable efficacy. "Are you both unharmed? Oh, Bureau Director, you appear to be injured..."

"Nevermind that now!" snarled Petros, eyes blazing blue murder. Though he seemed strangely wary of displaying overt hostility towards his power-armed underling, even at a distance, Abel could intuit no love lost between the two men. Father Nightroad couldn't begrudge Petros his animosity — Abel had only crossed the Moroccan Demon once, at Tallinn, receiving no more than a few hefty cuffs, a black eye, and a burst lip in the process. But he was fully cognizant of the fact that he was far more fortunate than most.

If he should reveal his intentions, much less his presence, to Matthaios at that moment, however... the silver-haired priest shuddered, hardly daring to ponder on what the consequences might be.

Caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, indeed. Abel would almost rather take his chances with the Magician and the Puppet Master.

Almost.

Petros's fists clenched and unclenched at his sides, telling Abel how close he was to unleashing his hellish temper. "Explain yourself, Matthaios," he demanded: "Why didn't you fire upon those Orden scum with the Uriel?" Several members of the Carabinieri, once so stout and sure, turned rather sheepishly to the man in the power armor. Even Abel could feel his stomach churning to water.

Despite the blood-freezing fear Mr. Petros struck into the hearts of his officers, Matthaios seemed entirely immune. He regarded his fellow inquisitor with a lofty stare of superb indifference from behind the shielding of the Uriel's cab windows.

"Maedhira — I am under express orders from His Eminence Cardinal di Medici to avoid any engagement with the hostiles in a public area, especially one heavily trafficked by civilians."

Not that the loss of civilian life had ever caused Matthaios pause before, thought Abel bitterly, remembering Tallinn.

"When His Eminence heard your most noble person was in danger, Bureau Director, he ordered me to serve as your backup. And in the wake of that most gruesome murder in the area surrounding the Basilica of Santa Croce, His Eminence was insistent that I operate merely as peacekeeper, rather than increase the chances of an armed conflict in the heart of the city during the holiday festivities."

Abel could not fault Matthaios for his manners, but his silver tongue wouldn't have fooled a man who just fell off the turnip truck.

Petros fixed the lower-ranking officer with a ferocious frown. After a moment, during which Abel was sure his heart missed a beat or three, Il Ruinante looked away in adject disgust, releasing Matthaios as a man might release a bait worm from a hook.

Taut lines bracketed William's mouth as he glanced between the two inquisitors.
Alucard, meanwhile, was near foaming at the mouth with excitement, straining towards Matthaios as though he would like nothing more than to sink his fangs into the Moroccan Demon's skinny neck.

"I don't know what to do with you," admitted Petros finally, his voice curt with anger, though no less deafening. "I'm of half a mind to put you on immediate administrative suspension for gross incompetence, Brother Matthaios! But that is, much to my regret, out of the question, provided your orders really do come directly from His Eminence..." He curled and uncurled his fingers a few times, testing his injury and, going by his scowl, disliking the results. "I will speak to the Duke of Florence myself to confirm your orders. In the meanwhile, get out of my sight, and you had better hope His Eminence's reasons are to my satisfaction, Matthaios!"

"As you wish, Reverence," capitulated Matthaios — though the man sounded, thought Abel, nowhere near as intimidated, or as deferential, as he ought to be.

The Carabinieri seemed relieved to be shut of the entire affair, wise to the terrible strain strung like taut piano wire between the two senior inquisitors. Brother Matthaios turned deftly, hydraulics hissing steam, the Uriel's march gathering into a rumble that shook free the cornices of snow gathered in the eaves. The smoke from the fusion reactor dirtied the antique lace of ice frosted on the windows, turning the piazza as black as a handkerchief that had been dragged through car oil and ash. The Carabinieri soldiers followed in the Uriel's wake like a line of obedient ducklings on the placid surface of a pond. Abel watched them go, his teeth rattling in his skull until well after the Uriel had reached the Ponte Santa Trinita, several blocks away.

Petros blew out a breath that lifted his bangs. "You can stop prowling behind that pillar now, Nightroad," he growled, purposefully not looking in Abel's direction.

Abel blinked. He shuffled into the piazza, peering myopically from over the rims of his spectacles. "How long—?"

"Your shadow passed over my head some time ago. I suspected you would not be long for showing yourself." He grunted, crossing his arms testily. "You were wise to keep yourself hidden. Your presence here, when you ought to be back in Rome, would have made the present situation even more complicated."

Abel looked blearily between Mr. Petros and William, Mr. Alucard padding on all fours. The sight of them safe filled him with relief. At the same time, their presence threatened to unlatch all the wretched emotion he'd kept battened down until that moment.

"Shadow passed over... Abel," murmured the Professor, looking distinctly troubled, "your cassock. Don't tell me you...?"

Disciplining his breathing, Abel stood awkwardly, his limbs stiff from spending hours in the air, his back freezing from where his wings had torn clean through his vestments, his eyes filmy from lack of sleep and stress and sadness. "It was the fastest way back. I didn't..." he swallowed. "I didn't want to get Kate in trouble with Miss Caterina. I didn't..."

Before Abel could utter another word, the Professor pulled him close for a crushing hug, embracing him with his familiar tenderness and strength. William was the one man Abel had always gone to first whenever he'd done something wrong, knowing the Professor would never condemn or criticize, even when Abel deserved it. He was a source of endless kindness, the one to whom he could entrust his worst thoughts and fears.

"I promised nothing would ever harm her," confessed Abel against the Professor's hair, his voice
cracking — he knew he didn't have to specify who she was. Abel felt a flush of shame, of guilt and terror, of cold, wriggling disgust, like eels in his belly. Abel and William had barely spoken on the Iron Maiden, but something had snapped inside of the former in the interim, and once Abel began to talk, he felt as though he couldn't stop: "I took my eyes off her when I shouldn't have," he went on. "I was too distracted to notice..." He stopped talking and cleared his throat harshly, trying not to choke.

William's gentle hands patted his back. He waited until Abel calmed himself before saying, quietly, "You remember when our dear Kate was badly injured because of me, five years ago?"

"That wasn't because of you," murmured Abel. He pulled away from the Professor and held him by the shoulders. "William, have you harbored that absurd idea for all these years?"

"It's the most terrible feeling in the world," he affirmed — but he did not answer Abel's question. "But it's not your fault, and trying to make it so won't help you, and it certainly won't help Esther. Dearest boy, are you listening to me?"

Abel shook his head in the affirmative, very nearly dislodging his glasses.

"Esther won't blame you for what happened," William told him, a mix of wistfulness and regret in his words, "any more than Kate blamed me. I know you feel as though you have an obligation to feel guilty." The platitude came out as if he were reciting an elegy. "Guilty... because in allowing the ones we love to come to harm, it is as though we are hurting them outright. But I believe it is best to beg our forgivenesses after we being them home, eh?"

Abel heaved a watery sigh, but nodded once. Petros had gone unusually quiet, shuffling awkwardly from foot to foot and holding his injured arm like a sullen boy. The Chief's wooden expression communicated to Abel that he wished he could be anywhere else at that moment, uncomfortable with the sudden display of aching vulnerability.

Alucard, however, was studying Abel with his cold, crimson eyes.

"Priest... I know where she is," said the Vampire with exceptional calm, even if his expression was rented in a snarl.

The statement didn’t fall into the silence so much as plummet, and his own realization had Abel recoiling like a suicide at the edge of a cliff, swallowing noisily into the void. "What..."

"I know where the girl is. And I know who took her."
**Picked his bones in whispers...**

Chapter Summary

And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear. But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid. And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water. And he said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus.

Matthew 14:25-29

Chapter Notes

As the climax of the action in the story, this chapter turned out to be uhhhhhhhhhh quite a bit longer than I anticipated. My apologies.

**Earlier**

*Message incoming.*

A small bulb on his console began to flash red, and Francesco di Medici thumped his fist on the panel in grim, unsmiling triumph.

Four hours.

Four hours he had been sequestered in his office in the Palazzo Riccardi, waiting for a reply.

Four hours Francesco had stood with folded arms, munching at the edge of his lip, trying to ignore the awful muscle spasms in his stomach: he could not remember for the life of him the last time he’d had a bite to eat.

For four hours, he had distracted himself by studying his reflection in the gold and silver surfaces of a papal tiara and two crossed keys, the coat of arms of the Vatican City State embossed on the hilt of the ornamental saber mounted over Francesco's desk.

The projection screen blazed to life, draining the room of color, but the Cardinal stood firm in the deescalating illumination; his stance straightened and he radiated the strength his fatigued mind and growling stomach had lacked just moments earlier.

A thin, androgynous figure dressed in a black paramilitary uniform moved into range of the monitor.
"Well well. Aren't we blessed?"

She — it took Francesco several moments to determine that she was in fact a she — was not particularly tall, but she carried herself with an erect posture and a decisive stride that supplemented height with haughtiness. With high cheekbones, a narrow nose, a livid white scar running from forehead to chin, and eyes the same fiery red as her hair, she exuded a dangerous grace that set the Cardinal immediately on edge. Her leering, mocking smile, even without the pointed canines, communicated to Francesco the sort of moral depravity he had come to expect from monsters of her clutch.

"To whom am I speaking?" he demanded.

The copper-haired woman returned no immediate answer, her annoyance registering quick and keen in the sudden jerk of her chin. The look was too obviously of the variety one gave someone who appeared to have taken leave of his senses; it did little to assuage the short fuse of Francesco's temper.

She intoned: "I am Captain Susanne von Skorzeny, of the Rosenkreuz Orden." She kept her voice level, but the utter contempt was unmistakable. "What is it you want, Duke of Florence? Has that spotty-faced little brat you so laughably call a pope dispatched you to formally announce the Vatican's surrender?"

Francesco's hatred flared like a grease fire. Arrogant, blasphemous little bitch...!

He ground his teeth in snarling, stubborn frustration. Controlling his fury with enormous restraint, and making no secret of the fact, Francesco said, very precisely: "I do not conduct business with subordinates. I would speak with your superior. Now."

Rigid with rage, Skorzeny stepped down from the small dais of her ship's quarter deck. "Verpiss dich!" she swore. "God damn you and your backward, benighted, bloody Vatican! The Holy See is centuries old and yet it still hasn't managed to drag itself from the mineral slime!"

"That is quite enough, Red Baron. Just as it is wise to be polite, it is unerringly stupid to be rude. To make enemies by unnecessary and willful incivility is just as insane a proceeding as to set one's own house on fire. Wise words from Herr Schopenhauer which you would do well to remember."

Skorzeny opened and shut her mouth furiously, like an affronted goldfish. The woman looked on the verge of another outburst, but obviously thought better of it and sat down with what seemed as much petulance as she could muster.

Francesco felt a shadow come over his soul as a second figure sidled into range of the screen. The man appeared to glide as he moved, tall and slender, as graceful as a cat, with that same feline aura of self-control, at ease yet deadly. His ink-black hair was long and unbound, framing a pale, sallow face that belied the steel in his eyes. He smiled slightly and nodded.

"Good evening, Cardinal di Medici. My name is—"

"I know who you are, von Kämpfer," interrupted Francesco, his voice uncharacteristically quiet, though it had lost none of its blood-freezing menace.

"You flatter me," he said urbanely. Isaak Fernand von Kämpfer gave a long, low bow. "Let me take this opportunity to express how very honored I am to meet you at last, Your Eminence. All my apologies for the delay in responding to your memorandum. The particular radio frequency of which you availed yourself in order to broadcast your message hasn't been put to use in, well... a
while."

And yet... Cardinal di Medici's suspicions had proven correct. If the Orden really were searching for the being they called Zamiel, as Matthaios seemed to suggest, and if the Blanchett girl really knew something of the creature's connection to Bishop Maxwell, then it followed logically that the Orden would be monitoring the ancient broadcast channels of the statio radiophonica Vaticana, the same frequencies used by Maxwell's Iscariot organization so many centuries ago.

Francesco had broadcast his memorandum on two shortwave frequencies running on ten kilowatts of power for much of the evening; to his dour, unsmiling satisfaction, it appeared the Orden had received the message.

"You'll have to forgive us our roughness of manner, Eminence..." von Kämpfer went on demurely, shooting a frosty look at his flame-haired subordinate. "You're not exactly catching us at our best. I daresay this is rather unexpected." The cadence of the man's voice darkened with some mysterious intent. "Pardon my candor, but I understand the Ministry of the Doctrine is not in the business of open communication with Methuselah kind, much less the Rosenkreutz Orden."

"The Lady Saint of István? How could we not? Mein Herr is rather taken with her."

"Ah yes. Abel Nightroad's little protégé."

"Esther Blanchett."

The name exploded out of Francesco with a far greater degree of violence than he had intended.

"Ah yes. Abel Nightroad's little protégé."

"The Lady Saint of István? How could we not? Mein Herr is rather taken with her."

"The poor girl." The Magician chuckled. "I confess, we were curious what had become of her. Your associates in the Ministry of Holy Affairs seemed to think we were in some way responsible for her capture."

"It is not an entirely unreasonable conclusion to draw."

"No, I suppose not. There is no love lost between ourselves and Arcanum Cella Ex Dono Dei, My Lord... a sentiment to which I believe you are largely sympathetic, no?" He adopted an expression of ersatz confidentiality. "It's something of an open secret in the Orden, but your internal feud with
Lady Cardinal Sforza has been a matter of no small fascination to me.”

"We all need something to believe in," sneered Francesco. "Even monsters like you."

"Quite right. Though as amusing as I find your ilk's zealotry, and as interesting as I find you, Lord Cardinal, I've yet to ascertain the purpose of your call. Your memorandum said so little."

"I understand your organization is looking for something... or rather, someone."

"I commend your agents for the efficacy of their intelligence gathering."

"Don't mock me." The Cardinal's hands clenched until he swore he heard the pop of a knuckle bone. "The girl confessed under interrogation. One Dietrich von Lohengrin couldn't keep his mouth shut regarding the Orden's intentions."

The corners of von Kämpfer's dark eyes pinched, just for the barest second, then cleared. "I would like to say I find that particular revelation in some way surprising, but I'm not in the habit of... shall we say, taking indulgences?"

"Fine speech becometh not a fool," spat Francesco.

"Much less do lying lips a prince. Proverbs, chapter seventeen, verse seven. Really, My Lord Cardinal... your charming sister wouldn't cherrypick verses so."

Speaking of whom... "This matter also concerns Cardinal Sforza."

"Indeed? Then consider my curiosity well and truly piqued, Eminence. What is it you propose?"

"An exchange."

"Oh?" He pulled an exaggerated expression of surprise. With aristocratic condescension, the Magician replied: "Do elaborate."

"Blanchett has become an encumbrance."

"Dear oh dear... eyes too big for your stomach, Cardinal?" asked von Kämpfer, giving a small tut of admonishment. "Bitten off more than you can chew? Gluttony is a sin, you know."

Francesco was dangerously scarce of patience. "The girl's position has shifted to the liability side of the balance sheet," he seethed, letting out a long, hissing breath through his teeth. "She is a risk rather than an asset to my organization. Moreover, from what my agents have been able to glean, she is connected in some way to this creature with whom your vile Orden is so obsessed. If you have the girl, you will soon find whatever — or whomever — it is you're looking for."

"A logical conclusion. We, too, have intuited some connection between Zamiel and Sister Esther."

The man sat stiff-backed, his black eyes roaming over Francesco's silver ones. "And what, pray tell, do you intend to get out of this, Your Eminence?"

"Regarding Cat—Cardinal Sforza."

The name, again, lured the demon of more esurient intentions into von Kämpfer's eyes, a fact which made Francesco deeply uncomfortable. "What of her?"

The Cardinal forced himself to suffer the indignity, grinding out: "As you well know, Blanchett is one of her agents. If the Inquisition turns the girl over to you, I have every expectation of your claiming the Sister as a spy for your organization, which will force the Vatican to condemn her as a
witch and a heretic. In addition, you will denounce, publicly, Lady Cardinal Sforza as an Orden sympathizer." He paused. "I ought to emphasize that these conditions are non-negotiable."

"A superfluous emphasis, I assure you, for I think we understand one another quite well, My Lord Cardinal. You know, I had wondered why your warmongering little underling in Florence allowed us the chance to escape. I suspected we would not be long for having a conversation of this nature."

"Stop wasting my time. I need an answer."

Von Kämpfer indulged a dramatic sigh. "I mourn for lost virtues. No matter: patience may be bitter, but the fruit is sweet. We accept your terms, Eminence. The girl... in exchange for Cardinal Sforza’s condemnation."

His mercury-gray eyes were ablaze. "I warn you, if you even consider—"

"Double-crossing you? My Lord, you wound me. You said it yourself: this exchange works very much to our mutual advantage. And the girl?"

"She is being held in the Castello di Signa. The Torre della Zecca is forecasting major blizzards in the foothills surrounding the city, and I intend to order an evacuation of the Carabinieri forces guarding the facility."

"That is more than generous, Eminence. I will have Marionettenspieler prepare—"

"Oh, may I join them? Yes... I would like to lend a hand, Isaak. Dietrich is such a foolish boy, you know, and his toys are so breakable. He needs, perhaps, a little help. A little nudge in the right direction, hmm?"

A disconcertingly aggrieved look strayed across von Kämpfer's face: a flash of something wary and fearful, lurking behind the bluster.

Francesco only caught a glimpse of the newcomer; he'd appeared quietly, without causing any stir, withdrawn at the margins of the projector feed. His voice had been oddly uninflected, almost childlike in its intonation. From what little Cardinal di Medici could ascertain, the man appeared young, with long blonde hair, a wry mouth that seemed accustomed to smiling, and frank, clear eyes of the most incredible blue.

Even at a glimpse, the stranger looked... disturbingly familiar, a ghost of a memory painted on his unreasonably handsome face.

"I will retrieve her," said the figure with a thin, vacant smile. "The Lady Saint is mine."

Then, before the Cardinal could utter a word, the screen went dark. With an effort, the Duke of Florence pulled his eyes away from the monitor.

And suddenly, to his alarm, he found himself shivering, as though with fever: hot and hurting in a body without a wound. Trembling, Francesco di Medici crossed himself.

"God help her," he muttered, offering up a prayer, though he knew not why...

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Later

Cold.
Blast it, those AX buffoons had said nothing about it being so cold.

The wind howled, piling snow in drifts, peppering the night with ice-white dust. He walked bent over against the storm, protecting his eyes with his arms. The cypresses along the Bisenzio were sheathed in ice, lifeless inside their resplendent armor. Forests and fields and crumbling Roman ruins loomed into view before vanishing, swallowed by the blowing snow.

Petros Orsini trudged over the frozen plain, muttering to himself, the ground crunching like shattered stemware underfoot. The logical part of him knew he was losing less heat than his protesting extremities otherwise suggested, but his toes and the tips of his fingers were still decidedly numb. His teeth chattered at a speed to make his jaw ache. His breath billowed pale and crystalline.

Sometimes the freak winter squalls grew so bitter the sap in the conifers froze, and the trees would burst open like ripe pomegranates. There were nights when Petros could hear them cracking, the air so sharp he half wondered if he might shatter, too.

Sister Simone, with her doctorate in geophysics, had explained the phenomena to him, once: ferocious updrafts from the multiple nuclear firestorms of Armageddon and, then, the Dark Times had lofted millions of tons of smoke and soot and radioactive waste into the stratosphere, blocking the sunlight and leaving in its wake severe and prolonged global climatic cooling, not to mention worldwide agricultural collapse and mass starvation.

And sudden winter storms, thought Petros, that, even after nine hundred years, could freeze a man in minutes with their bonecracking cold.

Perfect timing, he thought to himself with pointed vehemence.

The Chief willed himself to stand firm even though his every muscle strained and screamed for warmth, for shelter. Snow moved in sinuous patterns around him — tiny, frozen fractals alighting on his armor, hands, shoulders, his face, making his eyes water and, immediately thereafter, turning his lashes crusty with ice.

Matthaios.

The sky screamed to deliver Brother Petros's vengeance, like a hundred furies flying on the edge of the blizzard.

Damn him.

It would not be the first time Petros Orsini, as Director of the Inquisition, had found himself at cross purposes with one of his underlings, but it was, perhaps, the first time such false-heartedness registered so keenly.

The late Brother Bartholomaios, Brother Philippus, and Brother Matthaios were the only officers Petros had not specially handpicked for the Bureau. Incidentally, they were also the select three knights whose conduct and records of service made Petros want to grind his molars into dust.

Bartholomaios had been one of the Killing Dolls, spirited out from under the nose of Lady Cardinal Sforza and the Ministry of Holy Affairs after the Garibaldi rebellion. Bartholomaios's involvement in a covert ploy to mass produce isobutanol and cyanide gas — an off-the-books Inquisition operation to which Cardinal di Medici had yet to supply an explanation — had condemned the inquisitor to an ignominious execution at the hands of Sforza's wolfhound, one Father Tres Iqus.

Philippus was a nuisance, a belligerent flea in Petros's ear, who took a distinct pleasure in stepping
on the AX's toes at every available opportunity. Philippios had very nearly jeopardized Sister Paula's mission in Brno after he incited Gracia de Asturias to violence; the paperwork had been exorbitant. Petros had given the slimy, obsequious little man the rough edge of his tongue on any number of occasions, and the fact that Philippios had his beady eyes fixed firmly on Petros's station as Bureau Director did nothing to ease the tension between the two men.

That left Brother Matthaios… simple, plain, and short to the point of scrawny, his face forever fixed in that guileless little smile that gave nothing away. Perfectly polite, his manners impeccable, his presentation beyond reproach.

And yet, beneath the immaculate lacquer, the man was besmirched by a blight of cruelty and coldness, a lust for power, a vicious, probing curiosity, and a poisonous maliciousness that disturbed even Petros, who was perfectly competent in the world's more violent disciplines himself.

Matthaios had never from his earliest days with the Bureau shown a shred of reason or restraint or mercy without first calculating how it would return to his advantage. He had tortured and killed without regret or hesitation, and always took great care in dressing his sadism in the vestments of sacrosanctity. He served himself well before he served the Lord God.

An awareness of the Moroccan Demon's treachery fanned a flame in Petros's chest, very nearly warm enough to offset the storm’s bitter cold.

Wordsworth had said the girl was alive.

But Petros knew Matthaios, and Petros had his doubts.

"I remember Brother Matthaios from Estonia," Nightroad was saying, troubled, his gaze a thousand miles away. If a brain were capable of shriveling from too much worry, Nightroad's was dangerously close to living out the rest of its days as some desiccated gray raisin. "What he lacks in stature and physical strength he makes up for in sheer savagery. He is... well, a very violent person, for whom the torture chamber serves as his pulpit."

Alucard grunted. "I must commend you on your ability to summarize the entire history of the Roman Catholic Church so succinctly, Priest."

"Matthaios does not love," growled Petros; a note of bitter resentment entered his voice, striking in turn a sour chord in his heart. "He does not love, and that is why he schemes and lies and betrays. He does not love, and that is why he detests himself and his fellow man without repenting. Hatred is salutary only when balanced with the love of God. Alone it has the power only to destroy. If the fanged brute says Matthaios has the girl... then I believe him."

"I could smell her on him," bayed Alucard, pawing the ground in agitation. "He's our man."

"But why...?" Nightroad's voice caught as his windpipe swelled and knotted: "Mr. Petros, why would they do this? She wouldn't hurt anyone... not a soul. Miss Esther is kind... so kind..."

Professor Wordsworth cleared his throat, all business, for which Petros was grateful. "Abel, when you spoke to Caterina, did she voice any concern over her brother's doings? Has he, to your knowledge, been putting undue pressure on her in any way?"

Nightroad hesitated, his words stumbling out in tentative phrases: "Nothing truly unprecedented, no. At least, nothing beyond what we've come to expect from His Eminence."
Alucard tilted his head, flanks twitching like a stallion covered in flies. "Knight Templar, this di Medici is your superior. That piece of rat-gristle in the power armor is one of your subordinates. Far be it from me to make assumptions, but surely you're far more likely to know their aims than we are."

"The mere fact that His Eminence had Matthaios take the Sister into custody without my knowledge proves this matter has long excluded me, mutt." Petros forced himself to remain as composed as a medieval saint, wearing an expression of scowling inscrutability. Though he did not speak it aloud, the air was saturated with the poison of Petros's fury. Rage surged through his veins, turning his blood alkaline. Matthaios, that slavish little insect, had managed to worm his way into His Eminence's favor — Petros, meanwhile, had been discarded, his loyalties questioned and found wanting, his faith judged and found fatigued.

None of them could begin to imagine the enormity of the betrayal.

"If we proceed under the assumption that Cardinal di Medici's intention is to discredit and disgrace Cardinal Sforza and the AX," said Wordsworth, knuckling a hand under his chin, "he would make a public spectacle of his denouncement in order to pressure the Concistoro into a vote of dismissal. But His Holiness has yet to convene a formal meeting of the College of Cardinals."

"Therefore, Cardinal di Medici does not have what he needs from Sister Esther," concluded the Professor firmly. "For all the man's ranting and raving, he's exceedingly cautious. If my involvement with the Neue Vatican mess taught me anything about Francesco, it's that he won't leverage an advantage over Caterina until he's absolutely certain of the security of his position. If he were planning to make a move against the Ministry of Holy Affairs, we would have been made aware of it by now. Sister Esther is still alive." William's tone remained dry and precise, but his expression grew ever more grim. "Although… I cannot vouch for her—"

"Don't, Professor." Pushing back from the precipice of dread, Nightroad strained to speak, his words weak and staggering. "Don't."

"If she's in the Inquisition's custody," snarled Petros. "Matthaios will be holding her in the Castello di Signa. It's a military installation on the bank of the Arno, near the confluence with the Ombrone river. We house prisoners in the dungeons. And conduct the questioning there, too."

Petros struggled to get his bearings, peering through the whiteout in an effort to make sense of the countryside around him. Although the forest was covered in a thick blanket of glistening, nacreous snow, it nevertheless seemed a place of shadows, thick with foreboding. The cypresses shivered, dwarfish and twisted, as though squirming bitterly beneath their burden of needled branches and ice.

Under the wind, the silence of death lay over the land, as though the very stars, high above the clouds, held their breath and twinkled no more.

In less time than seemed possible, Petros arrived at his destination.

The castle rose over the floodplain like mutilated fingers from among the fists of knuckled masonry, two towers gesturing as though in blessing towards Heaven. Castello di Signa emanated an austerity, cold and repellent, a hint of ancient mysteries long buried, an effluvium of medieval dankness and decay. It was a heavy blot on the horizon, a shadow behind the snow; every time Petros caught glimpses of its gate and portcullis, the sight reminded him of the gaping mouth of a giant skull.
The castle was ancient: the walls had tumbled down around the outermost battlements, vanishing completely on one side and leaving only a ridge of fractured material barely fifty meters high on the other. The upper levels of the compound housed the administrative offices of the the Inquisition forces in Tuscany, a line of palisades defending the approach to the fortress, with the building itself boasting machicolated parapets and mounted battlements.

Petros had never been partial to the place — a child of Roman summers, Castello di Signa was far too grim and cold for his tastes.

He paused once he drew level with the gatehouse, the snow-covered balustrade rising high above his head.

Petros's face went parchment white.

"Where," he muttered into the night, the wind snatching away the words, "is everyone...?"

His brow creased and his eyes twitched feverishly from detail to detail.

No one. There was no one on duty.

Castello di Signa was completely deserted.

"Ah, indeed. 'Questioning,'" snarled Alucard. There was a shine of madness, of cruelty, in his eyes that made even Isaak Fernand von Kämpfer appear the gentleman he pretended to be. "Beaten into unconsciousness, kidneys crushed, bones broken, thrown down flights of steps like so many sacks of potatoes, faces torn, testicles mangled, kicks in the belly, rubber clubs, whips. I can only imagine the sorts of conversations you carry on down there in the darkness, Knight... you and that miserable old prat of a Cardinal."

Then, all at once, Petros was spluttering in affronted fury, Nightroad was making a muffled plea for appeasement, and Alucard was gnashing his teeth; their voices collided senselessly, all recognizable words wrung out by the stress headache skittering across the bone of the Chief Inquisitor's skull.

"Do kindly shut up, the three of you."

There was not exactly anger in his voice, but Wordsworth's tone nevertheless had the same effect as banging the flat of his hand on a hard, unyielding surface. The wolf's mouth snapped shut. Petros and Nightroad followed suit.

"We know where she is," the Professor reasoned. Petros looked into his incongruous, ice-green eyes and saw something of impatience and something of regret and something, blatant and wounding, of sharp self-hatred. "We know who is holding her. We know, potentially, why. It appears our course of action at this juncture is clear, gentlemen."

"Indeed!" thundered Petros, even as his fire dimmed a fraction of a degree — he would hesitate to call himself consoling, but he was, at the very least, solemn, the expression blunting the harsh contours of his face. "I will retrieve the girl from the Castello di Signa." In the same strain, and faced with three pairs of startled stares, he remarked to Wordsworth and Nightroad: "My men will not allow an AX agent, much less that thing," he tossed his head in Alucard's direction, "within two hundred yards of the installation."

"Why ever not?"
"Because I am the Chief of the Department of the Inquisition, and those are the orders I have given my soldiers! Furthermore, as the Bureau Director, my presence at the facility will not be questioned, and none stationed there have the authority to impede me in the execution of my sacred duties."

The sense that something was not long for going terribly, terribly wrong seemed to increase with Petros's every step.

Castello di Signa held its secrets and silences firmly within. Dust floated in the rare shaft of snowy light, while more than eight centuries of varnish rose from the relief sculptures to taint the trapped air with the mahogany scent of coffins. The walls were so thick, they seemed to absorb every sound, while the tall windows, the glass warped and distorted by age, tinted the air with a sepia tiredness. Time moved more slowly in the castle, if at all.

Petros's footsteps echoed through the galleries, but the sound seemed discordant, jarring with the unnatural stillness of the place. Nothing stirred save a rising intuition of danger and uncertainty, a darkening of prospects, the sense of being an outsider in his own place of refuge, with all of a stranger's suspicions. A wariness crept over the Chief Inquisitor, more intense and pervasive than he had been expecting. The emptiness ballooned in the air, a pressure that sat on his spine and sapped his strength.

Petros's long, loping strides devoured the ground, the tailing ends of his crimson surcoat licking the walls as he passed. The sharp sound of his footfalls rebounded down the corridor, the echo eventually replaced by the flat, continuous drip of water against stone, a two-beat pulse that sounded in his ears like thunder.

The overwhelming absence of guards and personnel was a curse, a condemnation, an act of provocation. Castello di Signa was not merely abandoned: it had been purposefully evacuated, the soldiers dismissed.

Petros's scalded forearm throbbed, and he thought back to the previous afternoon, the utterly unexampled way Matthaios, one of the Bureau's fiercest knights, had allowed the two Orden operatives to escape Divine retribution. And then, three days ago, the manner in which Cardinal di Medici had feigned ignorance of Blanchett's whereabouts during his video conference aboard the Iron Maiden.

"Damnation," muttered Petros, vinegar-bitter, turning the curses upon himself. He was painfully conscious of the fact that he must appear the soul of ineptitude. The memory of Matthaios's deliberate incompetence along with His Eminence's playacting made Petros aware of a venom of bitterness, a black resentment, that had his breath billowing like fire in his lungs. He was stricken suddenly with the sensation of being trapped, of falling prey to impotent rage — the victim of a savage, ruthless, utterly dishonorable manipulation.

He ought to have said something to Matthaios back at the Piazza Santo Spirito. He ought to have seen through the Cardinal's lies aboard the Iron Maiden.

He ought to have better guarded the Lady Saint against those who would wish her harm.

How blind he was. How foolish.

It was a cycle, supposed Petros tiredly. Negligence bred comfort, comfort bred dissatisfaction, dissatisfaction bred paranoia... and paranoia bred war. No matter how he spun it, that was all it was: a sequence, a succession. Past conflicts had been for land, for beliefs, for financial gain and
economic resources. The Minister of the Doctrine's war with his sister was no different, when one lifted the lid on the entire affair: two great heads of state fighting like crows over a carcass of power and influence, and people dying because of it.

Petros recited his Psalms in an effort to recover his composure — the wicked plotted against the righteous and gnashed their teeth at them, but the Lord laughed at the wicked, for He knew their day was coming.

There were plots afoot — plans of deceit, treason, and betrayal — and the only hope Petros had of surviving them was to be prepared, and to focus on the task at hand. The Cardinal's schemes were all, at that moment, entirely incidental.

Petros had made a promise.

He intended to keep it.

Il Ruinante inclined his head, glancing at the silver crucifix fixed above a triumphal arch, the vault marking the entrance to the dungeons.

Remembering the one about the spider to the fly, he began his descent.

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Nightroad let out a burning ball of air. "Mr. Petros, if Matthais catches you, you'll be in such terrible trouble. And your injuries—"

"Are superficial. The pain far exceeds the extent of the physical damage. And my holy vestments can be repaired."

The priest frowned his doubt. "And what of your arm? Plasma burns are quite serious."

"Have a care, Nightroad." Petros matched Abel look for look, his expression grave. "Do you think me incapable of this task?"

Nightroad shifted his feet, as though he wasn't sure whether to feel ashamed or comforted by Petros's insistence. The priest seemed to forever be wearing an expression caught halfway between affable concern and slight bafflement. But always, there was that sense of frazzled, weary compassion about him that, quite inexplicably, endeared him to the Chief.

"I think..." he managed, "I think I can't bear to lose another friend."

Petros blinked at him, uncomprehendingly.

The Professor sighed, affecting a misty dismay. "Much as it pains me to admit it, Petros's plan has merit. His station allows him a certain degree of freedom we would not, under the same circumstances, share. However, at the risk of belaboring a point, I feel I must emphasize the dangers involved, Brother Petros. If you're caught, Chief Inquisitor or no," reminded Wordsworth gravely, "this could very well spell the end of your professional career. It would be within Cardinal di Medici's power to have you excommunicated... or even executed."

The former prospect was far more frightening than the latter.

Petros felt his complexion going pale, his steely eyes underscored by shadows, and when he spoke, much to his chagrin, his voice held an uncharacteristically brittle, anxious quality: "I made you a promise, Nightroad. My lance and my life. I will bring the girl home."
He descended a flight of broad stone steps, eventually reaching an iron gate at the foot of the stairwell. Its door was shut, but Petros didn't bother fumbling with the latch. He leveled his Screamer at the door, wheeled the engine, and crushed the padlock as though it were made of balled-up newspaper.

He felt an absurd rush of fierce satisfaction in the feat.

Petros smelled the vast vault well before he stepped across the threshold: the pickled miasma of decayed remains and disintegrating rust, as though the iron fixings were eager to return to dirt, oxidation nibbling at everything slowly, delicately, like a tortoise.

His eyes required time to adjust to the cavernous dark. The vault was supported by an arcade of stone columns, penetrating the floor and rising within the presbytery straight to the seams of the high, shadowy ceiling. On a podium close to Petros sat a lectern, upon which rested a dogeared copy of *La Divina Commedia*, open to one of the terraces of Mount Purgatory. *Il Ruinante* only caught a glimpse of the verse: *quale offensione si purga qui nel giro dove semo?*

What sin indeed...

The Chief Inquisitor ignored the other instruments and implements festooning the room and made for a large, sarcophagus-shaped receptacle reposing on a central proscenium. His thin brows arched sharply over his eyes, regarding the tank with a kind of alert contempt.

Sensory deprivation and hallucinogenic torture were entirely Matthaios's gimmicks — Petros found the tank's utility needlessly convoluted. Moreover, *Il Ruinante* regarded the idle and valueless infliction of pain as indulgence, a surrender to moral weakness. His station often sanctioned his cruelty, but it was a hard, clean cruelty... methodical. Purposeful. Disinterested. He kept his subjects at a distance by his fine sense of justice and by the cool rationalism of his faith, which never fell into sensationalism or the purely emotional. Any degree of personal investment was a defect in an otherwise perfect inquisitorial machine.

Matthaios, meanwhile, was devoted to self-destruction and waste but unwilling to acknowledge his own indulgent ways — what use were active efforts at superfluous brutality in an industry devoted to maximizing efficiency and productivity? Petros mandated a strict obedience to hard reason, professionalism, and dispassion in place of cold-blooded barbarism.

Cruelty depended on an understanding of cruelty, as well as the ability to recognize when to choose against it. But Matthaios, impotent and malicious, regretted not the abuse, but the loss of his power, and sought always to hold by falsehood what he gained by sadism and force.

He was a disgrace to the Bureau.

Brother Matthaios did not put penitents in the tank to interrogate them.

He put them in the tank to kill them.

Petros depressed a lever on the cistern's side. The lid slid open.

The ancient Vampire, it seemed, had a good nose.

Esther Blanchett floated in a fetal stupor, serenely pink, wrinkled, with a pruny face and puckered eyelids. Skeins of hair, vivid red, as ever, snarled in an unwashed, tangled mess. She had dark circles under her eyes. Her pale, waif-like features were sharp. Petros tried not to breathe too deeply, because the tank smelled potently of vomit and sweat and salt. He put the back of his hand to her forehead, feeling its claylike reality. The sensation caused an immediate shudder of
revulsion in Petros, for her skin, when he touched it, was ice cold. There was something wrong with her jaw, some dislocation injury, and her right cheek was purple and swollen to the size of a plum.

So... Matthaios had struck her. Nightroad would not be pleased; Petros wasn't exactly thrilled himself.

The tank reposed at an awkward height for someone of Petros's stature, too high to be knelt by but low enough to force a stoop. He bent over at the waist, putting his ear close to Esther's mouth. He let out a relieved sigh as he registered her steady expiration. Even as the moment came, the sight of her twitching in the water startled him and he reared away from the tank. It wasn't an obvious movement at first... only soft breaths moving in and out of her nostrils, but then her chest began to rise and fall with it.

"Blanchett… Blanchett, can you hear me?"

He touched her shoulder. Shook it lightly. She did not wake. And then, after considering his options, few as they were, he reached down and swiftly undid the restraints on her wrists and ankles — chaffed after three days submerged in magnesium sulfate — and allowed her to buoy, gently, on the surface of the water.

"Blanchett... Sister Est—"

Taking him entirely by surprise, the girl launched her torso from the water and delivered an uncoordinated, desperate, but, unfortunately for him, remarkably sound punch to Petros's solar plexus. He made a sound that was half gasp and half choke, clutching his throat.

"Blanchett—!" he croaked.

The blow shocked him, forcing him to take a step back to steady himself. The panicked girl took advantage of his disorientation: her breath came fast and shallow, making a sound not unlike a keening wail as she threw her upper body behind another swing, hitting Petros's jaw with such force blood pooled into his mouth. The Inquisitor winced, but Blanchett's clumsy aggression was nothing compared to Petros's cool, almost clinical calm. The far bigger man wrapped one arm around her chest, held it there as she tried so desperately, desperately hard to wiggle free, tepid water going everywhere. Petros applied just enough pressure to keep her from injuring herself — or him.

"Blanchett, calm yourself," he barked the order. "Breathe. It's Brother Petros. I have come to get you out."

Her face whitened and her mouth slackened, the desperate edge to her movements easing. She raised her face to his and took a deep breath, as if trying to martial the reserves of rational thought. He commended her discipline, her instinct towards appraisal in place of blind panic. He had known since Carthage that Sister Esther was neither shy nor particularly calm. The girl had a temper like a stick of dynamite. Quick to heat, quick to blow over, but resilient, able recover quickly from the most difficult of conditions.

The young woman exhaled a sigh. Her mouth closed, and then opened again, her voice this time a hoarse, barely audible whisper: "B-Brother Petros..." His name sounded splinterly.

"Indeed. I apologize for startling you."

He crouched down beside the tank, awkwadly half-kneeling on the dais step. Blanchett's eyes were
focused on the middle distance, on nothing, and her face was locked in a slight frown.

The adrenalin appeared to abandon her in one fell swoop, and she asked weakly. "Are you—"

"This inquisition is over," he growled. But...

"Are you real?"

Petros felt the hairs stand up on the back of his neck at the flatness of her voice. Her small, slight figure was rigid and unmoving.

"The city was burning. Blood cascaded between the buildings. Everyone was dead... dying... Shara..." She tripped over her memories, mouth murmuring things that weren't quite words. She still wasn't moving. With each utterance she seemed to harden, like she was turning into a block of marble.

It was a dreadful display of vulnerability, her innards raw and exposed. Petros found himself an unlikely and quite unwilling voyeur to whatever lay beneath the comforting, operational conveniences of her psyche, to pains that ran so deep, they had called upon on the hidden fears of her soul in an effort to survive.

The two remained, for a while, in a silence as icy as the wind gusting around the Castello di Signa. The moment seemed to go on forever, even as the sky outside grew blacker and the snow fell thick and heavy, clumps of wet flakes drifting mindlessly down.

She looked so small, a part of her still young enough to be shattered by the unfairness of the world. But the cracks and crevices were not the markings of a victim, Petros affirmed.

No. They were the spoils of a survivor.

Water was capable of destroying or purifying, strengthening or weakening, all depending on the nature of the material being eroded. Pain had the same effects on the human soul, and for the same reasons.

Esther Blanchett was a warrior who'd had all the odds stacked against her... and survived. Triumphed.

Won.

Petros kept the thought to himself.

"We haven't the time for this," he said, quietly, a frown puzzling his brow. "I suspect the facility has been compromised. We need to—"

"Why should it matter to you?" asked Esther suddenly, rather fiercely, Petros noted, realizing that the girl was likely hoping with all her heart that he would not regard the question as rhetorical. "H-he's one of yours. Matthaios. "Why should you care?"

Petros felt unusually and keenly hyperaware, intent in the way a knife's blade was sharp, so that the discomfiture he endured from her questions was whetted and precise, like the paring of skin from a hard apple.

He reached for her shoulder. "Although you must—"

"Don't touch me!" she hissed, crossing her arms over her chest. Petros's hand froze in midair. His
height was such that she had to tip her head back to see his face, but when her eyes met his, they blazed with such upset and such rage it momentarily robbed him of anything to say. "Now you have... the effrontery to be merciful? How dare you... how do I know you're not... that you're not... the Inquisition..."

He gave a weary sigh, intuiting the root cause of her uncertainty. "Brother Matthaios was acting on his own recognizance, Sister. I was not aware of his intentions, nor of his interest in you."

She caught the inside of her cheek between her teeth, staring at him aggressively. "Do... do you mean to blame me? Is that what you're saying?"

"No. No, of course not." He shook his head. "This is not your doing, Blanchett. What I feel for my underlings, for my superior, at this moment... let us agree that it will be better — far better — if that anger is never explored or acted on."

"So, that's what this is for? To compensate for the past compromises of the Bureau?" The girl murmured, "You... you can't just expect to make things okay by mopping up the mess. If you're facing the wrong kind of enemy, even decency can be turned into a weakness."

Now that was Brother Matthaios talking, thought Petros poisonously, not Esther Blanchett.

"Honor and loyalty may sound praiseworthy in principle, but then someone you love is dead," the expression on her face was perfectly miserable, her eyes, narrowed with rage and upset only a moment ago, now softened with an expression far too close to utter hopelessness, "and there's no going back on it."

"No," agreed Petros. "Perhaps not. But in truth, Sister, this errand has nothing to do with my inquisitorial duties."

"I don't believe you," she said.

Petros tried not to appear too offended. "This is about the promise I made to your partner, and the oath I swore before God." He considered, one hand fiddling with a strand of blue hair at his temple. "At the risk of sounding vulgar, it doesn't terribly matter whether or not you believe me. I will keep my promise to him."

"My partner..."

"Abel Nightroad is waiting for you in Florence, Miss Blanchett, and I will not have it said that I, Brother Petros, broke my word or blackened my honor."

She blinked big, liquid blue eyes. Beautiful eyes, he realized abruptly, not entirely sure what to do with the observation. There was something about them that attracted and unsettled in equal measure — Esther Blanchett appeared to stare both at him and at nothing. Her gaze was cold and iridescent, silvered like mirrors to reflect the world beyond without so much as hinting at the woman within.

Petros started to say something, then frowned and kept quiet. He knew that he could never truly know the torment the Sister was suffering. The mind shrank from even imagining it. Perhaps inflicting physical rather than psychological injury was no true kindness but, still... bones could be set, burns soothed, bruises and abrasions mended. But there were some shocks that came so quickly and struck so deep that the blows were internalized well before they were registered by the flesh.

Petros was no stranger to spiritual torture; he knew the losses and the emotions engendered by the
assaults on the soul and mind would not be held indefinitely. There would be a reckoning, of that the Chief Inquisitor was certain.

It would, however, have to come later.

"I don't understand you, Brother," confessed Esther softly, finally. "But... I do want to thank you for helping me."

"There's little point in expressing your gratitude yet." He sighed. "Well... come along then." Petros held out a hand.

"I... I can manage on my own." She bit her tongue; crimson stained her cheeks in a fit of embarrassed modesty. "Although, could you... turn around?"

It took a moment for the dinar to drop.

Oh.

Petros, to his utter mortification, felt himself blushing, going as red as she was. "I beg your pardon," he muttered, immediately turning on his heel to face the wall opposite.

He only deigned to look again when he heard the splash of water and a muffled sob.

Esther peered up at him from the bottom of the tank. She lifted her chin so the lapping water couldn't reach her mouth.

In one swift motion, Petros unclipped his surcoat from his armor and beckoned for her. She shook her head vigorously, her shell cracking as she trembled, shivering in thin spasms. Sinking lower into the water, the Sister accidentally took in a mouthful and choked.

Petros gazed skyward. "We haven't all night, Miss Blanchett."

She tried again to stand on her own, wobbly and weak-kneed, and met with the same outcome: an undignified tumble back into the tank, landing heavily on her backside.

Atrophied muscles. Hunger. Shock. He could go on...

Petros sucked air through his teeth, his mouth pursed in a moue of impatience. "Confound your pride, girl." For a moment he sounded cross, but then he noticed how pale she looked, and his tone softened. "There is no shame in asking for help."

The girl stared at him, then down at his hand. The Chief merely kept his arm outstretched, his expression calm.

Then he felt a tentative touch of fingertips against his palm; he closed his hand around Miss Blanchett's far smaller one.

This young woman, whose life had been shattered by unimaginable cruelty, took his hand with exquisite courtesy.

Sensible to the preservation of her dignity, he kept his eyes on her back, the shoulder blades sticking out as though they wanted to grow into wings, poke through her skin like delicate poniards of downy feathers.

There was an irony in that, he supposed.
Petros wrapped her in the surcoat; the outer layers of the garment were burnished to a luster over years of wear, the inner batting worn thin from innumerable fights. He tuckted it under her feet, her elbows, wrapped it around shoulders, and pulled the hood over her head.

Swaddling a saint in a mantle of slaughter.

"Excuse my impropriety, Sister."

In one swoop the Chief Inquisitor bundled Blanchett, and his surcoat, bodily into his arms. He looped his right arm beneath the bend in her knees and held the girl close to his chest, allowing her to tuck her head into the crook of his neck. He carried his Screamer in his left hand.

His cavalier treatment of her was positively shameful, but it was a disinclination he knew he would have to put to his Father Confessor, not to a frightened child in the middle of a rescue.

Panic and sheer fright tensed her every muscle; he could feel her giving into the temptation to sag in his arms, to sink gratefully against him, but the impulse was so nearly overwhelming that it shocked her into going rigid again. The snarled compulsions cycled back and forth without resolution; under different circumstances, Petros might have been concerned the girl was having a seizure.

"Take me away," she whispered desperately. Her heart was pounding too hard, making her bones shake and her knees knock, no doubt driving most every coherent thought from her head.

He adjusted his carry, his shoulder sturdy beneath her cheek.

"Understood."

"But it wasn't your fault, Mr. Petros," murmured Nightroad, sounding wretched. His shoulders were slumped, as though trying to take up as little space as possible. At that moment, Petros could believe the claim that the priest was almost a thousand years old — hurt once too often, and doing his best to grow a protective shell around himself. "I... I was acting irrationally on the Iron Maiden, and for that I am sorry. But I can't ask you to shoulder my burdens."

All of Petros's bridled anger became pity, then. "This is not your labor, Nightroad. This is mine."

Abel ought to have been an easy man to read — tall and slight and fine-boned, but with a strong, clear-cut face and sensitive eyes. But despite the gawkish, obfuscating character the priest projected, trying to probe at Nightroad's deeper, more personal thoughts was, thought Petros, comparable to sifting through hundreds of gallons of water in search of a single speck of silver. However, for the barest moment, the Chief Inquisitor felt as though he knew exactly the nature of Nightroad's own sorrows, the very structure and slow process of his pain, the transformations and transmutations of grief, like rot in a damp coppice, mold and roots, blind things wriggling and writhing beneath the earth.

"I must take my leave directly," said Petros hurriedly, masking a sudden discomfort. "But before I go, there is something I have to say."

Wordsworth looked uneasy. "Brother Petros, perhaps now isn't really the time—"

"No. I will speak my piece presently in the event I do not live to speak it later."

The silver-haired priest winced. "Don't talk like that."
"Nightroad... Abel... I feel I must apologize to you. Allow me to say how sorry I am for the callous way I have treated you in the past. I regret it most keenly."

A few seconds ticked past. The man raised his eyebrows in surprise, his expression perturbed, as if he’d been reminded of something he had wanted to forget. "Do you?"

The air seemed to grow colder the more distance they put between them and the Castello di Signa. The cypresses were stripped bare, their leafless boughs making lace-like patterns against the sky, the wind moaning a soft dirge as it whipped through their branches, turning the air to a crisp pale powder.

Petros, who had been clipping ahead at a swift pace, halted suddenly. He felt the woman wiggling in his grip as she peered over his shoulder, no doubt expecting to see some obstacle in their path.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

A great many things, thought Petros with a sudden fierce thundering of battle adrenaline — the most immediate of which was the swarm of uniformed figures moving en masse towards them, like revenants rising from their dark tombs.

"Company," he grunted, hefting the Screamer.

They aggregated as vague geometrical patterns of black against the lighter gray-purple of the sky. Through the blowing snow, Petros could make out individual humanoid shapes emerging from the storm — ranks of figures forming a line between the Castello di Signa and the river. The banks seemed to collect the sound of their march into a narrow space, sending back to Petros an echo increased by its own compression; the groves of trees on each side of the Arno helped to swell the sound.

The Chief Inquisitor stole a glance at his charge.

"There are at least thirty of them," said Esther mutely, intuiting quickly and by virtue of refined instinct the gravity of their situation.

"I can count," griped Petros, lofting an ice-blue eyebrow.

Despite the troops marching on them, the Chief Inquisitor's mouth twitched upward slightly. He recognized the helmets, with the red mirror windows instead of eyes and filter canisters in place of mouths. The stinking pieces of meat were garbed in black, hermetically-sealed uniforms, their enormous double-bladed battle axes clutched rigidly in their fists. Petros had fought monsters of a similar stripe in the skies over Carthage: alongside Tres Iqus and Ion Fortuna, they had faced off against the efreeti Radu Barvon and his forces above the Vatican embassy.

Approaching the floodplain between the Arno and the Castello di Signa was a battalion of the Rosenkreuz Orden's reanimated vampire corpses.

Cardinal di Medici's chicanery... Matthaios's unwonted mercy towards their fiercest and most accursed enemy... the presence of the two Orden operatives in Florence...

In an instant, the body of disparate facts and figures erupted into an avalanche of clarity, a sheet of snow shearing off the mountainside and thundering to the ground, leaving the gray cliffs exposed to Petros's scrutiny. A chill, one completely divorced from the weather, wrapped its sinuous tendrils around his chest and squeezed.
The next few minutes passed in tense silence as the clatter of the approaching army mounted ever louder in their ears. Petros stood at attention, tall and stern and regal, though his stance did little to purge the sick cancer of resentment and betrayal and anger that gnawed at his heart. He felt light-headed with the pain of injuries both old and new, footsore, aware of the perimeter of safety narrowing to about a hundred yards in every direction.

The soldiers — autojägers, Petros corrected himself — fanned wide, closing around them in a black half-circle, like a snare. Petros glared out at them as though from a burrow in a hill, a wolf sensing the danger. The blizzard snatched at the Inquisitor's solid form, lashing his armor, ripping at the waves of blue hair so that they streamed about his face. His expression was impassive, the pale platinum eyes cold and merciless, unblinking and fixed on his prey.

Then the tension snapped, and the monsters crashed over the snow like a mighty breaker striking a white shore.

The sight of them caused the girl to shudder. "The Orden," she breathed. "Those are Dietrich's soldiers..."

"Death's pale horse," snarled Petros, without a breath. The autojägers careened for them, the holes in their gas masks glowing like coals in the darkness. The Orden's army of the dead moved forward relentlessly, a mass of bodies between Petros and the river.

Between him and the girl's freedom.

"Blanchett," he growled, "I cannot fight and carry you at the same time. Therefore, please pardon me..."

Like hoisting a sack of dirty laundry, Petros lifted the girl by the collar of his surcoat and deposited her on his back. She made a grab for the edge of his armor.

"Summon what strength you have," he ordered, "and do not let go."

She didn't argue. No doubt her fingers were numb and his surcoat was near-drowning her and she was tired beyond reckoning, but Petros felt the slightest pressure on his collar as she tangled her hands in the hydraulic cable. She pressed her knees into the ribs of his cuirass and tried to make herself as small a target as possible.

Then the Chief Inquisitor's hands moved, spinning his Screamer. He rushed forward, moving so quickly that he worried, for a space of a few seconds, that he might shake Esther free. He didn't have the luxury of concern for long as, in one fluid motion, Petros reached his first opponent, grabbed the autojäger's wrist, and twisted, hard.

There was a branch-like snap as Il Ruinanate stepped backwards, dragging the reanimated corpse along until it was too close to wrench itself free or swing its ax. The inquisitor pulled the vampire's wounded arm over his shoulder and jerked its head backwards, and, as Tres had done in Carthage, crushed its skull between knee and elbow.

Without the armor, Blanchett's hold on him would have squeezed the breath right out of his chest.

Back-pedaling swiftly, Petros dodged a swing that would have cleanly decapitated him. He couldn't see the autojäger's eyes behind the helmet and thus couldn't judge where the next stroke would land. But as the blade came down in his direction, he sprang aside. Petros took two short steps and in a blur of movement rotated around the autojäger, pressing its arm up into the small of its back before ducking behind it, giving the other monsters no clean shot without hitting their associate.
Petros pushed hard, sending the heavy creature staggering towards its partners, before delivering a sharp kick to the base of its spine. Petros dropped down on a third, his knee pressing into the autojäger's throat with enough force to crush its windpipe, the razor edges of the inquisitor's poleyns cleaving its head clean from its shoulders.

Yelps and howls and snarls resounded across the hillside. Autojägers landed to lie motionless at Petros's feet, dust and blood and viscera staining the snow black. Il Ruinante's expression never changed. There was no hint of anger or emotion, no sign of fear, no break in concentration. He simply acted as the need arose. In front of him, methodically, the monsters fell, and fell, and fell. At one point, an enemy axe windmilled end over end towards Esther's head. Instinctively, Petros's free hand shot up and snatched it by the shaft. His fist closed and it shattered as though made of straw.

He moved like a conjuring trick, a griffon from the pages of an illuminated bestiary. Something bright and distant, like silver falling through snow.

Petros surged into the Orden reinforcements as they tried to arrange themselves into a defensive line. They were well-equipped foot soldiers with steel helms over their masks and leather jacks, glaives, and axes, but as a unit, they were unwieldy, disorganized, lacking all rational thought save the impulse to feed. Somewhere, Petros knew some Orden scum was pulling the strings, but the puppeteer's concentration was splintered, pulled in too many different directions at once, whereas Petros pressed forward with a singular drive and focus, raking aside the dead vampires like a boar routing through the undergrowth with his tusks.

It had started to snow in earnest, sheets of white blown sideways by strong winds, gathering strength across the frozen riverside. At the edge of the water, a phalanx of autojägers smashed into each other in a last desperate bid to keep Petros and Esther from reaching the Arno.

The Chief Inquisitor charged to meet them, the wastes ringing with the clash of arms as battle was joined once more. Petros blocked an errant swipe of an axe blade before hurling his armored fist at the autojäger's nose. His foe ducked, slamming the barbed haft of its poleax into Petros's stomach, biting a long, serrated chunk out of his cuirass but, mercifully, sparing his flesh.

The Chief Inquisitor grit his teeth against the dull thud of impact even as he powered his Screamer into the creature's back, pile-driving its corpse into the ice. He reversed the grip on his lance and turned on one heel, directing the engine towards the ground—

But his opponent was no longer there, having somersaulted to its feet and thrown its axe at the hydraulic cables spilling from Petros's throat — too close to the inquisitor's precious cargo. A blast of supercompressed air from the Screamer's engine sent the blade careening from its intended trajectory and Petros took advantage of the autojäger's momentary distraction to smash his elbow into its throat.

But the autojäger saw the attack coming and twisted its torso at the last second, robbing the blow of much of its power. The whirring teeth of the Screamer ripped off its helmet in the pass, the dented metal catching on the dead, gray skin and tearing it free from its skull in a wash of fetid blood.

The autojäger didn't scream so much as gurgle in its pain, flesh hanging loose from the bone. It staggered back, regaining its balance before blocking Petros's reverse cut, deflecting the head of the lance away from itself and driving its axe into the inquisitor's chest, aiming for the rend in Petros's armor.
The monster found its mark.

*Il Ruinante* registered ribs shattering as the blade clove through his cuirass, exiting in a crimson spray through his thigh, just below his hip. Petros only managed though sheer, bloody-minded willpower to keep from stumbling, the flashbang of pain nearly causing the Screamer to drop from his hand.

"Brother Petros!"

"Be silent, girl," he hissed, the ragged edges of his ribs grinding together, his hip laboring under his weight. "And do not let go."

A promise... he had made a promise. He made...

The autojäger wasn't entirely stupid, it seemed: it advanced with some degree of caution, the crimson musculature of its features a truly repulsive sight, the twitching of glistening facial tendons clearly visible, blood weeping from between the sutures stitching together its eyes but leaving its mouth — and fangs — very obviously unimpeded.

Rather than step back, Petros ducked low and caught the haft of the axe on his forearm, feeling the force of impact crack open the gauntlet, directly over the burns von Kämpfer had inflicted that previous afternoon. He roared, spinning inside the autojäger's guard and gripping its arms, slamming his body into the loathsome creature and *pulling*, ignoring the shrieking protest of his broken ribs.

The momentum of the autojäger's charge carried it over Petros's shoulder; it smashed into the ground with enough force to leave a three foot indentation in the snow. He spun the Screamer and drove the spinning engine with all his strength through the autojäger's breastplate and into its heart. The reanimated monster spasmed once, and then went still.

"Are..." he coughed, discharge staining the snow. Each ragged breath lasted longer than its predecessor and seemed to weaken him more. "Blanchett... are you all right?"

Esther's arms around his throat tightened until the stranglehold was no doubt painful — though Petros, near anesthetized by shock, was completely insensitive to it. "Chief... your injuries..." she said hoarsely, her voice cracking under the weight of some apocalyptic emotion. "Oh no, oh no no..."

"I'll take that as a yes," he grunted, with effort.

"But—"

Before she managed to choke out the words, she was forced to cling to the Chief as he swept the Screamer in a wide arc and leapt for the frozen expanse of river. He landed with a skull-rattling *clank*. Though it groaned in protest, the ice held.

The drifts covering the river came to the top of Petros's calves — he had to lift his feet high to make any progress. His ears and nose were freezing. A thick, white frost brittled his eyebrows. His lungs ached. The air burned. Every breath tasted thin and fragile, freezing to dust and falling silently to the ground.

He began to bounce slightly as he jogged, and was soon reduced to lopsided stumbling.

Petros felt the click and tear of shredded abductor muscle, grit his teeth as pain pulsed from thigh to spine, nearly knocking the wind out of him. It broke through the dull throb of his broken ribs,
the slick, blistering ache of his scorched forearm. The monster had managed to find the narrow couloir between vambrace and cuisse, and its axe had filleted Petros's flesh clean from the bone. The strain of his whole weight — in addition to the girl's — hurt to the point of utter senselessness. The agony felt endless; it filled him up, displaced thought. He heaved every breath as wave after wave of pain swept over each other, cresting and falling. The pure depth and vastness of it was beyond comprehension. At least, with the Goliath, unconsciousness had come quickly.

He had no such luxury anymore.

He forced himself to face the pain with all that was left in him: each dark shudder, each dripping memory, as if it were as precious as the small Saint with whose safe deliverance he had been entrusted.

In spite of his efforts, however, Petros grew increasingly wise to the fact that the onset of shock was making him delirious.

Space and time seemed to ripple and swell. The cypresses towering above the river resembled a gathering of mute brothers from an ancient order, worshiping forgotten gods resurrected from secret occult visions. On every side of him fluttered radiant white bodies, which darted in erratic little zigzags through space, like falling into a field of stars. As the snowflakes crossed the path of his vision, Petros felt a strange lurch of vertigo flash through his brain; verses containing some maddeningly indecipherable thought pulsing beneath the vaulted dome of his temples.

Cold coruscations of rainbow fire flashed through his fevered brain, pierced by shafts of pure incandescence thrown out by the ice, like the afterimages of frozen cities, their obelisks and cupolas shining milk-white. For a moment, Petros, in his pained, exhausted stupor, was struck by the notion that he, too, had frozen along a fracture in time. The images burned for a few brief seconds before Petros stumbled and righted himself, the jarring motion causing the visions to fade away.

But then the Chief Inquisitor's leg buckled, and he was falling forward, each knee making a crater in the pack ice. Freezing shards shot through his kneecaps, the crust on the snow cutting like a dozen steakknives. His armor lacked the deep padding of proper thermal gear. While it was protection enough so long as he managed to remain upright, nearer ground level it was not much better than a dinner suit — besides which, without his surcoat, his trousers and tunic afforded little insulation from the freezing surfaces of the metal plates.

He grit his teeth and launched himself forward. No doubt Blanchett's meager layers were well and truly soaked; his hands, gauntleted, were so cold he could hardly bear the pressure of gripping his Screamer. He daren't think how the girl was managing...

Eerily anticipatory, the stranglehold on his collar suddenly slackened. Acting entirely on instinct, Petros pulled the girl off his back and held her in his arms. She had fallen unconscious, rigid with cold. Petros, despairingly, took stock of the awful paleness of her face, a vein in her throat pulsing with the fast shivering rhythm of her heartbeat.

The both of them, he knew, were not long for succumbing to severe frost bite.

He had to find the Professor…

He had to...

A promise…
Petros fought back a shiver. He was struck, suddenly, inexplicably, with a sense of impending disaster. He held Miss Blanchett closer to him, cradling her like a child, with her face and her shoulders and her red hair — the only violent stroke of color in the entire Godforsaken landscape — tucked close to his shoulder. The thick snow beneath his boots fell in undulations over the jagged black cracks in the river. He'd seen the effect in puddles on a small scale — the water, freezing inward from the edge, expanding as it did so, drove a wave into the rapidly cooling air, to freeze as it was forced skyward. The result was a spike like a fantastic lily of ice.

The sound of the snow touching down all around him was not unlike that of slippered feet behind an arras, or a peal of ringing, crystalline laughter, if not of God the Father, then perhaps of one of His angels.

"When first I saw your transformation, Nightroad, in Carthage... I thought, for a moment..." His Adam's apple bobbed like a buoy in rough water. "Though I was half-unconscious, I thought... this, then, was Revelation. I was certain I was dying, Father Nightroad, and here before me stood an angel whom nature had rendered more monstrous than ever God had."

A snow-limned shadow, what Petros had mistaken for one of the flutes of frozen water, resolved into a humanoid shape, a figure dressed entirely in white. Il Ruinante felt his mind might outrun time as the figure neared, as though he had an eternity to ponder its approach.

He was tall, as pale as porcelain. Fine, champagne-gold hair fell in tousled waves to his shoulders. At his side hung a lance, as delicately made as he was, the pointed steel head wrought as though from volcano glass, a silver so dark it was nearly black, the grip and pommel a deep, lustrous yellow chased with obsidian. His expression with its pointed chin and hollow cheeks was quiet, untroubled, like cool gray stone; his blue eyes, smoky and serenely vacant, gave no impression of life, hinted at nothing but surface.

Petros looked over at the figure, and he couldn't quite rationalize what he was seeing.

He... he looked like Abel Nightroad... was Abel Nightroad.

Petros shook his head, but that only made the world tip dizzily, and when he tried to steady himself, his leg threatened to give out again.

Impossible... Nightroad had remained behind in Florence. The Professor had insisted... to keep him safe from Alucard. He was not there with them now, on the snow. It was just Petros and Esther... just them...

The man took a step forward. He was barefoot. Barefoot, on the ice.

The snow fell gently, effortlessly, covering everything in soft crystal, the mist of moonlight before a rain, blurring the outlines and obliterating the color of the world. There was little for Petros to do but stare in awe and wonder and horror as three pairs of enormous wings crested the rise of the figure's narrow shoulders. They glowed as white as hoarfrost, their pinions folded demurely.

"Be not afraid."

Then the creature smiled, revealing almost pointed teeth. Despite the gesture, there was something in the man's expression that alerted Petros to impending trouble. There was a kind of coldness in it — as though God had given the immense nuclear winter form and voice.

Petros reeled at the scent of roses and rust. His heartbeat tripped to a frantic staccato and heat
flashed quickly across his brain, and he felt a type of fear that cut him to his very soul.

"Hello," said the Seraphim gently. His six wings fanned out behind him, a glorious corona of white feathers, fleece-soft and supple; despite its tranquility, his voice carried authority, glinting like burnished bronze. "You have something which was promised to me. I'll be taking her now, please."

"But you were only trying to protect your companions that terrible night... Sister Esther and that vampire princeling. Who can throw a stone at a soul who favors his friends under dangerous circumstances when, sooner or later, it becomes a question of life or death? No man should judge unless he asks himself in absolute honesty whether in a similar situation he might not have done the same thing. You are a creature of truly noble extract, Abel Nightroad, who in all probability will bring greater revenues of glory to God, and I... cannot condemn you for that."

"I was wrong about you. I was wrong about a great many things."

What... what was that thing...?

The winged apparition presented some new, seraphic temptation, but instead of stirring in Petros some manner of hope, it seemed to announce that any immediate retreat of evil would be followed by a new attack yet more cunningly devised.

His foundation was shaken, and for a moment, he forgot himself — for the first time, Petros began to doubt. He wished so desperately for an answer; was that not the purpose of Divine Revelation, to hint at a promising path to true salvation? To show a benign countenance gifted by God-given wisdom, glowing as if fanned by sacred breath?

No...

Petros's strength was all but gone. Even so, he had sense enough to know that to predict God's will was at once a work of human folly and yet the subtlest of all seductions, just as he knew faith, in all its many forms, preceded the miracle. It was not raining when Noah was commanded to build an ark. There was no visible ram in the thicket when Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac. Two heavenly personages were not yet seen when Joseph knelt and prayed. First came the test of faith — and then the miracle. Faith and doubt could not exist in the same mind at the same time, for one would dispel the other.

Petros understood, then, the purpose of the trials he had endured, as well as those he knew had yet to come; he understood the doubt and darkness and all the deep uncertainties that defined the outer boundaries of a mortal life, but in that moment, with his faith present at the base of it all, like the first stone of a rising tower, Brother Petros did not dare ask God to intervene on his behalf.

He would never take a rose from a beast... if the Devil's calloused hand were to hold out a scarlet flower, his grip unaffected by the pricking thorns, then the penitent ought to shrink from the gift and refuse it.

And Petros realized, abruptly, that the winged creature before him had offered him some similar trinket... a setting-aside of his burdens, the casting-off of his responsibility.

The girl... for his life.

To obey the Seraphim was not belief. To take the rose was not faith. It would not be putting the love of God above the love of his human duties.
The Lord was testing Petros.

Something which was promised to me…

Promise. Petros made a promise.

He would bring Saint Esther home.

Il Ruinante forced a grip on himself, his knuckles clenching around the shaft of the Screamer. He felt then a fierce protectiveness over his charge. He glared at the creature with glassy belligerence.

"No." Then... "Get thee behind me."

Snowflakes whirled about his head and alighted on the backs of his gauntleted hands. Each form seemed to encompass a billion pinprick galaxies, slow bursts of nuclear fire amidst the mountain cold. At the sight, he imagined the rough sphere of the cosmos blossoming within each drift, growing as he watched, life pushing forward against the night.

"Oh? That isn't very nice, you know."

The stranger's left hand went up in a salute-like movement that passed over his head and seized the hilt of his lance. It came free without a sound, describing a beautiful arc above him and coming to rest in a lethal position out from his left shoulder and slanting back — a single wing of black steel to accompany the six others, with an edge that gleamed like a filament of ice.

In the stillness that followed, Petros felt as though every inch of his skin was made of glass, a glacial membrane encasing him from head to toe like the carapace of a diamond beetle.

He didn't see the figure hit him — the winged creature simply moved too quickly. He wasn't even sure what the weapon was — the lance, a fist or foot. It didn't matter: it was enough to make him buckle at the knees. The glass casement cracked. A latticework of blood wept through the splintered surface of his body. Petros howled soundlessly into the darkness, chunks of his flesh falling away along with his glass exoskeleton. Flashpoint light filtered through his eyelashes, exposing the razor-sharp veins pulsing in his head, like sunshine through a transparent tree leaf. The pressure under his temples was delicate and fluid. If he moved his head, he felt the slippery pain shift behind his eyes.

But he did not let go of Esther Blanchett, even as the ice beneath him resounded with a dull, grinding rumble. Her head rested between his chin and collarbone, his arm looped under her legs. He braced the girl against his right shoulder and, with his left, forced himself to his feet. The arm von Kämpfer had scalded screamed its protest.

"You can't win, silly boy."

The night burned and froze; it splintered and gouged. Petros accepted the snow and ice, shining, shimmering; he resigned himself to the triumph of glaciers and the death of the world.

"I know."

Petros tensed for another blow, knowing he could not strike back.

But then...

"Well," said the Seraphim in thoughtful consideration, looking rather petulantly at his feet. "This won't do. No... no, this won't do at all."
Without warning, he spread his six massive, glimmering wings and leaped into the air. Each beat sent a gust of wind towards Petros, percussing with enough force to blast the snow clear of the ice. The steady rhythm was like the white noise of waves breaking on the sand, and as the being held himself aloft, his bare feet several meters above the ground, he retraced his sinuous course back to where he had emerged from the storm. He flapped higher, his hair streaming behind him like the glittering banner of a tidal salt flat. The inquisitor watched the flakes in the Seraphim's wake as they eddied and churned, meeting the ice in an erotic swirl of white, the fresh intermingling with the frozen in a turbulent, roiling dance, until it was no longer possible to tell one from the other. He watched until the figure vanished into the night, and he couldn't hear the beat of wings anymore.

Why had he departed? What had caused...

Then Petros heard the loud crack.

It was like a stick snapping, followed by the sound of something huge thrumming, as if a bass string the size of a city block were vibrating. The ice creaked and groaned.

*God help them.*

The river began to slip beneath him, shifting like a pile of bleached white spines...

"Save the contrition for the confessional and the sermon for the pulpit," snarled Alucard. "Regret isn't worth a damn to anyone, least of all her."

A muscle fired in Petros's jaw. "You are quite correct," he allowed, the words chilly. "Professor Wordsworth, Father Nightroad... Alucard, I will proceed to the Castello di Signa. Abel, secure a location here in Florence. At midnight, I will meet Wordsworth and the dog on the southern shore of the Arno, near the ruins of the village of Casone. If I do not appear, assume my capture and return to Rome to confer with Lady Cardinal Sforza."

*He began, then, to pray: "My Lord and Savior, You became man and labored with Your hands until the time of Your ministry. Bless me as I begin this work. Help me to bring it to completion. Lord, enlighten my mind and strengthen my body, that I may accomplish my task according to Your will. Guide me to bring about works of goodness to Your service and glory. Amen."*

Esther could hear someone breathing, wet and labored, each gasp mussing the small red hairs on the top of her head. She wanted to reach out to whomever it was, but she was so tired. Her fingers burned. Her toes burned.

So terribly tired...

"Ah."

When she finally forced her eyes open, she found her head angled towards the ground. Through the spikes of her eyelashes, she spied a web of hairline cracks which seemed a little too white, a little too wide, gleaming like diamond twine. She stared, terrified, as the intricate lattice of fissures and fractures extended from beneath someone's boots.

*Petros's boots.*

A low groan resounded across the river, a lowing of protest like a branch breaking off an ancient tree. Esther swallowed. The Chief Inquisitor's lids, when she chanced a glance, were heavy, his eyes dark.
She didn't recognize the expression, but it frightened her.

"Forgive me, Lady Saint..." muttered Il Ruinante.

Before she knew what was happening, Esther felt herself being lifted by the scruff like a wet kitten, the grip tight enough to choke off a yelp of protest, before Petros flung her across the ice. She landed with enough blunt force to split her vision with red. Her hip cracked against the frozen surface, but Esther ignored the pain as she clawed for purchase, peering over her shoulder.

She watched, the world sloughing forward as though in slow motion, as the weakened ice began to splinter. Petros's gaze locked with hers only long enough for Esther to register the man's incredible fear — and, to her horror, his solemn resignation — before the fully-armored inquisitor vanished into the brackish black water.

"BROTHER PETROS!"

Esther's first instinct was to bolt for the break in the ice. But she could barely summon the strength to turn her head, much less rise to her feet. The surcoat was soaked; the snow was deeper than it had looked from her perch in the Chief Inquisitor's arms, and the ice beneath was slicker and far more slippery than any skating rink. The river was dark, no longer covered entirely in its blind, white layer, for there were reflective patches of water from where Petros had gone under, displacing the volume. The current was black, and the ice itself was clear enough in places that the darkness beneath showed straight through.

The meltwater numbed where it touched. Esther felt strangely distant as she, gritting her teeth, dragged herself on her stomach towards the fissure, her hipbone and head shrieking their objections. Esther ignored them, as well as the bitter cold needling her fingertips and toes, as she flattened herself against the frozen surface, painfully aware that the ice was too rotten for this, and that the water beneath was as cold as water could be without freezing.

"P-Petros?"

Oh God…

He wasn't surfacing.

The Chief Inquisitor was the strongest man she knew, with the constitution of an ox and a terrifying force of will. He'd taken a direct hit from a Goliath tank and had been able to fight only a few hours later.

But he was dressed in full plate mail; he was very badly injured; it was the dead of winter, and the river was nearly ten meters deep in places.

A man his size, weighed down with his armor, would sink like an anchor.

"PETROS!" Esther wailed, tears pouring down her cheeks and immediately freezing, causing her skin to rupture and bleed.

Thin ice be damned — she lunged forward on all fours. Her nerves were strung so taut, her muscles seemed to twang with her every movement. Esther's arms groped forward to guide her when she found she struggled to distinguish the edge of the break, her tears, the darkness encroaching on the edges of her vision, obscuring her line of sight.

Esther let out a beastly sound of frustration as her arms and legs began to cramp, the joints growing gristle-stiff before refusing to respond to her commands entirely. Her body was near
insensible under a pall of snow and meltwater, marrow-chillingly cold. Esther sank to her knees and began to cry in her terror and helplessness, the weeping burning her esophagus, as though she'd vomited strong liquor. Even through her stinging eyes and the falling snow, she could see the water growing calm where Petros had gone under.

A lace of frost settled over Esther's throat. She forced the sobbing from between hacking coughs and shivers so violent she tasted blood in her mouth. The air whistled around her, blowing flakes in her face and biting viciously at her exposed skin. Up on her knees, Esther hugged herself tight and muttered prayer after prayer, hoping for a head of blue to pop up from the depths...

"Please, God," she whispered, her whimpers dying in her throat, "please please please…"

But the ice had already begun to refreeze over the river, healing the wound.

Esther fell sideways, landing heavily, but not feeling the impact. The winter wind numbed her senses and pickled her brain. The world lost, the light lost, her mind lost, Petros lost… the gleaming silver, voraciously hungry storm had become her sole and final reality.

"Petros, I'm sorry..." she whispered wretchedly, her words suffocating under the tide of the indifferent night. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry..."

Esther rolled her eyes in their sockets, looking up towards the sky, searching for stars, but the white ceiling was too solid and too low to be called cloud. It smothered the tree-tops, hurling flakes of itself in every direction, like a molting blanket tossed in the air. If she slipped away now, unconscious or otherwise, she supposed she'd still be seeing white.

Esther had always thought hell would be hot. But here she was, right at the mouth of it.

And it was freezing.

It was freezing and she couldn't move a muscle, not even if her life depended on it, which it did.

Esther Blanchett knew distantly, dimly, that she was dying.

_He... he will never know..._

_The Father... I will never get the chance to tell him..._

"Sorry? Why are you sorry, my dear? He was very heavy, that one."

In the corner of Esther's eye flashed a scintilla of bright light, the reflection of ice off pale skin. She bit her tongue to stifle a yelp before curling into herself, knees tucked close to her chest, arms snaking around her legs, her head buried between her elbows. She shook, the tremors wracking her entire body.

The figure appeared, superficially, human, but so ectomorphic that for a moment Esther completely failed to recognize him as such. The snow shimmered around the man's tall, white profile, an inverted silhouette — a mirage, realized Esther, like a quicksilver heat haze rippling on the surface of a pond. He walked completely erect, his head high, his long hair flowing around him. His hands were loose at his sides, and his body was relaxed, radiating power like a rod of uranium.

Six wings, each as long as the figure was tall, strobed in the ice-light like a stop-motion kinetoscope.

There was no mistaking the horrifying implications of the figure's appearance: he was either a
revelation of divine origin or a hallucination, and Esther was either blessed or losing her mind.

Or dying.

Oh God... Esther let out a convulsive gasp. She didn't want to die.

She desperately, desperately didn't want to die...

As she peered up at the winged figure from the shadowed folds of Petros's hood, she found herself staring into the bluest eyes she had ever seen. She had only encountered that deep shade of cobalt once in her life before, in the stained glass windows of Saint Matthias Cathedral. Her very soul grew hushed with reverence as she gazed up at him, holding her breath for fear the vision would dissolve, a mere figment of pain and fear and the freezing cold.

Her awareness of the world around her dimmed in the ocean-blue depths of his eyes and the bright plumage of his wings, gleaming like the dawn. His features were delicately angular, weary, almost careworn. His satiny skin glowed against the snow, pale and fine; his fair complexion seemed to hold its own radiance.

"Father...?"

But then the man — angel, demon, vision, apparition, dream, nightmare — smiled. It was gleeful, triumphant. Sensual, and yet somehow demure.

And absolutely nothing like Father Nightroad.

She catalogued her terror as a weight pressing down on her ribs, a dull ache in her head. She could feel her jaw clamping like a pair of calipers, her temples tensing, her stomach burning.

Esther didn't understand why, but at the sight of his face her fear grew to panic and she almost fainted there and then, for deep within her memory a warning signaled to her that this creature was inimical to mankind. It was hard to describe what she sensed, but the overwhelming urge to flee was distinct and clear, like the shape of a leafless tree against the sky, or an osprey flying across a frozen river. Esther hesitated to close her eyes again, for the figure had knelt close to her face, so close his small smile became all at once an unnervingly broad exposure of teeth.

A red flower, garish against the white of his clothes, was propped in his lapel. Like him, it didn't seem to much mind the cold.

A rose...

She felt the creature's mouth shift down to her throat. His face flashed in front of her eyes — the picture he presented burned itself into Esther's mind with a kind of magnificence, a certain splendor that was as unbelievably, unbearably beautiful as it was horrifying.

"I can still smell him on you."

Like she had so many times over the past few days, she tried to fight, but the creature held her easily, pinned to the ice under his weight. As his lips closed over Esther's skin, she stopped breathing and waited for the rip of teeth. Instead, there was only a warm sweep of tongue down the column of her throat, and, with it, the most extraordinary and disturbing sense of contentment, of peace.

The creature smiled against Esther's neck, his lips drawing back in a fiendish, sickle-shaped grin. Catching hold of her chin, he tipped her head back.
"You've done so well looking after him for me, dearest Esther. I am going to see him again. Very soon, now... very soon. The three of us will be tog—"

Something swept through the storm, then: jagged bolts of black energy flashing from snowflake to snowflake; they moved like the thunder's roar, like the swell and rip of a hurricane.

Esther watched the figure's blue eyes narrow and then widen. His mouth opened. Whatever he intended to shout was never heard, however, because at that moment, a gnarled tendril of shadow tore through his back, erupting in an obsidian spray as it exited the front of his torso.

A corolla of blood, like clotted ink, constellated Esther's face.

"Oh dear," he murmured, blinking plaintively at the gapping hole in his chest.

Turning her head, Esther spied bared teeth and unsheathed claws as an enormous wolfhound bounded towards them — a great red-eyed brute, its thick ruff bristling as it snarled and spat. Its eyes burned like hot coals and diseased foam hung in ribbons from its exposed fangs.

"Nice doggie?" offered the stranger, oddly genial, just before the rabid dog made a motion to tear out his throat.

Moving with inhuman speed, the man caught hold of the beast's neck. It pulled free before lunging again. The man batted it away with an elbow. Unhurt, the dog resumed its attack, cannoning into the man's side. He was floored, caught off-guard by the ferocity of the attack. Saliva cascaded over jagged teeth, webbing over the winged man's face.

As though with a mind all its own, a glistening finger of tar-black shadow lanced out from the dog's flanks, carrying with it singed molecules of flesh and chipped bone as it made a grab for Esther, coiling around her waist and dragging her violently, manically, away from her would-be captor.

Reality blinked, looked the other way.

Then the winged figure turned and fled.

The dog hurtled across the ice with a peculiar rocking-horse gait; it made a dive for the winged man with its mouth open, exposing every fang in its enormous array of sawlike teeth.

The figure's helplessness on the ice rendered his expression at once terrified and indifferent; madness and delight and fury blazed in his fierce blue eyes. He gave the occasional involuntary, spitting cough, vomiting fluid the color of coal slurry all over his white clothes, as he moved hastily away from Esther, bumping against shoreline before his bare feet could secure purchase on the crusted snow. The black bile in his mouth had frozen on his lips and his blond hair was beaded with ice. The angel dashed up the hill, beating his wings, taking to the air like a file of wild geese.

The man said a few words, hurling words into the storm, but the sound spiraled down and away from his ascent, falling just out of earshot.

At the edge of consciousness, Esther distinguished the dog trotting back towards her, black and red, all grizzly bulk and wolfish snarls. An amorphous pack of shadows with mass and teeth... and masses of teeth. Esther squinted, and the Shadow began to change, just as it had done in her dreams. No longer furry or fanged, it had a death-like pallor, which gave to the whole man — a man, she realized blearily, not a dog — an indescribably emaciated appearance in spite of his fiery crimson eyes. His long-suffering expression failed to harmonize with his leering, sarcastic smirk and keen, self-satisfied bearing.
Esther felt a shudder run through her at the sight of him, a cold thrill, and yet it was no longer
terror: rather, it was like the sudden bite of raw air, or the slap of a cold rain.

After a half-dozen leaps, the Shadow unaccountably wheeled, brought his boot down hard on the
ice, shattering it, and dove feet-first into the black water.

The weather continued to whip itself into a raging convulsion around her. The glass-cast trees
rattled and the wind screamed. But the sounds were no longer random. In the midst of the chaos,
the howling began to form an elongated word. She thought she recognized the stretched-out
syllables of her own name.

"Esther!" She heard the call as if from a distance, through the roar of blood in her head. "Esther!"

She knew that voice.

There was something else: a low, keening, gasping sound.

"Sister Esther... it's me, come on now... come on."

It took her a second longer than it ought to have done to make sense of what the man was saying.
And to realize that the keening, the gasping, was coming from her.

Esther blinked, and saw the blanched, horrified face of William Walter Wordsworth staring down
at her.

She tried to pull herself in his direction, but her body wouldn't respond. Her limbs felt like newborn
fawn legs, spindly and weak. Her strength was completely sapped.

The Professor's arms went around her. She felt herself being pulled up to him, his grip around her
tight. Feigning an imperviousness to the cold himself, he whipped off his mantle and bundled
Esther into it, until not the barest inch of flesh was showing.

"There now," he said, cooing. "I've got you. It's going to be all right. You did it. It's done, now. It's
finished."

The Professor cradled the young woman in his arms, seemingly oblivious to the bouquet of black
blood trickling down Esther's face, oblivious to the pain and hurt saturating the freezing air.
"Esther," he asked, "where is—"

"W-water..." she chattered, her voice tiny, cold, desolate. The metallic taste of terror shriveled her
tongue. "He's... in the water..."

William went white. "Alucard—!" he cried out. "Damn it all, where the devil is he?"

"Both... P-Petros... went to... to..."

Esther wanted to call to them, to plead with them to leave her and find the Chief Inquisitor, not to
give up on him, but everything was becoming formless and without shape: they were gone, and the
ice was fading...

And then everything...

Stopped.
Dr. Teresa Lauricella stood in the middle of the ward, mouth half open, words trying, and failing, to fall from the tip of her tongue.

Dawn concealed itself below the horizon; what little morning light leaked into the hospital room was cold and bitter and bleak. Beyond the Ospedale degli Innocenti, the fountains and pavings of the Piazza della Santissima Annunziata were swathed in snow, like briquets of charcoal turned to white ashes.

But Teresa was not, at present, paying attention to the miserable dawn breaking over Florence.

Her focus was riveted instead on the two young men standing in the middle of the room. The first was the Church agent from the autopsy a few days ago: a tall, attenuated figure whose eyes, large and blue amid a silvery thin face, appeared terribly weary behind his spectacles. The other was a stranger to Teresa: quite significantly shorter, gingery, with an expression so preternaturally serene, as still as a millpond, that Teresa was half-tempted to search for a wind-up key beneath his cassock.

The emotionless priest had a rather large pistol pointed at his fellow clergyman.

Abel Nightroad breathed out a slow, wilted sigh, the sound gusting through the ward. "Tres," he said gently, addressing his colleague, "you don't want to do this."

Teresa's heart pounded arrhythmically in her chest; her fingers fiddled with her buttons, trembling on the anxious edge of exhaustion.

The small man cocked his head to the side, and then said, with prodigious taciturnity: "Want... negative, Father Nightroad. My desires and intentions are irrelevant. You were ordered to return to Rome with Iron Maiden and Dandelion. I am making certain of the execution of Her Grace's orders."

"How did you—?"

"If My Lord's intention was to evade capture by the Special Services Annex, then it was inadvisable to return to the scene of the Duchess of Milan's last communication with His Eminence Cardinal di Medici."

"You retraced my steps."

"Positive." Tres had a way of communicating to Father Abel that the latter's presence had for the former the same significance as that of a piece of furniture. "I obtained the coordinates from Sister Kate."
"Oh." Father Abel eyeballed the gun as one would a pit of vipers. "Are you going to shoot me, Tres?"

Well, Teresa somehow doubted he'd brought the weapon along to perform a post-mortem examination, though she elected to keep the thought to herself.

The short, plain-spoken priest, a contractor of some fashion, like Father Abel, for the Vatican's Ministry of Holy Affairs, had arrived not long after one Father Wordsworth and a procession of critically injured agents had stumbled — broken and bleeding and quite literally freezing to death — into her hospital.

It had been a long night.

Teresa hadn't wanted to work the late shift, especially given the singularly gruesome nature of the recent murder and a certain wretched Cardinal breathing down her neck, but the need for her work, unlike her subjects, never really slept. She consoled herself with the knowledge that most of the calls she received in the small hours of the morning consisted of misdials and other nonemergencies, at worse some inebriated hooligans causing trouble and breaking curfew. Teresa had been prepared to spend her night squirreled away with a cup of tea, a crossword puzzle, and the company of half a dozen corpses, cozy in their refrigerated cupboards.

The arrival of Abel Nightroad and his urgent appeal for the aid and discretion of her medical staff had properly scuppered Teresa's plans.

In retrospect, it was just as well Father Abel had had the foresight, to say nothing of the common sense, to petition Teresa for assistance. If the priest hadn't roused the hospital personnel well in advance, allowing them to prep the emergency ward and operating theater for the imminent arrival of critically injured persons, Dr. Lauricella doubted her nurses would have been able to save the wounded.

Two of them were in a bad way. One had, apparently, taken a tumble into the Arno, worsening what was already a number of critical injuries. The river at that time of year was traumatically cold; the man, whom Father Wordsworth had identified as the Bureau Director of the Inquisition, had been clinically dead for almost three minutes before resuscitation. His heart and lungs had stopped, but the tissues required less oxygen when chilled. They hadn't degraded, despite the loss of circulation, and while they had started up again once his body temperature began to rise, the man had yet to regain consciousness.

The small, red-headed nun had fared marginally better than her associate, although she had also passed through patient intake critically hypothermic, not to mention dehydrated and malnourished. Teresa had patched a few minor contusions, set a broken pinkie finger on the girl's right hand, and put her on an intravenous drip to combat the dehydration. Teresa had been of half a mind to prepare one for Father Abel, as well, after witnessing his reaction to his novice's state. The poor man's knees had buckled, his face going as white as farro flour. The rush of shock and horror had come over him so strongly Teresa seriously worried he might faint.

Both the Knight and the Sister had arrived so slathered in gore they might have rolled in it like a pair of sheepdogs. There had been a fight, a rather nasty one, although Father Wordsworth and his associates had been miserly with the details.

Not that she really needed them to treat the wounded. An attitude she somehow doubted the short, copper-haired priest, one Tres Iqus, shared.

Unlike the preceding medical emergency, the standoff between the two clergymen wasn't exactly
the sort of situation for which someone in Teresa's line of work prepared oneself. There was nothing anywhere in her experience, medical training, or even primal instincts to tell her how to react to an ordained member of the Church quite calmly leveling a massive pistol at one of his coworkers.

"You disobeyed a direct order from Her Grace," Tres intoned. The words hung in the air like a personal accusation. He lowered the gun, which was almost as big as the priest's torso was tall, until it sighted on Abel's kneecaps. "If you do not consent to accompany me back to Rome, I am authorized to take any necessary punitive action."

Abel rubbed his shoulder as an invisible injury made itself known. In an effort to lend his assistance to the medical teams, he had rolled the sleeves of his cassock to the elbow, his hands ungloved and scrubbed. The priest was a pale, skinny thing, almost rawboned, but, curiously, his bookish appearance seemed to end at his bottle-bottomed spectacles. Abel was surprising lean and sinewy, as taut as whipcord, his exposed forearms all clean planes and parallel lines, like a pair of ivory-boned knitting needles.

But he looked, in that moment, near-gaunt with a pain that wasn't, Teresa suspected, physical.

"I can't return to Rome," he said quietly, scratching absently at his left ear, which was pierced with a silver cuff, high up in the cartilage.

"Requesting clarification, Father Nightroad."

"The less you know about it, the less likely we'll get Miss Caterina into trouble," insisted Abel. Teresa suffered the ambiguous comment with the same distant, numb confusion she'd felt from the moment he'd stepped through her door.

"Insufficient data. Please be more specific."

Abel passed a hand across his eyes. "I can't," he said in a faint voice. "I just can't. And since I somehow doubt Miss Caterina gave you permission to kill me and haul my carcass back to the Palazzo Spada in a toboggan, Tres, you had best let us crack on with things. Dr. Lauricella..."

Teresa jumped, incognizant of the fact that Abel had been aware of her presence, "how are they doing?"

Tres gave Abel a measuring look that ever-so-slightly bordered on annoyance. "Father Nightroad, do not ignore——"

"Miss Blanchett is resting comfortably, Reverence." Teresa's astute, elfin face was sombre and assured when she relayed: "The Sister has suffered a trauma, but with her injuries on the mend, the best thing for her right now is some peace and quiet." She shifted. "I can't say the same for the big fellow, however."

The last she had seen of Signor Orsini, the man was gray-faced, lips purple-blue, eyelids fluttering. The nurses had intubated him with an endotracheal line, and Teresa had been forced to administer vasoactive agents to raise his arterial pressure.

"When he was brought in, he was suffering from severe hypothermia, with several broken ribs and a fully lacerated abductor muscle," said Teresa worriedly. "I'm no neurologist, but I understand there is a chance of his having suffered some form of hypoxic-ischemic brain damage. We can't really evaluate his cognitive faculties until he wakes up. But, in spite of that... it's incredible, really, but he may yet live."
"May?" a voice contorted in a snarl. "Oh, he will not die. I want to kill him myself and the pontificating bastard will not deny me that."

Teresa looked over her shoulder in surprise. One of the men who had rescued the Bureau Director sloped in from the corridor, his foot propped on the doorjamb. He reclined against the wall, glaring daggers at the two priests.

The coroner felt a prickling sensation on the back of her neck, just under her collar. She registered a sudden, oppressive chill running down her forearms.

The man was tall, fully six and a half feet from his riding boots to the wide brim of his hat. He was wardrobed in a garish crimson coat that flapped about his ankles like the folded wings of an archangel, so thin and angular that the articulation of his skull was prominent beneath the pale sheath of skin stretched drum-tight across it. The eyes, eclipsed by a pair of tinted glasses, like welder's goggles, registered to Teresa only as twin depressions the color of a lithium burn.

The red-coated man made a most unpleasant exhibit. His smile, when it came, was slow, unmistakably insolent, his lips retracting to show a double line of teeth. One side of his mouth was lifted slightly higher than the other, lending the man a mien of perpetual sneering contempt.

Teresa looked away quickly, unaccountably disquieted.

Stiff and silent, Father Tres shifted his aim, sighting instead on what on any other person ought to have been flaring nostrils and wild, fearful eyes at having a gun pointed at his face. But the man — whose name, Teresa remembered suddenly, was Alucard — merely hissed through his teeth.

"According to Chekhov," he said, rising fluidly from his repose against the partition, "once a gun appears in a story, it has to be fired. Never brandish a weapon unless you're prepared to use it, Robot."

Teresa started. "R-robot...?"

"Positive. I am not human. I am a machine."

Tres's eyes were oddly ornamented, realized Teresa, filigreed like the crosshair of a rifle scope. The android priest was as self-assured a creature as she had ever met, as if he had long ago made a precise inventory of his qualities and found nothing wanting. His movements were metronome-regular and stiff, the motion of a mechanical doll or a marionette worked by unseen wires. A man with a face like his probably made an excellent confessor, thought Teresa — someone who could be told anything, no matter how awful, and remain as steady as granite.

"My Lord is also not human," Tres continued, adjusting his focus on Alucard. "Your body heat registers at two point four five degrees below twenty three degrees centigrade or room temperature, and I can detect no respiratory, pulmonary, or cardiovascular activity. Your physiognomic indexes match those of certain vampiric specimens."

Vampiric... specimens...

Teresa's blood turned to ice water.

Alucard studied Tres with raised eyebrows, plainly trying to fathom him out. The former's bearing and mannerisms were strange, almost contradictory — in one moment, he was slouching against the wall and smirking languidly like some slinky, spoiled house cat, and in the next, he was drawing himself up with the princely snobbery of someone for whom anything less than the royal treatment constituted a grievous insult. "Clever little toy."
"My Lord is mistaken: I am not a toy. I am, however, prepared to shoot to kill. You have five
seconds to identify yourself."

The short priest's placid brown eyes flashed — quite literally flickering red, a promise of
punishment if he didn't like Alucard's answer. Teresa felt goosebumps erupt on every inch of
exposed skin.

Father Abel edged closer to Tres, smiling in anxious placation, making small, flapping motions
with his thin hands. "Tres, put the pistol away..."

"Negative, Father Nightroad. This lifeform is hostile." Tres didn't flinch. He didn't even blink. The
robotic priest was at least a foot shorter than Alucard, but to Teresa, it appeared as though Tres was
looking down at him. "Five seconds have elapsed. Firing first volley."

"Tres...!"

The report of the massive pistol sounded in their ears like a thunderclap. Teresa shrieked as a bullet
flew within an inch of Alucard's head and embedded itself in the wall.

It happened so quickly that even Alucard was taken by surprise. His spine snapped taut.

The priest shifted the barrel to the left.

"Angle correction zero point zero four degrees. I will not miss again," said Father Tres without
rancor. "Answer: who are you?"

"Tres, stop it!" implored Abel, to little effect.

"This is a hospital!" said Teresa shrilly. "I won't have you militant bigots blasting each other's
heads off in the middle of the emergency ward!"

Tres and Teresa both were rewarded with a crimson glare that could have pulverized rock.
"Cyborgs..." Instead of doing as the priest ordered of him, Alucard only sneered. "Never much
cared for cyborgs."

"Rewriting resident tactical programming to genocide mode."

"TRES, NO!"

"Put that sodding thing away this instant!" shouted Teresa, aghast. "If you think you can barge in
here discharging firearms—"

She yelped as Father Abel surged forward and took her elbow in a none-too-gentle grasp. He
practically spun her until she was standing behind him and shielded from view. "Father—!"

"I beg your pardon, Doctor, but this will not be pleasant," he muttered.

"Commence combat. Firing second volley"

Father Tres didn't bother sighting down the short metal tube when he fired. The bullet shattered
Alucard's eye socket, punching through fluid-filled sinus cavities, through membranes, nerves,
arteries, muscle tissue, through the tiny blood vessels that fed three pounds of butter-soft gray
matter. Sphenoid bone, cranium, lobes frontal, parietal, and occipital, the cells arranged like cogs in
a clock, holding every thought and memory and dream. Teresa couldn't help it; she touched upon
the litany of anatomical adages like so many prayer beads on a rosary.
Abel stared, shocked speechless, while Teresa screamed loud enough for the both of them.

The bullet exited through the occipital bone, knocking out hairy, blood-wet clods of meat. The white wall was suddenly a lurid red.

Abel, satisfied Teresa was well out of range, lunged for the android priest's gun-arm. "TRES!"

Another crack, like a mallet striking a board. Alucard's head rocked back. His eyes — eye — was wide open, brimming with surprise. The man's knees folded in a reflexive spasm of agony. An instant before he fell, he might have been giving a final, arrogant bow.

Then his head hit the floor, with was now gore-drenched and brain-spattered. Two gruesome holes pockmarked the back of his skull, directly opposite the only slightly tidier holes in his forehead and eye socket.

Tres studied Alucard's corpse with clinical disinterest. Meanwhile, Teresa stared at the body in mute horror. Her legs trembled in shock as she stepped back, tears in her eyes. She tried to speak, but she could barely muster the necessary oxygen beneath the crushing pressure of panic on her throat. She broke the silence with a delicate, brittle wail, like cracking the top of a crème brûlée.

"Christ Almighty..." Teresa slumped to her haunches, clutching at her hair, not giving a toss about blaspheming in front of the priests. "You killed him!"

"Negative." She couldn't be certain, but she thought she saw Tres's frown tighten a fraction of a degree. "Failure to terminate brain functions. He is not dead."

"Not dead! You blew half his head off!"

In a display of rank insensitivity to the coroner's horror and revulsion, a disembodied voice began to cackle.

"Oh Lord," murmured Father Abel.

In the wake of the incorporeal laughter, the silence floated, bellied-up in their throats, like dead fish in a polluted river. Teresa watched in numb, inarticulate terror as, in Alucard's corpse, bones snapped back into place, tendons grew bow-taut, cartilaginous tissue tensed, and collagen-rich, stretchy slipcovers scabbed over his organs, as though his limbs had taken a bath in a vat of lye and sulfuric acid. The sucking, animate sounds were all muted, drowned out by Teresa's breathing: her soft little gasps as she tried not to cry. She stared with equal measures medical intrigue and rational terror as Alucard's organs shifted about his body, long tubes and ropey coils like slippery fingers catching in cobwebs. Blood began to boil and stir — the particles of fluid matter so minute, the gases so subtle, that they hung in the unstirred air. They moved towards each other like solenoids in an electromagnetic field, the tissue reforming before her eyes, coagulating and stiffening. The man's arms, neck, and chest contorted, from the bowed curve of his collarbones to the hollow saddle of his hips, where his stomach hung like an empty waterskin beneath the surface of his shirt, now blood-splattered. His lips puckered and drew back farther than seemed anatomically possible, baring his teeth in a gristly snarl, while his eyeballs inflated as if they were two engorged ticks.

The shambling simulacrum looked at Teresa with bright red eyes — no pupils, no corneas, only solid crimson that held little light — and tried to smile at her. The dark gash was frayed and bloodied, his tongue mangled, his teeth, too many to count, honeycombing his abominably martyred mouth. Teresa didn't consider it hyperbolic to think his smile ought to have detached the upper half of his face.
The thing made a gurgling grunt and began to regurgitate a brackish black fluid, the color of fetid blood. A writhing, fetid mass of shadow sucked and clawed its way from the holes in Alucard's ostensibly human skull. The blackness pressed against Teresa's eyes, filled her ears, probed every orifice with a clammy urgency. A cold, moist finger brushed her face. The shadows moved slowly over her nose and lips, the gentle caress of a drowned lover. Teresa began to shake.

"Enough. That is enough, creature. We'll not abide your torments."

Teresa couldn't be certain, but she was sure Father Abel's bottom lip was swollen, bleeding from two fine holes punctured in the pink flesh. For a flash of a second, his eyes looked strange. Different. All glowing irises and thin dark pupils, hooded with foreboding and fiercely angry. Though the air in the ward hung still and stagnant, Abel's cassock flapped about his shoulders, almost like a pair of black—

Laughter spilled from Alucard, rusty and hoarse.

Hysteria wound a thin, razor-edged filament, like garroting wire, around Teresa's brain. Swallowing audibly, she asked, "You're... you're one of them, aren't you?" Despite the tripping cadence of her pulse, she surprised herself with her ability to keep her voice level. "This man," she gestured to Father Abel, "was in here three days ago to investigate a murder. The victim's body very nearly vanished into the vaults of the Inquisition's dungeons due to the specific nature of the attack. The woman had been drained entirely of blood. That means—"


Alucard's face, though back in one piece, was ashen from the sudden exsanguination. His glasses in pieces on the floor, his eyes remained as smooth and red as those of an albino rat. He slid his jaw back into place with one gloved hand, half his skull still black and crunchy with blood, spiky with shards of his shattered spectacles.

Then, hardly louder than a whisper, he began to speak in some unknown language:

"Să te ia dracu, Priest. That hurt."

Abel glanced up as if trying to decide if the man's words were a prayer or an expletive, guessed correctly, and took a deep breath, marshaling his nerve.

"I am so sorry, Dr. Lauricella," said Father Nightroad, managing to sound both apologetic and relieved at once. "He has impressive powers of regeneration. For whatever it is worth, rest assured that this creature is working for the AX. He's been... deputized, you might say. He's frightening, I know, but I won't let him harm you. Or anyone else here. You have my word," he stated, "I will protect you."

Teresa believed that he meant it with every scrap of his being.

The silver-haired priest spoke with none of the agitation or strong emotion Teresa herself felt, and it was reasonable, she supposed, for an organization of the Ministry of Holy Affair's particular provinces to concern itself with creatures like Alucard. They were counterterrorists as soon as they were clergymen, an agency for whom investigating the supernatural was their bread and butter. Their association with the man — vampire — would also explain Father Abel's insistence on discretion where the Duke of Florence was concerned. Cardinal di Medici's extraordinary contempt for the eastern nations of the Empire was a matter of common knowledge. Teresa recognized that her scientific mind wanted to trust Father Nightroad and his intentions, even if her panic-addled,
His explanation, coupled with the fact Alucard had, for all intents and purposes, saved the life of the Bureau Director, ought to have made a difference in Teresa's reaction. Despite the monstrosity of it all, she ought to have been able to take the revelation calmly, intelligently, reflectively.

But to do so would be to assign rationality to the phenomenon. The trouble with abject fear — with searing, lurid metaphor — was that it was anything but rational.

Alucard was the stuff of nightmares.

"It's not… not that I fear… him in particular, Father," said Teresa, her face going pinched and white. "Just his... sort." A small hiccough. "Vampires in general, I mean."

"Oh, Dr. Lauricella," said Father Abel, rather melancholy, "there is no such thing as people in general. Everyone is someone very particular."

She wasn't entirely sure what to say to that, although she found she had to stop herself from reaching out to touch Father Abel's hand, reacting to a sudden compulsion she could not account for. Teresa tried to remain calm, to dwell on more logical arguments, but hers was the kind of terror that mustered every effort to convince her that no matter how reasonable or judicious or shrewd she liked to think she was, a tiny part of her was absolutely sure that some manner of evil existed just beyond the visible world. More things in Heaven and Earth...

Teresa wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Damage report, Dr. Lauricella."

"Wh-pardon? I'm not—"

"You screamed. Have you sustained an injury?"

"You... he... startled me, is all," replied Teresa with stilted dignity. The spasmodic shaking in her shoulders began to subside. She found some small mainstay of comfort in her exasperation. "And honestly, firing a gun in a hospital. It's disgraceful. I don't care if you're an AX agent or a robot or the bloody pope. You're fortunate this Alucard fellow can recover from such a grievous injury..."

"I beg My Lady's pardon."

"Yes, well, rest assured that if either one of you pulls a stunt like that again," she murmured, brushing imaginary wrinkles from the front of her smock and breeches, hoping the flush in her cheeks would come across as anger and not fear, "when His Eminence comes to collect his Chief Inquisitor, I'll be sure to tell him exactly what manner of creature Alucard is... and which Vatican agency has been sheltering him."

Abel winced. "I... would prefer if you didn't, Doctor."

Tres's eyes betrayed nothing of umbrage or upset. The flat, metallic color reminded Teresa of unrefined steel, molten before the press. "Father Nightroad," the robot's attention shifted to Abel, "what is your reason for involving this creature in your investigation? Is it a suspect?"

"He saved Mr. Petros's life... and Miss Esther's."

"That is not an answer," declared Tres, peering up at him with that same expression of faint disapproval.
So agitated was Father Abel that Teresa expected him to start pacing back and forth across the room like a bear at the zoo. She could hear the frustration in his voice when he forced a quiet: "Since the matter we're pursuing involves certain higher-ups in the curia, I have to tread carefully, Tres."

"I must report my findings to Her Grace. The Duchess of Milan ordered me to escort you back to Rome, and I will not allow you," Tres glanced sidelong at Alucard, "or anyone else... to get in my way. Sister Esther Blanchett has been located. There are no additional matters which require your attention here in Florence."

His words seemed to startle Father Abel. "She's one of us. Surely—"

"Negative. Sister Esther Blanchett is an attaché of the Ministry of Holy Affairs, but she is not a deputy enforcer. Your concern is unwarranted. Your obstinace does not analyze, Father Nightroad."

"Then analyze this instead," snapped Abel. "Tres, the reason I can't return to Rome is because I suspect Cardinal di Medici may have cut a deal with the Rosenkreutz Orden in an effort to falsely incriminate Miss Caterina."

Teresa felt the words land like fists in her face. She stared, slack-jawed and stunned, where the android merely blinked languidly and Alucard let out a long, low whistle.

The coroner didn't want to believe it, and doubted she would fully grasp the gravity of Abel's words even if she did, but there was something about the Duke of Florence that predisposed her to distrust. Teresa Lauricella had all but created her own position as Florence's forensic examiner simply because she felt it was a matter of public necessary. Before she had taken over the hospital, forensics work had been practically nonexistent. Bodies had simply vanished into the gullet of the Inquisition's dungeons, where they were lost or forgotten.

For such reasons, and others, the city was terrified of Francesco di Medici, and Teresa's own brief but contentious encounter with the man three days previously had confirmed to the coroner what she had long inferred — that the Duke was epically corrupt, cunning, ambitious, vindictive... a vicious tyrant who enjoyed the discomfort of the people who worked for him and reveled in being abusive to his rabidly loyal staff. Teresa couldn't stand politics on principal, and generally detested the prelates and cardinals for whom to pedal their wares was to sanction and support the conscious manipulation of the masses. Teresa suspected more often than not that God and government were the tools with which the godless and unprincipled influenced the vulnerable.

And as Alucard continued to grin, Teresa couldn't help but wonder if the devil was, somewhere, laughing until his sides ached, tickled pink for knowing the evil men would commit in the name of their redeemer.

Those Catholic fanatics were entitled to work out their own damn foolishness by whatever means they liked, but even they had the right to do so without having their lives cut short through the carelessness of men like Francesco di Medici, who were meant, by Divine ordinance allegedly, to have their best interests at heart.

Teresa pinched the bridge of her nose, and counted herself fortunate that dead bodies were not nearly so complicated. The coroner's own lack of religion had taught her a curious appreciation for small joys and hard beauties. There was something comforting in the simple, changeless patterns of death. For how many times, reflected Teresa ruefully, had she sought to and succeeded in understanding a dead or wounded creature? But for all her efforts, it was another matter entirely to penetrate the mysteries of very-much-alive human beings.
Father Abel was betting the proverbial farm that Cardinal di Medici would remain ignorant of the AX's knowledge of his treachery, while hiding his own injured comrades smack bang in the middle of the Duke's own city. The silver-haired wastrel of a priest was taking an incredible risk...

Alucard, who had been keeping uncharacteristically quiet up until that moment, grew impatient, and began to growl.

"Before the Duchess's little plaything starts peppering the Palazzo Riccardi in bullets," he began, leveling on the android priest — more specifically, on Tres's gun — with crushing intensity, "there is a small matter that needs addressing." Alucard's eyes seemed to draw color from the shadows of the ward and the opaque red of the dawn, to darken with them. "You're using a lightweight, aluminium-framed, double-action short-barreled revolver. 13 millimeter hollow point bullet, rounds jacketed with blessed silver, each with an explosive tip containing a charge of mercury."

The android nodded formally. "Positive. However, AX firearms and ammunitions specs are pieces of highly classified information. Answer: how did you acquire this data?"

"How?" Alucard's fangs lengthened in his mouth. "Why... I know all about that gun because that gun is mine."

"That statement is incorrect. This unit was armed by the State Special Services annex approximately five—"

"Who manufactured it?"

Keeping an eye on Tres's trigger finger, Teresa drew her arms in tight around her torso, fearful another firefight was about to erupt.

"This avenue of inquiry is irrelevant," said Tres plainly.

"Who..." Alucard enunciated each word with dangerous precision, evidently not one accustomed to repeating himself, "made you... that gun?"

"I did."

Teresa started, surprised as the older priest, Signor Wordsworth, shuffled into the room. He looked up at Alucard, taking a deep drag of his pipe, before releasing the smoke into the still air. Teresa reminded herself to have a quick word with him about tobacco products in a hospital...

"I suppose there's no avoiding it." Father Wordsworth's hoarse voice sounded like old tires on rough pavement. He nodded to himself after only a momentary pause. "I think Alucard and I are long overdue for a little chin-wag." He peered at Teresa. "I'll get him out of your hair for a spell, Doctor."

Father Abel looked at his colleague with deadly seriousness. "Professor, are you certain? It could be dangerous..."

Wordsworth smiled faintly. "I take that for granted in this line of work, my friend. Never you mind about me, Abel. Besides, there's a very frightened young lady who I think would greatly value your company, eh?"

Nighthroad's eyes widened as he intuited Father Wordsworth's meaning. "She's awake..."

"And probably in desperate need of a familiar face. Oh, and Tres, my boy?" said the older priest, his voice chiding, even as he smiled around the stem of his pipe. "That wasn't terribly polite of you.
Put the gun away, there's a good lad."

For what seemed like an interminable stretch of time, Tres stood staring at Abel, and then at Professor Wordsworth, and then at Alucard — a snarling head resting atop the sights of his pistol.

Tres took a step back. Then another.

He finally lowered his gun, switching the safety on.

"Father Nightroad," ordered Tres. "Tell me everything."

So Abel did.

He'd always felt vaguely uneasy in hospitals: they were such cold, sterile places. And so quiet. He found himself wanting to cough or sneeze, or to natter on about something or other in an effort to break the silence. It was a psychosomatic impulse, he supposed, like avoiding cracks in the pavement, or putting thirteen sugars in his tea.

Abel Nightroad's emotions, jumbled and complicated as they were, took many shapes as he tried to get his thoughts in order. His relief in knowing his friends were safe was soft and familiar, like a round stone he had caressed for so long that it was perfectly smooth and polished, while his incredible worry for Mr. Petros surged in his throat, where he could taste it, coppery like blood, in the back of his mouth. His fury at the Inquisition and the Orden was thin and serrated and sharp, like the blade of his scythe, capable of slicing through near about anything. His anguish took the form of a supernova, radiating the corona of his helplessness in all directions, leaving his insides as heavy and cold as the core of a dying star.

Tres had reacted to Abel's story in the way he tended to react to most things: with impassive, calculated impartiality, interrupting only to pose the occasional clarifying query. Whether Tres felt anger — or some mysterious equivalent at which Abel could only speculate — at learning of Cardinal di Medici's plot against Miss Caterina was a question for the philosophers. But Tres Iqus was fiercely protective of the Duchess of Milan, and Abel somehow doubted the day's revelations would long escape Miss Caterina's notice. Tres would, in all likelihood, take the opportunity to brief his beloved superior.

Miss Caterina deserved to know, he supposed, and Abel felt the more urgent dangers had passed, in any case. The threat of further treachery remained from the Duke of Florence, but thanks to Mr. Petros, Alucard, and the Professor, Francesco lacked any immediate means by which to levy an advantage over Rosenkreutz and, by extension, his own half-sister. With Alucard wise to the plot, and with Miss Esther no longer in the Inquisition's custody, the despicable man had lost his two and only bargaining chips.

Miss Esther...

Abel swallowed hard into the silence.

So early in the day, the hospital was eerily empty. The joyless, undecorated corridor hummed with the faint sound of a distant ice machine and the various beeps and buzzes from patients' rooms. Abel navigated around the nurses' station, towards the end of the wing, far away from prying eyes.

Her ward was predictably utilitarian, inimical to creature comforts. While the wallpaper was clean, the color was, thought Abel, dim and uninspired. There were no decorations save the curtains separating the in-patient beds. The fabric had once been the kind of green intended to remind people of spring-time, perhaps, constellated with the flowered fleur de lis, a pattern of crimson
lilies, but the color had faded until the hue was pale and insipid. In the arched windows, the glass was reinforced with wire, the frames metal, sunk deep into the stone, and beyond Abel could discern a grid of iron bars, a holdover from the days when the building was far more concerned with caging its tenants than healing them.

Even in the small hours of the morning, in the middle of winter, beneath the smells of snow and rock salt, Abel's nose crinkled at the sharp miasma of disinfectant and polystyrene. A thin, sharp skein of sleet blew against the glass, like a stream of small pebbles.

Abel closed his eyes. Opened them. He took a deep breath.

She was awake.

Miss Esther reclined on an unmade bed, half propped on a haphazard stack of pillows. Her skull reposed against the wall, as though it were too heavy to lift. She looked drawn, tired, her eyes wide, bloodshot and rimless. Skinny wrists, angry with welts, stuck out from the cuffs of a starchy hospital gown; the garment's sleeves were far too long for her. A narrow, opaque tube snaked from the dorsum of her right hand, and the pinkie finger on the same was covered in pale red plaster. A nurse looked at Abel and mustered a gentle smile before standing and moving past him. The door closed softly at his back.

Abel peered down at the small, hunched figure of his dearest friend. She was so emaciated, just skin stretched taut over bones. Had she always been so thin? Rather than preempt an answer, the question assailed Abel with a hundred different emotions, none of which he could name, none of which he could, in his current state of mind — of heart — understand.

To his mortification, the priest felt the bitter taste of bile in his mouth and spent several fruitless moments searching for a place in which to be sick. He turned away to retch, but his throat was too tight for anything to escape, and even if it wasn't, he hadn't eaten in days, and had nothing in his stomach to void.

Starting at the noise, Miss Esther's incurious gaze slid to him and held fast, her eyes growing, for perhaps the first time in hours, alert.

"Father...?"

Abel forced a wisp of a smile, and hoped the incredible effort didn't look too obvious. "Good morning, Miss Esther."

Slowly, taking Abel by surprise, she levered herself upright and placed her hand on the bedside table. Half leaning on the edge of the mattress, her bare feet braced on the floor, she regarded Abel with barely-restrained apprehension.

"Miss Esther," he began, concern coloring the endearment, his smile sliding from his face like water off wax. "You shouldn't exert yourself—"

"Father, where is the Bureau Director?" She winced; her voice sounded so terribly dry and corroded.

"He's unconscious, but alive."

"Alive..."

"Alu—a friend pulled him from the water. The Professor brought you both back to Florence. Mr. Petros..." Abel's reply was slow in coming and deliberately worded so as to be as noncommittal and
oblique as possible. "He's... not well, Miss Esther. The doctors aren't sure when... or if, he'll wake up."

Something strange crossed her expression, an undefinable emotion wrought of guilt and abject contrition, so desperately wretched that it formed a lump in Abel's throat. She stared ahead of herself for a long moment, then gradually lowered her head into her hands.

"I did this..." she mouthed, and Abel recognized in her words the raw hurt nibbling at her insides like a hungry rat.

"Oh, no. Oh no, no, no Miss Esther. Don't say such things." Abel knelt before her, taking one of her hands in his. All he could do was meet her gaze and gently brush her fingers, one by one, not knowing whether the gesture would help any more than his small, piffling words. "Believe you me, it was very much Mr. Petros's decision to go." Some species of forced humor lurked beneath his next words, never quite surfacing: "You know how he is. Once he makes up his mind about something, nothing short of Divine Intervention, or Alessandro's weeping, will dissuade him."

Esther's gaze brushed his face, an odd little caress he felt as keenly as if she'd touched him with her fingers. The light of the ward burned a spectrum of color into her eyes, great shifting continents of blue that blotted out all else, until an irrational part of Abel worried that all the color would boil away, leaving her eyes a bright, bloody red and entirely sightless, but shining, nevertheless, with the desperate dignity of a martyr.

He turned his head, tracing the contusion on her cheek, the bruised pouches pulling at her eyes. Bathed in fluorescence, the planes of her face were gilded with silver, the contours cast into delineative shadow.

"Miss Esther..." the words were tiny, feathery whispers, a marked contrast to the way Abel's heart flogged his ribs. He realized, suddenly, that he could smell the sea.

Epsom salt, he guessed: the scent of briny decay. It was everywhere, in her hair — which was oily and matted to her head, glistening dark red, like wine through a murky bottle — in the bedclothes, in the pale damp of her skin. He was so intent on the scent that the impropriety of his position didn't occur to him at first.

"Miss Esther... I..."

They both went still at the same moment.

"I am..." Abel knew he was breathing heavily, his eyes grave with a thousand apologies, a thousand explanations, a thousand things for which there were no words. Like a polished shield, Esther's face reflected his anguish right back at him. "I am... very glad. Very glad, that you're safe."

Abel's face creased with the faintest shadow of a small, sad, thousand-year-old smile, and then Esther was falling into the hug like it was the last one in the world, and he pulled her so close he could feel her sharp exhale against his throat.

He wanted to crush her, convulsively, in the fiercest of embraces, press his feverish face against her collarbone, strain bruising fingers into her neck and skate them up the ladder of her ribs, cling to her as though he would never let go until the world toppled into the sun and everything, every molecule and iota of matter, was extinguished.

When the last star winks out, we will be nothing — and equal to God.

But, wary of her injuries, Abel kept himself from squeezing the breath out of her. He ran a hand in
circles over Esther's back, her shoulders, caressed the greasy threads of her hair and traced the
curve of her ears, as though to assure himself of her presence, to take solace in the simple fact of
her existence. With him. Safe.

Alive.

Esther wrapped her arms around his waist, her head pressing into his sternum, red against black.
Abel bent over her instinctively, shielding her body with his own.

He felt her break against his chest, between one breath and the next.

Tears trickled carelessly down her face, tears of sadness and anger and fear, tears of which, he
suspected, she was not even aware. Her consciousness had turned inwards, repairing the defenses
that had been so painfully and violently breached, while trying to come to terms with the bloody
consequences of their failure.

Abel closed his eyes, beginning a silent prayer that he might find the right words to gentle and
soothe and entreat, words that would, perhaps, begin the process of healing. Some well-reasoned
part of him knew that to begin to talk about what had happened was the key to acknowledging
Esther's loss, and that such acceptance would in turn be a means of enduring the difficult days
ahead.

But Esther continued to shake violently, shattering in his arms — a million gasping, choking pieces
he tried so hard to hold together, each one doused with bitter hope and blind faith that somehow
combined to land her in a permanent state of anticipatory grief. Abel understood, as the rest of the
world did not, what it was like to stand poised on the brink of a pain that had an affective
component all its own, a quality of agony, of anguish, of horror — words which in of themselves
failed catch its essence. It was, Abel knew from his own tragedies, a sorrow that could not be
fought against, or accommodated. It crushed one into a quivering, almost mindless sort of pulp; the
assault surging through all one's powers of will, one's very identity, as indifferently as a wave
washing over a corpse.

Great breakers rending fractures in the window of Miss Esther's soul.

In piecing his friend back together, Abel could not help but see the cracks. He felt them just as
intensely, could scarcely breathe for despair at how keenly they cut.

And realized in the same instant that it was in his power to affect repairs. Temptation confronted
him like a demon, offering him a divine gift.

And yet what right did he have, thought Abel viciously, to play God? Him, blood soiled with the
pulse of alien bacterial life, tainted by their insatiable appetite for destruction. How dare he — with
his power that smothered and suffocated to the point of anguish, of shame — ever imagine he
merited the privilege of empathy with one so kind, with one so generous and good and light, as
Esther Blanchett.

Oh, Caterina was right: he was so damnably selfish. His playacting at human gentleness was not a
panacea for grief. Cottoning to Miss Esther's pain would only compound it. His abominated love
could only corrode, as surely as oxygen tarnished copper.

And, yet, at the core of his senseless actions, Abel vaguely perceived that he yearned for his
presence to penetrate — to illuminate, if however dimly and dirtily — that dark place within which
Miss Esther floundered.
He thought of Lilith, then, in her absolute belief in the ability of shared vulnerability to nurture human compassion. Abel knew all too well the soothing power of touch on aching flesh. Knew the strange bond that formed between two creatures united in mutual misery.

Perhaps, then... holding her was all he could do.

Cradling Esther on his lap, Abel fished around in one cassock pocket and produced a grimy handkerchief. He handed it to her, and Esther pressed it under her nose. When it became apparent that no sense could be made from her jumbled words, he tried to calm her, his hand pillowing her head while she hid her face, her complexion turning mottled, her eyes swelling, her nose dripping.

"Esther." He righted himself, the girl still gathered in his arms. "Esther, hush..."

But she couldn't; even though she hadn't made a sound, she was sobbing and hiccupping and gulping without oxygen, leaving him helpless to do more than hold her and murmur meaningless reassurances. All the while, he sorted through their encounter and seized upon a credible source of her upset.

"I know," he said softly, tightening his grip on her. "It's over, Miss Esther. You're safe, now."

"I'm sorry," said Esther in a muffled voice, sniffing. "I didn't mean to turn into some... some watering pot. I didn't, I'm sorry, Father..."

Abel's voice was very quiet. "You don't have to be sorry. You don't have to be finished, either."

"I can't cry." Her tone was matter-of-fact in spite of the deluge. "I can't stand all these... these tears. I hate them. I don't want them."

Abel smoothed her hair, his hand covering half her small head. "Give them to me, then," he said firmly. "I am on your side, Miss Esther... please, allow yourself to grieve."

He felt her knuckles slide against his. Then his large hand was in her tiny one, his palm pressed against hers. Slowly, he let their fingers entwine.

"What do I do?" asked Esther... a demand in all but power.

"There will come ways to live with it."

"I'm not living with it, Father," she murmured, "Every time I close my eyes, I can see their faces. I can't wash the taste out of my mouth, the salt. I... I wouldn't l-let them bathe me. The w-water..." A tremor moved through her. "I'm so... so scared, of the water..."

Abel did not trust himself to speak, then. He offered her no words, allowing her the dignity and the serenity to speak to his silent presence.

"Shara and... and Petros. It's my fault... my fault..."

He was distantly aware that her tears had soaked the front of his cassock. "Shara...?"

"I killed her, Father. M-Ma... that man... what he did... he... and I saw her again. I remembered, I..."

"Miss Esther, what happened in István was not your doing," he said slowly, with impossible gentleness. His proximity to her was like being inside her consciousness, a closeness that real life with its real bodies could never hope to imitate. "You did nothing wrong. Her sacrifice was done for you... not committed by you."
Esther arched her back, driving out a cry that pulled from far deeper than the bottom of her lungs.

Then... the sudden realization slammed into Abel with breathtaking intensity, tearing into his soft undersides.

He remembered Alucard's words, a mere three days ago that somehow managed to feel like months.

"Shara..." he breathed, recalling in vivid detail the Methuselah woman from István, with her curly hair, black at the verge of violet, who always wore a warm, laughing look in her eyes, her gaze nearly purple and with a liquid luster, like a splash of diamond dust in the eastern evening sky.

Abel remembered her kind, brave heart, one which had impelled her to save Miss Esther's life and soul, both.

In an instant, the true, savage, snarling truth of it all was clear to him.

"God in Heaven, it was Shara."

Abel found himself reeling, not for the first time, at how random and indiscriminate loss was, how helplessly they consented to its submission, how impossible it was to control or direct it. Beauty and kindness, grace and dignity, decapitated in an instant... the head of a rose snipped from its stem.

Shara's death, the loss of one so beloved, was Esther's greatest pain, rivaled only by the death of her foster mother, and in it, Abel recognized something of his own unappeased ache for atonement, the shameless greed which plagued himself and Miss Esther in equal measures, each of them coveting a warmth and companionship so long deferred by the enormity of their heartache.

Desire. A hole in a bucket: a gulf of grief into which the soul emptied itself.

"Oh, Esther... I am so, so sorry." He rested his cheek on the top of her hair. Pressed a single kiss to her temple. "I didn't know. I swear to you, I didn't know. I didn't realize..."

Esther looked askance, color highlighting sunken cheeks before she shook her head, as though unable to bear the intimacy of his gesture... or, rather, the memories it evoked. "She made me happy," she murmured, her tone raw and hurt. "She made me feel loved."

The images her words recalled to Abel's conscious mind were the most beguiling, irresistible mockeries of kindness. Her and Lilith both... how much torment Esther detained was in some way proportionate to the pain she sought to spare others; she would always — without hesitation, without reward, without witness — rather hurt herself than hurt another. She did not grieve for her own suffering.

She grieved for Shara's.

Abel was, for a moment, overwhelmed with compassion and gratitude and awe and another emotion he daren't name. His fingers traced the fragile line in her throat with a sensitivity that made her breath catch.

"I understand," said Abel, and meant every word.

"How can you deal with it?"

"I can't," he admitted, so gently. "And... you can't, either."
Esther's body betrayed her, curling inwards and shriveling like a leaf in a fire.

Abel went on. "Grief of this nature... it's not the sort of thing one deals with, Miss Esther. Compensate for, perhaps, like a person with an arm cut off. Or an old man whose memory has gone. You find a way to live without the part of you that you had before — the part that was sure of your innocence, the part made whole by that other person. But to deal with is to resolve, and neither one of us is very good at resolutions."

"But it's so big..."

He managed a nod. "It is."

All Esther could do was reach up, to Abel's face, drawing her fingers through his silver hair, trying to pull him to look at her from inches away.

"Help me," she whispered.

"I can't."

"You can. Abel."

Abel...

He made the terrible, terrible mistake of looking into her eyes, her face half-lit with all the flattery that flickering light was capable of bestowing on a lover's body, and froze. Her expression was so open, so full of longing that he balked. Abel's expression must have gone ash-white, for Miss Esther's hand came up to cradle one cheek, her thumb stroking back and forth across his jaw, her touch gentle.

Loving.

She searched his face, touched his other cheek, her whole manner one of such adoration, such selfless concern that Abel wanted to lash out at someone, anyone, for this injustice that had been done to her. Without warning, his eyes began to sting. He wanted to weep. Wanted to put his head in his hands and bawl until all the grief and pain and rage and loneliness still locked inside him was purged. But he did not. Instead, he took a deep breath and met Esther's questioning gaze. Same pellucid blue eyes. Same kindness in their depths, same concern for other people.

Abel remembered, though not very well, what it was like to fall asleep in the arms of another; how precious such an experience could be, and how blessed those fortunate few were to whom such beauty was vouchsafed by the God of friendship, of love.

Not really giving himself an opportunity to change his mind, Abel removed his mantel and toed off his steel-capped shoes.

"Pardon me, Miss Esther."

He lifted her, somehow managing to maneuver the pair of them onto the narrow cot, and gently drew her to him until she lay against his chest, his legs in their black trousers running parallel to hers on either side. Then he wrapped his arms around her upper torso and held her. Esther was so close to him that he could feel her muscles, from her back to her fingertips, once tense with a near tetanic rigidity, begin to sag in exhausted release. He became aware of her heart percussing against his, could feel her rib cage, unyielding and desperately shallow, pressing into his, her diaphragm deflating and inflating with air. He cradled her until his arms began to first grow fatigued and then numb, until his body slumped with tiredness, until he felt as though, together, they were falling:
first through the mattress, and then the bed frame, and then the wooden slats, sinking in slow motion through all the floors of the building, which yielded and swallowed them like the greedy currents of a riptide. Down and down, farther and farther, past bedrock and silt, through layers of fossil and shale, until they drifted towards the earth's core.

As they entered the fire, they didn't burn, but melted into one being, their legs and chests and arms and heads fusing into one.

He thought she fell asleep first. Abel lay awake for a while, listening to her breathe, allowing himself to revel, if only a little, in her warmth. Certain she was unconscious of his ministrations, he began to stroke her hair, running hands over strands so red they were almost bloody between his fingers.

But... then...

"I love you," came the low, near insensible murmur. "I love you so much. Thank you."

With a sigh, Esther began to dream.

For the first time in many long years, Abel Nightroad cried selfish, angry, inconsolable tears.

When Tres found them, some hours later, Sister Esther was in a deep sleep, and Father Nightroad was curled up beside her, with reddened lids and damp cheeks. Silver and crimson twined together.

The priest inclined his head, the servomotors in his neck ticking like a cooling valvetrain. An expression utterly indecipherable flashed across Tres's face so suddenly, so quickly, that no human eye would have been able to catch it.

Without a word, the android turned on his heel and, quietly, closed the door.
Hieronymo's mad againe...

Chapter Summary

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

John 8:32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ferns of ice unfurled across the panes, leafy fractals filigreed like fine crystal. Light slowly grew in the room, planted by a few seeds of morning sun that whispered through the windows. The milky sky leached the world of color, and a great silence hung over the city, austere and searching. In the room hung an emptiness which contained no answers, offered no peace, provided no comfort to the living.

A foretaste of the grave, perhaps.

*How frightfully morbid, Wordsworth.*

William shivered, the small vestibule chilled like an icebox. The heater struggled to catch up with the cold brought on by the stormy, snowy night. Steam rose from his mouth, and the backs of his hands, where they rested on the head of his cane, were so pale and papery that, to his eyes, they appeared almost translucent.

They were shaking, wracked with tiny tremors as though someone had set a fret buzz in his wrists.

William thought of lighting his pipe, but settled instead for biting the stem, the dry clack of teeth on ivory a welcome distraction from the nervous stutter of his hands and heart both.

A sound drew his attention, his eyes pulled towards an odd shadow shifting in the far corner of the room. At first it seemed to be no more than a chance ray of light, caused perhaps by the shifting of a naked tree-bough between the hospital and the piazza, but as William kept his gaze glued to it he saw that it was a humanoid form — that of a tall, cloaked, skel tally-thin man moving stealthily through the darkness.

The older man's face clouded over as Alucard sloped into view.

"Nothing for it, then," muttered the Professor, swallowing noisily.

Alucard took his foot off the grate and walked over to the desk, navigating the space in a slow, wide path that resembled a prowl far too much for William's comfort. The Professor stood rooted to the floor, while all of Abel's dark warnings about being alone with the ancient Vampire rushed through his mind with renewed vehemence. The Professor met Alucard's almost feline agitation with a shadowed scowl. Such bestial aggression shone out of those eyes, it wasn't difficult to imagine that all of those broad, grinning expressions were entirely feigned.

"That bucket of bolts shot me," he sneered.
William coughed pointedly. "Yes, well... where the safety of his fellow agents is concerned, Tres tends to err on the side of caution." His voice was not loud, but it expressed volumes of scandalized disapproval, calculated to fall precisely at the midpoint between mockery and sincerity: "How was he provoked into firing in the first place? Did you irritate him?"

"Irritate?" snarled Alucard. "Your toy had his mind made up from the moment he marched into the room. Surely you must realize that putting those unfortunate scamps in the direct vicinity of a machine prone to violence is hardly in their best interest, Priest."

William lofted an eyebrow. "A bit rich, coming from the likes of you."

"Oh no, Professor." The words were a near inarticulate growl, and if William had not previously been persuaded of the malevolent provenance of Alucard's mood, the Vampire's tone would have most certainly convinced him. "Death was always your vocation."

William froze, his mind registering the physical threat in Alucard's voice. Despite the chill of the room, his face went slick with perspiration. Every breath from the Professor's lips seemed overloud, reverberating in the small space, reminding him that he wasn't hearing the same sounds coming from Alucard.

It happened so quickly...

The Vampire's tennis racket-size palm snapped out and locked around William's throat, cutting off his air supply. The Professor staggered backwards — Alucard did not. The grip tightened, and William grew aware of a pair of ferocious jaws opening about his face. The stench made the priest's stomach convulse. The monster's breath was a fumigation of kerosene, rotten fruit, stale blood, urine, dog offal...

"I was minding my own business until you came to sour the air, Alucard," gasped William, ribcage heaving to the edge of breaking.

"Ah, well. We are born to suffer, are we not," then the ancient Vampire swore at him, spitting a filthy, foul name Father Wordsworth hadn't heard in a long, long time: "Înger de Moarte?"

William watched as Alucard's spine gradually tightened until he was holding himself so rigid it seemed he might snap. A cold kernel of curiosity forced William to study the gargoyle architecture of the Vampire's skull, the skin on his forehead gossamer-thin, as though, in recovering from Tres's two bullets, his muscle tissue had reformed closer to the bone. Alucard wore his own face like a scar, a sawtoothed circumference of bone-white, a crack, a hole, a hunger.

A rent in the world through which William glimpsed eternity.

"Your wariness of the Lohengrin boy's garroting wires," snarled Alucard. "Your knowledge of London and Hellsing... your ability to speak and translate Românăște despite its being extinct for millennia. And then the robot's gun..." There was a huge, physical anger in his voice. His grip grew so tight that William's vision exploded in a flurry of red and black spots. "I needed the wretched machine to shoot me to be certain, but after he did, I knew I was not mistaken. The make and model, the ballistics, are exactly like the Casull and the Jackal. And only one man ever made guns like those, Professor. Nothing I — or the robot, for that matter — shoot ever gets back up again."

William succumbed to a convulsive shudder.

"How long has it been, old friend?" Slender fingers palpated the Professor's pulse, which had ratcheted to a fever pitch. "How long has it been since you betrayed us?"
"Since... *he* betrayed you?" gasped William, forcing himself up for air. "One thousand and... sixty four years, five months... and fifteen days."

The Vampire towered over him, a pillar of black shadow and burning eyes. He had more than a full head of height in his favor.

"Hello, Walter," growled Alucard, voice lethal-flat, lips drawing back until most of his lower face was serrated teeth and oily saliva, halfway between a smug smirk and a ravenous leer.

"Walter..." murmured William, as if the name were foreign to him. "That man is long gone, Alucard."

Far from being appeased, the Vampire regarded him with gathering outrage. "Why shouldn't I kill you?" he hissed.

"I don't want to fight."

Alucard snapped his teeth by his ear. "Bullshit." The contradiction between the Vampire's scathing obscenity and William's natural reaction to being suffocated stunned him, briefly, into paralysis.

"She was a queen, *contesă mea*, who beheld the virgin soil of her kingdom laid waste, tainted by a traitor. Any other vice she might have pardoned: infidelity, indifference, cruelty, any sins of your pathetic human caprice, but who could pardon this? Not her, *Înger de Moarte*, and certainly not me. Never me."

"I know." The effort of speaking left him drained, and when William murmured next, his voice was quiet and mournful: "His sin... was not against his master alone; it was against every law of decency and truth that Sir Integra had been taught to hold sacred... it was against every tradition of honor she treasured. Yes, that man was a traitor, Alucard. A traitor par excellence. His hunger... his selfishness denounced... his vow.

"But the death and destruction, pain and loss... heartbreak and anger, in all these joining years, changed that... I am not him. He is not me. All wars leave a legacy of bitterness... and hatred, Alucard, but internecine conflicts create... the deepest scars. You... I think, understand that far better than most."

The Vampire bared his teeth, the baying of a huge dog who was not looking for a fight but could very handily finish one by ripping out his opponent's throat. The Professor took the message and clammed up.

"Who are you?" he demanded. His thoughts were as transparent as the depths of the ocean, in that, without the light, William could see very little. "*What* are you?"

"I would be more than happy... to tell you that... and a great many other things," the Professor's eyesight began to dim, Alucard's face swimming before his own as though it were a reflection in water, "if you would please... *please* ease your grip a fraction."

The prospect of compromise made a muscle in Alucard's jaw fire, but — evidently none too discouraged by the prospect of having to snap an arthritic academic's head from his shoulders — allowed his hand to fall slack around William's throat.

The Professor hacked several dry, painful coughs, palms pressed flat against the top of the desk.

"I am Dr. William Walter Wordsworth," he wheezed, "a priest attached to the Ministry of Holy Affairs, one of the founding members of the Papal State Affairs Special Operations Section, and a teacher at the University of Rome." He gave a low chuckle, more a croak, laden with self-loathing,
despite the warning growl from Alucard. "I am an old, sodding fool who made a terrible, terrible mistake: I trusted a man I believed to be my friend."

Alucard's gaze worked him over, trying to read his intentions. But William's resolve was steadfast: he continued to stare the Vampire down — a little pale, a little faint, but without fear.

"The black-eyed man from the piazza..." Alucard's words were little more than a mumble.

"A former colleague. A deceiver. A murderer. And the one who made me... like this."

Alucard's scarlet eyes went slit-pupiled... reminiscent of an octopus, thought William, a little delirious. "Are you lying to me, Priest?"

"Even if I am, if you keep up this line of questioning, you're bound to catch me in a lie in any case." The crow's feet and smile lines deepened subtly. "And I'm not a very good liar. Kate has always said so."

"Not a very good liar, eh?" Gazing at William over his tinted welder's goggles, he brooded: "No... perhaps you're not him, after all." He sounded almost sulky — no mean feat for someone so imposing.

William frowned, his cheeks puffing slightly. "Are you disappointed? Did you expect a man in black butler's livery? A dour, thin face with bony hands and microfilament wire? You've been dragging yourself forwards and backwards through time looking for death as though that word meant more than cold bodies and decay. You're still on the hunt for a ghost, Alucard," he said quietly, "but he's been well and truly exorcised."

"Then you're not—"

"No. But I can't say the same for his memories, his... well, those psychological abstractions which are not so easily disambiguated." William looked for a second as though he were suppressing a smile. "With the benefit of hindsight—"

"Which is always a wonderfully dangerous toy in the hands of the repentant," snapped Alucard.

William blinked. Then said, as calmly as he could while still pitching his voice to be heard, as if to express extreme disappointment in one of his university students: "*With the benefit of hindsight*, I'm beginning to see how this whole complicated picture is supposed to look on the lid of the proverbial jigsaw box."

"Then enlighten me, Professor Wordsworth... Walter C. Dornez... whatever the hell your name is."

"And if you don't like the picture?"

Grunting noncommittally, Alucard pulled out the only other chair and sat across from the Professor. "I killed you once." He crossed one absurdly long leg over the other and sat with both gloved hands resting casually in his lap. "I can do it again."

"We've both been killed, Alucard," he replied, in a lucid, tranquil moment amid the maelstrom. "Around here, being dead is as common as catching a chill."

"If you really do have Walter's memories, then you ought to know that I am in precious want of patience..."

"Very well... I suppose I ought to begin twenty years ago, almost to the day, in fact," said the
Professor, steepling his fingers, gazing into space in rapt concentration. "I was a student — a resident — at the University of Londinium's Royal Academy of Medicine. Von Kämpfer, who was at the time known to me as Izak Butler, was a fellow researcher."

Alucard made a low, guttural sound in acknowledgement. "The tall one with the dangerous eyes. He reminds me of Napyeer." William could tell from the sneer in the Vampire's voice that he rankled at the memory. "Spidery."

"Quite. But he was my peer... my fiercest academic rival... my closest friend." William ran his fingers through his untidy hair for want of something to do, his pipe having been knocked across the room when Alucard lunged for him. He went on after a heavy sigh: "Two crafty, ambitious hotheads, too clever by half. Too foolish."

"What happened, then."

"We were contacted, in secret, by the Duke of Belfast, the holder of one of the most politically influential peerages in Éirinn. Butler managed a vast majority of the correspondences, and as such, I was not made aware of the nature of the Duke's request until well after his preparations were past a critical conjuncture. Butler's stubborn reticence about the entire affair ought to have been my first indication that something was the matter, but the experiment was so tantalizing in its premise, so seductive in its repercussions... so heretical in its very essence, that even what little I knew of Butler's intentions blinded me to the incredible risk."

Alucard sat his chin in one palm, propping his elbow on his knee. The tepid morning light caught the lenses of his glasses, obscuring whatever dark thoughts lurked behind his eyes. William took the pregnant silence as an invitation to continue...

"Lady Francis, the Duke's daughter, had died under unforeseen circumstances the previous summer. She was young, ostensibly healthy, set to start school soon... poor girl slipped away one night. Went to sleep and never woke up." The Professor paused, unsure of himself, then emitted a long, deep breath. "The Duke of Belfast wanted Butler and I to bring her back to life."

"Proper little pair of Frankensteins," scoffed Alucard, raising his voice.

"Yes, well..." William cleared his throat. Rather officiously. "It so happens that we met with about as much success as Shelley's ill-fated protagonist. The analogy is apt: the procedure Butler proposed involved a comprehensive series of organ transplants as well as the induction of electrical current."

"Who was the donor?"

"Whose body did you use?" asked Alucard with a toothy snarl. "Walter—"

The head of William's cane came down so hard and sudden on the tabletop that he surprised even himself. Alucard's mouth snapped shut with an audible click of teeth.

"That is not my name," said the Professor solemnly, his voice as soft as smoke in one's lungs, but
with a tone that brooked little argument. The older man paused impressively. "It was, however, the
name of the corpse Butler exhumed for our use. One, I only learned later, he had liberated from a
vault deep under the ruins of old Berlin, in the Kingdom of Germanicus."

"Fir-ar să fie..." Alucard showed his fangs in a fearsome grimace. The Vampire spat a pearl of
saliva. "That black-eyed eel dug up the Angel of Death, then."

William lifted his chin. "Yes. The specimen was remarkable... a self-repairing, self-defending, self-
healing marvel. As fast as the flesh decayed, the body merely regenerated the injury."

Alucard's eyes caught sparks from the rising sun. "The organs were viable."

"And provided Lady Francis didn't reject the donors," explained William, his brows drawing
together, "we had a means by which to provoke the body's own stem cells into repairing any
wound, theoretically preventing senescence in living tissue. And indeed, if the body's capacity for
homeostatic regeneration were to prevail without limit, the girl's life functions would continue in
perpetuity."

"I doubt your associate's intentions were so charitable, Professor."

William wore a grave expression, and began to tap the surface of the desk with a thumbnail. "In so
many words. Butler never intended to restore Lady Francis. His heart had already been ensnared by
Contra Mundi, and in what little remained of the man who had been Walter C. Dornez, the Orden
saw the potential for a weapon."

"Did it not occur to you to question Butler's intentions?"

"I judged my own reservations to fall well within acceptable parameters. At the time, at least."

"Hindsight, Professor," intoned Alucard with damning acumen.

"Touché."

The Vampire gave William an enigmatic look that could have been surprise at his willful ignorance
and stupidity or contempt at what had been his inability to grasp the blindingly obvious. Or both, in
equal or lesser measure. "You sound like your pet robot."

"Whatever doubts I may have had, Alucard," insisted the Professor, "were ameliorated by the
simple fact that Butler's experiment constituted a new paradigm of modern medicine. Electrical
osteogenesis could be the opening wedge into a new era of disease treatment and prevention,
allowing a physician to direct nature, rather than play her helpless servant."

"A priest who defies God's plan for all His children — what a remarkable aberration in the
species."

"Faith," contended William, annoyed that Alucard's interruptions seemed to be for little more than
spite, "does not blind us to the world, but it transforms our vision of the world, and allows us to see
those inscrutable equations at work behind the complexities and the intricacies of all human
existence. This does not mean fabricating for ourselves pious hyperbole to explain everything that
happens. It involves no surreptitious manipulation of the hard truths of life... it is merely a
voluntary humbling of ourselves in our continual quest at rationalization."

"And where, pray tell, did such ventures land you and your estimable colleague, Professor? While
you were donning sackcloth and ashes in pursuit of your scientific ideals, to what mortal conceit
did your Haman aspire?"
With a self-consciousness William had not experienced in some while, his earnest green gaze turned shadowed, haunted, the morning light having offered no salvation or sanctuary from the demons that plagued him. "Ruination," he said simply. "The experiment went wrong... for all of us.

"Butler lost his prize. The Duke of Belfast lost his daughter a second time, and..." William's breathing grew momentarily labored. His chin knotted, and something warm and warped like a molten coal aggregated in the pit of his throat. "I lost... someone," he managed.

There was the barest hint of emotion in the Vampire's stare before his expression became unreadable. It was a very touch-and-go business, gauging Alucard's reaction to such treacly human domesticities, but William — or rather, the intelligence latched like a leech on William's subconscious — had had ample opportunity to practice.

"Sau poate ar trebui să spun, condoleanțele mele." 

William nodded, a tiny little jog of his chin, but couldn't bring himself to say any more than that. He had felt so hollow and sickened by his failure to help poor Raleigh, to stop the inevitable process that had led to his fiancé's demise. It would have been such a simple, easy thing to do... just one solitary life to save. Not a terrorist sect or an organization hell-bent on world domination, but just one person. An intelligent, charming, fascinating person who had depended, for their life, on Professor Wordsworth.

Not that his feelings on the matter, William supposed, miserably, could rectify or set right what had happened, correct for the incredible waste of life. Subsequently, his regret could neither affect the outcome nor, perhaps more pertinently, atone for his own culpability in Raleigh's murder.

"My fiancé offered to calibrate the instruments, that day. Lady Francis as well as Butler's... subject, were stored in copper cryogenic tanks. As galvanism requires no small amount of electrical current, it was imperative we maintained the integrity of the insulation equipment." 

"But the safeguards failed," intuited Alucard.

"Yes. There was an unexpected power surge in the machinery. The operation went wrong. Raleigh was killed, the laboratory was destroyed, and Butler and I were summarily expelled. He disappeared into the hinterlands of Germanicus to join his master, and I fled Albion. Back on the continent, I soon fell in with a young prelate, one Caterina Sforza... and her strange guardian, Abel Nightroad. After an attack by the Orden critically injured one of my oldest and dearest friends, I elected to remain in Rome to oversee her recovery, and to help the burgeoning Duchess of Milan fight against terrorists and murderers of the Orden's — of Butler's — stripe."

William shuddered. "And it was around about that time when I began to realize that something else had gone wrong with our blasted experiment. Believing the worst of my ordeal was over, and then realizing that something, someone, fled Londinium with me that night, was rather like reaching the top of a flight of stairs in pitch darkness, stepping through air where before there had been one more step..."

"Go on."

"I noted only small things at first... dreams, visions, fleeting impressions, not unlike young Esther's night terrors. I chalked it up to post-traumatic stress. I even took up smoking, entirely out of the blue. But one day, as I was taking tea with Her Grace... I..." he forced a wretched laugh, "I addressed her as Sir Integra Hellsing."

"The resemblance," the Vampire grunted, "is not insignificant. So... his body dead, his receptacle
destroyed, the little lamprey latched onto a host and slowly drained it of blood and life."

"I thought I was going mad! I knew things no man of my age should know... a fluency in dead languages, a stunningly accurate grasp of pre-Armageddon histories, an intimate knowledge of the Hellsing Organization and its leaders. Another man's mind, another man's memories, and such unhappy memories they were. Dreadful, bloody, murderous things. The soul of an angry, jealous tormentor who harbored no thought for the hurt he caused with his hatred."

William's left hand clenched so tightly around his cane his knuckles webbed blue. He paused for Alucard's reaction and, getting only a small puff of fetid air and an indolent inclination of one eyebrow, went on with his revelation: "I was overwhelmed by the inertia, trapped by a combination of my own reckless curiosity and the most damning thing of all... the sin of arrogance. The skill, the scholarship of the man... I took it for myself. I welcomed it."

Walter Dornez had left traces on the gray matter of his brain, hieroglyphics which commanded to be read but were impossible to translate. The Professor's mind had become like a ream of his lecture notes — teeming with writing, crammed with indefinable references, until William finally reached the point where any truly original thought was lost in the palimpsest of scribbles the Hellsing manservant had already scratched over it.

William released an exasperated breath. "I've another man's memories, his personality, his hopes and dreams, talents and traumas, all jockeying for space inside this old bonce of mine. I barely know when to take my antirheumatic medication each morning, much less where William Wordsworth ends... and where Walter C. Dornez begins. After a while... I stopped trying to. I accepted the situation. I moved on with my life. I'm old enough to know that people's histories are a tangled thing, but the people themselves are resilient, and the one constant law of the universe is that old hurts will always heal. Provided I kept my wits about me, I suspected I would survive the change."

Alucard tongued a fang. "Had you kept certain affectations and airs to yourself," he mused, "had you applied even a whit of subtlety, perhaps I would have remained oblivious to Walter's shadow. Sometimes, Professor, being as smart as a whip includes knowing when not to crack it." The Vampire considered. "Why, then, flog the proverbial horse? Why draw attention to yourself? Ignorance is bliss... is that not the nonsensical inanity over which you analytical types wax poetic."

William bobbed his shoulders, feeling a fluid headache rising up the back of his neck, hurting. "You're right, of course: the here and now is all too often the least considered, whereas thoughts of the past and expectations of the future conspire to tangle my mind with irreconcilable regrets. As much as I've been tempted, for my own peace of mind if not for my sanity, I can't say I've allowed myself the luxury of living my life in the present, with no recourse to what has gone before or what might yet be. Walter made that impossible." William's leavened his severe expression with a soft smile. "It seems a fitting penance, in any case, to feel a pain with no final solace. I had to shoulder the weight of Raleigh's death; better yet if the psychological dimensions of that death had a latency all their own."

"And in so bearing your burden, you sought to absolve yourself of your sins. You allowed that pale, skinny little shit back into the world, just to salve your bad conscience." Alucard made little effort at hiding his disdain. "I do so tire of Catholic guilt."

A moment of molten gold passed unhurried through the stygian stillness. After a while, a brief flurry of motion caught their eyes. Alucard and William turned to the window in unison, where a pair of dirty rock doves wheeled above the adjacent chimney pots. The silence and its exquisite tension contracted and expanded, like ice cracking concrete.
"Foolish little man."

Alucard emanated contempt, causing the air between them to simmer, although the rationale behind the enmity was difficult to parse. There was neither censure over William's strange schizophrenia nor pity for the same, nor triumph over having backed the Professor into admitting so much, nor any obvious skepticism for such an outlandish story. William supposed it came down to whether it was easier for the Vampire to believe a strange truth denying his initial suspicions over the most obvious lies that confirmed them.

"It sounds—"

"Far-fetched?"

"Revolting."

Something inside Alucard seemed molten, like red-flamed glass moulded by the power of a single breath.

"Lies can be made to sound toothsome," said the Vampire, cagey. "The truth, by it's very nature, isn't always so appetizing. And yours is positively nauseating. Almost as loathsome as that meddlesome boy's wires..."

"I suppose you have Butler to thank for that," confessed William, confronting the awkwardness like blasting a slingshot at his own forehead, possessed of the unfortunate inability to run away from his embarrassment. "And... me, after a fashion. The microfilament wires were a holdover from technological developments pre-Armageddon. But, ever cognizant of the fact they were little more effective than a can of silly string in Walter's final battle with you, Butler made some... adjustments."

Irradiated by what little weak light the windows afforded, the Vampire's angular features looked jaundiced. The way he stared — with bold hardness — just threw the Professor's discomfort into sharp relief. "Adjustments," he parroted.

"You couldn't break von Lohengrin's hold, no? You ought to have been able to tear through mere garrote wire like wet tissue paper."

Alucard, the betided centuries doing little to allay his insight when it came to munitions, recalled: "The wires were synthetic organic fibrils capable of integrating synaptic inputs between the brain and the musculature. Once fused into my spinal cord, the fibres sent out electrical impulses which allowed that wretched boy to overstimulate my nervous system."

"Three hundred million volts... about the same electromotive force as a bolt of lightning." William kept his voice as firm as he could manage, machined to a polish: "At a guess... that's because these new strings were designed with the intention of neutralizing threats of your particular pedigree. Each fibril tricks the nervous system into believing the voltage is burning muscle and tissue to a crisp, thus inducing a continual regenerative cycle, which rather precludes the possibility diverting one's energies into actually attacking people. Butler was prepared... and he armed his underling accordingly."

William wondered if Alucard's vanity was flattered by the efforts the Orden had made on his behalf, or if they registered as some blunt, obtuse thing — if Alucard, having so much practice in slaughter, had been in some regards inoculated against the prospect of devastation, including his own.
But then...

"Recunosc că oamenii sunt mici şi slabi," William wasn't sure whether it was an assertion for his benefit or a carelessly slipped thought, floating idly in the air. Beneath his gloves, Alucard folded his hands into fists. His knuckles showed white through the fraying fabric. "Dar... eu sunt mai slabe decât am crezut..."

Loathing.

Hatred.

Revulsion, Alucard had said.

But not, the Professor realized, directed towards him, or even the Orden.

The Vampire directed such detestations towards himself.

William's earlier considerations played second fiddle to a sudden understanding that Alucard recognized — and abhorred — something of his newfound weakness, as though, for all the sentient, animate creatures wriggling and writhing within his soul, the Vampire felt his own life's absence more keenly than the presence of the hundreds of thousands of others. In part due to William's affinity with Abel Nightroad, and in part due to Walter's with Alucard, the Professor could see something of self-pity in the Vampire's eyes, his regard of his own history as a blade scored bloody with death and disease and destruction, a ragged wound that was always, sooner or later, flooded by the briny waters of despair.

William supposed it was rather pathetic, pitiable in no uncertain terms... the manner in which this creature had surrendered to a verdict over which he held no sway. Here was a man whose strength had once been eldritch in its scale: capable of cutting down most supernatural enemies without releasing the seals that contained the vast majority of his power; able to perfectly and quickly recover from any physical injury; biologically immortal, immune to disease and aging; content to completely dominate the entire legion dwelling within his body. In another life, in another time, Alucard would have snapped von Lohengrin's strings like frayed twine... and very likely von Lohengrin's spine, for good measure.

The Vampire standing in front of him, thought William forlornly, rather paled in comparison.

He wasn't weak, not by long chalk.

Just... smaller.

The Orden had irreparably injured his dignity and self-respect in Oltrarno, the shame cutting deeper than Dietrich's infernal wires ever could.

William wondered if that had been part of the reason why Alucard elected to murder the girl in the Piazza dei Cavalleggeri: the Vampire took a life because the circumstances of his rootless, timeless, diminished existence humiliated him. His weakness hurt his image as the immortal, invulnerable monster, the Nightwalker, Zamiel, the Impaling Prince, forced him to disregard the dignity that demanded one suffer in silence.

Alucard had avenged himself through blood.

Coward.

The word rose vicious, vehement, from the back of William's mind, whining in his ear like a
mosquito. On another day, at another time, he probably would have taken Walter for the novelty. But the fact that his subconscious had produced something so reactionary, so savage, filled him with distaste.

"In the *Sympósion,*" mused the Professor aloud, sinking into a pensive mire, for his own benefit as much as Alucard's, "Aristophanes, through Plato, stated that humans were originally created with four arms, four legs, and a head with two faces. One soul in two bodies. The gods, fearing their power, divided them into separate parts, splitting the soul asunder. Weakened and consumed with yearning, these sorry creatures were condemned to spend their lives in search of their other halves in order to feel complete.

"And you... you have had your soul divided quite a few more times than that."

"Then the gods must utterly *despise* me." Alucard picked through William's line of academic anecdotes with ersatz lassitude. "You are building to a point, I trust."

"You want to know why you're..." *Weaker.* "Different. Why your powers are less effective."

"Regardless of my answer, I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"Quantum mechanics," affirmed William. "It slips into paradox the minute you introduce a second observer. Unfortunately for you, you've got about three million second observers."

"Three million, four hundred twenty-four thousand, eight hundred and sixty-seven souls, exactly. And if this is your attempt at placation, *Laudator Temporis Acti,* then I'd caution you not to insult me with the indulgence."

"I would never deprive you of the privilege, old friend. What was it you said earlier? Salving a bad conscience?"

Alucard growled a warning.

William was momentarily amazed at how swiftly they had fallen into their old patterns. "Consider it a matter of scholarly curiosity, then. Even before my little accident, the circumstances surrounding your disappearance from the historical records and Hellsing's subsequent slide into obscurity remain two of the profoundest mysteries in Albionion antiquity. Understandably, the Holy See has taken great pains to scrub the Battle of London from the records, given the less than attractive role the Church played in the atrocities. In lieu of physical data, Walter's knowledge of the matter has proven invaluable.

"You're a living superposition, Alucard — a probability wave with no fixed location, perhaps best described as a sentient statistical likelihood of being here, there, or somewhere else entirely. This would be rather more manageable provided this wavefunction existed in a dualistic eigenstate, comparable to light being both a wave and a particle. But you are a hive mind, quite literally encompassing millions of souls."

Even though Alucard's face was etched with displeasure and just a hint of alarm, William found himself warming to his theme, slipping back into the ensemble of lecturer with the ease of redonning a favorite tie. "A hydra-headed Schrödinger's cat... more than a little literally, in your case: alive and dead. In order to stabilize the superposition, you must collapse these iterations of yourself.

"To merely materialize might allow *this* you, this *current* you, to behave independently, but even you must realize by now that your power is diminished, your essence dimmed. Miss Esther may
keep you anchored here, for a time, but it's comparable to communing with the dead during a seance. You are an echo, Alucard. A ghost of a cat who can't quite make up its mind, or the minds of the millions of souls trapped inside itself, whether it's alive or dead. The ossification of your consciousness is directly mediated by the collapse of the superposition, and yours has yet to buckle."

William wagered the Vampire must have suffered through a variation of the same revelation hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of times, in every shard and splinter of himself scattered throughout history. Everywhere and nowhere. A stone worn smooth by the tide of time: far less rough around the edges... but smaller, and not quite as painful when thrown at one's forehead.

Alucard's high cheekbones balanced a jaw locked in a grin like a waxing crescent, and in his crimson eyes, inveterately cruel though they were, there shone rage, followed by bewilderment and then the steady accretion of comprehension, like sediment settling in a cistern.

It did not surprise William in the slightest that Alucard understood so much of the mechanical explanations while knowing precious little of the quantum physics. The truth of the matter lay in the sheer logic of Alucard's condition, one which undergirded specialized knowledge and encompassed vast stretches of time, space, and scale. Common sense, when confronting the altogether uncommon circumstance, was itself just another of the contradictions held simultaneously in the Professor and the Vampire's intelligences.

They both labored in labyrinths of legacy, of desire and consequence, of history and eternity. Haunted by wrong turns and roads not taken, pursuing images perceived as new but whose provenances dated to the dim dramas of times bygone. Walking corpses in a wasteland of past and present, trapped in Eliot's land of the dead.

They were, the pair of them, consummate paradoxes.

Alucard's expression clouded over with the suddenness of a winter squall, as if at the recollection of some dim and distant memory.

"Why her."

"I beg your pardon?" said William, but even he wasn't convinced by the thin protestation.

"You wouldn't be maneuvering me into suffering through your interminable sermons otherwise. You're avoiding something, Priest. The girl. The child the Cardinal was willing to sacrifice upon the altar of his own overweening ambition and pride. Why her?"

*Of course.* William felt the words moving silently on his mouth, as though they had captured something profound.

"You can't materialize, or collapse," he began, carefully, "unless the wavefunction is measured, in a manner of speaking. Unless you're summoned by your Master." Professor Wordsworth sat up straighter, frowning. "The Cromwell Invocation is your anchor more so than any individual person. It is the only thing that keeps you from slipping into pure statistical abstraction."

"The seal was broken." Alucard widened an eye and glared at him balefully. "My Master is dead. She has been dead for over one thousand years."

"Sir Integra was not always your master, Alucard. There were others before her."

He frowned. "Then a Hellsing..."
"Oh no. Hellsing is long gone. The line ended with Integra. But in lieu of an heir, the Invocation seal, that ancient emblem restricting your power, defaults to the supreme governor, the Fidei Defensor, of the Congregation of the Church of England."

"The monarch," finished Alucard.

"Correct."

For the first time, the Vampire smiled a genuine smile, the motion filtering up into his eyes and becoming something more knowing. It warmed his expression so briefly that William might have believed he imagined it but for the faint twinkle that remained in the irises.

"Then Esther Blanchett..."

"It's an interesting thought, isn't it?" William tugged at the cuff of his cassock sleeve. It unnerved him, how easily Alucard stared down the truths the Professor had avoided looking in the eye for years. "I've had my suspicions for some time... this entire situation merely confirmed them."

"How beautiful..." Alucard's eyes shone cold and glorious, a deity with his disguise flung off. "It will not be a monster to destroy a monster... but a queen... a light to drive out the darkness... killing oneself takes some time, and in my situation, there is a lot of self to kill. Three million, four hundred twenty-four thousand, eight hundred sixty-seven souls, within me, clouding my mind, denying me awareness..."

The Professor closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "You know, then, what has to be done in order to resolve the paradox."

"Cut them out," the Vampire snarled. "Pare away the iterations. All of them... the myriad old lives and decrepit souls, and let the wind take them, until nothing remains."


"And only my Master can break the Invocation," continued Alucard, almost dreamily. "Pentru a deveni nemuritor, mai întâi trebuie să mori."

_He was quoting Rushdie... how appropriate..._

"I have to die," Alucard bared his fangs in a lethal grin, as bloody as carrion, as red as a young nun's hair...

"And Esther Blanchett has to be the one to kill me."

Chapter End Notes

_hey Hoopy let's go at least one story without giving away the fact you're obsessed with physics_

_tOo LaTE_
Mixing Memory and desire...

Chapter Summary

The Lord appeared to us in the past, saying:
I have loved you with an everlasting love;
I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.

Jeremiah 31:3

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, pals -- turns out having four impacted wisdom teeth removed tends to throw a proverbial spanner in the writing works plus I lost 5k words of this chapter when my laptop decided to play merry hell with my word documents :/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The dreams returned.

Londinium... London.

Long ago.

The first intimations of sunrise broke over the horizon, revealing the guts of apartments and businesses scattered on the roadside. Further out, Big Ben loomed, dark-dialed and silent; St Paul's dome cracked open like an egg; carrion-caked ravens flew from the toppled Tower. From the roof-ridge where she perched, pigeon toed and gripping the brickwork, the rolling Thames appeared motionless, a seam of iron amongst the city's dusty strata. The broken chimneys of Battersea poured like molten rock into the river. The black slick carried barges and bodies and refuse towards the sea.

Esther dimly recognized the landscape, better perhaps than ever before. She acknowledged some strange familiarity, and in herself, a wistful affection, the scene more somnambulist memory than nightmare. The sense of vigil, of an unappeased yearning for return, grew more intense the longer she surveyed her surroundings. The Burning City was an amalgam of sensoria comparable to nothing else in her mortal experience. It was as if the abhorrent memories had been refracted into sublime iridescence by some corrupted prism.

Esther could do little save listen, turning her ear towards the hundreds of thousands of people burning and boiling and hurting and not caring about a ghost — no, not even a ghost; a herald, a portent, a premonition — grieving unremarked on an abandoned rooftop.

Lightning drew sharp edges across the skyline, blinking like a strobe, there for a moment and gone in the next. Embers fell from the sky. Esther picked one from the air with the tip of her tongue. It tasted of Shara's breath, and Esther's lips began to burn.
Her knees buckled, but she didn’t fall. Before another heartbeat had passed, Esther felt herself pulled back with such force that her bones protested the abrupt reversal of momentum. She staggered, fetching hard against something solid, warm... a torso pressed into her back. A thin, white hand, like a troglodytic spider, glided along her stomach. She shivered at the casual invasion of the touch.

"Poor Abel," murmured the figure against Esther’s nape. "I didn't recognize 02 at first. I wonder if he knows how much he has changed?" She couldn't move as the Stranger's lips played lightly at her temple. "I suspect he is realizing it now that he’s with you. He was so very violent before. Now he seems almost... austere. Well, I suppose if one spends nine hundred years burying friends..." He paused reflectively. "Some of it ought not to be left behind."

Esther wanted to scream. To flood her veins with the color and spectacle of the Burning City. Like swallowing a song.

A beautiful, terrible song.

As the inferno plucked and strummed the lines of power, Esther felt each shock and aftershock reverberating through the world's crust, sending out wave after wave of thundering, intricate music. Everything that vibrated broadcast a flurry of notes, rising and falling in volume, pitch, timing and timbre. It was the richest symphony Esther had ever heard, breathtaking for all its overwhelming immensity and profusion. She reveled in its endless variations, its luminous, incongruous fragility, the labyrinthine order bubbling within its ferocious chaos.

At the same time, it revolted her. She reviled the notes emanating from the fractured landscapes, crumbled walls, shattered glass... screaming people. Dying people.

Esther lost count of the seconds in the wrinkles of her palms, mere dust to wind, ashes to gale. She recited the seven sins and stopped at lust... how different from love while still, in some ways, exactly the same...

The Stranger nestled closer, the vague, gilt oval of his face in her peripheries wedged with darkness. A man — an angel — with an ivory-colored complexion bearing the brilliant effervescence of starlight.

So beautiful... so familiar...

With his cheek against Esther's, he reflected aloud, "It's obvious that dear Abel is besotted. But... 02 has always been drawn to wounded creatures."

A searing filament of crimson light curled into the firmament, trembled, and broke apart. Esther thought for a moment it might herald the birth of a second sun... a bright new star rising in the south. It turned the sky black, then rusty, the color of a tarnished chandelier. The clouds had the cast of snuffed-out candles, and the air tasted of ash and charred wicks. Esther felt soiled, sick in her lungs, so she tried to stop breathing.

"The wounded ones are often the most dangerous," she mouthed, and though no sound came out, the Stranger at her back seemed to hear her well enough.

His hand moved in a soothing stroke along her spine. He pressed his parted lips against the thin skin of her temple. Esther's breath snagged as she felt the electrifying touch of his tongue at the very tip of her eyebrow. He breathed against the tiny wet spot, a waft of hellfire that frightened her beyond reckoning.
"I try to bear such things in mind," he recited simply, almost fondly. "But then again… the effectiveness of one's resistance is almost entirely dependent on the danger of one's opponent, no?"

He leaned close to her ear and asked softly, "Would you say that I am a significant danger to your life, Miss Blanchett?"

He had Lucifer's own skill of making what he said sound perfectly reasonable, all with a grace that would flatter the Madonna. Discerning Esther's weakness, he leaned over until the solid weight of his body was poised behind and above her, his knee nudging wide the space between her legs. "God exists, Esther Blanchett," he whispered. "But He doesn't love you."

That voice — no longer that of the white-feathered Stranger, but of a short, thin little man with soft dark hair that fell in a curtain above his eyes, the color of coals in a dying fire — sent all rational thoughts scattering like dry leaves in the wind.

"Tell me, and this will end." That tiny, ineradicable smile still glimmered up at her: "This will all end."

Esther bolted upright, throwing off the covers. She gasped, her lungs distending like a pair of bellows, gulping air.

She dimly registered the sound of something shattering against the floor. She flinched away from the crash.

"Miss Esther?"

Her head snapped towards a wiry figure in eyeglasses and a tatty cassock, standing a little distance from her, looking discomforted. He stayed frozen in place, like some nocturnal creature lured out by the moonlight.

"Ah..." Esther's skin twitched under her smock; it took her a moment to realize the cause was goosebumps, erupting up and down her arms. "G-good morning, Father," she said quietly, her throat dry.

"It's late evening now, Miss Esther," he replied, sidling up to her bedside.

"Oh." Her eyes drifted to the window. "That was careless of me," she muttered, frowning at the wintery sky as though to scold it.

"How are you feeling?" he asked gently.


In profile, Abel's finely-boned face appeared drawn and brittle, his skin almost as silver as the hair that, bundled haphazardly into its customary tail, reached easily down past his collar. His dark purple tie was knotted with slipshod negligence, the piping of his cassock worn and torn against his funereal mantle. His hands, cupped, were covered in a syrupy brown liquid, the remainder of which was...

Esther remembered the crashing sound, and looked down at the shattered mug on the floor. "Did you drop your tea?"

Father Nightroad's face sank into the sort of despondency a puppy might wear when one stopped throwing it sticks. "Ah, yes... so I did," he murmured. "Oh... and I'd only just added the sugar..."
"I'm sorry. I must have given you a fright."

You and me both, Father.

"Not your fault, Miss Esther. I startle easily, is all. Jumpy by nature, me."

"It… that was…" She shook her head. "Bad. Bad dream."

A beat. Abel's right hand strayed to rub his threadbare left elbow. "The same dream." It was not a question.

Esther sighed, leaning forward. She pulled her knees to her chest, clinging to her new resource. "Yes."

"The city on fire."

"Yes. But… it's not a dream at all, is it?" she stated. "They're memories, Father. Someone else's memories. Londinium burned. A thousand years ago, it burned, and everyone died."

Esther took her friend's half startled expression and nervous rocking motions as confirmation.

She found, foolishly, that she wanted to hear Abel's voice, his comfort and consolation, more than talk herself, but she knew how strange such a request might sound, so she described instead the nightmare — although Esther left out the bits about the white figure… and the inquisitor…

The Father, for his part, listened rapt, his eyes riveted to her face, as though her words heralded revelation. He could scarcely bear to look away for even a second, as though fearing the dream, along with Esther herself, would simply vanish.

Curiously, despite his unwavering attention, Abel didn't look entirely dumbfounded. Alert and concerned, certainly, but not in the least bit surprised.

Esther couldn't quite describe it in words, but she could sense in her recollection the roots of two minds conjoined, a collective consciousness. She had touched upon, if for however briefly, the atavistic, cinereous echo of some ancestral voice, guiding her in ways that escaped her rational understanding.

The body would heal, given time and the physical rituals of forgetting. Blood clotted, tissues regenerated, flesh scarred. Soon, the thin white lines would be the only evidence of the pain. But memories abided in the spirit. Esther knew that now — they were the sentiments which endured in the infinite chambers of one's heart, ghosts unable to be exorcised.

Esther recognized the mind of another in such chambers: boundless, dark and demanding grief, as pitch-black as fly ash, burdened with all the passion and fury and sorrow of a creature who had lived a thousand lives, died a thousand deaths, and had known in all of them only hatred and miserable, shrieking loneliness.

No... not only loneliness.

There had been Integra, remembered Esther, with unaccountable fondness... the one with the cigar and the sword. Seras, Walter... a few others. She retained little of specific details save indistinct glimpses, flashbulbing through her mind with sudden brutality, like apparitions, among bursts and scenes and visions that were scarcely imaginable.

Esther supposed it was just as well they had taken the form of nightmares. How else could the
eternal take on limits? she wondered. How could infinitude and finitude marry?

"Zamiel's... Alucard's memories." Esther peered at the Father closely, trying to work out what he was thinking. "But you already knew that, didn't you?"

"I..." Twin creases appeared between Abel's brows. "Yes. I had every intention of telling you."

"Oh. Actually, I thought it... rather the opposite," she said honestly.

"The opposite?"

"That you were purposively trying to hide it from me, Father, because..." Because your instinct, as always, is to protect me. "Because it would make things complicated."

"Yes, well..." Abel gnawed absentely at a thumbnail. "I'd be lying if I said the thought hadn't crossed my mind once or thrice. But the Lord does not condone a false witness, and since you—"

"And since I'm not some infant playing peekaboo," finished Esther, in something of a snit at the thought, "bad things don't vanish from existence just because we can't see them."

"Quite." He had the good grace to look somewhat shamefaced. "However," the Father went on, "knowing that your own connection to the creature would make certain you found out the truth sooner rather than later, I pledged to tell you myself in due course. Unfortunately, our... predicament kept us from having the conversation. After you vanished from the library... after León and Mr. Petros returned without you, I..."

Twice Father Nightroad began to frame a sentence, and twice his voice appeared to fail him. Esther shifted, bending at the waist, hoping to ease the nauseating pulse in the pit of her stomach.

"With everything that happened, Miss Esther," he finally admitted, quietly, "it was only natural to have other things on one's mind."

She glanced aside, giving a slight, involuntary grimace. "Only natural."

"The circumstances, as they say," he murmured. Abel wrung his hands — he wasn't wearing his gloves, she noted — not quite looking at her, not quite looking at the floor.

"Circumstances indeed."

Neither one of them said anything for a while. The longer Esther waited, the more the ominous quiet stretched thinner and thinner, like a balloon blown big, until the temptation to rupture it was almost too great to resist.

"Father... was Alucard the one who saved Brother Petros?"

Father Nightroad nodded reluctantly. "Yes."

"Why? That doesn't make any sense." Another name buoyed to the murky surface of Esther's strange half-memories: Anderson. "There's no love lost between Alucard and the warriors of a Catholic God. Why would he rescue the Director?"

"Because... I think you wanted him to, Miss Esther." Abel's eyes glittered dark with an emotion hideously mournful. Unaccountably uneasy, he elected to change the subject: "Does anything... hurt?"

"Not really. My finger twinges a bit." And her cheekbone was still sore and plastered, but the
fevered swelling was gone, and a great deal of pain along with it.

"Are you certain? I can call the nurse, and I think the Professor is pottering about somewhere—"

She struggled with her reply, self-consciousness warring with a strong instinct for sincerity. "No. No, thank you, Father. I'm all right."

Esther made every effort not to appear fragile, but she was far less practiced at putting on a brave face than... certain other people. Her head felt too heavy for her neck. The grayish cast to her complexion, she knew, betrayed exhaustion. The bruise below her eye smarted whenever she twitched her cheek. Her splinted finger throbbed in concert with her pulse.

She remembered, with a small, inward grimace, the deluge of tears from a few hours before.

Esther hated making a spectacle of herself, and it was plainly obvious that Father Nightroad wasn't entirely assuaged by her reassurances. She supposed it was understandable — the man was packed with an anxious, nervous energy that anticipated disaster even as it crept up on him.

Esther recognized that compassion and madness, concern and compulsion, were adjoining chambers in Abel's heart... rooms with extremely porous walls.

When you disappeared from the library...

He must have been so worried. So frightened.

Oh, Lord.

Esther shook her head, not trusting herself to speak for fear she'd give in to the wracking self-reproach that threatened to overspill its container, like a pot brought to a boil. This man, suffering so quietly, so bravely, needed encouragement from her, not an appalling display of weakness. She suddenly felt selfish and ashamed — and guilty, too.

Esther hated vulnerability, especially her own. It humiliated her, and humiliation made her angry. Esther knew it was irrational, perhaps absurd, of her to plain over her own hurts, considering her ordeal. She had been laid bare in so many other ways, far more intimate ways. Far more painful.

But in that moment, she felt, passing before the Father's gaze, like a patient coming round from the anesthetic to find herself still under the surgeon's knife. A laboratory study in all shades of human frailty and guilt. To be tortured by the very nadir of humanity was one thing. To be dissected by the perceived judgment of such a close friend — who might previously have retained some affection for her...

The prospect alone was nigh on intolerable.

Esther peered sidelong at him: the harsh industrial lighting was at Abel's back and his eyes seemed bluer than Esther had ever seen them. Stress had exacted its toll: his tail was slightly longer, and he had a light dusting of stubble on his jaw, the same moonlit silver as his hair. The weak, watery hospital glare glanced off his pale head, causing dust motes to glitter around his crown.

As though sensible to Esther's own restlessness, Father Nightroad took a deep draught of the antiseptic air. He pulled at his collar, loosening it, an act of ecclesiastical impropriety that would have affronted most other men — and women — of the cloth, but which the Sister found she was not at all inimical to.

Abel had a very nice throat.
An awareness of a strange, disturbing intimacy rose in her chest like sap up the cambium and couloirs of a gnarled tree. The ward appeared to shrink to a vanishing point, a tumbling photograph in the hinterlands of her mind. The past hour came back to her in a rush...

A weight causing the mattress to sag near her hands.

A fluffed pillow impressed with the indentation of a head.

A long, slender body coiled torpid in repose.

Her heart beating steadily against another's chest.

The rhythm of his breath, without which the darkness had no measure.

An unguarded face, softer and so much younger in sleep, enviably long lashes hiding the ever present sadness.

Tears. A confession…

Esther fell back in the bed, red hair fanning out over the pillows, the back of her wrist against her forehead. The recollection of those dim, distant comforts, silently chorusing their presence, broke through the fog of her muzzy, pain killer-induced languor. Her innards wound about themselves in slow, lazy coils. The memories ought to have been mortifying. Instead, they were bewilderingly pleasant.

Esther wasn't sure which was worse.

"Miss Esther," began Father Nightroad, demanding her attention; he coughed, although it sounded more to Esther's ears as though he were choking on something. "I feel I may have... overstepped a boundary."

She wanted to sink into the mattress or pull the covers over her head or take a page out of Father Hugue's book and just disappear. "... I see."

Abel offered her a melancholy smile, his mouth twitching upwards on the left, dimpling his cheek — an expression which Esther wished, despite herself, he reserved for her alone.

"I wanted to apologize." He didn't feel the need to specify what for, for which Esther was grateful. "I was... concerned. I needed you to know that I am very very sorry. I conducted myself poorly. It wasn't my intention to make any rash decisions... or to... compromise your..." Honor. Propriety. Modesty. Heart... "your repose."

He regretted his decision; Esther belatedly recognized the fact, and the knowledge grieved and angered her in equal measure.

"If you'll pardon me, perhaps I'll go procure another cup of tea—"

"Stay," Esther forced out, even as she braced for an unfavorable reaction. Annoyance. Or amusement. Or worst of all, pity. Abel looked odd, as if he hadn't quite understood what she'd said.

"Stay. Please."

The silence that fell was deafening, the air washed with fresh expectancy. Suddenly, there was yet another elephant in the room.
There were so many elephants in the room that it was getting positively crowded.

The Father folded his arms tightly across his torso, and looked away over Esther's shoulder, plainly very embarrassed.

"I'm sorry, Miss Esther, but I really do think I ought to leave."

"Why."

He shot her a look, long and cool, that made it incredibly difficult for Esther to maintain eye contact. "Not to put too fine a point on it," he murmured after a humming silence, scratching the back of his head where his tail met his scalp, "but that kind of behavior is generally... well, frowned upon."

Then why indulge it in the first place? Esther wanted to say — no, scream — at him.

When she was a little girl, she'd accidentally knocked over a pile of dishes during kitchen duty. The tower had tottered for several moments, but Esther hadn't been able to grab and steady them, or even flee before the crash gave her away. She had been too entranced by the oncoming disaster.

Esther knew their confrontation was going to end badly, in shame and humiliation for one or the both of them, but her mouth couldn't seem to form the retractions or say the necessary goodbyes.

Abel, meanwhile, maintained his mask. Jaw clenched, lips pressed into a thin, unforgiving line, spine rigid. But as he lifted his head, spectacles askew, Esther saw his gaze falter. His eyes slid over her face, snagging finally on a ribbon-thin strand of red, which had fallen forward to tap her cheek.

"I'm..."

Then, at his collar, the slightest flush rose, painting his neck and the tips of his elfin ears, lending his porcelain complexion vibrance. Esther would have thought the Father far beyond the age of embarrassed blushing, but the warmth in his cheeks, radiating heat like two oven coils, was unmistakable.

A lump formed in Esther's throat at the sight, choking her with an emotion that had espied its corresponding thoughts but had yet to find its words. She grew acutely aware of a slight shiver on her skin, like the surface of the sea during the full moon, a great shifting at high tide. She might have been standing beneath the stars, that vast cosmic ocean endlessly deep in every direction, besieged by a palpable vertigo, overwhelmed by the hemisphere of an unknown infinity. Esther noted a sharp, sweet ache in her chest: not allure, but grace, like the sight of starry skies to a derelict, a means by which to chart a course through the darkness.

Abel... the fierce, irrepressible tenderness — the warmth and compassion and love — Esther felt for the man in that moment was too overwhelming to fully comprehend. He had given her the world. He had fed her languages, landscapes, sounds, tastes, creatures beautiful and terrible. He had weeded through her hurts and helped her sort the wheat from the chaff. Her gratitude could never be fully expressed, the absoluteness of those experiences never recaptured: no geometry of a portrait or painting, no ambiguity in a turn of phrase, would live in her heart as intensely as a companionship to which she had given herself wholly, without reservation.

That potent furnace, her uncompromising, ignorant love, endured, steadfast and perdurable with a primacy that was as enormous and compelling as it was foolish. It endured, the excruciating emotions concomitant with her adoration. In endured, in spite of the fact his wide, earnest eyes,
stark blue and somber beneath their silver lashes, forecasted rejection.

Esther wasn't self-deceptive. Discretion and delicacy had taught her to be more parsimonious in her affections, less indiscriminate and dotish in her enthusiasms. Meanwhile, Abel balked at the sheer scale of the emotional tedium such affinities invariably involved. She recognized in him an immense fear, a terror at the idea of fastening himself to the ever present possibility of heartbreak, of loss. He was overtaken by a paranoia difficult to define but one in which weariness and grief and panic predominated.

Esther raised her hand towards his face and he winced, as if anticipating a slap.

"Miss E... Esther, hear me, please... I beg you..." His words stumbled over each other, his throat constricted. "If there's one lesson I've taken during this accursedly long life, it's that of all the qualities that distinguish a hard target from everyone else, among the most important are... vulnerabilities. Yes, you have to be able to think like the opposition, which enables you to spot the ambush. And yes, you have to be able to take immediate action in case your ability to spot the ambush fails. But fundamental to the rest are blind spots. The Contra Mundi, Esther... that monster knows our weaknesses even better than we do. He knows us intimately. He knows the desires of our hearts and minds. He knows where and when to attack to gain the best advantage. I know, Esther... I know because—"

"Because it's already happened once before," she finished, understanding dawning on her.

_Lilith_...

Esther knew so little, barely anything, but the Sister had gathered enough from the others to understand that whoever, or whatever, Lilith had been to Abel... she lingered in his heart.

He loved her still.

Of course he did; the Father nurtured her memory like a sprig of green in an otherwise barren, grieving soul.

And Esther, in turn, loved that mysterious woman for it.

Esther loved Lilith for giving to Abel what Shara had given to her: the chance to acquaint herself with dignity and sufferance and joy and mercy when she'd had so very few of those things. Lilith and Shara had striven to stir in their loved ones both confidence in themselves and compassion for other people, and to defend them from a world that, from all accounts, quite despised them.

There was in Abel's life a person-shaped hole, a rend in reality that led to a place Esther couldn't begin to fathom, try as she might. Death clung to him subtly, robbing his blue eyes of warmth and silvering his beauty with the bitter breath of winter.

If only Esther could plunge her arms through the hole and drag his loved ones back...

Empathy twined then with despair. Always, Abel had held himself aloof, held himself away — held her at bay, too — believing, wrongly, that he ought to be regarded with nothing less than hatred and revulsion, with a contempt befitting the most brutal and worthless specimen of mankind. By some twisted logic Esther, for the life of her, couldn't begin to parse, Abel felt he deserved nothing, and so allowed himself nothing, as though anticipating his own fatal disintegration, stretched between two dreadful absences. As though he wanted to remain so immaterial to the world around him that when he finally did slip away, it would have been exceedingly hard to tell he
had ever been alive at all.

The actual dying part, the withering of his physical body, was a mere formality. But until that time, he had been so careful to guard his heart against the hurt that he had erected a balustrade about himself, his affections and friendships little more than fault lines in the brick and mortar.

Weaknesses...

That monster knows our weaknesses even better than we do.

No.

Esther Blanchett would not allow Abel to reduce her — to reduce Lilith, even — to mere defects in his self-imposed exile.

Not ever.

Exhaustion, the throbbing ache of her broken finger, the look of perfectly wretched misery in the Father's eyes made the blood rush suddenly to Esther's face, until her cheeks began to warm. Her hand clenched in a desperate bid to control her emotions.

"How dare you," she said quietly, but with frigid clarity.

The silvered circumference of Abel's eyes warmed to molten mercury. "Wha—"

"If only you understood," she went on, undeterred, "how helpless and stupid and damn insipid it makes us feel to sit here while you deny yourself happiness... just so you can stay faithful to the monster you think you've become. You gave yourself a script, Father... you gave me a script. Only I don't have a speaking part..." Her shoulders slumped. "Again..."

Esther favored Abel with a small, sad smile, one that begged his forbearance in allowing her her indulgences.

Pater... miserere mei, sana animam meam quoniam peccavi tibi...

"The Church only canonized me because they needed some... some allegory. Some marble statue towards which the masses could fling their withered roses. Even to that vampiric monster out there," Esther stabbed a finger at the door, her voice gravelly, the words halting, "I'm just a leashing post, and his incessant barking hasn't permitted me a wink of peaceful sleep in weeks. The Inquisition cared nothing for my life, and nothing for my death. They needed leverage, and I made a useful bargaining chip. And then there's you, Father..."

Esther tailed off. He had been staring at the floor with a wooden expression, disturbingly passive. But at the mention of his honorific, Abel's head snapped up with resuscitated, frighteningly alarmed attention.

"I'm just a pale substitute, aren't I?" Esther pursed her lips in a thin, white line. Blood thundered in her ears. "You're just... just... comfortably numb, content in settling for some inferior version of her. Well, grief doesn't strike bargains, Abel Nightroad... and the more you struggle to ignore the pain, the more you inflame it. You're afraid and you're using me to be brave, but all that effort is only your fear trying to run away from itself."

The Krusnik nonewithstanding, vehement swathes of emotion rarely marred the surface of Abel's perpetually even-tempered mien. But shock at her words had struck the placid calm of his soul like a rock hurled into still water. His expression drained of color, to match the white piping of his
cassock, and his eyes dilated until Esther could see reflections of herself in the dark centers. A skinny slip of a girl: small mouth, snub nose, wide eyes, like blue lace agate in gravel, which seemed a little too old for her face. Flyaway red hair in desperate need of a trim...

"I know, Father. I know you loved her. I know you still love her. And if I were even a shadow of the wretched Saint D'Annunzio made me out to be, if I had the ability to work miracles, Abel, I would give you your heart's desire in an instant. I'd bring her back, so she could wipe away your tears and tell you not to cry. So you could be happy, Father. I just..." Esther's voice cracked. She struggled to compose herself. "I just want you to be happy."

A wave of remorse washed over her, the stale odor of it soaking into her smock.

"I cannot... I..." Esther saw something of Abel's capricious torment in the stutter, the anguish of a man who had lost his sense of himself and wallowed in the impotence of his misery. "I dare not... Miss Esther, I'm so desperately sorry, but... I cannot give you what you want."

"Just once," she said softly. "Just now, just for a few moments..."

"It will not end in a few moments. It will not end in a few minutes or a few hours. It will go on... it will fission, regardless of what other kindnesses or cruelties you might know thereafter." What was intended to be a bitter laugh sounded more like a croak. "Despite León's affectations to the contrary, I am not made of stone, Esther, and I'm old enough to have had some experiences of my own on that score." He extended his left hand to touch her on the crown of the head. His face wore a look of faraway, inward focus. Distantly attentive. Tragically apologetic. His voice grew remote. "It's a powder train... something will burn, and I do not want that something to be you."

Esther felt as though Brother Petros had blown a hole through her chest with his Screamer.

There was no longed-for recognition in the Father's eyes... no dawning sign of confession. She had loved Abel with her own kind of deep, secret devotion. He had worn a place for himself in a bright corner of her heart. She would have gone with him anywhere, even with her affections muted and maimed, already mourning.

She knew... she understood that sometimes, oftentimes... people gave their souls to those who did not or could not return the same strength of feeling.

Esther Blanchett wanted — with a yearning greater than any desire she had ever conceived could exist without destroying its owner — something, she realized, she simply could not have.

"I do not deserve such devotion," said the Father with a quiet intensity. "Not now. Not ever, and especially not from you. This is my fault. All of this. I never should have—"

"It was my choice to follow you to Rome," stated Esther.

"And I let you! I was blind, and... you..." His glasses slipped down the bridge of his nose as he regarded her with an expression of genuine panic. "And you were so young. It was reckless..."

"And?" she demanded. Esther mined a vein of boldness in that moment that overcame any hidden motives, displaced explanations, subtle concealments and lingering mysteries. "Why can't I be reckless? You're reckless all the time! How come you're allowed to rush pell-mell into danger when you would scold me — strike me, even — for doing likewise?"

"Esther. I am less... breakable." The long fingers of his right hand fell to her wrist, squeezing reflexively. He ran a thumb along the sensitive skin underneath, supple and soft. His tone, when he spoke, was harsh. "After I've expended so much effort keeping you safe all these months... safe
even from me..." He snorted, a soft, low sound. He drew in a shallow breath, lips thin with anguish, but, determined, went on: "It was not enough. I should have taken more care."

A heavy chill settled over Esther's chest at the note of censure, of almost patrician disapproval in his tone. "I never asked you to."

"You shouldn't have to ask. If I'd known at the time, back in István, what I do now, all these terrible things—"

"No. Don't you dare. So help me, if you feel guilty about this for even one minute, I'll bloody well thump you. If everyone were to consider all the possible consequences of their choices, no one would move a millimeter, or even dare to breathe for fear of what might happen!" An almost desperate attempt was made to catch her breath. "What would become of us then?"

"Survival," he whispered. All at once Abel looked alarmingly grave, his eyes glistening. "You would survive. I would not lose you."

Esther's knuckles showed white where she'd bunched the bedsheets in her fists, hoping the onion-skin linen might armor her against the hurt she'd invited. Little girl fears warred with bravado, and Esther hiccupped with an acid churning deep in the pit of her stomach.

But bravado won.

Her chin went up belligerently. "Do not martyr me, Abel. Do not mourn me. Look..."

She took his hands, dry and soft, whispering beneath her fingers. Ignoring the way the contact made the hairs on the nape of her neck stand on end, Esther planted his palms on her cheeks, until he was cupping her face. Staring at each other nose to nose, Abel's set of wide, pronounced cheekbones and narrow jaw imparted an exquisite, feline triangularity to his features.

She held him in place, her tiny hands settled over his far larger ones. Esther felt her fingers interlaced with his, memorizing by touch each hint of the pattern of bones in the back of his hand.

"See? I am alive. I am still alive. I have already survived, damn you. Look at me, Father Nightroad."

"Miss Esther..."

She reached up to lay her hand on his cheek, both of them flinching a little, and her touch came to rest on the swift, shivering place beneath his ear. Esther felt the hard angle of his jaw against her palm, the roughness of his skin where the shadowed start of stubble darkened his cheeks.

"I survived," said Esther again; her manic burst of strength had started to dwindle, until she found her muscles growing languid, stiff in some perverse rigor vitae. Her blood, syrupy with dobutamine, sloughed its way through arteries shriveled by dehydration and hypothermia. Fatigue pulled at her and she fought it, forcing her eyes open when they threatened to drift shut. But she didn't release him.

Abel, meanwhile, neither dropped his gaze nor made a move to recoil from her. Esther was under no illusion that he could brush off her grip like dandruff if he chose to pull away, but Esther held on just the same.

"I claim the right to be who I want to be, Father." She squeezed his hand. "And even if it doesn't alter or change things in the slightest, being able to make decisions based on convictions that I believe in... and walking my own path... has its own merit and worth. There's dignity even in this
nonsense... this shame. Because it belongs to me. It's mine.

"And loving other people, Abel, at my own choice... it's as fearless as I know how to be."

The Father's eyes widened abruptly, as if scrutinizing her expression were the most paramount thing in his life. "I am sorry..." he murmured.

"Stop apologizing... please. Stop apologizing."

"I don't know what else to do."

Esther's throat tightened to the point of pain, and before the Father registered what she was about to do, she threw her arms around his neck, embracing him fiercely.

"Live, Father. Don't survive... live. Do that for me... do that for Lilith. If I could have any wish, it would be—"

Then, without warning, Abel crumpled into the hug, silencing whatever else Esther was about to say.

The tiny redhead held on to him desperately, arms sliding across his back, mouth murmuring things that weren't quite words. After a moment, the Father's arms tightened around her, as though acknowledging she was there, real and solid.

Esther could feel his feather touches in her hair, the current he carried as his fingers flitted back and forth between the two of them. She could almost see the marble of his skin softening to flesh, as if he were drawing the color of the world straight into himself. Esther was reminded then of the figure she had hallucinated on the ice, the seraphic dimensions folded to encompass earthly vision. Like an archangel appearing in a splendor so divine, his form blotched out the horizon and his light eclipsed the world.

Abel's was a gesture of comfort, Esther knew, any decent person would afford a friend and companion. Tentative fingers skated across her face. A thumb ran along the wet skin of her cheekbone.

And she suffered for it, suffered for the misery of knowing that whatever possessed him to afford her such gentleness could be no more than mere concern. He valued her that much. But not enough.

Never enough.

But then he planted a small kiss to her temple, adjacent to her eyebrow...

... pressed his parted lips against the thin skin of her temple...

God in Heaven, thought Esther despairingly. She choked down an outbreak of stark, staring panic.

No... not that... not there...

... electrifying touch of his tongue at the very tip of her eyebrow. He breathed against the tiny wet spot, a waft of hellfire...

Oh, mercy, not there... Anywhere but—

Esther turned her head. A reflex, an impulse...
A mistake.

What she knew, but never learned, she realized, was how to angle her head so two sets of noses didn't smack into one another...

Abel made a tiny yelp of alarm, inhaling sharply. Something about the sound caused Esther a moment of vertiginous paranoia. But she was prepared. She braced herself for humiliation, for coldness.

But, in an instant, something appeared to break away from all the snares and traps and tangles of the propriety in which the Father had steeped himself. Sheared clean like the calving of a glacier.

*Et ne inducas nos in temptationem...*

Abel lifted his hands as if to push her head away, but instead his trembling fingers curved around her skull, holding her in place. He crushed the fiery strands of her hair beneath his palms.

And he kissed her with ravenous urgency.

Had she the inclination — or the oxygen — Esther would have laughed, charmed to discover Abel gasping like an untried boy.

His wonder humbled her.

She was conscious of nothing in the world save the pressure of his softly parting lips. The motions scratched impressions upon her mind as though they were the styli of some strange, alien language, a curious lassitude; and between them she felt an unknown and timid pressure, darker than the swoon of sin, softer than any sound or color. But the shame of it never seemed as substantial as the pleasure, even if the former, she knew, would last far longer, would linger in the hinterlands of her memories. It was infatuation, and it was loneliness, and it was a longing to be loved, and it was a smoldering so pyretic it devoured worry and fear and time and being.

It was joyous.

For a hundred heartbeats, there was no death, no pain, nothing hard, nothing terrible, nothing but warmth, and the taste of him. The heat of sunshine. The sweetness of summer rain.

"Esther..." murmured Abel, breathless, his lips brushing hers as he surfaced for air. He was so gentle, teasing color to the surface of her skin, chasing little shivers with his mouth. "Brave, kind Esther..."

She closed her eyes. Buoyed by a ballast of feeling beyond her reckoning, and yet determined to lay hold of it with eager incredulity, she lowered her lashes in exquisite deference.

Esther felt his fingertips touching the bridge of her nose, then her forehead, then her eyelids; she reveled in the incendiary drift of his breath against her cheek, caught together in a half-embrace.

"We are not loved in proportion to our deserving, Father," she heard herself whisper, shaky and strange. "You owe me nothing. Not love, not friendship... not even obligation."

He shook his head no. Just barely, so that only someone who was holding his cheek and his neck would notice.

She kissed his jaw, and he let his head tip forward into her hands. She kissed his cheek. And his chin. The groove below his bottom lip. "Stupid man," she said near the corner of his mouth,
sounding incredulous, before gently adjusting his spectacles, savoring the gesture. "What I give, I give freely."

Abel's fingers closed around her wrists, and Esther felt a cool burning sensation, like a bracelet of white fire. They both turned towards the window, where ghostly flakes were drifting out of the darkness and into the candlelight across the piazza. The white appeared to glow at the shadows' edges, like will-of-the-wisps brooding over a stagnant pool.

Esther registered fatigue rising in her like a stifled yawn. Too much too soon, she reasoned fuzzily. "That felt… nice," she murmured. She wasn't breathing at all well, a flush crossing the crests of her cheeks and the bridge of her nose. Suddenly, she was very tired and very dizzy. She leant back against the open circle of Abel's arms, sagging in exhaustion, feeling in her bones once more the feverish tension of her injuries, consuming with its fires all other immediate desires.

"So I've been told, Miss Esther," said Abel softly.

She was still gloriously angry at the whole world — at Cardinal di Medici sitting somewhere in his ease, at his numerous soldiery, at Matthaios for his exceptional cruelty, even at the AX for not caring that Abel had worn himself tired and grim on her behalf when he should have been laughing and smiling and acting like the child he so often pretended to be.

It's not fair.

No, Shara, thought Esther, aggrieved. No, it wasn't.

Gently, Abel eased her back until she was lying against the pillows. She felt him maneuver around her, adjusting her head and shoulders, pulling the blankets close to her chin. He filled his lungs, then managed to summon sufficient strength to disengage and lift from her.

"You should rest," he said quietly.

His slight weight depressed the side of the mattress, and a slender arm slid behind her. As Esther was caught in that half-cradling hold, she considered asking him, again, to stay by her side. But then his hand touched her cheek with a tenderness that somehow undermined her intended persistence.

So she just nodded, refusing to acknowledge the fear she suddenly felt at being left alone. She decided not to importune him further; they both had a lot to think about.

Esther only realized later that she didn't remember Abel leaving.

Her head rolled to one side, and she fell fast asleep...

Later

"Well, now... isn't this cozy?"

For the second time in as many hours, Esther came around suddenly and violently, instantly alive in every nerve. A disturbingly vivid memory of Matthaios peering over the rim of the immersion tank writhed in the black spaces behind her eyes, until she half-expected to feel the heel of his palm on her sternum and his hand in her hair, ready as ever to peel back her defenses with a shrewdness and deliberation that had both surprised and terrified her. Esther found herself shaking at the thought, her chest struggling to rise, the very breath squeezed out of her like the dregs of
toothpaste from a crumpled tube. She fought to suppress a convulsive, sour retch, heaving at the unexpected memories the suffocation summoned from the depths of her soul.

Esther could smell salt.

She forced a few chest-deep breaths, a respiratory ventilation of the abrupt lurch of panic, and slowly, calmly, took stock of her surroundings: the emergency ward. The hospital. Florence. The city loomed listless in the midnight gloom, streets empty, slush banked high against the unshoveled sidewalks, the rooftops buried to their chimneys.

Esther strained her ear: outside, there was a snowy, muffled quiet, punctuated only by the occasional icicle snapping free from the eaves. Inside, there was the rattle of the radiator and the distant hum of the surgical lights.

She turned. Empty beds, a parade of green mattresses, stripped of their sheets and blankets, rested in neat rows to the far wall. The hospital staff had, at some juncture, made a half-hearted effort to provide festive decorations for the upcoming holiday: knotted stockpaper chains and twists of crêpe, plastic mangers attached with tack and string to picture rails above the chipped plaster walls. A squinting angel straddled a molting pine tree. Esther's attention snagged for a moment on a fruit bowl — empty atop the aged formica of the adjacent cabinet. The lack of an offering suggested to Esther that Abel had left to find her — or more likely, himself — something to eat.

Abel…

She had slept late, far more heavily than she had expected or intended. Her head pounded, her nose was stuffy, and her cheek hurt. She opened her mouth and very nearly gagged at the furry taste, like fungus, on her tongue.

The room was far darker. She could hear the sounds of footsteps and muffled conversation coming from the lower floors. The nightshift change, most likely.

"Abel?" she asked thickly, tension and tiredness stringing her voice so taut, it twanged like a harp cord. She rubbed her eyes.

"Guess again, alteţă." A pause. "Tell me... do you address the entire congregation by their Christian names, Sister, or only those worthy of the privilege?"

Esther squinted, the prospect of rest all at once the meanest of her priorities. Scant moments later, her gaze alighted on a figure draped, indolent and shiftless, across one of the patient room chairs, using its back as an armrest. Her visitor raised a gloved hand in greeting, and Esther counted one too many joints in each finger.

She took in the attenuated, gaunt face, whorls of shadow black against a moon-pale complexion. He was long and thin and absurdly tall, taller even than Brother Petros, although far skinnier. He positively dwarfed the chair, and his trousered legs appeared to go on forever, one foot crossed carelessly over the opposite knee. The rest of him was resplendent in maroon and crimson, a rakish hat set low over gimlet-lidded eyes the color of molten basalt. His lips retracted around a maw of sawlike teeth, the chef-d'œuvre of which being two pristine white fangs that were as thick as Esther's forearm.

The Sister felt the blood fall out of her face. Her first instinct was to scream; her second, a hasty smothering of any sound, worried the merest whimper would cause the man — vampire — to take some action, to reach out and touch her, proving well and forever that she was not, in fact, imagining things.
The smell, however, soon corrected for any lingering doubts: his musty, abattoir stench was so strong, Esther shied away from him.

"Well?" he asked by way of introduction, peering over his welder's goggles. "Are you going to say something, or are you trying to catch flies, girl?"

If Esther were going to swallow any bugs, it would only be the ones emanating from him: he reeked like a week-old corpse.

In spite of that, there was something immediately familiar in his features, in the handsome angles and deep, wicked shadows, the hollows of his cheeks, the sharp line of his jaw. A whisper of recognition, an echo of the Shadow that had appeared to Esther in her dreams, the Oltrarno alleyway, the winter wastes of the frozen Arno beyond Castello di Signa. If she screwed her eyes, Esther could distinguish traces of the dog-like creature, all bones and ribs and snarling mouth, although the human version looked little healthier.

A madman. A thin, half-starved, and full-crazed madman.

Esther became aware, suddenly, that the Vampire hadn't blinked in what seemed like the past several minutes. That, for all the scrutinizing she had done of him, he gave as good as he got — she grew wise to his alien mind pressing and probing at her tiny, human convolutions, like a nurse palpating for organs. The webbing was imperfect, but he found channels of similarity, and where none existed, he groped for alternatives and made connections where before there had been only coincidences.

Esther thought the Vampire had the look of someone who had already declared himself, and sensing a certain mutual understanding pass between them, her panicked terror turned into something else entirely. The affirmation of her own suspicions had her blinking away stars, as though stepping into the sunlight after being let out of the shadows for only one day in a thousand.

This, then, was Alucard.

He certainly dressed the part, thought Esther grumpily. Red clothes, a hat as wide as Ion Fortuna was tall, riding boots dirtied with she daren't think what.

"Is that outfit a conscious choice? Part of your disguise?"

"My disguise?"

"Yes, disguise," she snapped, seamlessly masking fear with flippancy. "A noun describing a means of concealing one's identity. Often used by clowns and spies. And now apparently millennia-old vampires." She sighed. "I suppose they don't let dogs into hospitals..."

"I can take any shape, and of the infinitude I judged a starving stray to be the least conspicuous in di Medici's beleaguered city. Otherwise, my appearance has little bearing on anything of real consequence."

The assurance rang hollow. It didn't escape Esther's notice that he'd elected to wardrobe himself in what resembled, more than anything, a crimson inversion of the pontifical pellegrina and galero. It would have made the prelates of Saint Peter's choke on their altar bread.

Even so, there was no real way of knowing if Alucard wasn't, in fact, still wearing a mask, one as false as the deerhound, rendering Esther's initial appraisal of his character a matter subject to doubt. Any conjecture she made with respect to the dimensions or components of his terrifying features — not to speak of the motives of their wearer — seemed not only impractical, but also a
monumental waste of time.

Still, thinking of the Vampire wardrobing himself in bodies like a jester appearing in ridiculous, ill-fitting motley was almost enough to make Esther smile.

Almost.

"I can appear as anyone."

Alucard's face began to shift, skin stretching, bones twisting, the white flesh whirpooling like ink stirred in a well. The nose narrowed, the jaw tapered, the top lip thinned. In an instant, the raven-haired rake had assumed the serene expression of an anchorite. Silver hair. Black cassock. Complexion waxen, posture wilted, with glasses so thick and concave that the figure's eyes — a near colorless, lucent blue — seemed to recede to the back of his head, and expose to the oxidation of the air an open fondness, an intelligence, a humor... and an incredible, apocalyptic sadness.

"Anyone in the world," sneered Alucard with Father Nightroad's face, barring teeth not entirely unlike the Krusnik's.

Esther grimaced. "You've made your point."

He cackled, almost hyena-like, and when Esther peered up — for he was almost twice her height, even sitting down — she was staring once again into eyes a staggering shade of red, as vivid as ochre paint on an antique amphora. Though Alucard's expression was merely contemplative, and his manner mild, she felt her neck prickle.

At least he no longer looks like Abel...

Esther intuited that both Father Nightroad and the Professor treated Alucard with respect, albeit of the sort one usually accorded dangerous carnivores. But Esther also knew Abel in particular disliked the Vampire — intensely. She somehow doubted the Father had swanned off and left an eldritch nightmare to look after her in the meanwhile.

Although... the more she considered the possibility, the more Esther decided such absent-mindedness would have been perfectly in-character.

Her bottom lip burned. Esther fought fiercely against a tiny smile.

"Where's Father Nightroad?"

Alucard's long fingers interlaced about his knee. "Around," he decided, his words glutinous, sticky like stale blood. "You needn't worry: I promise to return you to your priest none the worse."

"I'm not his to whom to return, thank you very much."

"No?"

"No."

He gave an amused little titter; Esther went red to the tips of her ears.

"The only one laughing at your little jokes is you," she told him archly, still flame-faced.

"Jokes? No, these are manners, alteţă. Hatred stirreth up strife," recited Alucard with an excessive amount of satisfaction, the snark grating like rusted nails, "but love covereth all sins. A proverb in whose provinces I'm sure you've become proficient... thanks to Abel." The use of the Father's
Christian name was blatantly unambiguous.

Esther's head dropped quickly, red hair curtaining her indignity. Humiliation burned her cheeks, followed by anger all the more bright.

She could sense him trying to sully and tarnish the moments Esther hugged to her heart and enshrined in her memory. What few gentle, intimate kindnesses the Father had gifted her seemed slightly coarse, dusty from sleep, but still strong and warm, reminiscent of touching rough sackcloth and standing in a dark, stuffy kitchen on a freezing winter day. It was so singular, so precious, that it lingered in Esther's mind, vague and starry with unreality, like a dream where the details grew fainter the harder she tried to grasp them.

Like hell she would surrender such things with the likes of Alucard. Like hell she would allow him to ridicule the memory, transmute the enormity of it into a triviality, an absurdity.

Like hell.

Alucard snickered openly.

The tone of his mockery unsettled her. Or maybe it was the fact that that her ire hardly disturbed him at all. In fact, he seemed almost enchanted by it.

"What do you want?" muttered Esther venomously. "What are you doing here?"

His crimson-clad shoulders heaved an overdramatic shrug. "What are any of us doing here, really?" he said, waving a hand philosophically.

Esther attempted to mask the mangled expression of intrigue and annoyance that appeared involuntarily on her face. Ample time spent around León had conditioned Esther to be wise to such baiting; Alucard must have known that she would see through his conceit.

"If you're looking to start trouble—"

"You might avail yourself of the scalpels on the gurney," he suggested, spiteful with scathing contempt. "Unless you intend to strangle me with your intravenous line?"

"I can be quite lethal when I want to be. You don't want to imagine what I would do with a pair of defibrillator paddles."

"You terrify me. Truly."

Esther pinched her underlip firmly between her teeth. She knew he was taking the piss, but she found some odd mainstay of comfort in their raillery — it reminded her of bickering with the other AX agents. "You should be scared. I can be quite fierce when provoked."

Alucard regarded her through slitted red eyes, gaunt and hungry, a pale windigo. "Undoubtedly."

"You still haven't answered my question."

"Is it not enough to say I wanted to take the opportunity to chat?"

"No. I know—" Who you are. What you've done... Esther bit back the accusations and just shook her head. "I know you and compassion haven't been on speaking terms for a great many thousands of years."

"I confess, that's a fairly magnanimous way of putting it. And here I labored under the
misimpression you were rather partial to the company of Twenty First Century gentlemen,” he concluded with a smirk that rubbed Esther raw.

She clenched her hands, her knuckles going ashen. It was the only thing that kept her from striking him, which was just as well, she supposed. Esther doubted his patience would long suffer any physical altercations.

More was the pity.

"Tell me everything, Alucard."

He chuckled and leaned back in the chair, front legs leaving the floor. "What a comprehensive command! Where to begin?"

"Before we join hands and jump off a cliff together, I want to know exactly who I'm running with."

"Oh, we jumped off that cliff some while ago, girl." He lofted a brow. "Although I thought our introductions were civilized enough."

"You've been giving me nightmares for weeks! What do you want?"

"You keep asking that question, alteţă. Would it inconvenience My Lady terribly to importune her for more specificity?"

He was making fun of her again, damn him. Esther supposed it was just as well Father Nightroad was otherwise preoccupied — he would have either bared fangs and black wings in defense of Esther's honor or else collapsed on his backside in hysterics.

"Brother Petros," stated Esther, uncompromisingly forthright, crossing her arms. "You saved him."

"Would that I hadn't. One less zealot in the world never did anyone any harm."

She forged on, undeterred: "If I were less familiar with Methuselah, Alucard, let alone someone like you, I'd think your actions were staged as a free, voluntary display of generosity. But a little while ago, a dear friend of mine refused to leave a city that wanted her head because her stewards, her kethüda, remained in the Carabinieri's custody, and she had sworn an oath to serve them even as they served her." Esther projected her chin. "When you were in the service of Sir Integra, you couldn't act on your own intervention. It was all orders... all arrangements and exchanges. Reciprocity asserted directly."

Esther forced herself to match his gaze, no small feat, considering his corpse-like odor and countenance. Due to the seeming thinness of the white tissue of his face, his eyes functioned like two crimson tether balls that moved synchronously, mirror images of one another.

Placing her hands demurely in her lap, and satisfied that she'd done as best as she was able on the front of getting his undivided attention, Esther grew bolder, an attitude to which she was more accustomed. "And yet... you pulled Brother Petros from the river. You rescued a man who wouldn't hesitate to burn you at the stake, given half a chance. You're not an altruistic creature, Alucard. What... do... you... want?"

The shift in expression was so subtle, at any further distance, Esther might have missed it. But for a moment, Alucard appeared a shade uncertain. At least... not his usual polished, urbane, boredly smug self.

Esther surprised herself with her insistence, but the sense of unfulfilled obligation nagged at her
like a hangnail. She somehow doubted it would be in her best interests to remain indebted to this creature. She daren't imagine what price he might care to extract if he woke up one morning and decided generosity didn't suit him.

No, affirmed Esther. Better to settle the check now while she still retained some power of arbitration.

As she waited for an answer, Esther felt something in the air shift and give, like the hospital had let out a breath it had been inadvertently holding in around them.

Despite her impudent confidence, her heart crashed against her ribs; she felt the throb in every extremity. The silence spun out until she worried the pounding of her pulse was perfectly audible.

Esther stiffened.

Pulse.

Heart.

Contraction and dilation, ventricles and atria. Veins and arteries and capillaries.

_Blood._

It dawned on Esther, with the flighty, panicked, pinwheeling urgency with which one attempts to right oneself on a pair of ice skates, that she was in a position of breathtaking vulnerability. The sensible camp of her instincts told her to get up and run, very fast and very far. It would be the rational thing to do, and what Esther knew about Alucard was hardly comforting.

The Vampire inclined his head, sniffing thoughtfully with his mouth open so he could taste the air as well as smell it. Then he looked at her with as serene an expression as he seemed capable of affecting.

"What do I want..." he reiterated meaningfully. "There is one thing that comes to mind. Although," he grinned like a deranged maniac, "that Father of yours isn't going to like it."

"Fortunately for the both of us," Esther kept her voice level, the tone she most often used to draw obedience from the most recalcitrant of criminals, "it's not Father Nightroad you're dealing with."

"A shame, really. An exquisite vintage, him. All that pain and loathing and despair, all those centuries... he would taste divine..."

Alarm knifed through Esther's chest.

Alucard's expression then appeared less relished and more... famished. Cold, impotent desperation, concealed beneath an ostensibly polite exterior and a sawtoothed smile.

He was hungry.

He wanted to feed.

Was it any surprise? wondered Esther. She remembered young Ion: the reliance on blood was no bestial caprice. It was a fragility, a weakness built into a vampire's very biology, an ischemic anemia that could no more be disentangled from a Methuselah's chromosomes than the Krusnik bacilli could from Abel's. The best the brain could manage was shutting down conscious awareness of the thirst when the pain became so vast or unbearable that it threatened to overwhelm
their capacity to function.

And Alucard’s predicament went beyond mere hemoglobin deficiency or myocardial stress. Esther wasn't a physicist, but she retained enough of the Vampire's memories, not to mention her science lessons at seminary, to piece together the cogent details. For every instant an individual intelligence inside Alucard remained self-aware, the Vampire's soul split apart, multiplied itself. He had — or would, or was already — living multiple lives.

Which in of itself made very little practical difference. Alucard's other waves and particles, cats dead and alive, were as inaccessible to his current self as if they did not exist at all. But there he was, superposition made manifest, suffering the illusion of unity in his endlessly bifurcating body.

Splintered. Broken.

Esther couldn't help but think Alucard had been in some way dispossessed from reality. He engaged as a participant, certainly, but the traumatic fracturing had critically impaired Alucard's abilities. He retained precious little of the physical transmogrification and psychic overdevelopment that had once enabled his great power. There could be no further amplification of his vampiric faculties without radical change, and his characteristics were no longer adaptable.

Esther hated to use the word *stunted*, but she could think of little else more appropriate.

For some reason, she was the one who had drawn him from the void; but more, she was keeping his original consciousness linked with this particular body. Esther could just barely sense the connection to his other iterations, but she was not wise to their memories, which was just as well. She doubted her sanity would long survive the encounter.

Alucard let out a small, near inaudible whine, dragging Esther back to the present.

There hovered in the air a charged expectancy, turbulent, tingling along her nerve endings to the core of her, so that, for a suspended moment, she felt a peculiar sense of oneness with the creature sitting across from her, perceiving his tumultuous emotions, his indecision, as if she were an integral part of him.

Alucard wanted to spill her blood with a primal ferocity, but something, perhaps the Almighty Himself, stayed his hand.

So Esther made what was, perhaps, a very stupid decision.

She'd taken risks before, yes, but mostly in the belief she was mature enough, clever enough, strong enough to merit the assumption of the consequences. But she saw then what she hadn't seen before, that she was very good at despising sin in the abstract, in the removed and anonymous masses, but in the concrete, intimidating flesh of the Vampire sitting at her bedside, she had lost the ability to be repulsed by it.

Esther had, at some juncture, grown comfortable with the particulars of evil. There was a frightful muteness that dwelled at the center of all unspeakable things. She had stumbled blind right into it, and had emerged from the other side knowing well, and with certainty, which of God’s creatures she considered truly abhorrent and horrific.

Alucard was not one of them.

*Look at me, Abel.*

*Being reckless.*
"Give, and it shall be given unto you," murmured Esther, "good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again..."

Esther bit her finger. Bit it hard, the pain chasing through her nerve endings and alchemizing into something close to exhilaration. When her mouth opened, it was flooded with welling blood.

She might as well have been taunting a bull with a red rag.

Esther watched Alucard's mouth yawn wide with delight and unholy hunger.

A death-god of old — starved for life.

Interpreting his silence as assent, Esther said plainly: "T-take only what you need. Do..." the fierce conflagration of bravery dimmed to meagre stirrings of foolishness. "Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, alteţă. Perfectly."

Very slowly, with his eyes fixed on hers, Alucard took her hand, put her finger to his lips, and gently slipped it inside.

Too discomforted, too mortified, to stop him, Esther fought the urge to squeeze her eyes shut. She felt the warmth of his mouth, the moist, velvet brush of his tongue as it lathed over the pad of her finger. The feather-light scrape of teeth.

Esther registered a muted, damp reverberation in her chest, a strange vibration, like someone singing through deep water. Alucard's touch sent a jolt through Esther's skull, an explosive surge that, coupled with his strong, heady scent, fanned a boiling heat in her stomach. The effect was almost analeptic, the tiny afferent nerve fibers on Alucard's tongue whetting impulses and appetites she didn't want to think about at great length.

Then, with an excess of gentleness, Alucard drew her finger free and placed her hand back in her lap.

"You are entirely too generous," he murmured, smacking his lips obscenely.

Esther didn't disagree. She managed a tiny nod, fighting the urge to shudder. The skin of her finger glistened, and she glanced away.

"Now... to answer your earlier question, regarding your priest..."

She glanced immediately back again.

"I believe he is currently conferring with your fellow agents about how best to address the matter of your abduction."

"Oh, for pity's sake," muttered Esther. The Father was more Machiavellian than she'd given him credit for.

With a deep sense of grievance, Esther sat up on the bed. Her legs swung over the side, and she began searching around for a robe to throw over her starchy hospital whites, or at least a pair of slippers.

"Should you be doing that so soon?" asked the Vampire idly, though made no move to stop her.

Esther came to her feet with the hint of a wince.
"Making certain I am cared for is no longer your concern." She considered. "I'm not sure it ever was."

"Are you not pleased... to learn of your comrades plotting their revenge..."

"His Eminence won't be long for learning of Brother Petros's state, if he hasn't found out already," stated Esther, bluntly, without preamble.

"So, when the cardinal arrives, you'll have a decision to make."

"There is no decision. So far as the Vatican at large is concerned, Brother Petros saved me from being abducted by Rosenkreutz. He was injured in battle. That's all there is to it."

"You're electing to ignore the fact you were being held at an installation managed by that bellowing oaf's own underlings."

"That's not something anyone else needs to know. In light of his failure to produce results, I somehow doubt His Eminence will be keen to advertise his own agent's role in what happened. If the Duke of Florence knew what was good for him," Esther elaborated, "he would pin the blame on Matthaios alone, and wash his hands of the whole affair. That way, he might manage salvage his relationship with the Bureau Director without incurring public disgrace."

"Therein lies an incredible degree of uncertainty."

"And what would you have me do, Alucard?" she asked, exasperated. "Denounce Cardinal di Medici to Lady Sforza? Condemn the entire Inquisition? Share a quiet word with Father Garcia or Father Hugue and have them hunt Matthaios like a dog?"

"An idea to which I am not entirely unopposed." The offer of bloody vengeance winked at Esther, a tease of light through a barely open doorway. "That rat of an inquisitor... would you like me to kill him for you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's a simple question." His mouth, slightly upturned in a parody of a smile, opened to reveal his teeth grinding in a sideways motion. "I would very much like to kill him," breathed Alucard. "I want to gut him like a trout and feed his insides to the crows."

"Yes, well... take a number," said Esther with no trace of humor. "Or better yet, put the thought out of your mind. It's not going to happen."

"And here I believed I had left all this infernal politicking well behind me," snarled the Vampire, eyes growing stormy. "Your indulgences invite those guilty parties to exercise their wrongdoing elsewhere and moreover, get away with it. To attain their righteous world, those like the Inquisition believe some must be slaughtered and silenced, that all those who oppose them must be destroyed. Iscariot was no different. The worst suffering in human history has been carried out by who seek to implant by force their narrow, particular version of goodness. Fear of sin begets sin, Sister."

Esther bridled; she couldn't help but feel as though she was being scolded. "I'm not a fool. I would never knowingly put the internal security of the Vatican at risk. Don't speak to me like you're the only one who understands the need for discretion. There is danger in anyone else knowing. What if someone less... delicate were to find out and decided they wanted to take matters into their own hands?"
"Someone like Nightroad, perhaps?"

Esther went rigid. "No... he wouldn't do that. If I asked him to hold his piece, he would. He... he abhors violence."

Alucard grunted. "Not all of him, Sister."

They stared at each other stonily, their postures stiff, neither of them breaking the hush that had fallen over the room.

Esther could see Alucard's point well enough, and indeed, a part of her still clung fiercely to her own odious hatred, recognizing a certain distorted security in familiar pain. Gyula Kádár had taught Esther something of the satisfaction of hate, the sweet joy of revenge. She felt the utter loathing and disdain masquerading as conscience, intended for that vile, sadistic Demon on di Medici's payroll but ultimately directed inwards. Esther held herself in far more contempt for the simple fact that she would, one day, be forced to forgive Brother Matthaios. For no other reason than because her duty would demand she do so.

No.

Not forgive it.

Endure it. Abide it.

Because she could not touch him.

Esther had sworn a monastic vow, an obligatory oath, to His Holiness the Pope to defend the integrity of the Church irregardless of blazing battles, enemy tortures, the dark of subtler temptations towards revenge and reprisal. And when the radius of her thoughts touched upon the longitude of her ecclesiastical trusts, it elicited pain. True, almost physical pain, a burn like indigestion.

Under ordinary circumstances, the word of a nun would slide off the sheer political fortitude of a cardinal like water off wax. But if Esther were to denounce Francesco di Medici and his agent — a condemnation which, she suspected, the Minister of the Doctrine's own Bureau Director would corroborate — the Concistoro would be torn asunder by internal strife. Cardinal against cardinal, prelate against prelate, Sforza against di Medici, the Special Operations Section against the Department of Inquisition: misconducts exposed, loyalties shattered, rituals of political humiliation consecrated.

Esther was no stranger to the manners in which power was maintained and transferred behind the walls and beneath the domes of Saint Peter's. She intuited well enough the invisible understandings which guaranteed that influence and authority would reside in certain hands but not in others, that information would be transmitted to this one but not to the other, the hidden collusions and connections with other, more shadowy institutions from which the Holy See was supposedly independent.

Without the mechanisms in place to suppress dissension, and unable to present to the world the unified front the Vatican needed to gain power over its enemies, the maelstrom of conflicting impulses would expose those few fatal chinks in the Church's armor.

The Orden wouldn't have to lift a finger...

Esther knew in her heart that her own life, her own pain, amounted to very little apposed to the future security of all humankind. The atrocities that had been inflicted on her paled in comparison
to the delicate peace the Vatican still had left to lose.

Bow her head. Suffer in silence. Play the Saint. Project unfeigned goodwill with delicate, dignified ceremony. Go on living, mortally wounded but resigned. Forbidden from striking back against the persons who had injured her... unable to keep them from injuring another...

Perhaps that was the reason why Abel had taken her in his arms and cradled her, had kissed her and comforted her... to offer her not the promise of justice exacted but his own, merely human, consolation. Perhaps he had sensed her hatred at her own innate powerlessness and had, for just a few moments, turned a blind eye to his notions of propriety and personal rectitude in favor of salving immediate hurts. He had changed the tenor of the moment from complete and utter disintegration into an embrace far more intimate than any Esther had ever known before.

Not even with Shara.

Damn them...

Esther ached at the injustice of it all — a sacrifice for the sake of preserving a saccharine script. Again.

That bastard of an Archbishop would have been so proud.

A fine shiver rolled up Esther's spine, and she turned her back to idly straighten the bed coverings, so she didn't have to look Alucard in the eye.

"I'm making a decision that you obviously don't agree with," she said, "but that doesn't make it wrong."

Alucard rolled his eyes, a growl-like sound sliding through his teeth.

"Cu riscul de a fi impertinent, fie după cum vă taie capul," he muttered. "You humans... you never change."

"And you change too much," retorted Esther. "That's how you ended up in this mess in this first place." She was immediately relieved to see the hospital staff had left her a change of civilian clothes; she doubted Petros's surcoat had survived the flight across the Arno, and her habit had vanished into the bowels of Castello di Signa.

Along with her rosary...

Esther suppressed a watery sigh.

"Before you go..." began Alucard, freezing Esther midstride, "there was one other order of business, Sister, we had yet to discuss."

"I've already given you blood," she muttered, drawing on irritation to cover a sudden nervousness. "So you don't go murdering any more innocent women."

"Do you remember those scalpels I mentioned, the ones on the gurney?"

Nervousness became danger in an instant. "Yes, but—"

"A final favor, Highness." As Esther struggled to puzzle out the strange choice of address, Alucard told her: "Take one of those silver scalpels, position it over my atrium, and order me to—"
Before she could engineer a protest, or Alucard could finish his request, the door swung open, banging against the wall opposite.

In marched a short, stocky man whose expression retained all the emotional inflection of a lump of coal.

"Sister Esther Blanchett."

Esther gave a low, involuntary cry of astonishment, while Alucard's expression blackened.

"Father Tres!? What in the world are you doing in Florence—?"

"Insufficient duration for a debriefing at this time," intoned Tres Iqus, insensible to — or completely disinterested in — Esther's surprise or Alucard's sudden sour mood. "Sister Esther Blanchett, you will be attended by a nurse in three minutes. Then you will accompany the medical staff to a secure location."

Esther went ash white as she tried, and failed, to get her questions in order. "Father Tres, what's going on... what about—"

"My Lord Alucard," continued Tres with nary a facial tic, "you will accompany me and serve as backup to agents Krusnik and Professor."

Esther pulled at Tres's sleeve, just as she had when she was seventeen and hurtling across the Balkans from István to Rome, all those months ago.

Finally, the copper-haired android swiveled his head to face her.

"Father," she pleaded, "what's wrong? What happened?"

Tres's neck muscles ticked like a cooling engine. He drew his two enormous, double-barreled pistols from the holsters at his hips. "Grade-A Terrorist sighted in the vicinity," he relayed with his customary stoicism. "Subject has been identified.

"My Lady, Dietrich von Lohengrin is in the Piazza della Santissima Annunziata."

Chapter End Notes

It's my birthday tomorrow! Yay!
The Isle of Dogs...

Chapter Summary

Do not take revenge, my dear friends,
but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written:
“It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.

Romans 12:19

Chapter Notes

okay, not that it really matters for my purposes, but let’s pretend that 80% of the Orden
didn’t peg out in the light novels because damn, Cain, you can’t run an international
terrorist organization with, like, four people and 576 of Isaak's pet monsters — so...
the Neumanns, von Vogelweide, etc... they’re all alive and perfectly wretched

A young man sat perched in the basin of the Fontana dei mostri marini, crouched with his elbows
on his knees, staring at the entrance to the Foundling Hospital.

He had a sharp, elfin face framed by long curtains of hair the color of copper, as fine as sunlit
smoke. His smile seemed too long and thin to affect sensitivity convincingly, his bared teeth tiny
but perfect, like those of a baby. His eyes, the rusty umber of a corroded door hinge, wore the lean,
rangy leer of a creature perpetually starving but not quite sure where his appetites lay…

At a glance, a passerby might mistake him for a gargoyle, an apparition shadowy and indistinct,
completely still save for the occasional flash of yellow as he rolled a florin over his knuckles,
pushing the coin across the backs of his bony, articulated fingers with the practiced ease of a man
clever with his hands.

Like a pickpocket.

Or a puppeteer.

The cold air was a tonic in his burning chest, his breath turning to vapor. Icicles dangled from the
underside of the fountain's statuary, each one suspended like an ominous sword of Damocles. Two
marine grotesques rose behind the young man, garlanded in shellfish and algae, giving him the
appearance a chthonic monk guarding the gateway to hell.

Lasciate ogne speranza, thought Dietrich von Lohengrin to himself, voi ch'intrate…

The rest of the city was asleep, silent and still. The nine bay loggia of the hospital, which defined
the eastern edge of the piazza, and the Loggia dei Servi, which defined the west, appeared hazy
and pale in the predawn darkness, like lengths of white chalk rendered in harrowing crosshatches.
Night had settled in like slow blindness, sucking the color from the piazza, the low sky and the
lime-plastered walls, even the toothed eaves and frost-white windows, until there was little left
save sheets of black ice on the cobbles, their surfaces glass-like and with as much give as concrete.

Sanded... that was how the world looked: pale and polished and worked slowly down to no rough edges.

The stalls from the market remained, still, nestled around the piazza, not in rows but in odd spots, as if the booths and countertops had alighted in random places like fat, red-feathered partridges, roosting in the craggy hollows of the old loggia and in the corners of the walls.

Although the Nöel market was long closed, the scents lingered, still — Dietrich had a keen nose. He recognized cinnamon, figs, cumin seed and saffron, ginger; the gristled fetor of the butcher fridges, selling salami and prawns and crimson carcasses still buttressed by the animals' bones; even the pungent clove of day-old cigarette smoke from the old men playing sette e mezzo, staring at frayed and folded cards as if waiting for a mystery to unfold.

After-impressions.

Ghosts.

Dietrich had let the darkness slip through his fingers like sand on a beach. He couldn't recall what day of the week it was; he certainly didn't know what hour it was. The night was shimmering pearl-gray, the color of light bounced back by water and snowy air, crimson-edged, like a dog shot and bleeding by the side of the road.

Yes, Dietrich mused: he felt in the air some vague promise of bloodshed, an instinctual thrill exceeding the tolerance of taste or touch.

The prospect of impending disaster allowed his mind to slow and settle. Violence was a chromatic palate-cleanser, something to stimulate senses that had otherwise grown sluggish in the previous eight months... stifled, suffocated, relegated to a position little more ignominious than the Orden's...

What was it Esther had called him, back at the library? Errand boy...

Dietrich balanced the florin on the flat pad of his thumb, before snatching it back and pressing the coin into his palm with such force, he left an indent on his skin.

His mouth fought a snarl.

The Puppet Master sacrificed to the Orden his service and obedience with the bitter reluctance of a victim to his blackmailer; playacting at loyalty gave him as much delight as sticking hot needles deep into his abdomen or swallowing pieces of broken glass. So far as Dietrich was concerned, to roll on his back and expose his belly at the Orden's beck and call was to admit to a loss of self-respect that was truly pitiful.

The boy's lip curled, remembering the fight outside the Santo Spirito... how he and Isaak had glared at each other, stubborn as cats on the stable wall, full of mutual resentment. And, several weeks earlier...

... pale, spidery hands grabbing him from behind, holding him by his hair... the burning end of a cigar moving towards his face... towards his eyes... the heat beating through his eyelids... the smell of his hair beginning to singe...

The Puppet Master had suffered humiliation before — Radu's destruction under Byzantium, even being hauled away by the scruff of his collar in Oltrarno — but never like that.
The memory made him feel dirty inside. It had his throat burning with embarrassment and fury, causing him to breathe heavily and shallowly through gritted teeth.

Dietrich had drawn two lessons from Isaak's coordination of Orden operations in recent months... one: that the Magician was more willing to use intrigue than force — often to the point of hopeless complication — to manipulate weak-willed people into doing his bidding. Two: that he was an immoderately generous patron. Whenever Isaak's pawns were threatened, he wouldn't simply abandon them as Dietrich might. Marionettenspieler had never regarded other people as anything but potential puppets, carved from linden wood and preserved in beeswax, fashioned only to populate an empty stage. He divided them into two classes: those he allowed their lives beyond his control, and those he did not. Both categories of individuals were equally insignificant in his eyes.

But Isaak cared about his precious schemes too much, and valued his own cleverness too highly, to ever scrap a stratagem... to do so would be to admit he had made a mistake.

The first lesson evoked contempt in Dietrich, the second frustration — a dangerous combination.

He hated being ordered around by lesser creatures.

He hated being told what to do.

Despised it, in fact.

Panzermagier was a shrewd strategist, but not all battles required tricks.

Sometimes the simplest way to destroy something was to swim up to it and bite it in half.

For two days, Dietrich had stared sullenly at the walls of the Red Baron, biding his time while Isaak pecked and prodded at Cain, who had been critically injured during the botched siege of Castello di Signa. Like a person who couldn't vomit despite horrible nausea, Dietrich had lurked about Skorzeny's ship, resisting patience as he resisted mercy and forbearance, despising with every fiber of his being his superiors' hesitancy... their damnable instinct towards caution.

So, the Puppet Master had decided to take matters into his own hands.

He'd had a quiet word with Susanne, who, being no great admirer of Isaak Fernand von Kämpfer herself, had agreed to cover for his absence on the Red Baron. It hadn't been difficult to convince the good captain: in an insular organization like the Orden, resentment could only go so long before it grew teeth, sprouted sharp claws, and turned, snarling, on its own self. Before fragments of gossip became rumors, and the rumors became suspicions. Before the operatives started eyeing each other with the mistrustful narrowness of oft-kicked mongrels.

And Dietrich knew Skorzeny was one snide remark away from dousing Isaak's cigarillo on his own tongue.

Circumstances, secrets, and rival personalities had sown unrest in the ranks, bit by bit. The greed and disaffection of the Neumanns... Vogelweide's conspiracies... Isaak's fixation on that Sforza bitch... mutual unhappiness and resentment had snowballed to proportions which ought to have been impossible to ignore, although the Magician's tricks had always been adept at making things disappear. Everything untidy had been swept under the rug, of course, where the dragon of discontent feasted on the crumbs. They all whistled in the dark, even as the negotiated order of the Orden threatened to disintegrate in the face of internal dissolution.

Not that Dietrich really cared about the politics. His diet of violence and manipulation and torture and pain had made a sophisticate of him. None of Isaak's finely-tuned, precisely-adjusted
stratagems were ever vicious enough to titillate his jaded palate or make taut the Puppet Master's slack mind and body. Dietrich's complete and utter indifference towards most living things was so gravitationally massive that it had crushed the very loneliness and hatred from which it was conceived — the same emotions which caused most other Orden members to bare their teeth at one another from out of their rat holes. He ceased to feel in any real capacity, and he didn't suppose he had ever known empathy well enough to get a good idea of what, exactly, he was missing.

The end result being that those of Isaak's ilk had no way of knowing that the emotion Dietrich felt when surrounded by the wholly yielded, the adjusted, the obedient, was neither disdain nor disgust.

But boredom.

Terrible, hopeless, draining, paralyzing boredom.

He had little interest in weaning his mind from a dependence on distraction. The ever-present threat of restlessness was too great. The Orden's ability to satisfy its own needs and eliminate — or, at least, retrench — its own discomforts had produced a state not of contented, serene tranquility, but of dissatisfaction. For Dietrich, the stifling paralysis had to be relieved by novelty, as an itch needed to be relieved by scratching. As power increased, boredom grew, provoking an ever more frantic search for stimulating experiences. His nature was such that he was never satisfied with what he had. So he kept on trying to stimulate that jaded appetite of his.

Dietrich had discovered — and corroborated, on a number of occasions — that there was a tremendous beauty, and a certain palatal piquancy, found in the infliction of pain. He was impelled in such diversions by feelings that were primal and yet, paradoxically, wholly impersonal. Give him a centimeter of flesh and Dietrich could fashion a litany of suffering that would swallow a soul as the ocean swallowed a grain of salt. To experience pain required no morality, no guilt, no slow working of the hormones in the moist midnight of one's innards. Humans were always in season for pain. All life was ripe for it.

Too long disaffected by Isaak's bland spread of canapés, Dietrich's taste for pain had made a vicious comeback, his more unconventional delectations no longer asphyxiated by ten years of blind obedience. Instead, the fire in his belly had grown, unmitigated by training or logic or reason. At least inflicting pain relieved some of Dietrich's crushing boredom.

It was too bad about the killing, of course. He went through playthings like Mein Herr went through bodies...

Perhaps that was why Dietrich had always been so fascinated by the likes of little Esther Blanchett, drawn to her the way apathetic people were often drawn to things especially fresh and unusual.

She presented an opportunity — a distraction whose potential for emotional and physical vivisection filled him with uncommon relish. She had been vulnerable, succulent, hanging low and alone, yearning with all her being to be picked for something special. She possessed a sweetness without sentimentality, a limpidity without naivety. She wanted to be cherished, to be idolized, to be treated like the perfect little pietist with her poisonous blue eyes and red mouth, ripped open like the distended stomach of a sacrifice, bloody and oracular. Going out to heal the sick, raise the dead, cast out demons and preach the kingdom, allegedly out of some overwhelming compassion for those in need. Esther fancied herself a saint when in reality she was little more than a graven image begotten in the shadows of sycophants, and Dietrich hated her — and loved her — for her specious, sanctimonious, holier-than-thou benevolence.

He thought he had never seen anything so beautiful in all his life; he wanted to take her apart, study
her all the way down to her bones, and then build her back up again in new shapes, in new combinations. Dissection without death, discovery without destruction. Pain without passing.

She was so easy to hurt. So easy to break.

And yet... it wasn't enough. It would never be enough. To crave and to have were as indelibly distinct from one another as an image in one's head from a hamfisted attempt at committing it to paper. As disparate as flesh and memory...

Tastes never sat upon the tongue as sweetly as when he longed to mull them over; the hues and savors of pain and pleasure, ripeness and sex, were never so vivid in their consummation as their consideration. His wants were so often rendered rusty by the oxidation of reality.

*Never enough...*

A moratorium, Dietrich mused. Perhaps his desire to see the girl steal over to him with a whore's glow in her half-lidded eyes — glistening slivers of blue beneath the lashes, a red forehead butted low on his stomach — was all but to feel it. Perhaps that was how time really worked... through an endlessly deferred anticipation. Zamiel might know... Dietrich considered asking him.

Perhaps whatever one lost, the very craving gave it back again... if with ever-diminishing returns.

Then again, there was *something* in the prospect of licking Esther's wounds, smacking his lips over agonies long past, lathing his tongue over bitter confrontations still to come, savoring to the last toothsome morsel of both the pain he had been given and the pain he had returned to her in kind... for someone of his jaded tastes, it would be a feast fit for a king.

Blood beaded in Dietrich's mouth; he had bitten his tongue quite without his realizing it, and he groaned at the metallic taste of it, licking his lips, giving them a fresh coat of color.

He took a long breath, deep and even.

*What the hell was taking those AX morons so long...*

There was so little backbone among Sforza's brood that he reckoned they ought to make the next logical evolutionary step and join the slugs.

Dietrich was sure Tres had spotted him earlier, during one of its patrol circuits around the perimeter. The Puppet Master had even given the robot a wave.

That was nearly ten minutes ago.

Perhaps the dolly wasn't programmed for greeting people. Or perhaps a hundred-odd Carabinieri or Vatican gendarmes were about to materialize from the Via dei Servi with shackles and machine guns, ready to haul him to di Medici's dungeons beneath Rome.

No, Dietrich decided. The Castello di Signa had been Inquisition territory... and Esther had been in Inquisition custody. He somehow doubted di Medici and his soldiers were on the AX's speed-dial.

The agents of the Special Services Annex were stupid, but he didn't think they were quite *that* stupid.

"Von Lohengrin."

*Speak of the devil...*
A crust had hardened over the snow, and with every step the surface cracked, the mineral crunch audible across the still, silent piazza. The heels and balls of their shoes made a path of shallow divots, like footprints braiding together on a swathe of wave-washed beach.

Dietrich recognized their treads instantly: it was not the first time he had met these men in the midst of snowfall.

"Da waren es nur noch vier..." he murmured.

Four of them.

Dietrich quickly took stock of his company: he recognized the Professor from Oltrarno, the careworn face that held a permanent grin somewhere in its creases, even when the older man was quite obviously irritated — as he was at that moment. The Professor's complexion was pale, his posture somehow crooked. He looked haggard. Worry had dug itself deep into the muscles of his jaw.

Despite the fact that both pistols were drawn and their safeties off, Tres's synthetic expression was as smooth as an electric kettle, the robot's cow-brown eyes perfectly placid. Even its hair looked as though it had been painted on, not a strand out of place.

Zamiel... Alucard... seemed far more human than when last his path had crossed the Puppet Master's. The creature from the Piazza Santo Spirito had looked more like what one would get if one somehow managed to cross a wolf and a monitor lizard with an oil slick, and decided what the new monstrosity really needed was a bunch of extra teeth.

The cloaked figure was a clear head higher than most people Dietrich would consider tall; he was very thin, and sported a thatch of tangled, matted black hair on top of a face that was so pale it was almost paper white. From a distance, the man looked as though he were sporting two horrendous scars on either side of his mouth, but as he drew closer, Dietrich noted that it was just the sheer size of his smile, twisting nearly to his ears... like the grin was attempting to cut his face in half.

Alucard's fingers, unnaturally jointed, were the size of butcher knives, and despite appearing human, his mouth could still barely close for the dozens of dagger-sharp teeth.

The Vampire tipped his goggles down the bridge of his nose, his crimson eyes exuding a confident authority.

Finally, Dietrich's appraisal landed on Abel Nightroad.

The priest was shorter than Alucard by about six inches — the fatigued stoop made the gap closer to ten. Dietrich's rust-colored eyes swept over him in a way that — had it been directed at, say, Esther Blanchett — would have earned him the pointy end of Krusnik 02's scythe. In the gray, vaguely opalescent air, Nightroad looked beautiful and dissolute, shirt open at his collar and filaments of silver falling over his eyes. Like a monument of marble, with juts and angles and cold, shaded parts the sun never touched.

An antique revolver appeared from a holster at his hip.

Dietrich's gaze roved languidly from Nightroad's face to his battered-looking antique gun — a service revolver, if the Puppet Master recalled, operated with a cylinder that typically held five or six rounds of ammunition... and unlike the AX's pet robot, the priest wasn't wearing a bandolier or carrying extra cartridges.

Not that Nightroad's trite human weapons had ever been the prize of the man's offensive arsenal...
Dietrich inventoried Abel's glorified period piece, the Professor's sword-cane, and Iqus's two double-barreled, semi-automatic pistols. In of themselves, they didn't account for much.

No, confirmed Marionettenspieler. It was not the weapons which gave him pause...

It was the men — and monsters — wielding them...

And they had Alucard, of course.

"Going to shoot me, Father? Your brat sister isn't here to finish the job properly, this time."

Nighetroad thumbed the hammer back. "You're playing a dangerous game, von Lohengrin," he said, his tone one of quiet devastation.

"Well, I am nothing if not audacious."

Dietrich could imagine Nighetroad's hackles standing on end under his copious layers of clerical accoutrements. "The autojägers who attacked Mr. Petros... and Miss Esther... that was you."

"My one regret," said the Puppet Master, "is that I wasn't able to let my Death Hunters take their time with the Chief Inquisitor. I still owe him one for fucking things over for me in Carthage... and now he's gone and destroyed thirty of them..."

Dietrich had felt every soldier fall, out on the Arno. Like strands of multifilament yarn interlaced on a loom, stretched tight, the death of each autojäger had caused the strands to recoil and snap against the Puppet Master's fingers. That blue-haired, militant maniac had severed Dietrich's connection to his troops like der Metzger hacking through connective tissue, hewing silverskin and ligament from muscle.

Meeting Nighetroad's eyes, Dietrich's answering smile turned lascivious, and his beautiful face satanic. "I'd take my time with Esther, though," he confided under his breath. "You know I would. I'd do the job... properly."

Better than you ever could, he didn't say.

Abel made a very inhuman growling sound. "I warn you, Puppet Master, if you have any intention of harming—"

"Peace, Pater." Dietrich raised his hands, fighting the urge to bait the priest further. The man was transparent. "I'm just here to talk."

"I've learned well not to trust anything that comes out of your mouth," seethed Nighetroad, his eyes brilliant, almost relucent in his pale face.

"That's fair, I suppose." Dietrich was under no illusion that the AX didn't trust him an inch, but if Abel Nighetroad and his merry band of abominations thought they could take him on, they were welcome to give it a go.

In fact, Dietrich would like nothing more.

When he felt like this, mad and scattered, harrowed by a constant subliminal hum, it was as if his hands had a life of their own. His whole body itched. He wanted to break things... glass, perhaps.

Or people.

He rather hoped they would decide to make a fight of it. He found himself filled with that familiar,
eager exaltation, as if a relay had been tripped in his mind.

"So glad you got my message, Iqus," sneered Dietrich, peering over Nightroad's shoulder. "As punctual as clockwork, pardon the expression. It's been a while, der Automat."

The robotic priest marched into the courtyard, its movements as fluid and precise as a well-oiled crankshaft. "Dietrich von Lohengrin, if it is My Lord's intention to negotiate the terms of truce and suspension of aggressive actions towards the Vatican Papal State—"

"Oh, nothing so grandiose. I speak only for myself. The rest of the Orden can go hang, for all I care."

The scowl had started out as a muscular twitch, the result of a social impulse Dietrich somehow doubted the Killing Doll's had any actual use for in its five years of operation. But it had no reason to change its expression, so it hadn't bothered resetting its facial muscles. No need for any new thoughts inside its head, Dietrich supposed.

Idle speculation was the province of humans, after all.

"Going rogue then, are you?" The Professor looked at Dietrich, eyebrows raised inquiringly. When the Puppet Master said nothing, he continued, not so much addressing his audience as reasoning aloud: "No... you don't have the backbone for it, I don't think. You may profess to resent your masters, Marionettenspieler," said the old man with a thin smile, "but a nest of vipers is a veritable haven of repose for a snake like you."

Dietrich sniffed, vaguely offended. "And here I thought the gentlemen of Albion were famed for their manners."

"The effort's wasted on you, my boy."

The Puppet Master stared back defiantly, eyes wide, mouth leering, a grin of sadistic satisfaction etched upon it. "Sforza's little toadeater... believe you me, Professor, if I thought it'd give me even the merest glimmer of satisfaction, I'd garrote you with your own intestines."

"So violent..."

Alucard's lower face fissured into that red-rimmed, hideous grin, bearing fangs that would have done justice to a doberman pinscher. "A declaration of war, perhaps? Excellent! I'll destroy you like I destroyed that white demon on the ice!"

Right.

Dietrich thought back to the Contra Mundi's arrival aboard the Red Baron...

He had appeared to Isaak in a celestial apparition of white and gold: an uncanny, androgynous creature with the despotic pout of the beautiful, the insufficiently loved. His complexion had been near translucent, as pale and dangerous as ice under a waning moon, burning low and blue through the branches of rime-cased trees.

Someone — or something — had blown a hole through his torso.

Black viscera had percolated from his insides, the microscopic monsters in the gore sucking impotently at the air like filthy leeches. There had been so much blood. It had poured from the ragged aperture in a steady torrent, like oil in rainwater, soaking into Cain's white robes, speckling the scabbard of his lance, constellating the floor like cast bones in a pagan divination. The Krusnik...
had not reacted to the injury, merely glancing over his stomach as his intestines sloughed out of him.

Nothing managed to put things into perspective quite like remembering that the Contra Mundi, the Enemy of the World, was very seriously injured and stuck in his regeneration tank, bones knitting back together, tissues reconstituting, caught halfway between life and death.

And Alucard was the one who put him there...

"You certainly did a number on Lord Cain, Vampire," noted Dietrich. He brushed away a stray lock of hair that had fallen over his cheek. "Should have seen Isaak's face... all that fear and frustration certainly disabused me of the notion that his plans to intercept Esther had been anything but a colossal failure."

"Aitsu..." A near epileptic tremor convulsed Nightroad's hands as he made some small, involuntary gesture that was recognizably God-fearing. "He... tried to take Esther..."

"Abel..." hissed the Professor. "Be careful."

"Oh, didn't you know, Pater?" Dietrich pretended to inspect one pristine fingernail. "Wouldn't surprise me if the air-headed little idiot thought she hallucinated the whole thing..." The corner of his mouth pulled skyward in a sneer. "She was certainly injured enough, eh Abel? I'll hand it to your Church, the extremists among your number know their craft better than I do..."

The Puppet Master's words seemed to yank Nightroad back through past hurts, forcing the Father to confront Esther's ordeal all over again, its crystal splinters tearing at the soft sides of the man's throat until Dietrich thought he might choke. Abel shook his head like a horse brushing off flies and when he looked at the Puppet Master, his face was ash-white, terrified and panicked and furious... the emotions only vaguely interconnected with each other, like atoms whirling around in magnificent isolation — the look of a man who might cry out in his sleep at night, like a child. The rims of his eyes showed red. Dietrich backed up a step — just one — as the twin tines of fangs pushed through the line of the priest's lips.

"Get a hold of yourself, Papist," said Alucard shortly, lip curling. He glowered at Dietrich. "The world would be so boring without skinny little shits like you in it to amuse me... but I ceased giving a tinker's damn about you the moment you used Walter's wires on me in Oltrarno."

"So unless you have anything useful to say, you may as well spare yourself the breath... and us the abuse of your prattle."

His tone dripping condescension, Dietrich crooned, "Ah... but children, I've come to tell you a story. That's how this works, right? L'Opera dei Pupi... puppet theater. I'm simply acting according to my station." He twisted his wrist, pinching his fingers together, spinning the florin on the slick edge of the fountain. When the coin fell, he picked it up and did it again, counting. Over the last hour, it had fallen tail's side up thirteen times. Eighteen times it was down. "And since you all keep threatening to kill me, I believe I'm allowed this small luxury so long as my life is at risk. Don't you?"

"If I see so much as an errant string," declared Alucard without irony, "I'll rip out your throat before your next breath escapes it."

"All bark and no bite, mutt," said Dietrich, simpering, "It's a tactic with a very high face value which is quickly pricing itself out of the market, wouldn't you agree?"
"Eu nu fac amenințări... I do not make idle threats."

"And it's not as though a contest of numbers would work in your favor, von Lohengrin," noted the Professor. The old man was leaning on his cane, regarding Dietrich with cool speculation. It seemed the his style to cast about for a witty retort pertinent to the occasion, though it made Dietrich want to strangle him. "Even without Alucard and Abel's considerable set of... shall we say, skills? Talents? Well," the Albionian bobbed his shoulders in a noncommittal shrug, "even without those... I am not without combat experience myself, and though Tres here usually isn't the sort for holding grudges, he doubtless remembers your innumerable aggressions against Lady Caterina."

"Positive," affirmed Tres, the single word tolling with the bold, resounding stroke of a funeral knell.

"Do give me some credit, you two..." Dietrich plucked the florin from between his fingers, flicking it into the sky. Taking a deep breath and whispering an orison for steady hands, Dietrich's thumb and forefinger curled in a motion almost like a summons. In one fluid movement, something cut the coin cleanly in two. The Puppet Master managed to pluck both halves from the air.

"Being a loner is no fun at all," he said as truculently as possible. Dietrich twitched his fingers a second time. "So I brought some friends with me."

A roar began to build at the periphery of the piazza, squalling and shaking like beaten babies. With a sort of heavy-fisted dexterity — their hunched, muscular bodies heaving and wheezing and shuddering, their dribbling jaws twitching in anticipation — a cadre of axe-wielding Death Hunters lumbered out from behind the market stalls. Dressed in dark armor and black military overcoats, they shambled like passionate drunks, legs and heads lilting listless, as though weighted by wine's thick dregs.

No sooner had the Death Hunters stopped their forward advance than Dietrich found himself staring down the double-barrel of an enormous pistol, laser sights fixed intractably on his forehead. It was an absurdly accurate weapon, if he remembered correctly; coupled with the fact that a certain Father Tres was the one aiming it, Dietrich figured his chances of survival, should the robot pull the trigger, didn't bear mentioning.

"Shit," muttered Abel, bristling. He raised his revolver.

With a harsh whispering of steel the Professor's sword was in his hand, its edge leveled at Dietrich's throat.

Alucard's tongue lolled from between his teeth. "I did warn you, boy…"

"Tell your dog to heel, AX," said Marionettenspieler, smirking.

"If I'm a dog, then you're dog food."

"Don't you want to hear what I have to say? It concerns you, you know."

Dietrich thought he could see a faint snicker flicker about Alucard's lips: the mirth of a creature who looked down from a great height on the characters of lesser beings. "I don't give a damn."

"Fifty two hostiles confirmed," intoned Tres. "Rewriting resident tactical programming to genocide mode. My Lord," it said stonily, turning to Wordsworth, "I suggest you retreat to a safe distance."

"Don't you go treating me like an invalid, Tres," grumbled the Professor. The creases in his face congealed into an uneasy frown. He shifted from one brogue to the other. "I'm not some doddering
"Negative. Approximately six months ago, this unit, along with the Chief of the Department of Inquisition and the Earl of Memphis, combated the like of these hostiles in Carthage. The conflict skewed in the hostiles' favor, even with the aid of My Lords Orsini and Fortuna." The robot paused. "You, Professor, are significantly less vigorous than both."

The blunt accuracy of the observation caused the Professor to smile reluctantly. He snorted: "I sometimes hate how sensible you are, Tres."

"Positive."

"Nevertheless," He flashed a grim little grin at the robotic priest, who scowled back. "I'm not about to turn tail and flee, now am I?"

The exquisitely crafted, purposeful edges of its face suggested that a long-suffering frown was Iqus's natural expression. "Your obstinacy is ill-advised."

Dietrich found himself biting the inside of his cheek to keep from a derisive chuckle. "They ought to print that beneath the AX's coat of arms, eh? *Auribus teneo lupum*. But my Death Hunters are just insurance. As I said, all I want to do is tell my story... and give Alucard a little proposal."

The Vampire in question stood erect, carved from dark granite into a form of supple elegance and power. A sneer curved his mouth and deepened the tiny lines that fanned from the corners of his eyes. He tilted his head skyward, as though he were sniffing the air.

"I can smell it on you. The aroma of war... of men being strangled, of women being sliced apart and cut down where they stand. A bouquet of death. What a cruel little boy you are..."

"Takes one to know one, Vampire." Dietrich let out a sigh, draining the last of his breath from his lungs. "Return with me to Germanicus."

It didn't take someone of Marionettenspieler's preternatural awareness of fine detail to detect Alucard's form shaking with silent, gloating laughter. Even in a bad mood, he doubtless found Dietrich childish.

Naïve.

The Puppet Master drew in a short breath, staring up at Alucard's hateful face before pressing on, trying to keep his temper at a low simmer: "Stand up and reclaim this world from the Vatican, those Catholics you once hated, who flee from your kind in terror even as they abuse and torture young women in the name of their righteousness. In the name of their God. Send a message to the Church that you won't be controlled by them."

"So you can earn back your Lord's favor after the Knight Templar broke your little puppets?" mocked Alucard. "You're pathetic... why would I bother wasting my time with a loathsome little cockroach like you? Some prattling insect buzzing about, pollinating the air with his stupidity..."

When Alucard took a step forward, the light from one of the street lamps fell on the side of his face, and, for the first time, Dietrich saw the marks of fatigue under his eyes. "You bore me, Păpușar. Why don't you fly back to your hive like a good little drone?"

Dietrich could feel his anger scratching at him, wedged in the space where the two halves of his ribcage came together.

Oh, how he despised being ordered around...
"Fealty isn't an obligation," he ground out. "You don't owe the Church your loyalty just because some cow-eyed nun gave your collar a tug. Loyalty is *pointless,*" spat Dietrich, a fraction of a laugh breaking through the bitterness. Then he favored the AX agents with a look of utter contempt. "And yet... you all think there's a point to what you're doing. You think it *matters.*"

"Yes." The Professor made a spire with his fingers. "I daresay there's a point to most things from one perspective or another. The point here being," he went on with renewed resolve and chanced a glance at Alucard, "to get this fellow back where he belongs... and to keep him from falling into the hands of troublemakers like you."

Dietrich raised his voice a notch: "They talk about you like you're a gun or a cannon. You're just a weapon to them, Vampire. Isaak's told me all about the Cromwell Invocation... the relationship between you and your Masters is symbiotic, yes, but in a delicate balance. You owe your Master obedience, and she in turn must show only strength. Not that I care, but such obligations are usually reciprocal, are they not? And contingent. Should either fail in their obligation, it is the duty of the other to destroy them." He placed the tip of his tongue on the roof of his mouth, behind his front teeth. He laid a hand just below his stomach. "And trust me, Alucard... you could do better. Esther is so *easily* broken..."

Nightroad's eyes glinted cold, like chips of blue ice.

But, if it were possible, Alucard seemed even more upset...

"În momentul ăsta ar trebui să tacă din gură!" he swore, teeth bared to such an obscene degree, the edges of his mouth appeared to vanish, as though maggots had eaten his lips and burrowed into his flesh and started pushing out his fangs. "Pathetic piece of shit... I was *hers.* Because I wanted her, I could not bear to give her up. I wanted her to know me, know the worst. See all of me. I wanted her to bind herself to me... so I could never leave her side. You know *nothing.*" He clenched his fists so tightly, Dietrich could see the knucklebones bulging through the fabric of his gloves. "If you say a word against my Master," he declared. "I will kick your teeth so far down your throat you'll be shitting them out."

The Puppet Master was struck with the distinct impression Alucard was not, in that moment, referring to Esther Blanchett.

*Interesting.*

"Loyalty is a contrivance of coincidence, Vampire," Dietrich scoffed. "The only thing it truly engenders is proximity. And sometimes not even that, as plenty of the world's bastards, including a certain Secretary of the Doctrine of the Faith, will be glad to tell you."

Some distance away, the Professor's face screwed up. "We want nothing to do with you or the Orden, Puppet Master," he announced gravely. "Considering what your autojägers did to Sister Esther and Brother Petros, you would be fortunate — very fortunate, indeed — to escape this piazza with your life." Wordsworth made a noncommittal sound. "Give my most insincere regards to Butler."

Dietrich caught the tip of his tongue between his teeth.

"Leave this place, von Lohengrin," said Abel softly, his voice low and resonant with some ambiguous, barely-restrained emotion; he seemed so withered and shrunken. "You are a vicious, spiteful child, and your battle was lost on the river."

"This unit recommends immediate withdrawal, Dietrich von Lohengrin," parroted Iqus.
"The show is over," agreed the Professor. "The curtain's fallen, you've taken your bow. It's high time you and your little "friends" made your exit... before Alucard here decides he's getting peckish..."

"Everything the AX has told you, Son of the Dragon," announced Dietrich, wresting Alucard's attention back to him, "everything you've learned from that idiot Professor and his schizophrenic memories has been so carefully curated it's a small wonder the old man's eyes haven't turned brown. He's tried so very hard to keep the truth from you, the way priests," he spat the word like a curse, "so often do.

"Helping them just means hollowing yourself out to make a space for them to crawl inside. And you do it, because that's what servants are supposed to do, and because it's so good to be needed. Just for a little while. If you're a fish, and you live in a fishbowl, you have a duty to preserve the fishbowl.

"But the Professor didn't tell you everything, Alucard. Because if he had, you would never ally yourself with the AX." Dietrich's eyes drifted around the piazza, before fixing on Nightroad's face. For an instant, they blazed clear and pellucid with accusation. "If you knew the truth, Vampire, you'd rip Abel Nightroad's heart from his chest."

"This is not an optimal use of time," said Tres. The robot wore the vacant expression bored youths assumed when doing nothing was preferable to some imminent, uninviting task. "These accusations are too ambiguous: they must be accompanied by vocal or visual data."

"Well, I did promise you a story, didn't I? And you happened to mention Carthage a little while ago, Father Tres."

Nightroad touched a finger to the bridge of his nose, absent-mindedly attempting to reposition his spectacles, almost opaque with greasy thumbprints. The priest's glistening blue eyes were wide open, but his jaw had clamped shut. His cassocked flanks shuddered with ragged breath.

"I spent quite a while in Carthage, as you well know," Dietrich went on. "For all its sunshine, it's a dark place, where all the world's ancient and most dangerous secrets are kept. There are ghosts down there, sleeping all around the ruins, in the sand and in the living rock, in the spaces between spaces. One is liable to stumble across any number of interesting things."

Snowflakes, as white and elaborate as paper insect wings, flapped through the darkness and alighted on the ice-slicked statuary, a chiaroscuro of light and dark — diaphanous as a half-remembered dream in some corner of the mind. The flutter of insubstantial moths, bugs crawling in the system.

Ghosts in the machine.

Watching Alucard, it was clear that the Vampire was making a not insignificant physical effort to keep from biting Dietrich's head clean off. "If you're quite finished, I believe it's high time to educate you on how a real monster does battle..."

"There's a sad story I heard once, Alucard." Dietrich said the name as though tasting it, savoring. "Have you read Virgil? I imagine you have. Do you know the one where Élissa and Aeneas fall in love by the management of Juno and Venus?"

The Professor's gaze sharpened even as his expression grew strained.

Tres cocked its head to one side.
But Nightroad had gone ominously still, adopting a silence which the merest movement of air might shatter.

"I thought Élissa might get your attention, AX." Dietrich paused for a few seconds, then leaned forward with his elbows braced on his knees, pale hands dangling, unfolding the mystery as he adjusted his perch.

"I know what you're thinking, Alucard," he said in a resigned tone of voice, "it's just an old story, and like you, I've never been one to take these sorts of things seriously! But I must confess..." Dietrich chuckled perversely: "This is one of those tales that reveals the poverty of their religion," he gestured vaguely towards Abel, Tres, and Wordsworth, "most distinctly. There's probably some cheap biblical platitude about the shepherd leading the most wayward of his flock, and indeed, bringing stray ewes back into the fold is one thing... but wolves?" He smirked. "That's not foolhardy... that's hypocritical.

"The story goes something like this: when Élissa, also called Queen Dido, sees Aeneas' fleet leaving the harbor, she curses him and proclaims endless hate between Carthage and the descendants of Troy. In such a night stood Dido with a willow in her hand upon the wild seashore, and waft her love to come again to Carthage... in her righteous grief, Élissa ascend her own funeral pyre and then falls on her sword."

"Dietrich..." Abel staggered as he sucked in a whooping gasp of air. "Stop it..."

_P Marionettenspieler_ smiled — a cruel, cold, gloating smile. He was thoroughly enjoying himself... for perhaps the first time since Radu in Byzantium. "I don't want to, Father. And I do so hate it when people order me around..."

"At any rate, you know the Virgil version now. This is what really happened, though: in one of the final battles of the Dark Ages, the Returners, the forebears of the Empire, destroyed the nation of Tunisia. Humanity's last stand in Northern Africa took place in Carthage, in a walled citadel called the Byrsa. It was there that the commander of the Carthaginian armies, a woman who called herself Élissa, after that ancient queen, would meet her end.

"Like Aeneas, the last desperate dregs of the human race came to Élissa's stronghold suppliant and impoverished, the aura of their martial failures wrapped around them like a cloak. Élissa felt in her heart the tender contempt of the strong for the unlucky, but it was mixed with something else... a hunger that wormed through her bones and left them hollow, to be filled with fire. She wanted to pick up the shards of a ruined society and help rebuild civilization.

"So for three days and three nights, she held out against the vampire armies. But when it grew clear that the humans didn't have a chance in hell of defending Carthage, Élissa did what any operatic heroine would do at such a moment: she sacrificed herself.

"Despairing Dido, queen of ancient Carthage, allowed herself to be slain rather than face the prospect of Aeneas — the embodiment of humanity's hope — lifting anchor and sailing away forever.

"When the sun rose on the fourth day, a single man — the Contra Mundi himself — walked across the desert. He carried with him the body of First Lieutenant Élissa dar Cheraiet. The battle was won. Carthage was free. Dido was deified and worshipped as long as the city endured. The end.

"Isn't it a sad story? Isn't it tragic, Father?"

Nightroad's head had lowered towards his chest, his eyes narrowed with distressed concentration,
as if he couldn't quite remember who he was.

As if he didn't want to.

His gaze grew haunted. The grief, the vile rage, the despair in his gray, mangled expression forecasted a spiritual hopelessness, an anguish at being forced to suffer such an irremediable vivisection of the past.

Alucard's eyes were filled with light — not the poetic light of passionate emotion or vitality, but a harsh, unnatural fluorescence. They were like two spitting candle flames casting faint shadows.

"What does this horseshit," he snarled, "matter to me..."

Cold licked at Dietrich's face and crept under his clothes, spreading across his skin like the lacy tide on a frigid winter beach. He could feel a deep, insidious chill seeping through his skin, crawling into his marrow, clotting his blood. The cold of the snow felt suddenly caustic, burning, like liquid nitrogen.

A bilious taste rushed into Dietrich's mouth, a lurch of instinctual fear with nowhere else to go.

"Walter..." breathed Alucard. He turned to look at the Professor for the first time, and the unnatural calmness in his tone was far more frightening than his usual anger. "Cheriaiet..."

"From..." The old academic swallowed — he masked his fear by rushing though a sentence as if worried that he might forget how it ended, and then drawing out the last word to make up for the hurry. "It's... from the French... pour l'éminence de qualité personnelle... Chevalier, the old Franc term for—"

"For a Knight," finished Alucard, swaying slightly. "A Knight of Great Britain... a Protestant Knight..."

Dietrich grinned, relishing the drama. "Think about it: humanity on the brink of extinction... the Carthaginian forces with no ammunition, no reinforcements, precious few rations. To defeat the Enemy of the World under such conditions would take more than a minor miracle. It would take something just short of divine intervention, plus luck, plus, well... some other element..."

"I can see why Butler keeps you on such a short lead," said the Professor, his hand straying to the hilt of his sword. "You're trying even my patience. Do be quiet and—"

"Tacă dracului din gură!"

Wordsworth went immediately silent, his mouth shutting with an audible clack of molars.

Something shifted on the ground beneath Dietrich's feet — several long spiders of shadow, scuttling across the cobbles as they ran out of sight behind the fountain. It may have been a trick of the light, reflections on the ice, but the Puppet Master thought several of the febrile tendrils had eyes… their slow, languid blinking playing at the peripheries of his vision, almost lost in the gloom. They moved like ghosts, and, detached from the body which cast them, appeared to writhe in torment.

When Alucard spoke, his maw was deep with teeth: "This Cheriaiet... who was she?"

Dietrich trusted he wouldn't have to spell it out for the ancient Vampire. He knew Alucard would have learned the truth, eventually — he had an eternity, after all, to figure it out from deep within the cerebral convolutions of his own memories, his suspicions, at last, turning to certainties, some
of them as harsh as light on ill-adapted eyes.

Still, Alucard's own capacity for shock-absorption meant he was unlikely to come slinking over to the Orden at the merest flip of a florin; the Puppet Master was going to have to try a more direct approach...

"I have another translation for you, Bird of Hermes." His rusty eyes grazed the Vampire's expression like a needle over vinyl grooves, reassembling them into uniform arcades and legible thoughts. "On the walls of the Pinacoteca Vaticana, in Rome, there is a tile mosaic depicting the Siege of Carthage. The artwork portrays Dido, or First Lieutenant Dar Cheraiet, as a winged figure — an angel — armed with a spear and a massive cannon gun. It conveys a sense of action and triumph, as though the soldier were descending to alight upon the gates of the ancient city."

Dietrich's blood thumped hard through his temples. "The vaulted mosaic, Alucard," he said with mock solemnity, as though confiding a deep, dark secret, "is called Victōria de Seraphim."

"Now... isn't that interesting? A maiden — unaging, ancient, capable of facing an army by herself?"

*Does it sound familiar?*

"Isn't that curious?"

*The way time works... deferral... just out of one's reach...*

Truth. Sometimes, it cast too harsh a light.

The ancient Vampire remained motionless for several minutes, a glassy, brittle brightness in his eyes. It was, Dietrich thought, the look of a creature forced to confront one of his worst fears, and then finding that he simply wasn't ready for it. The realization, the *understanding*, forced its way into his head like a pincushion of syringe needles, sucking out his most precious memories.

Leaving little more than a husk, his eyes cold and empty.

"Contra Mundi, the ones who killed her, were a pair. Brothers, in fact. My own Lord... and his twin. *And the Lord said unto Cain, where is thy brother?*" Dietrich, no longer able to help himself, began to giggle: a low, snuffling laugh in the back of his throat and in his nose. "*Where is Abel?*"

"*Fratris mei custos sum...*" Alucard finished the verse, gaze seething with the red candor of the satanically fallen — horrific, tragic... both furious and vulnerable.

He turned away from Dietrich to face Abel Nightroad.

The Father looked as though he was feeling around inside himself for grief, or horror, or rage at his own transgressions. But all he seemed sensible to — evidenced in the hunch of his shoulders and the fetal arch of his back — was the dulled tension in his muscles as he held himself in place, neither moving nor at rest. The whites of his eyes glistened, like a spooked horse.

"Why so quiet, Father?" sneered Dietrich. "All these centuries you've endured, all these lives you've lived... who has died to keep you in them? How many souls has it taken to allow you your numbness?"

A war of primordial grief waged on the Vampire's face, misaligning his features. Dietrich registered an almost physical frisson in the air, an irradiation that made his fingers tremble and his pulse quicken, his senses suddenly heightened as though wise to the presence of danger, the faint noise of pursuit. It was simultaneously the feather-light tread of the panther, the hiss of the blade,
the soft and deadly flap of the wings of an angel of death. A single note, held in an amber suspension of time, like a charcoal drawing of Icarus falling. It was sad and fierce all at once, alive with a lonely purity. It went on and on, until Dietrich felt his own lungs burning from having unconsciously stoppered his breathing.

"Did you kill her, Papist?" asked Alucard with strange, disaffected calm, as though observing the plight of another man far distant from himself. There was cold fury, black as night, in those words. Pure menace, the threat of death, growing cold and hard inside the Vampire's throat.

"My Lord Father Nightroad," said Tres with the smooth ease of water washing over window glass. "It would be advisable for you to retreat immediately."

"Tres… I…"

"Abel," said the Professor quickly. He didn't look at Nightroad, but kept his narrowed gaze on Alucard. "Go. Run."

"Yes, do go on, Abel," goaded Dietrich, a poker to smoldering embers, stirring it to flame. "Flee. No Seth to turn me into a pillar of salt... no Esther to do a palm print authentication. No one to save you, now. Go run and hide for another nine hundred years..."

The priest didn't move. He stood frozen in the middle of the piazza, like the donkey in Aesop's fable who couldn't choose between bales of hay.

Behind the opaque sheen of his eyes, like two scummy blue pools, Nightroad's focus turned inward, laboring in webs of war and bloodshed spun long before the birth of the current generation — haunted by horrors, still so raw in his memory, whose provenances dated back to the Dark Ages.

Dietrich cocked his head, thinking for a moment of an ornamental bookmark he'd once found fallen from the lectern Bible of Saint Matthias in István — the once-precious relic tumbled in the ash and charcoal of the gutted cathedral.

Abel and Alucard... two beings so old they were antique, driven nearly insane by the howling emptiness in their hearts and wrapped only in the thin, transient mantles of temporary lucidity; terrified, because an innate desire lay in the bottom reaches of their minds for the poison of grief and despair that was slowly killing them. They had wasted most of their long and ghostly lives wandering the future and the past on their hind legs, looking for meaning, only to find that they were, in the end, completely, utterly alone.

They were almost fated, thought Dietrich ruefully.

A dragon with two heads.

Dietrich understood why ancient monsters were so often rendered as polycephalous things made of distinct creatures — multiple heads, multiple hearts, multiple minds. Chimeras and hydras and Beasts of Revelation. There was strength in such a combination of opposites, in the creation of amaranthine horrors with grotesque features and proportions, mad faceless gods screaming blindly into the darkness... conjoined twins sharing their steaming hearts.

Dead bodies and dead souls pumping their last thick liquids into a slick, organic puddle, an orgy of metal and meat...

A half minute or two trailed off before Abel and Dietrich's wandering thoughts returned to reality.
"I…” Nightroad shuddered. Slowly, he raised his head — his face almost as gray as his hair, his eyes forecasting a desolation Dietrich had yet to imagine. A skeletal wreck of a man.

*How beautiful...*

"... I did."

"But all's fair in love and war, right?" said Dietrich as a matter of fact, rapping on the side of his head with the knuckle of his long, pale forefinger. "Except... violence was a bloody convent from which not even the most self-righteous saint could have steered you, Lord Abel. You wanted death, and having tasted it, you only craved it more. Élissa ventured into the desert, alone, and there offered herself to the Contra Mundi, if only he would spare the city and its people. So, naturally, you murdered her." The Puppet Master shrugged. "She followed her destiny to its appointed end, and never once turned coward. She forswore the devil. She had character, and people with character tend to receive the short end of the stick in biblical stories, eh Father?"

"A war with the future of the entire human race at stake," murmured Alucard, something close to wonder in his words, "as close to hell as any mortal could imagine. And what did she do? What fate did she choose... she fought... she stood her ground... good girl, Seras... Well done, Policegirl..."

"I... she was just another soldier." The Father spoke with a nauseous fatigue, the kind that came after the soul had lost its mooring, and, half-drowning, succumbed to the tide. His expression became lost in its own shadow — a slender silhouette against the snow. He needed to force out an explanation or denial, but no words could get past his lips. Alucard's presence seemed to paralyze him, an effect far more irresistible than anything Dietrich had yet achieved.

The Puppet Master watched the priest take another few steps forward until the two ancient monsters were no more than a foot apart. Nightroad looked as though he might very well keel over from the shock. Yet somehow, he forced his mouth to shape the words: "I... did not... didn't know..."

His voice was hardly loud enough to count as a whisper. Certainly, nobody else in the piazza could have heard him, yet Abel could not control his breathing to manage anything more.

"I didn't know... I..."

*I am so sorry*, his eyes said, and said it eloquently, begging to be believed. His gaze was one of a man in desperate need of mercy. A supplication built on old shames, new hurts, sins both vast and tiny, a thousand embroideries on a basic truth.

But there was no reaction on Alucard's face.

"Ar fi fost vreo diferență dacă ai fi știut?" he asked instead, lip crimping.

Nightroad's guts had been torn open — Abel hemorrhaged anguish, just as Cain hemorrhaged lifeblood. The waves of despair came faster and faster, disconnected, washing over him. Every time he tried to heal himself, heaving air, the seams tore all over again. His eyes were pleading, trying to outpace tears, struggling to reach something beyond the grasp of his gaze.

And over each stuttered breath, Dietrich heard the man's murmurs, stray fragments, small sounds of sorrow and remorse.

"No," gasped Abel. "No... if I had known... it..."
"It would not have made a difference."

The admission struck the Puppet Master with unexpected force, leaving him with the distinct sensation that he was in a lift and had left his stomach back in the basement.

Alucard's entire body began to hum. Tres — clever machine that it was — had pivoted both its pistols away from the Death Hunters until they were pointed, instead, at the Vampire's head.

Dietrich swayed where he stood, unable to tear his eyes away as the agitation in the air ratched to the tension of a strained bowstring. Another intense wave of cold washed over him. *Marionettenspieler*’s whole body quaked with anticipation, his fists clenching and unclenching greedily. He arched his neck; the moisture of melted snow shining on his scarlet lips and on his red tongue.

"Those who refuse to give up," murmured Alucard, "are entitled to their time to trample upon the weak."

And then the Vampire vanished in a corkscrew of shadow.

"Damnation," swore Wordsworth.

"Target lost," announced Tres.

The Vampire's disembodied voice echoed endlessly inside their heads, welling out of solitude and suffering — Alucard consisted of a million selves. His voice oscillated not merely between two poles, such as the body and the spirit or the saint and the sinner, but between thousands and thousands.

On and on... alive and dead. Everywhere... and nowhere...

"But if you killed her, Priest, well… for honor's sake… *I must trample upon the weak for her*..."

Dietrich's fingers twitched in their near-invisible cradles of twine...

"Releasing Control Art Restriction Systems... commencing the Cromwell Invocation. Ability restrictions lifted for limited use until the enemy has been rendered silent."

Abel obviously recognized the incantation and made an effort to shield himself, leveling his pistol, but not soon enough as a violent shockwave knocked him off his feet. His shoulders slammed into a wall fifty yards across the piazza, throwing up a shower of plaster particles that whirled gently downwards, like a snowstorm in a paperweight. The halo of light about the priest's head did little to alleviate the dreadful grinding of his shattered bones.

Nightroad's knees buckled and he collapsed to the ground, in no state to mount a defense. His blood coagulated to the consistency of glue on the icy cobbles.

"Abel!" bellowed the Professor.

"Commencing combat," announced Tres.

"This isn't your fight, Tin Man." Dietrich laughed. "*You're a machine, a simple vehicle, no more worthy of my time than the car that brought me here!* *Marionettenspieler* knuckled his hands — the threads braided between his fingers quivered. "You and the old man can sort out your differences with my friends here..."
The Death Hunters were heavy, clumsy creatures, confined in the cage of their dead flesh. Their perceptions were coarse and brutish. They could divine nothing clearly, nothing with certainty.

With the help of his strings, however, and by sheer volume of numbers, they made an astonishingly effective fighting force.

The robot's features hardened with a boorish kind of determination. There was nothing heroic in Iqus's expression, no semblance of valor or noble resolution. It was machine with a pair of pistols and a moronic refusal to stand down.

Tres fired its guns at a rate that would have cramped any normal human's hands. There was, thought Dietrich gleefully, a sick sort of beauty in the brutal, passionless proficiency with which the robot dispatched each Death Hunter, reducing them to so many wet, red pieces. They seemed to dissolve in the air whenever a silver-tipped bullet found its mark. First went the legs, the gray sinews and tissues beneath the glossy, hermetically-sealed suit disintegrating in a fine crimson mist. Then the fabric of the muscular torso splintered and cracked like old, perished rubber, ground down to a spray. For an instant, the black, helmeted head would be left hovering in mid-air. Finally, Tres peppered the sutured skull with holes, until it was little more than clumps of bone and brain matter, like gray cauliflower.

Soon, the piazza was dotted with ragged uniforms and glistening lumps of meat.

The Professor, meanwhile, leapt aside, avoiding injury by the barest inch, and instinctively raised his walking cane, unsheathed, the blade glinting. One of the Death Hunters growled threateningly and Wordsworth lowered his arm, raising his other hand in what the senile fool no doubt intended to be a placating, reassuring gesture.

"Easy now, old boy," he soothed, as if he were talking to a disgruntled rottweiler. "There's no need to be afraid of me. I don't mean you any harm—"

The axe came down. The Professor held his blade even, a perfect, disciplined horizon, level with his nose. He managed to stall the Death Hunter's swing, but his sword shivered under the brutality of corpse's compelling strength. The old man parried each successive strike with an aptitude belayed by his age. Despite the Death Hunter's steady attack, the Professor kept his muscles relaxed, his balance sure. His attention followed his opponent's movements no matter how small, adjusting his stance, looking for weaknesses.

Sensing an opening, the Professor's right arm swept upwards. His sword struck the throat of the Death Hunter's ax with surprising force, sending it spinning end-over-end through the air. Without a mistep, the Professor ran his sword neatly up and through the Death Hunter's chin. He kicked the hissing, gurgling creature away before wrenching his cane free. One of his brogues lashed out at head height, which brought his heel level with another Death Hunter's chest. The heel of his shoe caught the corpse in the solar plexus, and there was a sound like pottery cracking. The Professor fell backwards to absorb the momentum and rolled over his own shoulder.

Without a word passing between them, Tres immediately reached down and hauled Wordsworth to his feet. They continued to fight with ferocious efficiency, the twin report of pistols thundering around the piazza, drowning out the whispered hiss of the sword.

But Dietrich's attention was drawn to...

"Nightroad!"

Alucard had relinquished all semblance of human shape. A clotted darkness gathered at the center
of the piazza: a heaving, gangrenous mass of blackness bulging out of the shadows like something retched from the back of reality's throat. It started small, but it bubbled bigger every second. Rising black and ugly through the veins in what had been Alucard's feet, up and up, bursting his cells and filling his lungs, encasing itself around his bones and finally spilling from his eyes, tacky like tar. It tumbled from his mouth in a howl of rage so deep it shook Dietrich's teeth and caused the hairs to rise on the back of his neck.

The Vampire — or whatever he had become — hurt the eyes to look at it, as though a void at Alucard's center had absorbed all available light. Dietrich could hear it, too. A faint rushing noise at first, like the hiss of a distant waterfall, but growing louder moment by moment. Soon it sounded like the roar of a crowd, a thousand voices crying out for mercy: screaming in agony and despair.

Dietrich could feel Alucard's malevolence in the turgid air all around him. Something opened in the shadowy face with a wet, hollow noise, the massive head mostly teeth, contained in a yawning chasm of a mouth. "Abel Nightroad..." escaped from the orifice, born on dead androtting breath.

Alucard's features looked to Dietrich even more horrific with his shifting, red-limned shadows — dark things, alive, crawling across the ashen apparition of his face, the exposed sinews snapping in its rictus grin. He saw glistening ropes of suppuration around the edges of his many eye sockets — the Puppet Master counted at least thirty of them, livid crimson, like burning potassium chlorate — the pulped flesh that remained slopping over bare bone. The pale, geodesic oval of Alucard's head was little more than an embolism in the midst of the contorted appendages of shadow and flesh. Only the dark, glowing eyes spoke of the remnants of a human intelligence — a spark of life corrupted beyond words and reason.

Dietrich found his senses ambushed. The thick scent of blood-stained earth. The howl and rustle of wind. The taste of ash on his lips. Thrashing tendrils of smoke lacerating his face. Gaping wounds seeping blood and gore. Smashed teeth grinding together. An amorphous, seething mass of inarticulate shapes and chimeric forms.

In one moment, an enormous mongrel with ragged fur pulled tight over starvation ribs, lean, elongated limbs tipped with five-fingered claws. At least three pairs of red eyes blazing over a sharpened dog's snout, a pink tongue lolling out between yellow teeth...

Another moment: a swarm of black wasps, a spaghettied snarl of slick-backed centipedes, a boiling cloud of mosquitoes, the wings humming sonnets about sickness and disease while their mouths swallowed maggots. The insects swollen, engorged by a constant flow of blood and putrid matter...

Another: a storm of blood-red, demoniac phantoms hurling around each other as though buffeted by invisible winds; teeth bared, screaming defiance with voices like shattered glass...

For an instant, Dietrich got the crystal-clear impression Alucard was in excruciating pain.

He sensed it for a split second.

"Nu dau doi bani..." the disembodied voice barely a breath in Dietrich's ears, and yet it resonated like a jet engine. "Mi-ai luat ceva ce nu mai pot primi niciodată înapoi... O să te mâcelăresc că pe un mielușel!"

Alucard lunged at the prone AX priest...

... as a pair of bespectacled eyes snapped open, crimson rimmed with black, like garnet charred at the edges.
"Krusnik 02 Loading. Limitation at eighty percent... acknowledged."

Over a hunched, silhouetted figure, blue-white lightning blazed, and stuttering thunder chased it.

Abel Nightroad began to scream.
Awful daring of a moment's surrender...

Chapter Summary

For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.

Corinthians 15:21

Carthage

Tunis Governorate, Tunisia

2217 AD

Nights fell fast during the war.

Their enemies were creatures of darkness — daytime constituted a reprieve from the bloodshed and butchery, a reprieve that never felt, despite being the height of summer, sufficiently long enough.

The hours, during battle, flashed by at an immodest speed — even for her, for whom time held little meaning anymore. She retained only a hazy awareness of the months and years that had passed. Season after season, generation after generation, grinding together like rockflour in glacial melts, until the fine powder of centuries was indistinguishable from the vast, fluid mass of eternity.

And yet, impossibly, the war seemed to precipitate time in its solid form, like rocks weathered smooth and washed ashore.

She had been floating in a dream for so long, that when she broke on the banks of a nightmare she, too, was dashed to pieces.

Death, she decided, had always been a terrible thing to witness from the pedestal of immortality.

All around her, the darkness was deepening, staining the sky in seams of crimson. The last low beats of sunlight glazed the white palaces and mosques, the steppe cliffs and promontories along the coast, running from the town of Sidi Bou Said in the north to the village of Le Kram in the south. Dew in the twilight wet the needles of the primroses and mustard bush, until the scrubby, ugly plants looked as though they were freckled with diamonds.

The sirocco wind blew grit from the desert. It came howling and wailing across the peninsula like the guttural cries of the dying — unearthly echoes which managed to worm their way into even the tiniest capillary reaches of her body. The woman's short tuft of blond hair rose to its roots, her nostrils flaring at the saltpeter and sulphur stench of spent munitions... the rank flavors of blood and sweat, urine and shit, sitting on her sinuses as fiercely as a broken nose.

The carcass of a combat zone... the desert as dead as the bodies littering it.

The woman who called herself Élissa dar Cheraïet turned towards the sea. Silent explosions inflamed the clouds — out over the molten ocean, incandescent thunderbolts lashed down from the
sky, erupting in fountains of boiling water.

"Warning barrage," murmured the regal figure at the First Lieutenant's side.

Élissa nodded an agreement. "I've given the order to move the civilians into the qanat, though if the blighter turns his cannons on the city proper, a fat load of good a bunch of sandstone plunge-pools are gonna do..."

"You're right. The karez system is too shallow to shield several thousand townspeople from that kind of firepower. However, I suspect he will confine the salvo to the Gulf of Tunis. Ishvara will not order a laser strike while his soldiers are quartered within Cartago, not after Nevşehir decimated Contra Mundi's ground troops in Paris. I suspect they can no longer afford to waste the infanteers."

The two women stood on the steps of one of the largest remaining structures — an ancient Byzantine cathedral. The façade at their backs was framed by two square towers, the junction of the wall falling beneath a cupola and surrounded by eight small steeplings. The two tallest towers had once been capped by teardrop-shaped flags, emblazoned with the crossed keys of the See of Rome.

One of the weathered scraps of fabric was constellated with bullet holes and hung slack in the wind, while its partner had snapped from its pole completely.

A junior officer had used it to patch a hole in her tent.

"We can't evacuate from the coast," surmised the First Lieutenant. "Not if we gotta contend with that kinda bombardment. 'Sides, these days we got more boats below the waterline than above it."

"Indeed. The fusillade is a message, meri jaan: no one will be leaving Cartago."

"So we're trapped here."

"It would appear so."

Élissa went quiet, stirring the dust with the toe of her boot. A sandgrouse caught her eye as it descended on a stooped acacia tree. The bird flitted in the black, brittle branches and, like Élissa, settled down to survey the soldiers bivouacked on the slopes below the Byrsa. Their tents lined the main road, like the long handle of a warming pan, running from the forests to the foothills of the Acropolium in neat little regiments of sagging canvas, punctuated by the occasional latrine or billie fire.

The sentries picked at their rations, filled their canteens, smoked cigarettes, looking like birds wanting to shove their tired heads under a free wing. Of those on patrol, Élissa counted twelve armed with simple shamshir swords; even though a few lucky buggers carried submachine guns, the First Lieutenant knew the reserves of silver-tipped rounds were running dangerously low.

The sandgrouse at landed Élissa's feet. The small, brown-feathered fledgling pecked at the dust, looking for morsels. The bird drew Élissa's eye to her right...

Like the motionless illusion of a madly spinning top, the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of the See of Rome stared vacantly into space, insensible to the grouse and Élissa both: cloistered and clinging to her silence, trying to make sense of the world.

She was an uncommonly tall, uncommonly graceful woman, shy and quiet, with a calm disposition, and far older than her appearance intimated. She carried a khopesh at her belt, but wore no armor,
adorned only in a diaphanous patolu. The double-ikat woven sari was the color of the sea, adorned in lapis lazuli, turquoise, gold and silver. Instead of parrots or flowers or elephants typical of the habit, her patolu was inlaid with fine sequins set in the pattern of celestial constellations, the most notable of which being the six stars of the Pleiades, representative of the six mothers who took care of newly born baby Kartikeya. Her bare arms and palms and forehead were filigreed in intricate whorls of henna; the designs resembled foliage in old chased ornaments, but with such a luxury of forms that of a hundred markings which at first appeared exactly the same, no two seemed alike upon a closer examination.

When she turned, her bangle bracelets jingled, and the mang-tikka on her brow glinted against the twilight, incandescent like an eye of fire. Her complexion, a dusky sienna, had been roasted closer to copper from weeks spent under the relentless Maghreb sun. She peered over the battlements, exposing the amber curve of her nape beneath the upsweep of hair a vivid, Venetian red, the same color as the Aurès Mountains in high summer, their limestone slopes fired by the light of the setting sun.

She was a woman of unparalleled piety, veiled like a bride of Christ. Beautiful almost beyond belief, her eyes a clear, citrine yellow, shining with the fervor of her passion and faith, the desperate dignity of a martyr.

Élissa pictured her standing at the summit of a remote mountaintop, the heavens opening and God congratulating the Holy Woman for her mercy. Asking her to join Him and watch as the stars burned down to dull orange cinders and the worlds around them broke their orbits and tumbled endlessly into the nothingness, everything once permanent pulled apart so effortlessly, like a ball of yarn.

A life into divinity.

The woman's name was Lilith.

The Naia Sancta... humanity's savior...

"I anticipate his making a studied assessment of the rationing we have put into effect, meri jaan," Lilith was saying, pulling Élissa from her well of introspection. "No doubt he has reached the conclusion that the population will starve to death quite soon."

"He's not wrong."

"Ishvara has already blockaded the harbor and choked the badawī roads into the desert. He has even posted sentries at the terminus of the qanat running from the groundwater aquifer. He intends to wage a war of attrition."

"Is he that patient?"

Lilith shook her head. The strain of vigil was evident in the hunch of her shoulders and the weariness in her eyes. "In troth, no. But there resides in his heart no great love for this conflict. The bloodied waters of disillusion have left a deposit on his soul."

The implication chafed at Élissa. "You keep sayin' that, Your Grace. But if he's havin' any faint stirrings of conscience, I've yet to see any indication of the fact."

The ghost of a smile. "And yet you allowed me to program the failsafe into Iblis's controls."

"Only 'cause I don't reckon we're ever gonna have to actually use it..."
"I pray not." Lilith sighed. "But I have known this man for a very long time. He is tired, *meri jaan*. He is tired and homesick and hurting, deep inside... and he is so very lost."

"His heart ain't innit anymore." Élissa snorted. "Then why the hell did Contra Mundi figure he could take Cartago easily?"

"This attack was calculated by 01 to be a show of overwhelming strength, the intended audience being the armies and peoples of Hispania and the Vatican Papal State, the lands directly across the Mediterranean. Such a siege neither favors nor indeed requires his twin brother's willing participation."

Lilith's reasoning made sense, considering the state of the two armies. The *Naia Sancta* had driven the Returners from the European continent after their attack on the Franc Kingdom. Over the course of weeks, no less than seventy thousand citizens and soldiers had been slain in Paris. For the Returners, there had been no capturing, no selling, nor any kind of traffic one might expect in war; they would have nothing but slaughter. The fighting had been gruesome, savage, even by the standards of the Dark Times, as hideous a battle as one might expect between one side who were not afraid to die and the other who were, after a fashion, already dead.

But Lilith had emerged victorious, against impossible odds and unfathomable violence. Her victory in Paris had dealt a major blow to Contra Mundi.

Élissa knew Cartago was a watershed moment, the siege which would decide the fate of what few humans clung to life on the European and African continents. Tunis's mercantile and military influences were an economic reticulation that spread eastward to Egypt and the Levant, and westward to Gibraltar and Ceuta and the Canary Islands. Cartago constituted the final line in the sand, in both the proverbial and quite literal sense.

And yet, Élissa realized, there was some echo of truth in Lilith's words: attrition warfare was not Contra Mundi's style. In Paris, the Returners had attempted to achieve a decisive victory by using the minimal necessary resources in the minimal amount of time, through strategic maneuvering, a concentration of their ground forces, and sheer brutality.

The younger half of Contra Mundi had elected instead to grind down the Carthaginians by starving them out. He had laid siege to the city for three days and three nights, but unlike Paris, the Returners' primary targets had been artillery magazines and ammunition dumps as well as food stores, rarely focusing the brunt of their attacks on the general civilian population.

Anticipating an escalation in engagements, Lilith and Élissa had concentrated what little remained of their forces within the raised citadel of the Byrsa, keeping the promontory and sea inlets of Militaire and Manchand at their backs. Élissa had thought the port city nigh-on impregnable from both the Mediterranean and the surrounding desert: the Carthaginian walls were thirty feet high and abutted by trenches and earthen embankments that made approaches by invading armies extremely difficult.

But the Returners, with their enhanced physical capabilities and technologically advanced siege engines, along with the strategic cleverness of their commander, had managed to breach the Utica Gate two kilometers north of the Byrsa. Theveste and Thapsus stood, still, but Contra Mundi's forces had blockaded both ports of entry, allowing neither resources nor reinforcements into the city.

Élissa thought of the Returners' commander, then — the creature Lilith called *Ishvara*: a callow, silver-haired figure poised like a specter of death at the front of his armies. His pallor of decay, the twitching of his bony hands, the arabesque profile with its pointed ears and bared, acicular teeth,
the vampiric emaciation, had once hinted at little save hunger and an appetite for destruction, wanton and indiscriminate in its intensity.

But something had changed — what little Élissa saw of him, always at a distance, surveying the Carthaginian gates, projected grave dignity and careworn arrogance, an unquestioning submission to the vagaries of fate. A congenital restlessness, disgusted by the war and its killing fields.

_Tired_ Lilith had said.

Perhaps there was some truth in it...

"I know how he must feel," admitted Élissa quietly.

She sometimes felt like a stage performer penned into a play with no coherent plot, the script of which she had no role in writing. She acted her part helplessly, with neither direction nor steadiness, as the planet, already decimated by an annihilation of its own fashioning, lurched into conflicts with creatures who were not so far removed from humans themselves.

While her long life had harkened new realizations and greater awarenesses which her mortal mind had previously been unable to conceive, the long, suffering centuries, full of war and death and violence, and her all the while alone, had left her feeling so terribly tired and shriveled. Her limbs hung weighted and her marrow sloughed cold and every touch of softness resonated like a lie.

Élissa had dragged her feet through the wispy backward-stringing mists of eternity, from nowhere to nowhere. Trying to piece together a vanished purity from the dust and debris of a world she no longer recognized. Trying to resurrect a vocation, a purpose, from the ghosts of ancient loyalties.

So far had she wandered, and so long had she waited, and so weak she had grown, that she often wished she was human again, just so she could die.

A great fire was burning over the Earth, taking with it people and plants and animals, cultures, languages, ancient skills and visionary wisdom. All the major countries on the continent had been sucked into the maelstrom, leaving a number of dead that God alone could count.

The bodies could be buried and the cities rebuilt, but the fact remained that the dregs of humanity teetered on a precipice; the fall of Cartago would harken a final, irrevocable extinction. The equations whirled through Élissa's head with brutal efficiency: dynamic forces, balances of power, the push and pull of battles fought and lost. If the bombs came, the explosions would darken the sky for decades, turn the seas piss-yellow, sow fertile ground with poison. Many would live, escaping a clean, righteous execution, only to starve over years.

She imagined legions of gaunt, cancerous brutes eking out an existence in half-buried homes, the ash and radioactive fallout too thick to wash away. Authority would crumble, justice forgotten, popes and kings abandoned once it became clear that they could no longer protect the people.

It would never end.

Élissa touched her young face with her ancient hands to find her cheeks damp.

Behind her lay what remained of the Acropolium, and a life that felt fictitious and unreal. Ahead of her was the barely visible seam where the desert met the sky.

She supposed she could scramble over the rubble and reenter the world, partake again of the mad, erratic pulse of the besieged city. Or she could vanish into the sea of sand, let it seduce her,
overwhelm her with its intimate whisperings.

Walk into the desert and never return...

Élissa looked at the sky, searching for an answer, watching the pale slice of moon rise over the distant mountains. Two degrees shy of the Earth's natural satellite, the Contra Mundi's ARK hung in geostationary orbit, like a sullen, manic eyeball, burning with steady hatred.

A crimson scab against the stars... something she'd seen in another sky, in another burning city, a long time ago.

Like Lilith Sahl, First Lieutenant dar Cheraiet was far older than she appeared.

Some of her human comrades even called her Dido, the name a talismanic fetish, once inscribed in the cold stone of her memories, though it lingered now as little more than a light nudge in her thoughts.

Élissa let her eyes close to slits, retreating within herself.

She searched her history for some noble deed, for some bloodless tread. While there was something about the bygone centuries that made her feel like a survivor, something about letting go of the fear of dying that made her feel free again, she knew in her heart that she had made few, if any, touches on the world that left it a brighter place.

Regret rippled through her soul, ate it away from the inside out, like woodworm in the hull of a derelict.

Élissa had sailed across the ether of time, floating on its currents and eddies and backwashes. But never had she allowed herself to simply... sink: to be inanimate and naked and vulnerable before a trespass into the black waters of history, with all its layers that served to veil.

She had never dared plunge into its trenches, the lethal black scars with no visible bottom.

At the thought, Élissa felt the back of her neck crawl, the motions tiny, like the fall of teardrops.

The trickle reached around to the corners of her jaw, then up to her temple, and across her cheeks.

Then it stopped. Waited.

Asking. Offering. A deal with the devil, metaphorically speaking.

Not the first one she had made...

"Will you remember, Policegirl?" he had asked her once, turning back to look at her, his hands, gloved and reticulated, hanging loose at his sides.

"How long... I mean... how long will I be around to...?"

Over the rise and fall of the wind, she had heard his toothy laughter.

"Always," he had said with a voice of honeyed blood, filling her dreams, sleeping and waking, for what seemed an eternity."You and I made this journey... we went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go, and none left to follow us..."

Élissa's smile, when it came, was barbed, exposing the weathered tips of fangs. "It's the oldest question of 'em all, isn't it, Master: what will you sacrifice for the future?"
Perhaps there was grace — truth, even, and absolution — in standing accountable before such an invisible unknown.

*Mercy.*

The soft thought sank slowly in.

Mercy... forgiveness. A chance to make good, pass on the hard lessons learned.

Élissa tasted tears in her throat.

"It's a beautiful night," the First Lieutenant heard herself mutter.

Something in the timber of her voice attempted to betray her to Lilith, giving her cause to examine Élissa's face searchingly. The latter's boots sank into the sand, winnowed to softness at her feet, and she felt an unbearable sadness, tender and sweet, like the memory of falling asleep.

"We're not gonna die, Lilith. Everything..." she swallowed, "everything's gonna be okay..."

*Naia Sancta* offered no immediate reply, a frown of concern carving slight crow's feet at the corners of her mouth, her forehead furrowed, as though someone had scored worry lines into it with a bowie knife. Lilith glanced around, as if to make sure no one was eavesdropping — but it seemed that the forthcoming engagement was more than enough to keep the others in the vicinity distracted.

Besides, Élissa would have heard anyone's approach. She could detect a heartbeat from one hundred meters away.

"I wish..." she began softly, "I wish people realized how this felt all the time... why does it take a life ending to learn how to cherish each day?" Élissa gave a little hiccup deep in her throat. "Why do we wait until the end to start to accomplish all that we dreamed, when once we had all the time in the world?"

"Élissa?" asked Lilith gently. "Where is this coming from... what are you thinking?"

"This will be the third sunset," she said, not answering *Naia Sancta's* question. She let the mild wind carry the significance of her words: "Three days and three nights..."

"Élissa..."

"You believe," said the First Lieutenant quietly, wondrously. "You believe there is still good in him."

"Of course I do."

"Despite everything..."

"Because of everything. Because he does not know how to share anything but pain, meri jaan, since fate has not seen fit to teach him anything of kindness. Because he feels he is safe only in chaos, claiming souls before they can claim him. Because his heart has been broken, and rather than help him mend the cracks, his twin brother has propped them open, like faultlines." Élissa's chest tightened at the bruised, aching intensity she heard in Lilith's voice. "Would that he would allow me to forgive him..."

Forgiveness.
Mercy...

Love.

Lilith would have moved mountains. She would have battled God and the Devil for that man's soul.

"If I spend my life hoping he will suffer the consequences for what he did to my heart, to this planet," she murmured, "then I am allowing the world to hurt him a second time."

Even if that creature made the entire world his enemy, Lilith would still be on his side. She would always forgive him, and welcome him home.

Élissa smiled faintly. There were no words, no thoughts, that could well and truly encapsulate the essence of Lilith's kindness. Even though no one was ever truly perfect, Naia Sancta, in Élissa's eyes, had attained a state as near perfect as she could imagine. Even dreams couldn't conceive of a greater wonder...

Humanity was in good hands.

"Lilith," murmured Élissa. The name whispered out of her. "There's something I have to do."

Lines of radiance, the light of the setting sun, danced across the silence separating them. Lilith's face had hardened. Her yellow eyes came to rest on Élissa pointedly. "First Lieutenant..."

"We won't have to use Iblis. No one else is gonna die."

Her gaze glinted. When Lilith spoke, her voice was dangerously, ominously soft: "Night is falling. Ishvara will launch his attack soon."

"No, he won't."

"Élissa—"

"This is bigger than me," said the old soldier. "I can end this, Your Grace. I can save them. Peace. Freedom. Forgiveness. Isn't that enough?"

"I could stop you." Something monstrous flared briefly behind Lilith's eyes, yellow stained red, sending the tiniest thrill of terror down Élissa's spine — a sensation she had only felt once before, with one other man... "You know I could."

"But you won't. They need you to lead them."

She shook her head. "I do not look for glory on either side of heaven. My role is merely to guide. But... they are your people, meri jaan. This is your world."

"Not any more, Lilith. All my loved ones are gone. They're not coming back." She felt a heaviness, a familiar turning of some inward tide. "I am all alone."

"Please," she implored. "He... Abel will..."

"This is something I have to do. It... it matters, Your Grace. This will matter."

Élissa had died once already, two hundred and eighteen years ago. She remembered an old legend: after a millennium had passed, there was bird who built its own pyre, lining the branches with cinnamon, myrrh, and cassia. When the sun set the next evening, the bird climbed to the top of its
nest, and with great sorrow for all that it saw, set itself alight, and died in the flames.

But the creature was not remarkable for its feathers or fire.

It was most revered for its ability to rise from its own funeral pyre, from the very ashes of its charred body, as a brand new life ready to live once more.

"My arms were around my master, in the end. I told her we were with her — me, and... and him, too — and that everything was going to be okay." Élissas eyes burned. Her throat swelled and knotted. She welcomed the abrasive drag of the sand on her face, welcomed the stygian morass of her fear and grief, welcomed the sting of tears in her scarlet eyes, welcomed any pain that momentarily distracted her from what she knew awaited her, out there in the desert.

"I've lived a long time... longer than you, Lilith. And I dunno... maybe," she murmured, "maybe we can still change the world long after we've departed from it."

"He will kill you," said Lilith in a hollow whisper, her body perfectly still.

"No one can hide from it forever... not even monsters like me." It wasn't self deprecation... just a cold iteration of fact. "Time took my masters... it even took Pip. It finds a way. It always does. And now it's found me. All that's left is the end..." She shrugged. "Which is all any of us ever has."

"Seras!"

Lilith knew, then.

She understood it all.

The brief, bright conflagration of desperation dissolved, giving way to the sorrow underpinning it.

The two women breathed the sooty air, composed of incinerated glass and sand and steel but also, they knew, incinerated human flesh.

Like souls sharing a body, breathing the cremated ashes of the dead.

Élissa declared solemnly, "I'm not gonna let this world fall."

"Please..." protested Lilith, opening her hennaed palms, powerless. "He is... he is my burden, meri jaan. Him... and his brother. I wanted to spare you this..."

"I know." Élissa could almost read Lilith's eyes, weaving the expression into some coherent, meaningful pattern. Desperate like Élissa was... doomed like Élissa was... "But this is my choice."

"You have such faith in him...?"

"No... but I have faith in you, Naia Sancta. I have faith in your belief, and in your love. And it's enough... it is enough..."

Already, people were starting to move beneath the slopes of the Byrsa, the air electric with the primitive instincts of survival. Officers and soldiers and civilians, tailoring perceptions and actions in order to face the forthcoming horrors of the night.
"You will not return, will you," said Lilith, sullen and scared and sad. "Even if you survive this, you will not be coming back."

"No."

But when Élissa turned towards Utica, Lilith stopped her with a gentle hand on her arm.

She tipped forward to kiss Élissa's brow in benediction.

"It won't hurt for long, Your Grace," said the First Lieutenant gently. "Be brave."

"I will try, Élissa dar Cheraiet. I will try to be as brave as you."

The Naia Sancta embraced her.

Amid the nascent chaos, it was as though every one of Lilith's emotions were conveyed in those few brief seconds of contact.

And it was enough.

Enough.

"God go with you..."

And Seras found, then, that she was no longer afraid.

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**Somewhere over Florence**

**Tuscany, Vatican Papal State**

**3063**

"Let him beg assistance..."

The cold, dark man with cold, dark eyes found himself lost in concentration, tutting at passages that irritated him.

"Let him see the unmerited deaths of those around and with him," he read aloud, "and accepting peace, on unjust terms, let him not, even so, enjoy his kingdom or the life he longs for..."

Isaak Fernand von Kämpfer thumbed through the sheaf of papers, yellowed and crumbling, held together with a ribbon between two cracked covers of black leather. He found the script — all flourishes and interlocking serifs — near impossible to fathom. He wasn't sure how, if at all, the Orden's interests might fit in with these unfamiliar names from still less familiar times.

In spite of the fact, the story was sad and stirring, gently medieval and brutally modern all at once.

Pouring over the ancient copy of the *Aeneid*, laboring with such focus, Isaak began to feel a familiar cranial pressure between his ears. The urge to deconstruct and analyze every word, every idea, beat at his brain, spreading centrifugally from the skull inwards. Worse, Isaak knew there was no one with whom he could talk who was capable of understanding the complexity of the problems his mind conjured, or his approaches to tentative solutions.

Isaak would have welcomed Dr. Wordsworth's insight in that moment.
The Magician found he missed the deft strength of his old friend's reasoning, the keen cleverness of his mind. Theirs had once been a piquant correspondence of intellects, a simultaneous firing of two spirits engaged in the autonomous act of discovery.

The confrontation outside the Santo Spirito was the first they had seen of each other in decades. William had grown so furrowed... wrinkled, sagging, ravaged by time and tragedy.

But his eyes were still so bright. And, if not young, then somehow transcendent of the decades that otherwise marked his face.

Isaak sighed, uncharacteristically gloomy. He took a puff of his cigarillo — three breaths at a time at precisely thirty second intervals. His mind began to wander, the book falling open on his lap, his eyes — wet and shining, like pools of deep water — peering into the middle distance.

Let him beg assistance...

Let him see the unmerited deaths of those around and with him...

The words were simple, yet their significance coalesced with glacial reluctance, manifesting only as a vague series of images, of memories, lacking in any coherent sequence or connection.

As he often did during moments of intellectual pique, Isaak found himself thinking back to the events of two decades ago. The Belfast Incident had proven, with the benefit of hindsight, to be not only a testing-ground for experimentation, but for accepting the consequences of one's more... morally objectionable scientific interventions.

Indeed, for someone of Isaak and William's ambitions, the two impulses were exceedingly difficult to separate: technological contrivances themselves were vehicles of self-affirmation, a way of recasting one's aspirations under the camouflage of invention. Even so scrupulous an undertaking as bringing a dead woman back to life was also, on some level, flirting with the chance to play God. Not that Isaak had ever harbored any interest in reciprocating the tease, and not that resurrecting Lady Francis had ever been his true aim.

The same could not be said for dear Dr. Wordsworth.

For someone like William, science evoked an awareness of sacrosanctity, a spectacle charged with spiritual significance. For someone like Isaak, however, experimentation itself failed to create any sense of awe or reverential wonder; it merely exposed what was already there, if only hidden away.

The body they had used for the resuscitation, that belonging to Walter C. Dornez, had been to Isaak an unprecedented windfall, a proverbial Rosetta Stone of restorative prostheses and gene sequences. More than raw material, it had served as a catalyst for novel insights, disclosing Isaak’s ignorance and compelling him to ask whether and how his lack of knowledge might be filled.

Whether or not the results of the experiment would prove Isaak's hypotheses had been entirely incidental. In his work, he assumed the inevitability of failure; whenever possible, he harnessed error as a guide towards further investigation — after all, all empirical knowledge was, in the end, tentative... incomplete and open to revision in the light of new evidence or cogent new arguments.

Indeed, even at that moment, pouring over Virgil, the data points continued to pick and prod at Isaak with relentless constancy.

Nothing was ever finished... not even the past.

Accordingly, Isaak thought it poetically apt what little remained of Dornez had found a home in
William's subconscious; it was an accumulation of historical knowledge and resources that, Isaak hoped, might redeem something of his old friend's past misfortunes. He didn't think it entirely accurate to say, as some had done, that his interest in the matter was motivated out of somesentimental attachment to the memories of his time in Londinium; nor did he retain anyproprietary arrogance that lead him to suggest William Wordsworth was somehow his to watchover.

The man formerly known as Izak Butler had attempted to make a fresh start in his own life; it merely seemed right and proper that William do the same.

Right and proper... and entirely ludicrous, of course.

William was far too neurotic. He was man who reached for understanding with frenzied clutchings but no overall grasp. If he had not lurched into the orbit of Miss Scott during his postdoctoral tenure, and later Dr. Raleigh Throckmorton, William would have burnt out many years ago from the consequences of sheer self-neglect and overwork.

Therefore, it was a mistake, affirmed Isaak, to think of William and Walter as the same person. The latter had, in the end, given up: his greed and cunning and resentment had been all consuming — and so, naturally, consumed even itself. Dornez, faced with a fate he could no longer abide, had abdicated his principles, his loyalties, and indeed his very life... resigning himself to his miseries, his outcast state.

But William Wordsworth was far more aggressive in his disappointments — his very acrimony was qualified by his belligerence, his persistence. His stubbornness. The more he wasdispossessed, the more intense his appetites grew.

Such hungers were plainly evident in the Professor's scientific enthusiasms... bordering on obsessions. Isaak's dear friend, who had lost everything, preserved as a last resort the hope of a paradigm shift: some major breakthrough which would affirm strongly and publicly the man's moral entitlement in the trite and vacuous annals of scientific enterprise.

In the meantime, William's purpose in life, his very being, hung indefinitely in suspense. He was paralyzed by his own principles, having to constantly balance his rational arguments against their own moral counterweights.

But, in spite of everything, Walter and William were alike in four key respects: they had both consented to abandon everything, except their very names, at the precipice of ruination.

They both flourished on the near or far side of civilization, and never at the center.

They both needed other people to help them find a reason to live.

They both were in the wrong place at the right time.

Nothing was ever finished, affirmed Isaak again. Nothing was ever a coincidence.

Not even the past.

Fate and history, Isaak knew well enough, constituted corrupted visions — facts so often failed to articulate the multiplicity of bilateral reciprocities and relationships at work in human affairs. Every echo of every decision, analyzed with the benefit of hindsight, could only ever touch upon the sanitized accountings of reality's true nature. Try as one might, it was impossible to separate the lie from the living, any more than one could distinguish William from the parasitic consciousness that had taken root inside his mind.
All of space and time existed in superposition: a ball and chain in the place where wings ought to have grown... a morbid pageant for the wise. A confirmation for the doomed.

Isaak had yet to decide to which category he himself belonged...

"Why did you stop?"

The question was soft and quiet, barely a sound at all.

It reminded Isaak of sanitized paintings of Christ... so concentrated on the Son of God's divinity that the artists omitted to give a humble carpenter dirty fingernails or calloused palms or less than perfect teeth.

"My apologies." Isaak concentrated on finding his page before replying with great deliberation: "I was lost in thought, Mein Herr."

"Is my company boring you?" asked Cain, the Contra Mundi, with mock offense.

"Not at all. There is simply... a great deal on my mind."

The silence went on for more than was strictly comfortable or polite. "You stink of cigarillo smoke, Isaak. Cloves, I think."

"There is no possible way for you to know that. Besides the fact you are currently submerged in a pluripotent enzymic solution, I am standing upwind of you."

"Oh, Isaak... I know what you smell like by now." A pause. "What was the last line? In the story?"

The Magician adjusted his spectacles. He sighed over the delicate whisk of pages. "But fall in battle before his time," he recited, "and lie unburied on the sand."

Closing the book with a decisive thud, Isaak rose. His pupils dilated in the diffuse light of the room.

"The Death of Dido... from the Aeneid by Virgil." Isaak took in a short wisp of smoke, eyes narrowing faintly on Cain's regeneration tank, before turning his head and blowing out a breath in the opposite direction. "How are you feeling, Mein Herr?"

"Like I'm going all to pieces."

"An accurate assessment, despite your attempt at comedy." Isaak examined a pressure valve on the tank's exterior, frowning at it. "Forgive me if I do not share your amusement," he murmured, tapping the dial plate with a perfect fingernail.

"Humor is healthy," protested Cain from within his receptacle.

"Carelessness is not," countered the Magician. "I understand, and indeed sympathize, with your instinct towards active participation, Mein Herr. But while spontaneity is a charming attitude when it merely precipitates in one's social faux pas at, say, a fish and chips counter, it has dangerous and unpredictable results when applied to matters which may very well endanger my Lord's person."

Isaak ground out his cigarillo in a nearby ashtray. "Regeneration is a process that demands months of artificially-induced protein synthesis before your muscles condescend to perform the simplest of movements," he continued. "Even now, after nearly two decades of devoted care and maintenance, the bacilli are so volatile that the sheer rate of cellular respiration renders their host's body as
delicate as a bone-china cup."

Though Cain's regeneration chamber was perfectly opaque, the solution the color and consistency of tar, Isaak could imagine in his mind's eye his Lord laughing in that peculiar way of his... both violent and soundless, as though he were in the last stages of alkaloid poisoning. His long, lithe body heaving side to side, his head tipping back into the fluid until his blond hair fanned out like the branches of a bleached sponge, swinging in hypnotic motion.

"Oh, Isaak..." he chuckled, "you worry so..."

"If Zamiel had not found himself under an obligation to rescue the Chief Inquisitor... if he had done any more damage, your body may very well have necessitated a complete physiognomic reconstruction."

"While we're on the subject, Isaak, why do you suppose the big doggie left me alone and jumped into the river? The water was frightfully cold."

"Frigid, I expect." The Magician turned on his heel, what someone might mistake for a cross look darting across his face. The muscles around his eyes twitched, a tiny change of expression. 
"Enough to defeat the Vatican's strongest Knight, at any rate..."

Isaak couldn't help but consider the gospels of Matthew and Luke, though he doubted the Director would much care for the comparison. The Magician meditated on the forty day fast, a similar harsh and lonely trial of character and purpose, even if that vigil had passed in a searing Judean desert, not during a blizzard in the heart of Tuscany.

And when, at the end, Satan came with his visions and offers of power, the Son of God had shunned him.

So, too, had Il Ruinante.

Much like the Biblical devil, rejection had not worked in Cain's favor.

"The Cromwell Invocation," intuited Isaak. "Someone gave Zamiel an order which took precedence over his more violent compulsions — a subconscious command to save the Bureau Director rather than destroy you, Mein Herr. A command which came from Miss Blanchett, I shouldn't wonder. It appears our suspicions about her birthright may prove correct."

His Lord's long, pale body buoyed in the enzyme solution, naked in a womb of warmth, oiled by glutaraldehyde and aqueous formaldehyde, softly laved by precipitates of the bacilli's own mysterious means of regeneration. An ectomorphic carcass slowly piecing itself back together.

Isaak pictured Cain's expression growing relaxed, almost vacant. Calculating, assessing, caressing his chin with his hand in a strangely feline gesture... there would be a faint amusement glinting in his eyes, like distant stars in a midsummer midnight. No color and every color. Like water and crystal. Like light.

Isaak had dropped the mention of Miss Blanchett into the conversation as a sideshow, something to throw Cain off the scent and return his attention to matters regarding his own self preservation. Though, given his Lord's curiosity about all things pertinent to the girl, perhaps Panzermagier ought to have known better...

"I was so close... so close..." Cain sounded even more distant and distracted than usual.

The Magician experienced a moment of amber-like stillness, reminiscent of a glance at a watch, the
fleeting impression of a frozen second hand, only to see it continue its inevitable clockwise circuit.

"Young ambition, all mortal greatness is but disease," he quoted quietly. "Mein Herr... a query, if I may."

"I could never deny you, Isaak."

"What is your interest in the girl?"

"Hmm?"

"Miss Blanchett," reiterated Isaak, softly, but with great assurance and far greater patience. "You wanted to retrieve her personally from the Castello di Signa. I would know your reasons."

To his credit, Cain did not entirely dismiss Isaak's question. "Dietrich might have hurt her... he can be such a foolish, careless boy, you know. He might have broken her like he broke Flamberg..."

"Perhaps. But then again, perhaps not."

The Magician could imagine his Lord puffing out his cheeks as he considered his answer. "I... I do not know, exactly..." said Cain with dazed mirth. The words came slowly, each one a gift-wrapped grenade of emotion. Wisely, Isaak did not interrupt the ensuing silence, allowing Cain to gather his thoughts. "It's quite remarkable, isn't it, Isaak?" His Lord paused again, some great drama playing out behind his eyes.

"Well..." he murmured after a few moments, peacefully resigned, "I suppose it's because she's kind."

Isaak arched an eyebrow at the faint note of wonder he thought he heard. "Kind...?"

"Yes. I think..." Isaak heard Cain sigh, the sound like a ghost through grass. "I think she might have the kindest face in all the world."

_Curious._

The Magician interlaced his undernourished white hands, tapping his fingers absent-mindedly.

The sentiment resonated with a distinctly childish integrity. Isaak was struck, as he often was, by his Lord's consummate lack of pretension. There was a simplicity about the confession that connoted truth with far more coherence than any justification about taking hostages or exacting revenge or satisfying some baser, brutish fancy. The very essence of Cain was his forthrightness, his refusal — indeed, his inability — to conform to Isaak's own measured expectations of sadism or subterfuge.

Nor was it something so simple as envy: Cain's curious preoccupations came not from any dormant jealousies that were wont to develop between siblings when one had a stroke of good fortune the other did not share.

Perhaps his Lord wanted to understand what force, what profound, almost maternal tenderness, had been strong enough to strip his beloved brother from his side more than nine hundred years ago.

Perhaps he was a creature whose nature was as delicate as his body, and just as his physical form required regeneration, his spirit needed to be nourished and cared for by another, in order that some inner desire might be fulfilled.
And perhaps, above all else, Cain was simply very lonely.

To live was to be incomplete — Isaak's Lord unsettled him not because he was so unfamiliar in his manner... but because he was, at times, so desperately, achingly human.

Because loneliness was, in the end, an inevitable fact of human existence.

Cain loved his brother beyond all bounds, and Lord Abel held some deep affection for Miss Blanchett — after Carthage and István, Isaak no longer doubted the fact.

By some transitive law of creation, perhaps Cain had reasoned he might also, one day, love Sister Esther, too...

And be loved in kind.

Not merely feared or followed... but cherished, a yearning Isaak doubted his Lord knew how to express save in passive mourning for what he had become and for what he could not have.

Less a feeling than an instinct, imperceptible and invisible but real, like a vein of silver in a mine.

"Panzermagier... we've reached the coordinates you specified."

An officer had opened the door and popped her head around the corner. Her face was thin, her chin thrust forward, her wine-red hair cut short. Everything about her seemed angular... spiky. Personality not excluded.

Skorzeny skulked closer, affecting nonchalance, as if she just happened to be passing by — though, of course, the whole thing had been precisely engineered to project a casual lack of hurry.

After all, it wouldn't do to have his Lord worrying over nothing.

Isaak accepted the Red Baron's announcement with a slight inclination of his head. "My thanks, Captain Skorzeny," he replied, brushing smooth the front of his uniform. He peered over his horn-rims, as though suggesting her homework was late. "Are the preparations in order?"

"Yes, sir." She muttered his honorific under her breath, almost as an afterthought.

"Oh... are you up to something, Isaak?" queried Cain, perfectly cheerful. "The Cardinal again?"

The Magician cocked his head silently, his expression fixed. "Di Medici's promises were naught but ashes, Mein Herr, poured into a cremation urn. Caterina has proven herself to be the far more diverting of the two."

"Then what clever contrivance have you in mind?"

"More of an intervention, I fear."

"Oh, dear... you know, I was beginning to marvel at how scarce that clumsy boy had made himself over the past several hours..."

Isaak had learned, over the years, that it was more expedient not to question his Lord's unfathomable omniscience concerning the comings and goings of his subordinates. "I had considered the Puppet Master an asset with at least the intelligence necessary to exercise a modicum of personal restraint. And while baiting Zamiel into dismembering Lord Abel may give Dietrich a few hours' entertainment, it accomplishes nothing. In fact... it works almost exclusively to our detriment." Isaak sighed. "Following Dietrich's failure at Castello di Signa, I might have
been able to salvage the situation and perhaps acquire Zamiel by other means. Alas, *Marionettenspieler* has now made that impossible."

Arrogance featured chiefly among Dietrich's less agreeable personality traits, though Isaak supposed it was more a matter of mien than anything else. And if there was one subject about which the boy tended to be cavalier, it was the ease of inflicting pain and sowing discord for the purposes of his own amusement.

"What will you do, Isaak?"

*Panzermagier* diligently avoided eye contact with the regeneration tank. "If we allow Zamiel to consume your brother's body," he explained patiently, "then we will forfeit any means of splicing your deoxyribonucleotides from Lord Abel's gene template."

"Ah... yes. That sounds like a problem."

"One which I have every intention of correcting, *Mein Herr*.

Isaak's demeanor was one of perpetual calm, and he accepted the exigency for remedial action with his usual degree of sangfroid.

The Magician dealt with monsters and mutants and other such *lusus naturae* on the daily: the possibility of gifted assets getting out of control and becoming liabilities was a routine concern of his.

And sometimes, the most expedient and efficient means of managing a rabid dog was to put it out of its misery.

Zamiel... and Dietrich, too, if the need arose.

Isaak removed his spectacles and polished them with care. His eyes roved towards Captain Skorzeny, her pale face tired and drawn. He noted how she kept her left arm tucked inside her service uniform, the jacket sleeve hanging empty and limp at her side. Her body language reeked of injured dignity.

Isaak had been certain to make it a clean break; the bone would heal, and the Magician reasoned she would be as right as rain within a few weeks.

"Captain," said Isaak, his expression as watery as the morning's first light, "thank you for keeping me apprised of our progress. I will walk you back to the bridge. If you'll excuse us, *Mein Herr*..."

"Of course, Isaak. Things to do... monsters to murder..."

Susanne swallowed, eyes wide, as Isaak fell into step beside her. The woman went completely silent, her mouth hanging open. She looked like a punch-drunk goldfish.

"I'll be at the helm," she murmured, making a move to peal away. She grabbed her broken left arm with her right hand, trying to pull it clear from Isaak's reach.

"Before you go... there was one more matter which bears mentioning, Susanne."

"Yes?" came the terse reply.

Instead of answering immediately, Isaak lifted a finger. He tapped it along the length of Skorzeny's scar, tracing the space over her right eyebrow and nose, then down the path from under her
cheekbone to the outside corner of her mouth.

She froze, her breath unsteady from watching him, from feeling the gentle weight of his finger against her face.

"Despite affectations to the contrary, my patience is not limitless."

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Isaak's fingernail bit into her cheek, raking skin and drawing blood.

The Captain didn't cry out. She barely flinched, though both officers clenched their jaws — Skorzeny in pain, and Isaak in an obvious effort to control the sudden urge to gift the Red Baron with a matching disfigurement... something to equalize the symmetry of her rawboned face. A look of speculation flickered in his narrow, deep-set black eyes.

"If Marionettenspieler seeks to conspire with you again, a broken arm will be the least of your concerns. I will break your legs next. And then your pelvis. And then your spine." Isaak took a deep, measured breath. "And then I will throw first him, and then you, out the window mid-flight."

The Red Baron jerked her head back, like a pantomime of treading on a rake. Her expression changed, the subtle signifiers of shock imperfectly repressed. The air was cool, but Isaak could see sweat trickling down the back of Susanne's neck, dampening her collar and plastering the linen between her shoulders.

"Our Lord's infatuation with you will die, eventually," she said in a soft tone, showing her teeth. Isaak nodded, ostensibly affable. "No doubt. All things end, Captain."

"But the day that happens, von Kämpfer... I'd watch your back. Ice Witch failed. I won't."

"Believe you me, Susanne... failure has a way of driving even reasonable men to madness. Consider my old friend, Dr. Wordsworth. William certainly made the best of a most unfortunate situation, after you put the woman he loves into a coma.

"To splice a human being's living consciousness with a navigational apparatus? Insanity. Unhinged desperation. Although... a part of me has always wondered, in lieu of dear William's success and Sister Kate's heretofore prosperous professional career, if perhaps AX had the right idea of it all along... instead of an impatient, disrespectful, disreputable whoreson like yourself, why not just use a cybernetically mediated artificial intelligence network to run our computer systems?" Isaak's black eyes tapered dangerously. "Why not do to you exactly what you did to Miss Scott?"

The words had power. They wounded.

"Bastard..." she expelled her remaining breath in something not unlike a snarl. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Captain Skorzeny, rest assured: disposing of you would be as simple as breathing wishes from a dandelion.

"But you're human... by the most basic of definitions, at least. Subject to all the commiserate foibles and fallibilities. To err is human... so says Herr Pope. So I allow you this one chance, Fräulein: walk away. Keep walking." Isaak leaned closer, until his words feathered over the shell of Susanne's ear, causing the flesh there to pimple. His voice dropped to a whisper. "Get out of my sight."

For what felt like a very long time, Skorzeny stood staring at Isaak. No longer with hatred, but with
disbelief. There was the briefest flash of defiance, but then it sputtered out.

Susanne spun on her heel and marched quickly away.

Isaak straightened. He listened to her steps retreating down the deck, back towards the bridge. After a while they grew faint, then silent.

He walked in the opposite direction, to the bulkhead directly adjoining his Lord's chambers.

The room, one of Isaak's many laboratories on the Orden's flagship, was sharp-cornered — the walls and faceted ceiling constructed from flat sections of zinc-nickel plating. A cold cathode fluorescence suffused the air, glinting on the sloping edges of the floor that ran down to a decagonal table, stretched out into a lozenge shape, its glass-like translucency mirroring the room around it. It was like sitting at a wedge of smoky gray quartz, the color of funeral pyres and acid in the spring rain.

A row of upright incubation cylinders ran along one wall, bolted to the floor and vanishing into the ceiling.

A thin smile traced creases at the corners of Isaak's lips.

He tapped a single fingernail against the glass of the closest tank. Wise to the Magician's presence, the creature suspended in the milky formaldehyde gave a sudden, convulsive twitch. A wave broke against the curved surface, churning the oxidized methanol for a moment, mixing bubbles into the opaque, soupy solution, the color of myelin.

Isaak caught a glimpse of delicate, pale-brown limbs, naked and glistening, like the stark silhouette of bones in the flash of a radiograph. A finely branched network of fibrous and granular tissues burst into view as filigreed shadows: a red-tinged cluster of pulsing organic parts; a translucent confusion of elastic muscle and gland sacks full of lukewarm fluid; nerves and blood vessels vitrifying into a pair of pliable, sheetlike wings, the gossamer-thin patagia stretched between five stave-like fingers. They were folded in repose and, like the body to which they had been artificially attached, suspended in a fetal stupor.

"Good evening, Fräulein," said Isaak quietly, almost reverently. He spread his palm on the tank, the surface moist with condensation. He failed to detect any kind of animal warmth emanating from the tank, or even any hint of breath suspended in the fluid. "Es ist Zeit aufzuwachen, Liebling..."

By Isaak's face, pressed right against the glass, a pair of rheumy eyes snapped open. They were a pale, leucitic blue, as guileless as those of a newborn foal. The creature in the tank batted its lids at the Magician, as though blinking out a question.

Isaak's fingertip hovered over the edge of its brow, tracing the elegant, clean line from orbital arch to cheekbone. A light scatter of freckles was the only visible concession to the face's human origins. "Your vision always was poor, was it not?" he murmured. "You needn't worry... I've made a number of improvements. You shan't require those old spectacles any longer."

The creature's mouth had been distended by a ventilator and endotracheal tube, as though it were vomiting the equipment from its innards. Twisted ripples of the creature's torment, echoes of its silent howling, flooded out into the formaldehyde.

"I'm afraid one of my subordinates has made a grave error of judgement. Due to circumstances beyond my control, your servant is now wreaking havoc. If he cannot be tamed, he must be
exterminated. You understand, of course, Fräulein. It is a matter of enforcing discipline."

Isaak felt the small hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. He thought he could smell the clean edge of a thunderstorm, taste the faintly salty, staticky air.

"The body is a machine," said Isaak, "even a dead one. That is what you failed to understand, William, so many years ago. A corpse is subject to the same laws of mechanics as a clock. If one treats a human being only as a colony of cells in temporary alliance, an incandescent cloud of electrical impulses and precariously stacked carbon-coded memories, what is left is no longer precisely a human being. It is little more than hardware. And something else you never took into consideration, my old friend...

"The possibility that Walter C. Dornez was not the only corpse I ordered exhumed for our experiments..."

An assurance of certainty, a cognizance of inevitability, entered Isaak's mind like lights traveling in tandem through a vast darkness, drawing imperceptibly closer to each other. A constellated canvas of virgin stars...

He found himself mulling over the doom-laden prophecies and future legends foretelling the resurrection of Hellsing's self-styled Bird of Hermes. From a dozen far-flung artifacts — the tombs under Carthage, the vaults of Londinium cathedrals — Isaak had unearthed the shards, long-lost fragments of eternal power, knowledge from bygone ages. And, in a distant place, he had dared assemble them, binding their influence to his obeisance.

The resurrection was worthy of his fertile mind alone. Every detail had been meticulously prepared — every gear and cog sliding neatly into place.

"You," said Isaak to the creature in the tank, gentle and coaxing, "died. And now you will rise from the dead and stand in judgement over us all. Let us not be Herod, and murder all plans for life, but let us all, like the shepherds, run to you in whom life is free from fear and pain. For through fire, nature will be reborn whole…

"Igne natura renovatur…"

Isaak Fernand von Kämpfer rested his forehead against the cool surface of the tank. The creature inside began to squirm.

"Integra."

Elsewhere

"Room fourteen... room fifteen... room sixteen!"

Esther scrunched the patient register into a ball and stuffed it into the pocket of her robes. She had swiped the directory from a nurse's station while the hospital staff were distracted, too preoccupied with moving patients to the safety of the basement to pay any mind to the tiny woman whisking down the corridors like an overlarge ball of red lint.

It was a curious thing, almost a relief, to discover that she had at last met a group of people even more desperate and overwrought than herself. And, like herself, far too wrapped up in their own concerns to pay close attention to what was going on around them.

The nun released an audible breath; her heart thumped in time to the pulse in her temples.
Esther only hoped Dr. Lauricella's staff hadn't evacuated his wing of the hospital yet...

She opened the ward door.

They hadn't.

Esther had braced herself for a shock. Her time serving under Cardinal Sforza — and even before, from leading the revolt against Gyula Kádár — had ensured she was no stranger to the aftermaths of serious injury. Esther no longer suffered from the handicap of freezing in the face of others' torment. She was accustomed to pain. She had learned to live with it.

Still, the sight of the Chief Inquisitor gave her pause.

Esther's tongue stuck to the top of her mouth, and she suddenly found she had difficulty swallowing.

She almost didn't recognize him. No longer was Petros Orsini the tall, sharp man with the booming voice of an auctioneer, the confident poise of an actor and the suffocating presence of a master politician. There was nothing peaceful or dignified in the way his body lay, prostrate, placid with unconsciousness, on the duvet-less bed. The Director's closed eyes were swollen, the lids purple and near-translucent, like the albumen of an unfertilized egg. A clear tracheostomy tube snaked out of his neck. Every inch of him that wasn't swathed in bandages was polka-dotted with multicolored electrodes.

Esther stared at him, dumbfounded. Sick burned the back of her esophagus. She couldn't think of anything to say, and was grateful, in the guiltiest possible respect, for the fact that she had Dietrich to worry about; the prospect of facing the Puppet Master prevented Esther from devoting her full attention to the shame and self-reproach seizing her stomach at the sight of a comatose Petros.

At least the heart monitor at his bedside chirped at regular intervals, marking the passage of time like a metronome.

At least he was alive.

"Brother Petros..." Esther ventured quietly, uncertainly, faintly sure she could shout into his ear and he wouldn't be any the wiser. She clutched her hand to her chest as she sidled up to the edge of the bed, swallowing hard around a stone in the pit of her throat. "I... I need to help Father Nightroad and the Professor now, but this hospital doesn't stockpile any weapons... so..." She took a slow, chest-deep breath — Esther felt as though she had been trapped in some clear, fast-setting liquid, like an insect cast in resin. "So... I'm going to check your belongings…"

Esther inched closer. She peered over the top of the steel headboard, her hand reaching beneath the mattress...

The man on the bed reacted so swiftly his movement was a blur.

Petros's hand hinged out like a hog trap, snapping shut around Esther's wrist. She recoiled on instinct, but even bedridden, he outmuscled her by a comical margin.

The electrocardiograph tripped to a much faster pace.

A yelp of alarm died stillborn in Esther's throat. Her heart made a mad leap for her mouth. Two eyes — cold and clear despite the fact they were horribly bloodshot — focused on her face, the man to which they belonged wearing an expression Esther couldn't diagnose right away.
Distress was the closest she could manage.

Petros looked almost... frightened. Vulnerable. Manic.

"Ah..." Esther dragged in a desperately-needed breath; any joy or relief she may have felt at having roused him to consciousness was smothered by her more immediate concern that he was going to snap her wrist like a carrot stick. "B-bureau Director..."

Long fingers, like tensile steel, remained shackled about her arm. His lips thinned; the austere planes of his face hardened.

"Blanchett..." Petros spoke so quietly, his words were hardly more than a soft exhalation. He sounded wretched — he looked far worse: forehead bound in bandages, cheeks hollow, fatigue loading his eyes in a way that made them hang heavy and hopeless inside his mallowed skin. "Alive... you're—"

"I'm all right," Esther assured him, her arm beginning to hurt. She had little doubt she'd be sporting a tidy set of bruises in a few hours. "Thanks to you."

His gaze darted from detail to detail feverishly. "Where..."

"Florence. You're in the hospital, sir." He stared at her with flaying intensity. Esther's composure threatened to wither. "How... how much do you remember?"

With her every word, his thoughts seemed to run slightly clearer, gathering momentum. His grip grew slack, and Esther snatched her wrist back.

"Enough," he muttered. "You were... the Inquisition installation. Fighting... axes..."

He remembered Dietrich's autojägers, then. "And the river?" she prompted.

"River? What about the river?"

"Oh." Esther cleared her throat, rubbing feeling back into her arm. "I'm sorry, Brother Petros," she said softly, in what she hoped was her most soothing tone of voice. "The Father mentioned that your memory might be a bit foggy, but I don't have time to fill you in right now... something's gone wrong, and I need... that is, weapons—"

"Weapons..." Petros parroted.

His expression blackened, and Esther had to stop herself from taking a mincing step back, instinctively wary of his hellish temper.

"Are," he snarled hoarsely, perennial scowl back in place, "are we under attack?"

Esther grew wise to a new, ferocious tension in the Chief Inquisitor's body. With a lethal shift of his muscles, he turned to glance in the direction of the doorway. His skin broke out in a pale sweat as he tried to swing himself — without much success — out of bed. The cardiac monitor gave a bleat of alarm. "Darnable heretics—!"

Oh, Lord. "Director, stop it! You'll tear yourself to pieces!"

"So... you're a doctor now as well as a Saint?" he seethed, even as his face went ash-white from the pain.
Esther huffed her impatience; she was sick to the back teeth of pigheaded men and their martyr complexes. "I daresay I've seen enough illness and injuries in my time to predict the outcome accurately. You're," she took his shoulders in her hands, "staying," she knuckled a fist in his bandages, "right," she gave him a firm shove backwards, "here."

His head hit the pillows with an airy *whumph*. Petros's expression was more mortification and affront than anger, like a snarling dog swatted across the nose by a kitten. "Wha—"

"You would just be a nuisance. The only weapon you'll be swinging at people for the next several weeks will be a walking stick."

"I beg your pardon?" he hissed, the words weak and sandpapery.

"You heard me. If you tried fighting in the state you're in, we'd waste half our energy just trying to prop you upright! We can't afford to have invalids like you dragging us down!"

"*Who are you calling an invalid, girl?!*"

"And I don't have time to argue!" Esther lifted her chin, crossing her arms over her chest in an effort to abort what no doubt promised to be an impressive tirade. How he managed to muster the wherewithal, much less the oxygen, to *speak* through his tracheotomy, she had no idea. "You told me once... there is no shame in asking for help. Now... weapons. Do you have any?"

His expression turned bitter and brittle. "And am I expected to believe that you're in any shape to fight, Blanchett?" he muttered poisonously.

"I wasn't the one who went for a little dip in the river, now was I?" Esther paused to catch her breath, simmering with frustration... and some other, murkier emotion for which she didn't have a name.

She could barely keep the meager hospital foodstuff down for the terrible sense of foreboding that churned in the pit of her stomach. The feeling, an almost physical intuition, had been gnawing at her ever since Father Tres appeared, as relentless as a swarm of glistening, bloated botflies that buzzed about one's face in the desert sun. Esther sensed danger: imminent, remorseless, mindless, coiled like a heat-maddened rattler between flimsy bars of bone. Fragile yet solid...

She had the distinct impression that it centered on Alucard — Esther could almost feel the effort he was exerting to keep his rage under control. It was difficult to disentangle her external perceptions from Alucard's inner sense of confusion and contradictory anger. A broiling evil, a darkness, was building in the back of Esther's skull like the onset of a bastard migraine.

Dietrich... and now Alucard...

What on earth was happening outside the hospital...?

"Brother Petros," began Esther, scrounging her courage, "I think Father Nightroad is in terrible danger. If I don't do something, he..." She stretched out her hand in a gesture of mute appeal, then let it fall to her side when the motion elicited little from Petros save a contemptuous crease of the lip. "The Father... I have to save him, sir... I..."

She found she didn't... *precisely* know what else to say.

Esther had gone to rescue Abel so unthinkingly, so instinctually, so *blindly*, that, looking back on it, she realized she had never actually made the conscious decision.
She hadn't worried about a single thing besides protecting him.

Esther cast around for an excuse that would satisfy her present company, some molecular structure to render her cause logical or rational. An excuse, because Esther could not share the real reason... least of all with Petros, of all people.

The Chief Inquisitor, meanwhile, leveled on the Sister with crushing intensity, alert to every nuance of inflection and body language. His scrutiny layered a chill like morning dew on her arms, soaking right through her clothes and into her bones.

After a few moments of silence that seemed thick enough to carve, Petros's eyelids suddenly lifted.

"Oh, damn it all," he muttered, looking nauseous, and not from his injuries. The mortar-like grinding of his voice somehow managed to make the note of accusation all the more evident. "I've had my suspicions since Carthage, but I had hoped I was mistaken."

Esther frowned. "Look, if this is about—"

"You're in love with him."

The real reason...

For a moment, Esther couldn't react. One thought followed sluggishly after another, each connecting briefly like hands in a torch race. She opened her mouth, paused, closed it, then shook her head ruefully. Her gaze grew strained as she waited for her inherent tendency towards deference or denial to kick in, for her temper to anesthetize the sudden panic.

It didn't come.

Petros let out a boiling ball of air, his glower not entirely unsympathetic, yet still... disappointed. "For God's sake, Sister, what is the matter with you?"

"I... It's not—" Esther looked down, eyes and cheeks burning. She stammered for a moment, tripping over her own tongue. "It's... not what you might think it is, sir. I doubt it's even requited... not really."

"Then Nightroad is an even bigger fool than you are," he grumbled, without a trace of embarrassment or, perhaps, comprehension. He turned away from her, facing the wall opposite.

"You've got it wrong."

"Spare me." Esther didn't expect him to continue; even stringing together a full sentence seemed to sap the strength from him.

But he did.

And that was almost worse.

"There is a holiness to love, requited or not, and those people who do not receive it with gratitude are arrogant beyond saving."

Esther felt her ears go hot at the implication.

Petros knew, she realized, despairingly.

Petros, for all his pigheadedness and truly prodigious stubbornness, despite the fact he had all the
nicety and nuance of a blunderbuss, had her pinned down.

How humiliating...

Esther stood there, tongue-tied. The two of them didn't speak for some time, until there was no sound save the shiver of the radiator.

Then Esther closed her eyes, grateful that the Chief Inquisitor had fallen sidewise on his pillow, facing away from her. Out of shame on her behalf, or disgust. Or both. Whatever his reasons, they suited Esther fine: she did not want to be having this conversation, and especially not with him. She did not want him to see that she had already gnawed her underlip to the point of bleeding.

She did not want him to see her weakness.

Not again. Not ever.

"I don't care about all that right now," she began, taking a deep breath. "Director... I need your help." Again. "Please. I want to fight."

Petros's head rolled. He glared at the ceiling as though he meant to drill a hole straight through the roof.

"You're a fool, Blanchett," he snarled, guttural, voice almost rusted away. "Just like him."

But then the Director peered over the edge of the bed, locking her gaze with his. Despite the vehemence in his voice, there was a strange quietude in his pale eyes, a degree of simple, calm concession in his expression that Esther had come to realize was quite rare for him.

It was not unlike how Petros looked at Alessandro...

Esther heard a muttering sound that may have been a prayer. Petros seemed deep in thought, then, rather than merely piqued.

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels," he murmured, “but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal; and though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."

He opened his mouth as though to add something more...

But at that moment, a blinding bolt of lightning fired the room from within, the corresponding thunderclap causing the windowpane to quake. Esther nearly jumped out of her skin, her eyes stunned. Petros's face seemed to leap forward in the brilliance of the flash. Everything turned white for the barest second.

The shock faded, but then another flash came, dulled by the darkness of the winter night. Blades of electricity broke through the screen of snowflakes, accompanied by yet more violent cracks of thunder.

Outside, the rumbles rose in pitch to something not unlike... not unlike...

*The dihedral drift... of two black wings...*

Esther's mind went blank. She clapped her hands over her mouth, muffling a whimper. All the brave words she'd planned to tell the Director fled in the wake of her frantically beating heart. Her
throat knotted. Her vision misted, until the ward was a faint blue-gray blur. When she looked up, Esther's eyes were almost as bloodshot as Petros's.

"Please..." she mouthed. "The Father... he..."

The Director's expression had gone devastatingly grave. His frown deepened, settling between his brows like claw marks in a carcass.

In spite of their recent disagreement, a look of fierce understanding passed between them.

"Blanchett," he barked, snapping her to attention. "I have only one armament. But you may yet be able to make some use of it."

He inclined his head towards a dim recess of the room.

Esther's eyes widened.

"Provided," grunted Petros, "that you can carry it..."
I knew nothing, Looking into the heart of light...

Chapter Summary

To everything there is a season,
A time for every purpose under heaven

Ecclesiastes 3:1

Chapter Notes

......... i offer no excuses for how late this is

well, there is only one character's perspective we haven't touched on yet...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

London burns.

He watches its towers and churches and bridges, its domes and bell towers and quaysides, curl black like kindling. Big Ben looms, dark-dialed and silent; the dome of St. Paul sits cracked open like an egg; carrion-caked ravens fly from the toppled Tower. The broken chimneys of Battersea tumble into the river. The Thames runs through the devastation like a hemorrhaged artery, dead-eyed treasures percussing against the shore: river-bloated rats, cold-meat corpses, eels plucking at tender fingers and toes. The open vein carries barges and bodies and refuse towards the sea. Smoke hangs in the air as thick as clag and renders arabesques in the gray, slanting light.

The sense of presence seems somehow dense and heavy; he finds he has to fight the urge to rear back his shoulders, to glory in his inability to decipher the solemnity, the sadness, the horror, of the Burning City.

"Don't close your eyes."

The streets, ankle-deep in blood, beckon to him. He wants to submerge himself beneath their surfaces, to glut himself on the viscera. The city's carcass has withstood centuries of storms and now, robbed of the change time brings, it stands muted and lame and bleeding, broken — a temple without parishioners, a faith without cause.

No past, no future... alone with the certainty that everything must end and a knowledge that at the heart of all things rests an almost mortal, passive sadness, circling endlessly, forever and forever, everywhere. Like a Christ face in a mirror, locked into a sequence as perfect as a pattern.

The sky is a cold, gunmetal gray, dull and dead save for a bloom of live rose in the east. Below, in the slick, crimson streets, the serrated coin of the rising sun drowns in its own reflections.

He ought to end with the night, with the smoke and the stars... resigned, reconciled, everything packed away into some radiant significance... a calm of mind, all passions spent.
"Head my voice!"

And yet he lingers...

He wills nothing, attempts nothing... merely stares into shards of shattered time, the iniquity of oblivion, as his mind reaches for some mark, some abrasion, to render the darkness intelligible.

A crease. An edge.

A shadow cast against its insensate skin, something to confirm his understanding of what is, and what was... and what must be.

Recognition. Coherence.

He falls to his knees, invisible to the outside world save for the soft impressions in the earth beneath him... an imprint writ in the divots of his shins, side by side in the dust.

"I'm giving you an order..."

He wants to hear the susurrus of her hair, trace the flesh of her lips and press his ear to the beat of her heart, the muscle stretched taut like the rope of a tabor, forged from the wet, leathery sounds of ventricular contractions.

He yearns for life. He aches for it.

His face feels sticky. He tastes salt, and he thinks that, perhaps, he is weeping... either because he doesn't want to die or because he does. It is hard to tell... and who would believe him in either case... and who would remain to believe him in all cases.

He weeps on account of his helplessness, his terrible loneliness, the cruelty of man, the cruelty of God.

"Don't leave me!"

Her voice is a commandment, echoing through the rebar ribs and rawboned carcasses of the Burning City, dying away with no response. Her voice is steel and strength; it urges him to live.

And yet... he hears her suffocating, suffering gasps under the rumble of collapsed masonry and the roar of boiling firelight. A beckoning beneath her divine rule.

And he tries to obey her.

He tries...

*He is below, in the dirt, clawing his way to the light, fingernails scraping stone, mouth filled with maggots, eyes stinging from the grainy topsoil.*

*He is straining, reaching... dragging himself towards the sky; when he breaks through, he levers his jaw wide but does not breathe, for he no longer needs to breathe.*

Impudent and bloodless, he lingers.

He veers between barely conscious and bare consciousness, comprehending at some innate, instinctual level that he must hold firm to the latter, no matter what, even as all the bacterial memories race to evade his scrutiny.
He knows he must fix every piece of himself in his mind's eye, to examine every cell in the minutest detail, no matter how much he wants shot of them all.

Because he is anathema, a black terror that cannot be destroyed.

He is a sinner, and utterly unloved.

He lingers.

He feels no pain at first. He makes to crane his neck so as to get a look at the rising sun, but then something in his chest begins to hurt. He is only too aware that the blood he has consumed is in turn consuming him... a molecular flaying stoked to its fiercest intensity, skinning him from the inside. He feels the pull... feels the boiling, sulfurous waves rippling through him, paring meat from bone... reaching into the deepest folds of his flesh, caressing each hidden synapse, flowing through every vein.

For a moment, he hates her.

Even at a distance, each word she utters smells of smoke, hanging in the stale air above her head. He hates the cigar ash all over her trousers. He hates that her teeth are yellower than ever from the nicotine.

He hates the clothes she wears, shapeless and fussy. He hates the way the heels of her shoes are worn away on their outside edges — not badly, but appreciably. It looks mean to him, in his mind's eye: slovenly, and horribly human.

He hates her for being human.

And he hates that she cannot save him...

He cries out softly; the words, when they come, are thick-tongued, sleepy murmurs, clotting in his throat. It takes him a moment — an age — to recognize the voice as his own.

"I fear..."

*He is scared out of his wits.*

"I must... disobey you..."

The blackness seems to brood over him, covet him, await him hungrily — an appetite with a yen for his soul... and the souls of all the others...

He falls against a nearby wall as the final lethargy creeps into his limbs.

"Farewell... Integra..."

The city is ash-gray against the wounded heavens. No more cathedrals, no palaces, no temples. All the petty vanities and sophistications swept away like so much dust. Not a sound issues from it: wisps of smoke rise in the limpid air — grease fires and smoldering embers alone sing the fragile glory of the dawn. A slight breeze leaves its sick flavor on his tongue like the kiss of a decomposing lover.

The first thin, blood-red stripes of sunrise shimmer on the blistered horizon.

"How lovely... this sunlight which I forsook so many centuries ago..."
Every time he dies, it is the same vision that greets his eyes.

Every time...

_Time._

He feels himself buckling under the sentence of immortality, pronounced on a creature who least deserves it, who least desires it — a fate administered without warning or satisfactory cause.

In an instant his quiet terror transmutes into a frenzy as violent as it is futile. He is no longer a rational being among his fellow rational beings; he is only a lacerated animal, screaming and struggling in the trap.

Too many lives... too long...

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The sun rises over the Burning City.

Alucard does not die.

---

"Stop this."

Across a gray courtyard, surrounded on all sides by thin pillars, he sees footprints in the dust. With no rain to wash them out and no wind to grind them down, they may have been laid an eternity ago. They veer between two monolithic slabs of tilting stone, framing at their apex a manor house like the cinder of a fallen star.

The mansion, set square on the gently ascending lawn, rendered piebald by the filtered moonlight, radiates an atmosphere of decay. It seems an extension of the dark, alkaline soil that gave it birth, something that has evolved in secret, away from human eyes. Emaciated trees defer to its majesty. Its corners rise as stunted towers; its frontage of dark and unwieldy granite forms a crenellated archway pierced by huge windows. The cruciform main building is surrounded by a rectangle of shabby barracks and old stables. Ugly black walkways of cast iron link the various wings; a bare frame of primitive scaffolding rests against the rear of the building, locked into the bricks and mortar by thick ivy and calcification.

The manor touches a mathematical point of endlessness, a singularity with no width, occupying no space. Eternity is less an extension of time than an absence of it.

What do the individual moments matter here?

All the past, all the other lives he has known, all the futures in which he might be making the same conclusions with the same sense of truth... they are meaningless in such an insensate, formless, timeless void.

No more pity, no more tenderness. The mansion makes him certain of the fact: he has been decomposed, divested of light. He is as variable as the particle, as heartless as stone. He is alive only by virtue of locality.

He senses no accident or affection, no cause, power, or principle... there is nothing of the symmetry and order that confines all created beings, by which the animated nature of the universe moves.

Indeed, the only signs of life are the footprints, and the fresh, silvered glint at their edges.
The great front doors creak open at his approach, their hinges groaning like the bones of a giant roused from his slumber, like a Lazarus patiently sleeping as the comatose do.


But embers, too. Ash. The heavy, charcoal miasma of burning.

Fire and water.

He turns and walks down the musty, dim corridor, along a strip of flagstones that still cling together by means of crumbling, powdery lime. The furnaced house stands gray and gutted, pillars and banister rails cindered to the core; on the soft ash lays stiff, black limbs sifted in still-glowing embers.

He touches his palm to the charcoal. Doors — dark, oblivious, inscrutable — sidle by, like a row of stopped-up cavities, bloody and weeping, in a giant honeycomb of a mouth. The manor is worse than the grave, for in the grave, at least, there is an absence of consciousness.

"Stop this."

The whisper registers as a feather's touch inside his head.

"Don't close your eyes."

The night air flows over his face like undulations of black satin. He feels anguish, like a physical spasm, twist the muscles of his face; he realizes instinctively that he will have no control over the display, caught in the grip of a wild grief that paralyzes everything but itself.

He mourns for the wounds of an old man, an old friend, once loyal, lost to the darkness of his own self-loathing and beguilement.

He mourns for the sorrow of his master, for the pain of her service and the exquisite satisfactions of her faith, for the thrashing exhaustions and the endless dyings that maligned her soul.

He mourns for his fledgling, who, at his beckoning, abandoned any notion of God's radical tenderness. He mourns for the knowledge that she died — is dying — alone and frightened, wondering where he is, why her sire broke his promise, why he allowed these terrible things to happen...

In an instant, his mind staggers. There is no diabolic hope, no purposeful pulsing of blood, no flight into coherence. No easy fluency of thought. The stillness resonates like the terrible retreat of the ocean before it devours the shore, the in-breath before the surge, white-veined swells gathering like great fists drawn back for a blow.

The sky falling through the sea, the clouds smashing on impact like glass, the great pale sheet of the firmament lying broken at the bottom of the waves...


There is only surrender.

He is alone.

He is anathema, a black terror that cannot be destroyed.
He is a sinner, and utterly unloved.

He lingers.

Completely, utterly alone.

Standing in the deep snow, in a city caught in the catalepsy of winter, an apocalyptic despair — no more to be named than met or escaped — leadens his heart.

Alucard pulls his lips back from his fangs, bares his teeth in a gluttonous grin, and howls — a long, searing cry of anguish and rage, showing the black of his palate.

And then he feels the snowflakes blasted from his face... by the current of broad-soaring wings...

"You have been alone for so long," says a young woman's voice. "I thought you might appreciate the company."

From the shadows of the manor, a figure shimmers into view, dressed in an ethereal silver gown. She wears a lily in her hair, a white bloom on the crest of lavish black curls. Her dark face defies carbon dating, gracious yet fading, like a geranium between the leaves of a book, memorializing the decades through which it has endured. Not so much the work of man as the work of wind and rain and the herd of the seasons. She is as poised as a king or emperor, as remote as the farthest fixed star, her features formed with tender gravity.

Reciprocal in his appraisal, she levels on him with a pair of remarkable eyes that approximate no other shade he has ever seen. Except, perhaps, batches of ink made by boiling indigo and copper sulfate together for days until they form a blue so dark and deep that it approaches violet.

And yet her eyes do not have the soft, cherubic quality one might expect of such a color. They are shrewd, seasoned, as if the girl has gazed far too often at an unsavory side of life, and despite the fact, has not yet been inured to its horrors.

"I know something of being frozen into the passive position of an object," she says gently, in a syrupy Middle Eastern accent, like the slow stretching of honey from a silver spoon. Persian, perhaps, or Iraqi. "One whose very existence depends on the eye of its beholder."

Under her scrutiny, he feels as though the metal of some inner conviction is being softened and bent by a persistent flame, cooling slowly to anneal and ossifying into a form he no longer recognizes.

"I am reminded," the girl goes on, "of a line from The Rime of the Ancient Mariner... As idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean..."

Above him, a wall of black feathers snaps at the rushing wind like the sails of a great sea vessel. Alucard strains to maintain his footing, holding fast against the dark, vile heart of the hurricane.

The creature that was once Abel Nightroad bears himself aloft, his plumage as black as pitch against the claustrophobic lamplight. His face is fierce and bloodless beneath an aureole of silver hair. Six-centimeter claws erupt from his nail-beds. The eyes, once blue, radiate red, as though lit from within, glowering with unutterable malevolence.

Alucard registers low murmurs percussing under the thunder... a chorus of death whispers emanating from the parasites in Nightroad's muscle and tissue.
As Alucard watches, he gains the faintest impression that, beneath the priest's face, writhe many smaller bodies — hands and legs, grotesquely screaming mouths.

But then reality blinks, and the skin is unblemished, waxy and smooth, like something newly born.

A bolt of electricity — sharp with the faint, bleached odor of ozone — flies from the priest's wingtips, striking the mounted statue of Ferdinando di Medici at the center of the Piazza della Santissima Annunziata. There is a bright flash of lightning, and thunder rolls through Alucard's bones; the ancient Grandduke's head falls to the cobbles, crushing the snow with a feathery exhalation.

The nearest of the Puppet Master's monsters makes a sound that might have been distress.

In Nightroad's outstretched hand — percolating from the ragged stigmata of his palm — oily matter crystallizes into the crescent of a scythe. The blade circles over the priest's head as a vane signals a change in the weather.

The scythe's chain jerks wildly, trailing sparks like a wire dragged along a pantograph. Thunder rumbles overhead. The stridulation changes tempo, until there is a boiling, rushing noise that rises sharply in pitch, crescendoing in an ear-splitting explosion as another bolt of lightning cracks against the cobbles.

The flash sears purple after-images into Alucard's retinas, the concussion rattling his teeth. The shockwave throws him against the fountain, the impact blasting bloody debris out of his torso; his head slams into the edge of the basin with enough force to shatter the skull of a normal human. The change in air pressure tugs at the flesh of his cheeks. A terrible weight seems to settle on his chest, splintering his ribs like dry kindling.

The pain is impossible to believe — Alucard feels himself being squeezed, crushed, his bones shattering, his flesh becoming something shapeless.

"I... I'm so sorry..." Abel surfaces for a moment, dragging himself from the muddy clutter of his own hindbrain. "I... if you wish to kill me... for honor's sake... I would not stop you... but..."

He coughs out a huge, sobbing breath, as though choking on his own fangs. Suddenly, he gags, and bile-colored liquid flecks his black lips.

"We..." the Krusnik begin to seethe; the voice of the gestalt consciousness resonates in Alucard's skull, pressuring a reply. The chorus slices keenly, as razor-edged as the feathers erupting from their host's shoulders, shredding the cassock beneath to ribbons. "We will not allow ourselves to fall to the Orden, Zamiel. We will consume you... before you consume us..."

Scuffing his boot across the ground, Alucard scatters sparks, throwing the carcass of the manor into gentle shadow. Then he gives the strange girl a brutal look, forcing his hands to curl loosely at his sides, his stance too deliberately relaxed to suggest anything but the most exquisite tension.

She doesn't so much as flinch.

"I don't know you..." he states in Romanian. *Nu știu cine ești...*

"That ought not come as a surprise... I am not your memory, Unholy King."

He feels a fragmentary flash of recall, a bolt of recognition like the blink of candlelight inside a dark cavern. "But this is the Hellsing Manor." He considers the house's smoldering husk. "Or what
remains of it."

The girl looks up at him, and he thinks, for a moment, that she is going to mark him for his presumption. She seems ancient, her eyes dark and cold, her expression imperious... unreadable. Opaque.

"You are a quantum anomaly. What becomes of a soul when it is multiplied, incarnated in its many images?" She shakes her head, obsidian curls bouncing about her brow. "It volatilizes itself in the simulacra, at once extant everywhere... and nowhere." A pause. "This place... is the latter."

He comprehends her meaning in a way that defies his ability to articulate. The house is a void, a fatality without substance. When everything else is gone, when the universe has collapsed back in on itself and time itself has ground to a halt, the manor will remain... frozen in the singularity. Trapped in a cluster of moments, surrounded by no moments at all. It constitutes a total break from the reality to which Alucard is native, the severing of the umbilical cord that once tied him to existence.

The minutes and the hours are unknown computations of a span irrelevant. It is as if he has been moving towards this young woman, and her towards him, for an eternity. Though neither of them was aware of the other before this moment, there seems to him to be a kind of mindless certainty brimming beneath their ignorance.

Like two solitary birds flying by celestial reckoning, drawn together across lifetimes.

He tends toward her, but not without a certain hesitation. Confusion, frustration, even fear, works like yeast in his thoughts; the fermentation summons to the surface a catalogue of threats, none of which, he suspects, will do an ounce of good in extracting any more information than the child is willing to concede.

Alucard feels his fingernails digging into his palm, even through the fabric of his gloves. "If not my memories," he begins, a demand in all but courtesy, "then whose?"

"Do you not know?"

He does. "The Princess... you belong to her..."

"Would that I ever had that privilege."

"Who are you?"

She turns her head towards him. Stares with violet eyes... as deep as water. As soft as the twilight sky.

Her upper lip curls to reveal a pair of sharp, thin fangs.

"My name was Shahrazad."

Stooping like an osprey, Nightroad yanks his scythe skyward, wrenching a thunderstroke from the charged air. Alucard manages to knock away Abel's first strike and jumps back to avoid a second. The parasitic monstrosities and their host swing a third time, the barbed edges of the scythe passing through their arc with blurring speed. Alucard ducks, the movement starting in his thighs, trying to get under Nightroad's reach so he can close with his teeth...

But then the priest spins on the inseam of his boot, allowing the slick ice to carry him. His blade
carves a neat slash across Alucard's eye — from brow to the root of his jaw — and before the Vampire can sink his teeth into the Krusnik's arm, Nightroad makes a second slash in the opposite direction — a nearly perfect X across Alucard's face. The diagonal trajectory of the scythe cores down and out the back of his head. In an instant, Alucard's left eye and his right occipital lobe are reduced to a slimy, greasy pulp, like minced cauliflower.

He has seen Nightroad at the extremes of his emotions in the last few days, but never before has he received the impression that the priest can be cruel, however upset he might become...

Alucard snarls an obscenity.

Viscous matter — as depthless as shadow, as red as blood — trickles from the wound in Alucard's face, falling upwards into the air. Instead of spreading horizontally like water on the ground, the accumulation hangs vertically, a coronal nimbus above the Vampire's head, a mirror of crimson mercury. Its edges are as ragged as torn cloth; within it, sickly shapes boil up like dumplings in the dark broth.

Alucard wills what remains of his flesh to dissolve like boiled sugar, relinquishing his human shape in a flailing tangle of sluicing, breathing tissue — full of festered eyes and jaws dripping ropes of spittle. Countless vermiform limbs writhe like earthworms, throbbing with larder beetles and scums of glistening centipedes. The Vampire's bulk against the sky is an eclipse of aberrant origins, twisting and surging like waterspouts over storm-gray seas; building, spiraling, climbing in vague streamers and tendrils of shadow.

The purulent sore, the livid mass of darkness, distends as it advances towards Nightroad.

Alucard plunges into vengeance as another creature might plunge into despair, dragging a crimson wake across the snow.

He attacks the Father with a ferocity that has more grief in it than hatred.

Shahrazad...

The name dies somewhere in the space between him and the young woman, giving way to strained silence. In the quiet that follows, he supposes their gazes have some long conversation their mouths could never have managed.

"Did you imagine, Unholy King," murmurs Shahrazad finally, "when you were bonded to her, that you would not feel her touch upon your mind, as she felt your touch upon hers?"

She poses the rhetorical question with a thinly-veiled purposefulness that sets Alucard's fangs on edge. "My mind ought to have swamped hers. There is no possible way for mere human affection to leave any trace—"

"Perhaps I was no mere affection," she counters. "Indeed, Esther Blanchett is no mere Terran."

His tilts his head to one side, locks it at an angle. He places some truth in the words — there predominates in the Princess's mind a vivid and intense sense of compassion, of sympathy and tenderness, which seems to him so strong and full that they will never fully pass away.

"You loved her," Alucard intuits, glaring balefully.

"I never stopped. Not even in death."
"I recognize my own kin, girl," he snarls belligerently, eyeing the serrated edge of her canines. "I know that you and her Church would have been at one another's throats as soon as you ran out of common enemies. You may have had many fine reconciliations, but were they worth the pain?"

She doesn't hesitate. "Yes."

He sneers. "Love is a dangerous disadvantage."

"Perhaps. To love another creature is a magnificent task... tremendous and foolish and human." She smiles. "What, then, does that make us?"

Alucard offers no immediate reply. In the ensuing silence, Shahrazad moves her arm across her breast to cradle her heart, as though consoling it, afraid it might burst.

And only then does Alucard notice something dark like mucilage glistening at the center of her chest, though Shahrazad herself seems only vaguely aware of it. It takes her drawing close to him for him to recognize the gash as an entry wound — the wadding and metal fragments from the cartridge have reduced her sternum and ribcage to gables of serrated bone. A shotgun blast, he suspects. He can still smell the carbon deposits, the soot, the unburnt powder... the combustion gases, intermingling beneath the blood.

Not even in death...

"If our affections are to be our demise, given that demise is unavoidable, is it not better to die loving than to succumb in any other way? We are just... insects. Moths," she murmurs, "tumbling towards burning bulbs. Not because we are exhausted from flight, or wanting to wait out the pain in our wings. We fly and die because we see light in the distance... light like that of the stars we long ago used to navigate the darkness. It is hard to reconcile, is it not? We both know what happens to moths when they fly too close to burning bulbs. To turn from such temptation would seem the most practical of impulses.

"Oh, but Alucard..." Her eyes half closed and her shoulders thrown back, a shudder passes through her body. "Our ability to cherish... to embrace, to love these brittle, breakable creatures — these creatures of light — is perhaps the rarest and most dangerous faculty ever bred within our souls.

"And for someone like you... for someone whose own soul is but a mote of dust in an ever-growing dust storm of possibilities... how much more fierce your own love must be..."

Lightning scintillates along the spines of Nightroad's scythe; the blade passes clean through Alucard's discarnate wisps of shadow. There is no pain; the Vampire feels the curved edge as a swimmer in a river might feel the caress of reeds...

A mandible knits together briefly; a mouth with five rows of teeth in each jaw emerges from the fetid mass of blackness. Alucard bites clean through the fingers Nightroad's right hand, severing the middle digit down to the knuckle, leaving the priest's pinkie hanging from a tendon.

Alucard leans close to his ear. "I hope you weren't planning to take up the violin, Papist."

Then the jaws hinge shut around the scythe; Alucard barely registers the razor-edge of the blade against the soft walls of his mouth. He yanks the massive, diamond-hard weapon forward and down, causing Nightroad to stumble and the spiked whip below the stem to swing towards the priest's wings. Two barbs enter Abel's scapulae at an angle and exit through the folds of his primary feathers. A third bites into his back until the bare skin bleeds.
His opponent folded over, momentarily stunned, Alucard drives his gloved fingers into Nightroad's eye socket. He yanks the eyeball free, its base trailing a bloody root. A glacial slough of oily matter pours like blood from the hole, black in the fitful light that filters down between the buildings.

Nightroad's breath comes in short, ragged gasps, as though building to a vulpine howl.

But the bacilli get over their surprise quickly: ostensibly insensate to the missing organ, the Krusnik's downy plumage sops up every drop of its own blood, like toast in a crock of soup. Countless mouths, as small as fingernails, each with fangs the size of sand grains, gnaw at the scattered fragments of Abel's flesh. Long, sucking tendrils, like knots of black arion, curl around the priest's naked bones. The dusky skin of the Krusnik's throat blushes a pulsating pink, swollen with blood, straining as though about to burst.

Necrotic, suppurative ropes of oily matter solidify back into flesh. The cells in the Krusnik's hand and eye jerk with insect agony as they knit back together... the reconstituted body parts are alabaster-white and as smooth as spider's eggs.

Before Alucard can fully rationalize the incredible rate of regeneration, the scythe describes a perfect arc above the priest's head. Nightroad slices through Alucard's shadows, piercing some approximation of the Vampire's neck. When Alucard's face emerges in an effort to catch the scythe between his teeth again, a concentrated burst of lightning has him writhing spasmodically. The bolt blasts his nose away, leaving only two holes in the front of his skull. The heat welds the seam of his mouth shut. Alucard's glistening facial muscles convulse, contorting as if, beneath the skin, there wriggled a mass of freshly butchered eels.

A curl of shadow, operating independently from its fellows, seeks to wrest Abel's scythe from his grip, wrapping around the stem like a tar-black boa constrictor. Diamond-hard blood reverberates against corporeal shadow, the metallic sounds echoing through the wide marketplace and filling the crannies of the dark alleyways adjacent to the piazza.

Nightroad roars his outrage and lifts his wings, buffeting the air.

The two of them are in some ways colliding and wrestling on a molecular level, the Krusnik's vaporizing lightning trying to compress Alucard back into flesh, even as the Vampire gouges and minces and mangles with the edges of shadowy, whiplike appendages that are as sharp as whetted carbide.

It is as if he is looking at two images through the same lens — superimposed, one showing through the other.

Alucard consuming the Krusnik, or the Krusnik consuming Alucard. A man with the trappings of a monster... slaying a monster with the trappings of a man...

He feels a magnetic incandescence tugging at the iron in his blood, working in much the same way the full moon does on a long winter walk. Were he still in possession of a functioning pair of lungs, the sensation might have left him breathless.

"Trapped... until the weight of my past is shattered by my future." He grins thinly, an expression that hints at a dark understanding. "Difficult enough to have to slaughter three million, four hundred twenty-four thousand, eight hundred and sixty-seven souls, but—"

"Warrant Officer Schrödinger has rendered them wavefunctions," she concludes, something not unlike pity in the words. "And thus, by the strictest scientist definitions, they cannot be killed.
Merely... observed.

The thought leaves the taste of sick in his mouth. He feels lethargic, listless, like a child who has just discovered the violin only to learn he can manage barely more than lurching discords. "Observed by someone bound by the constraints of the Cromwell Invocation. A Hellsing... or a member of the royal family."

"You are far from floundering in candidates, Alucard."

The Vampire turns his head towards a window. He stares at a vein of sludge percolating from a pipe and down a supporting wall, as wet and dark and slippery as an internal organ. The eaves of the roof drip rainwater in beads of weighted glass.

"I never asked for this..."

"Neither did Esther. It is her mercy that you need," she says, "and even that will be hard-won if you cannot comprehend the value of the lives you have taken."

"Hers is not the mercy I seek," he replies succinctly.

Her eyes narrow with what he very much hopes is hesitancy, or at least doubt. Her next words disabuse him of his expectancy, however: "It ought to be." Her tone darkens to one of dignified contempt: "You have caused her such anguish, and yet it is by her hand that you seek to rid yourself of this torment, no?"

A little muscle at the corner of his mouth twitches; he has near played out his hand with patience. "You are a figment of a memory, girl. A drop in an ocean." Glimpsed from the frozen light of his eternal present, the statement seems patently obvious, conclusive and indisputable. It strikes him in equal measures frustrating and infuriating that this imperious, regal creature should be so naive; it is particularly unbelievable that she should set so great a store by love... love for a human girl, at that. "What in hell's name could you possibly know about such suffering?"

His mind picks out in livid detail the pinpoints of existence beyond the battle, like peering at a whirling landscape through the windows of a moving train. God lifts his baton sharply above the endless orchestration, and the eternal movement pauses, suspended.

Alucard watches, through the folds of feathers, the movements of the robot...

The Professor...

And the undead infantrymen of the Orden's manufacture, so much like the ghouls from the old world...

One of the helmeted monstrosities comes abreast of the android priest. Tres Iqus avoids it with preternatural grace, a mere whisper of a movement, only as much as is required to sidestep the blow. He turns his shoulders and extends his arm, rigid, directly into the corpse's path. The ghoul drops like an anchor, the front of its face crushed, the small, oblong bones of its nose driven into its brain by the force of impact.

Iqus races ahead, pivoting on his foot as he places the pistol directly into the chest of another ghoul and depresses the trigger three times.

Its sternum blows out in a spray of blood and dead flesh. Alucard hears gurgling in the creature's throat, its lungs blasted to pieces. Dark stains appear in suspect places.
Another ghoul lumbers after Iqus, hefting a tabar axe and preparing to hurl it at the back of Tres's neck.

"One point zero two seconds too late."

The flat cutting edge comes down, but before the robot can knock the blow aside, something causes the priest to grind to a halt.

A thread, attenuated like catgut string, glints thin and silver against the snow. The wire appears to hold Tres immobile for the barest moment, frozen like a bas relief in a cathedral.

A mere instant is enough...

The ghoul's blade spalls Iqus's left hand — green-gray circuitry sparks and synthetic flesh smokes. Metal shards crack and cascade into the snow; the hand dangles uselessly — a marionette off its strings. The incredible impact, less than a foot in front of Iqus's cross-haired eyes, momentarily stuns him.

The robot manages to reorientate his remaining pistol, trying at the same time to regain his balance, the enormous gun making for an equally enormous draw.

As if in slow motion, Alucard is sensible to the small, skinny specter of von Lohengrin making his way across the battlefield. The boy's knuckles pop and flex, double-jointed fingers convulsing with feverish animation.

Silver filaments flash through the air. In that moment, he is a spider. With lines stringing out in all directions, he sits at the center of his web and interprets each tug.

The android appears to suck on his teeth... almost censoriously. "Your efforts are a waste of time, Marionettenspieler. Your bioelectric fibers will not work on a machine."

"My strings alone, no."

With his free hand, the boy winds a thread around the terminal of a small black box, procured like a conjuring trick from his sleeve...

Wordsworth's eyes go wide. "Tres, cut the wire!" bellows the Professor.

The significance of the tableau clicks in Alucard's mind, like a confusion of colored dots resolving themselves into an image.

"One point zero two seconds too late," sneers Dietrich, not quite low enough under his breath.

Shahrazad looks at Alucard for what seems a very long time, her bottom lip holding in her top one. There is an ache in her eyes that cuts clear through him.

The ancient Vampire thinks, in that moment, she is sadder than anyone he has ever seen.

She raises a hand... rests it on his mouth. The gesture is tentative, her expression tranquil. Her palm is cool and smooth... and unmistakably dead.

No one has touched him in a thousand years.

It would probably be too much to say that he feels the darkness lift at the caress of her fingertips against his lips. But it does, at the very least, begin to shiver, allowing light to bleed in between the
cracks.

She draws close to him, until it is difficult to tell beneath the shadows where she begins and he ends.

An overlap.

He has known something like this, a long time ago. He once felt another's breath on his nape, the heat of them beside him, the cold damp of day on his back... the helpless overwhelm, the sense of crossing. Of culmination and lips bitten to blood and waves crashing in the pink folds of an ear.

Barely time to register the staggering beauty before the separation...

An enormous current runs through the fibers strung between the battery and Tres's mechanical components. The huge voltage spike in his circuits fuses his precision engineered microboards and central processing units into fried silicon. The sudden increase in electrical pressure sends Iqus's sparking, twitching body flying across the piazza.

"I picked this up from Pygmalion... it's one of the black boxes from a Siegelind unit. In the event of a major malfunction in a Killing Doll's OS, this device will not only trigger a thermal overload in the fuses, but will prevent the machine from tripping its own circuit breakers." Dietrich pauses. "Abel broke Radu Barvon... it's only fair I get to break one of your toys, too."

The Professor takes a step back, his face openly mutinous. He is panting from his exertions, his chest seizing at the carnage about him. His eyes are as clear and bright and dangerously cold as the waters of a fjord; his nostrils flare as he advances towards the Orden boy, heels clicking on the cobbles like a clock's breath. Von Lohengrin crimps his fingers, garrote wire pulling taut; one of the Puppet Master's monsters intercepts the Professor.

The ghoul's visor glows with blood-lust. It opens its mouth, barring its serrated canines in a snarl that dies on its lips as the Professor slits its throat.

Another corpse stops and turns towards the priest, birling its battle ax. Despite its dead, lumbering bulk, the ghoul's hands slide purposefully along the haft, fingers grasping tightly as it brings the blade down towards the Professor, who leaps aside with uncommon agility for a man of his age. The axe cleaves into the street with a mighty thwack, sending splinters of stone flying in every direction.

It splays one gloved hand flat on a piece of statuary, gripping the haft to work the blade free of the icy cobbles.

Before the ghoul advances an inch, the Professor plunges his sword into the back of its skull, under the crimped edge of its helmet. It is dead before its body registers the fact.

William wrenches the blade free from the occipital bone just before the ghoul falls to the ground.

The Professor, not slowing down, swiftly juliennes the spinal cord of yet a third puppet, using the momentum of his stride to follow through. His sword sends the ghoul's armor to splinters, and the ghoul itself to worse. The monster folds and falls backwards into the snow.

Something stirs in the pit of Alucard's soul.

The Professor...
William Walter Wordsworth...

*I answer to no man's will, but my own. I am myself in mind, body, and soul. I am the Angel of Death, and as the dawn light cuts through the darkness, so shall I reap all of your souls in bloody turn.*

But von Lohengrin's reflexes are sharp, his control absolute. His chaotic impulses prove a virtue as the Professor, burdened by his dependence on reason, tries to rationalize the ghouls' movements. A corpse is as likely to drop out of William's path accidentally as to dodge him deliberately. And the older man is already losing focus, the assault wearing him down. He is so determined, so desperate, to cut his way through to Iqus that he doesn't look back, doesn't pay attention...

When the blood falls out of the Professor's face, Alucard can almost smell it, even at a distance. Wordsworth's eye snags on a flicker of movement from just over his shoulder. Alucard hears the priest's heart stutter as the axe descends, from behind, towards the Professor's throat.

The ghoul forecasts a feint, but the parry comes a beat too late to catch it.

It draws William's defensive action to his chest and head; he levels his blade at eye-height while the ghoul swings low. The blunt knob of the axe blows out the old man's kneecap, forcing him to the ground. The priest tries to stand, but the ghoul kicks him in the stomach with every whit of its phenomenal strength.

William's body jackknifes before striking a retaining wall near the loggia, gouging a crater in the plaster. He fails to draw a single breath before retching; his stomach lining has split, if the crimson clots mixed with his vomit are any indication. His green eyes roll; there is foam at his mouth and his breathing grows dangerously labored.

The ghoul pivots its weapon and sinks the blade through the pauldron near the juncture of the priest's neck and shoulder. The Professor cries out as blood wells between the rings in the metal, the same red as the crucifix emblazoned across the armor's surface.

The old man folds over from the pain, rolling up tight and fetal.

Wise to the destruction of their allies, the Krusnik gestalt hinges their jaw in an ululating shriek.

"Vermin," snarls Nightroad. Lightning torches the sockets of his eyes. "Leave them alone…"

"I suppose it was too much of me to ask..." Shahrazad murmurs, as though the words are something tender and hurting, almost confessional. Her face is drawn and accountably tired, the tiny wrinkles at the corners of her eyes folding in on themselves as though they have given up trying to intimate any expression save sorrow. "After all, how can I expect a man whose life has been assigned so little worth, beyond that of a mere weapon, to value even the smallest scrap of empathy in others?"

"You think I do not know, that I do not understand, what this existence has cost you. But you are wrong, Unholy King. We are both lepers, are we not? Stained as demons, emergent only as pariahs for nothing more than our desire to die. No memorial for creatures more complicated than martyrs."

"If your life has been so cruel," he snarls, "you should be glad to be rid of it. Your regret will avail you nothing."

"You are right. And I might have believed the world would be better off without me, but I knew
the question was not one of whether I deserved to die... but whether Esther Blanchett deserved the
guilt of murdering me..."

Alucard's eyes widen and his grimace relaxes, if even for a moment. "She killed you." It is not a
question.

"I pulled the trigger... but it was my beloved Esther who held the gun. My life was blown away at
a stroke... because I knew I had cease to mourn what could never be and make the most of what
was possible."

"And what, precisely, was that?"

Her expression misty, distant, the girl probes at the edges of the entry wound; it isn't possible for
Alucard to place the where or the when of it, but he only has to see Shahrazad's downcast gaze to
feel a kind of instant, animal sympathy for her plight.

She makes a single sound, a low note he can't quite interpret. He catches her looking out over the
manor, her eyes enormous and beautiful, the lashes fanning the sweep of her high cheekbones.

"Esther and I could never be together," she says softly. "I could never hope to extend a friendship
that was only meant to last a season into a lifetime. I saw a sort of perfection in the Lady Saint that
in any other place and light I could have only ever imagined. What right did I have to spoil the
clarity and virtue of that vision... by wrenching it into this cruel world?"

"In the days we were together, Esther felt so betrayed, so completely abandoned by her faith... by a
Church she had always believed loved her deeply and absolutely. How terrible that must have been
for her. How alone she must have felt."

"Her Church," Alucard growls, "is a world of broken images, one where fools readily believe that
their precious, final truth is domination, which in turn demands more and more while offering less
and less until, eventually, the absolute winner and wielder of power have everything... save the
need to give anything back." He grunts: "Two thousand years of their inane prattle... truly, some
things never do seem to change."

Both he and Shahrazad were pawns to their enemies, subject to the brutal machinations of people
who held little regard for their lives. Assaulted, betrayed and abused. It is a small wonder they
retain even the faintest semblance of sanity. The fact that she could muster even a modicum of
compassion — enough for the both of them — is, frankly, astonishing.

He sees for the first time, in their just proportions, the cruelty and suffering she endured during her
life, and the sure release, the one real consolation, provided by her death.

The manner of her destruction leaves Alucard with an unaccountable desire, if only it were
possible, to beg her pardon, and the pardon of all helpless wretches, for the tragic unkindness of
human swine...

She clasps the edge of her dress so tightly that he can see the blood draining from the back of her
hands. She remains like that for a few long moments, her breathing lapsing to a shallow silence.

"All I wanted her to know... all I wanted her to understand, was that in spite of everything, no
matter how maliciously anyone might act towards us," she insists, "our ability to express mercy is
the only life-sustaining panacea. Whenever we foster compassion, we are able to overcome the
vilest actions and greatest atrocities committed by other persons."
Nighthroad blanches at the peril of his friends. Flexing their jetblack, feathery wings, the Krusnik's crimson eyes train on Wordsworth and Iqus, glancing away from the Vampire at their feet...

And Alucard takes advantage of the distraction.

Nighthroad seems not to hear, until it is too late, the spectral fluttering of Alucard's shadows. The Vampire shimmers into nothingness. Nighthroad swings his scythe — but the blade passes through empty air.

No doubt the Krusnik feels the chill on their lips as Alucard lands at the priest's neck and bears his head to the cobbles, holding the host pinned against the ice. Nighthroad's spine arches, cowering close to the ground, with his almost human eyes fixed intractably on Alucard.

Alucard grabs one of the wings, twisting it at an unnatural angle; he hears a low, popping sound as the humerus disconnects from the coracoid.

All at once, he feels the hate and fury boiling over in his innards. Every iota of emotion that has been churning around inside him, the anger and the grief, the shock and the confusion, all manifest themselves in a final, violent act as the Vampire simply yanks the wing free, like twisting off a chicken drumstick.

Alucard ogles, transfixed, as the stump sprouts blood... blooms of black that open like petals. For a moment, he struggles to reconcile the savagery of the blow with the mellifluous way Nighthroad keens or the beauty of the deluge, like so many black roses, coiling around the trellis of the Krusnik's empty shoulder socket...

Somewhere behind him, the boy they call Dietrich howls with laughter.

Alucard's expression flattens dangerously. Despite his unwonted degree of sympathy, he suspects the girl requires a sense of resolution — she clings to closures and uses them to superimpose some manner of discipline over her uncertainties. Her martyrdom acts as a charm to halt the plaintive existential questions regarding death and judgement.

But Alucard is more cynical.

He has learned well to distrust the words of the souls of the dead. Their orisons register as open and ambiguous, mere after-impressions, like the vaguely pleasant odor of a bouquet on a casket, its significance long forgotten.

The flowers were never for the dead, anyway.

"I've seen cities burn... I've watched entire nations crackle and spit and crack to black earth and shadow. I've waited and slept and ignored more horrors than you and your kind will ever know."

Shahrazad's expression is shrewd and patient. He can sense her considerations — but he knows the numbers are too big, the concepts too huge, and there is only so far her sensibility can take her before it starts to fail her.

Death on such a scale surely lays beyond the providence of her comprehension.

And yet...

"Do you still let yourself remember what grace was like, Unholy King, before you fell from it?"
As Alucard turns his face to study her, he states, "I do not care about them... I don't give a damn about the lives of those human cattle. I have never had any occasion to interest myself in such things. Their Church, their crusades, their faith... it can all pass right under my nose and I wouldn't smell a thing."

She smiles, then... in a small, sad way.

"Lies."

Von Lohengrin's laughter chokes off with a violent abruptness.

Before Alucard can consider why, there is a sudden, agonizing crunch against his chest; the crack of his breastbone echoes across the piazza, like the snap of a tree branch antecedent to an avalanche. The blow drives blood and suppuration from Alucard's guts and causes him to stagger backwards. Nightroad's unjointed wing jerks from his grip, his fingers slipping from the thicket of greasy feathers.

Before he can muster the scene of mind to fight for balance, he collapses backward onto the ice. His lips retract in an expansive gesture of rage as a second barrage of super-condensed air threatens to turn the flesh of his face to burlap; the gyre spins shards of ice and stone and slings them against the buildings — banging off the windows so hard that he wonders if the glass, along with his bones, might shatter.

A small, thin figure stands before the loggia of the Ospedale degli Innocenti, brandishing in a double-handed grip a silver stave mounted at one end by a spinning rotor assembly. She wears a starchy hospital gown and nurse's robe, the sleeves of which have been folded twice-over to keep her hands free. The gaslight turns her features wan and waxy, excavating already cavernous blue eyes. She glares at Alucard with fierce righteousness. Her head arches upwards, red hair blowing about her face and down her throat.

Even at a distance, he can hear her heart jackhammering in her chest. He breathes in deep and hinges his jaw wide, catching the scent of the girl's fear, sharp and sanguine, like sweat and salt and soiled bedclothes. Though she is plainly terrified of the monstrosity Alucard has become, and despite the fact that she appears very frail — like an old photograph dusted from an album, whitened away — courage causes her head to tilt skyward, iron in her poise. Her primary instinct, as always, in the face of fear is to stand her ground and fight rather than flee.

The Vampire feels a pull in the pit of his stomach, not unlike hunger... but deeper, heavier. He laps at the blood pooling in his mouth.

He supposes he ought to count himself fortunate: the Princess can barely lift the pike — which Alucard recognizes as one of the two halves of the Chief Inquisitor's lance — much less aim it properly: half a foot north and the vortex of compressed air might have shattered the top half of his skull. Had the girl not been braced against a pillar, the momentum from the engine's kick would have knocked her on her backside.

Hefting the weapon in her arms, she moves to stand between Alucard and Abel, with every intention of shielding the latter from the former. Though the top of her head barely reaches Nightroad's sternum, and the single half of the lance is as thick as her thigh, Esther holds her chin high and levels the high frequency wheel at Alucard's chest.

"You will not touch him," states the Princess, rubbing her tongue raw against her top teeth. "That is an order, Alucard."
His face is fixed in a lethal snarl. His lips retract in a canine imitation of a retch. "God damn you, girl."

"All you know is pain. All you feel is desperation. You have long ago given up crying out for help, because you have learned that no one will listen. No matter how loud you scream, you cannot stop or change what is happening... what is fated to happen. No matter what you do, the pain will not stop. Betrayal is too simple a word to describe the overwhelming helplessness, the overwhelming loneliness and isolation..."

Even as she speaks, flying in the teeth of his anger and shame, Alucard cannot help but watch the miracle unfold.

The girl knows his suffering and knows, besides that, worlds more. And yet she bends over his pain alone — he watches his own desolation appear in Shahrazad's dark eyes, then sink so deeply into them that she shudders. His grief has become her grief, his sorrow her own. And though he grieves not one bit less for it, yet his heart makes room for her... for her will and wisdom, for he finds she bears the sorrow better, with dignity and grace where he can muster only fury and the longing to destroy.

"You do not hate humanity, Alucard. You hate the manner in which they treat pain like a philosophical contemplation. You hate the way they erect conceit into duty, because the people whom they most admire are conquerors, whose glory is cleverness in causing men to die. You do not hate them, but you hate the truth they represent... that there will always be kind people forced to violence by an unkind world, and the corruption of all innocent things..."

Exhausted, all of the Krusnik's energy given to regrowing their wing, Nightroad pitches forward. His forehead falls to rest in the space between Esther's shoulder blades. He sags against her back, and the Princess is forced to take a steadying step to keep the priest's weight from knocking her to the ground. Nightroad is practically an invertebrate, and the girl has to play the part of his spine — a wall of strength designed to defeat any argument and brace any weakness. Only her voice, injected into each hairline fracture, lends the man some degree of cohesion.

Even with Nightroad collapsed at Esther's back, he still plays the grudging host to the bacilli. The Krusnik hold their remaining wing agape, until the razor-edged feathers ruffle back to show their oily-black underdown.

From Alucard's angle, it appears as though the enormous sable pinions have erupted from Esther's own shoulders, enveloping her in a mantle of midnight.

"Are you all right, Father?" she asks, not taking her eyes off Alucard. Her quiet words are near swallowed by the cathedral expanse of the piazza.

"Child... we are—"

"I wasn't asking you," she interrupts testily, though her voice is shaky. "I know you're perfectly fine... or will be. I was asking after the Father."

"We are the same being, Miss Esther..." comes the chiding retort; his voice is the croak of some dead, dry creature. "And... I will be all right. Hurts..."

"Just hang in there. What about Dr. Wordsworth and Father Tres—"

"Miss Esther, you shouldn't be here... too dangerous... your injuries..."
"Stupid man... worry about yourself, for once."

Her gaze darts around the piazza, landing on the Puppeteer and clinging. She is wise to the boy's fixation, slimy and rank. Alucard thinks he sees rage, quickly veiled, then disgust as quickly suppressed, tug at the corners of her eyes. Von Lohengrin is clutching the bruised remnants of his right hand and the Vampire realizes, abruptly, that Esther has used the Screamer to crush the Orden boy's fingers, shattering his metacarpal bones and severing his connection to his reanimated soldiers.

Indeed, the remaining helmeted brutes have collapsed, and though Iqus doesn't stir, the Professor lets out a low, agonized groan.

"Don't you get it yet, Father?" The Princess pauses to take a breath; the words arrive in rushes: "I will always come for you."

It is almost... hallowed, sacrosanct, the way she cleaves to the sanctity of compassion, of mercy, despite the bevy of sins her companion has accumulated over time.

That Alucard himself has accumulated over time...

Despite the way she maintains her grip on the high-frequency wheel, the sudden tenderness on Esther's face cuts at the Vampire's heart.

She watches him thoughtfully for several empty seconds. Then she says, very gently, "I know you're hurting. I know you're in pain... more pain than I'll ever understand..."

How can she continue to address him so graciously? He has subjected her to such torments, poisoned her with all the hate and malevolence of his own history, a fate he would not wish on his worst enemy. All consequent of circumstances far beyond his control, but certainly nothing to endear her to him...

"But I also know you don't want to hurt him, Alucard. Not really."

"It is not mankind you hate," says Shahrazad.

"It's not the Father you hate," says Esther.

"You grieve. You hurt..."

"But... I know, deep down, you still value life..."

"You lash out with anger... you try to exact vengeance..."

"But that's only because you understand... you know exactly what it feels like..."

"To rob others of their loved ones..."

"And to be robbed of your loved ones in kind..."
"You have known such pain... your entire life, and in every iteration thereof, all you have known is the hurt... the shrieking loneliness."

"The world has taken everything from you."

"Thus you sought in turn to take everything from it."

"But even so... this is your home."

"These Terran... these poor, frail creatures... they are your kin."

"Abel is not your enemy."

"The world, for all its cruelties, is not your enemy."

"You have the power to forgive him."

"You are capable of mercy."

"Remember that."

"Never forget that..."

Alucard drops to all-fours, grinding his palms into the ice and rock salt, splintering his nails beneath the fabric of his gloves, fighting to restrain the howl that threatens to tear free from his throat.

But this time... it is not pain or fury or a thirst for vengeance that fills the emptiness at his center... but memories, flooding back, bringing an unwanted cognizance. A world of smoke and blood, stinking of desolation, seems to shimmer about his head like prismatic bursts of color in a veil of mist. Vacant, empty eyes look not at Blanchett and Nightroad but past them, lost in memories they can never fully comprehend, nor ever be allowed to share.

He is a stranger to whom their existence matters not at all.

From one end of his life to the other, he carries with him all that he has done. Absolution — a repulsive, degrading mechanism if ever there was one — may grant forgiveness for it, but it does not expunge the weight of his sins. It does not alleviate the burden of the past.

He rises to his knees, supplicatory.

Alucard's eyes try to weep. Fail.

He begs Esther Blanchett: "Kill me."
She stands fast against a tremor that threatens to buckle her legs. Alucard can see in his mind's eye — as Esther can see in hers — the fires of the city, a travesty of beautiful sunsets. Flames and smoke have haunted her dreams, and now those dreams are manifest, coming to claim her. The inferno reflects even in the snowflakes, which tumble in her direction like fireflies wheeling about a candle bracket... "No... I can't... I won't just—"

"You're the only one who can, alteţă. Make it an order. Strike me down... and command me to die..."

"But more than hatred... more than anything... you feared your time with them would drive you mad, that you would surrender entirely to despair if you were to live forever with your Domna, know no other thing but her campaigns and crusades. Sir Integra would pass, in time, and you would remain. She would sicken, and you would stay the same, and you feared you would tire of those mortal hurts... and of each other. You feared you would grow to hate every word, every stone, every creature you touched. It takes courage to love, and be loved in turn, and not collapse under the weight of it. It is every day a trial, and you feared you would fail. Not for lack of strength, but for lack of endurance. Perhaps the world does not care a whit about the hopes and dreams and sorrows that lay masked by flesh and bone, and if so, why obstinately persist in making efforts that you understand perfectly well are quite pointless?

"You suffer, Alucard, because you do not know the answer; even though you may claim affection is trite and vacuous — meaningless — you continue to think and act as if it has dimension, a molecular structure all its own.

"This effort to pare away the iterations of your soul is not so much a matter of escape, though it may seem to be so. It is, in the end, a longing for home... for the trial yet unfinished.

"You want the fear back, Alucard... so that you might conquer it."

The air freezes, and Alucard's request dies on his lips.

He shivers with foreboding and a faint sense of doom.

From the mist-wreathed gloom beyond the piazza rises a scream... nightmarish wail of misery, of agony, that slices through his skull with scalpel-like precision, knifing into his brain.

A single, thin, blood-curdled lament of fear and grief and pain.

Such pain. Excruciating... the sound blinding him to all else, like blinking in the light of a cold white sun.

The Vampire and the priest sideline their differences and stare, dumbfounded, as a winged figure propels itself towards them from the Via dei Servi. The impact of its bulk against the narrow buildings cracks the windows into innumerable jigsaw shards, the drift of twin wingbeats showering glass on the slick cobbles. The shadow withdraws a little before rushing again with a shriek like a thousand murderous flutes. An immense, greasy, vaguely-humanoid shape launches itself into the luminous atmosphere, and hovers there, still, with outspread wings, as an eagle basks in the sun.

Instinct and training drag the girl from Nightroad's embrace and forward, towards the center of the piazza. Left hand clamped over her mouth, she breathes shallowly through her fingers, using the pike to prop herself upright.
The creature crashes above the square; in an instant, the girl and Alucard both distinguish the vague outline of a woman's figure, framed in the rectangle of the Via dei Servi... a demonic silhouette, black against the bronze splendor of the Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore.

For a moment, Esther seems frozen, showing no change of expression. Then, almost as if someone is pulling a shade over her face, recognition dawns — a look of vacant, hollow-eyed shock occasioned by a horror way beyond her young, tragically mortal mind's capacity to process. It starts in her eyes, which grow impossibly round and somehow even more blue than usual, then it reaches her mouth, her lips parting as a gasp of air rushes in.

"It's her," mouths Esther.

And it is the Princess's reaction that crystallizes his worst suspicions into certainties.

In an instant, there falls to Alucard's experience one of the most profound and maddening upsets capable of reception by any intelligence, human or vampire.

"The moment is nearer than you might think," says Shahrazad.

"An end..."

"In the language of love the concept of an ending is devoid of sense. It is a quantum entity. It does not end; it merely... collapses.

"And collapse requires witness. Observation. And this, Unholy King, will be, perhaps, the most difficult thing you will ever see or do…"

"So… do not close your eyes."

It hits Alucard like an orbital strike, like a missile in terminal phase, sprinting ahead of its sound wave. Not even a whisper before it strips entire cities down to their bare bones.

Every detail, every scent, every shock seems to imprint itself upon his mind, as though he is subconsciously packing away the moments with as much sensation as possible.

Then Alucard knows, even before the veil of snow clears to reveal the face.

The figure sweeps overhead and looses a thin wail — a pair of chiropteran wings, thin membranes pulled taut between auxiliary finger bones and her shoulder blades, shift only so far as to keep her aloft. She is tall and slender, her flesh as frangible as the pages of an old paperback novel, hair filthy and sparse. Her fingers are long and tapered, terminating at talons yellow and thick like shingles, filthy underneath. Her mouth hinges open like that of a python, saliva flowing from her jowls and dripping in opaque black ropes.

Her huge, leucitic blue eyes blink as they meet Alucard's own with a look of imploring terror.

There is so little comprehension on her face, her beauty so corrupted, that the Vampire wonders, for a moment, if she is an apparition, or a graven figure.

She is a terrible, wasted thing.

But then she grins with the blackened ashes of her teeth. Another scream erupts from deep in her belly, cutting the air so sharply that, some distance away, Blanchett and Wordsworth clasp their
hands over their ears.

The cavern of her mouth, impossibly, begins to glow like a live coal; her teeth, he realizes, are black because they have been burnt to cinders...

Alucard hears each intake of breath beneath the boiling firelight in her mouth. An evil effluence rises from her throat, a scent primitive, savage, starving — not the respiration of any living thing, but a gusting like a pair of bellows, the sound of wind stoking embers. A cadence like the continual percussive thundering one hears when one put one's ear to the waves of the sea.

The sound of millions and millions of creatures running and struggling and dying before a great swathe of fire...

A sound of pain.

Of suffering.

She is immediately recognizable to him yet remains, for what feels like an eternity, unnamable — her identity not to be spoken aloud, not even to be remembered in silence.

So horrific that his numbness passes from simple frustration to a felt dread, whose intricacy deepens with each passing moment.

Like an infinitesimal circle converging towards its canonical zero-point.

As she tries to focus on Alucard, Esther seizes her chance and thrusts the Paladin's lance towards one bright blue eye. A compressed vortex of air shatters the orbital bone. With a terrible shriek of pain and rage, she claws at her bloody eye-socket. Esther falls flat, scooting backwards as the benighted creature writhes in midair, sobbing and screaming.

Alucard watches as Nightroad unfurls his pinions with a deafening snap of air. He flings himself towards the nun, knocking her to the ground and screening her behind a barricade of black feathers. He resembles a massive vulture, arching its shoulders and spreading its plumage over a recent kill, concealing the carrion from other scavengers.

The winged woman's throat glows molten red, incandescent. Each gust of wind radiates an incredible heat.

With a furnace thunder, a torrent of fire erupts from the figure's mouth and billows out above their prone bodies, scorching Nightroad's exposed flesh, singeing his hair and setting the closest market stalls ablaze.

The violent boiling of the snow flashes the moisture into steam, spraying scalding water in every direction. The superheated explosion lifts Nightroad off his feet. Before the creature can draw another breath, Nightroad hauls Esther to her feet and together they careen for the shelter of the loggia.

"The chemical splitting of carbon dioxide and argon, producing superheated carbon monoxide in a pulsed corona discharge," calls out Wordsworth, a strange edge of hysteria to his voice. "Butler has turned her into an ambulant plasma torch!"

Alucard's eyes have narrowed to slits, the lines around his mouth etched white.

Violation.
Desecration.

That bastard has not even done the fledgling courtesy of divesting her of an ability to feel pain.

The cruelty of it. The profanation... wiping out all vestiges of sanctity. Mangling a perfect body to satisfy the diseased curiosities and speculations of a perverse mind. Alucard cannot bear the grotesque, lying piety of the Professor and his unhinged contemporaries.

The Vampire's impressions of the black-eyed man, then, are beneath contempt. Added to the shock of her nonconsensual resurrection is the trauma of being forced to live as some biomorphic horror.

This physical, mental, and spiritual abuse, this mutilation... he knows, in his heart, he will never forgive it.

Even as Alucard grieves, the fire is proving too much; it burns too hot, disintegrating bone and frying tissue. She cannot sustain it; the Vampire somehow doubts her creator ever meant for her to survive it. The smell of cooking meat, smoldering flesh — her flesh — contravenes the virtue of Alucard's nose, forcing him to fight the urge to heave and retch. Dimly, he recollects how hangmen would boil the heads of the condemned who had been drawn and quartered in a mixture of salt and cumin seed, to keep them from putrefying before their relatives could claim their bodies for burial...

Her expression contorts with pain, the skin of her face sloughing off her cheekbones like braised meat. She chokes out a sob, the fluid in her esophagus boiling. Her skin is melting away as she paws at it, the red sinew clearly visible along with the fine network of capillaries, veins and pumping arteries. Tough, fibrous tissue unravels; her circulatory system melts away, until the bone beneath shines through.

Although a part of him knows — a part of him comprehends — that he is little more than flotsam, a wafer of ash caught and tossed between temporal eddies, knowledge of the fact does not make the current any weaker.

As he watches her, moments in time tumble and surge inside his head, disjointed and cracked, like carillons on glass, cresting and cracking with crystalline resplendence. Such transience and significance are exalting, terrifying, all at once.

Alucard is utterly still.

He is everywhere... and nowhere...

He is silhouetted against clouds of red and black; the streets beneath him are burning. The firestorms have stirred the atmosphere; the back of summer is broken and low clouds bring a fine drizzle over the wasteland.

A cold wind stirs the ruins... even as they smolder...

Fire and water.

Burning and freezing.

Fury and grief...

The cobbles beneath his knees are a harsh sweep of white iron, smooth as glass and cold enough to freeze any uncovered inch of flesh to the surface.
His palm connects with the fine crust on the snow, like translucent eggshell, desperately fragile. A wave of brittle fractures ripples outward from the place his hand has struck. The ice shatters. He watches the pieces fall about his fingers in a powdery hailstorm of blood and broken mirrors.

Snow falls, freezing a city which struggles to breathe.

The girl and her priest are little more than minarets whittled out of ice, gathering the last of the night. Isles in a smoking brume.

The flames stretch to the horizon, stopping only at the moors.

*Everything burns.*

The Vampire trembles, his head in his arms.

This, then, is penance.

His sense of loss is incalculable. The emptiness runs true to no form, and the void assumes no shape, save perhaps that of his silhouette — a black rend in the world. There lurks, then, in his mind, the ambush of a despair to rival Nightroad's own, a simpering rootlessness to render Alucard's existence equally distasteful. The grief is vivid and immediate, direct. It had once been a gray, spacious thing, like a damp fog that colors the air, collects on one's skin, hovers about one's nostrils with a smell like must and briny hawser. An emotion through whose tatters a pale sun will eventually flash and dissolve into melancholy and then, ultimately, mere reminiscence.

Never, not for a moment, did he expect the anguish to strike him with such awful precision. It sweeps through him with such devastating, debilitating competence that he would have gladly traded it for more of Nightroad's abuse. The grief radiates through the seam of his ribs, as sudden as the stroke of the assassin's blade and just as hard, cruel... painful. Between him and it there is no shock absorber of vicarious thought or precedent gleaned either from history or experience.

Alucard is so alone... that even his anger has abandoned him.

So hollow, so empty, that he lacks even the hunger necessary to correct it.

He is overtaken by the desolation — in an instant, he relinquishes himself to a limp, limbless resignation, as if his heart is merely an echo chamber for some ancient march divested of its time signature.

There is nothing for him in this world anymore. Nothing for *her*...

Across the piazza, the Professor attempts to rise; blood oozes from deep puncture wounds at his torso and shoulder. His right leg flops unnaturally, forcing him to bear his weight on his left side. From the middle of his back to his waist, the Death Hunter's axe has left long, ragged lacerations.

The sight has Alucard by the throat.

An accident took Walter...

A war took Seras...

And Integra...

*Don't leave me.*
This is the moment to which he has always been striving... the singularity to which he has been drawn across souls and centuries. Since time began. And when he departs from this place, it will remain the lodestone to which everything runs... and from which everything will run.

In the realization rests a mockery which runs ahead of him like a gust of wind. He tiles back his head as if the confirmation is written on the ceiling, in the sky. The movement registers as an orison of his own private devotion, as if he feels the need to acknowledge the heavens in the regard to some small, humble comprehension.

Alucard steps forward, towards the winged figure.

"I am sorry," says the gentlest voice he has ever heard, hardly rationalizing that it is his own. "Time is savage. It is, perhaps, the worst monster of all."

She begins to howl. She cries until she aches.

"Die," she seethes. "Die... Want," she gasps, "die..."

Alucard raises his hand. In doing so, he feels an awful draining of age and experience, his future flooding away. With centuries flying from his soul, he puts out a hand to brush her cheek.

This, then, will be the true punishment for his many, many sins: the disintegration of his ignorance. A keen knowledge of the incredible cruelties of which the future is capable. A presence in a world which outrages and horrifies him in equal measure.

A world to which he does not belong, and she does not deserve.

Perhaps she intuits, in whatever remains of her mind, what it is he wants from her — a cleansing, an absolution... a chance to atone for the uncountable number of lives that he has torched with his touch.

"Killing these creatures will not save you," he tells her. "No more than it could save me. For what you have done, no god would forgive you."

He holds her, staring deep into her tormented, wounded face, his hands, gentle, beneath her blue eyes.

"But I am no god."

The shimmering clarity endures for a prodigious interval and then disappears in an instant.

No sooner has it passed than he realizes what it is he has to do.

"Is there no other way?"

She strikes him across the mouth, once, and then again. Because she doesn't want to hear his words... degenerate, reprehensible words that once changed the world around him, changed people... the words that once changed her. She drives her elbow into his nose, claws at the flesh of his face. She punches and pushes and rips chunks out of him. She grabs a handful of his hair and wrenches his head to one side, trying to snap his neck.

Alucard embraces her. He rests his head on her shoulder.
His grip is that of a drowning man — a dying man. He will not let her go.

He holds her until his back aches and his balance begins to weave. A slavering circle of teeth angles out to tear at his throat, ripping and rending. He shudders and clings on, even when she retches superheated plasma from her gut, scorching his skin to a cinder. His muscles smolder and his marrow hisses. Fibers of flesh split with the same terrible tearing sound of sacking stretched and broken. His flesh withers like shrinking leather, the ossein of his arms reduced to bolts of black kindling in the ascending blaze. It catches his hair, wreathing his crown in flame and frying the keratin to scoria, leaving his skull a distended mass of molten bone.

When he opens his mouth, he drinks fire.

The heat washes him in an artificial blush — that tiny, dim contact giving life to a creature long lifeless. Something hard and vital in him focuses on the burning, yearning towards it. His senses go quiet and dark in helpless waiting.

She bites her tongue; black ichor, like tar, bubbles from between her lips and seeps over her mouth and chin. He finds himself fighting the urge to wipe it away. Her body is wracked with epileptic tremors; she takes enormous, heaving gulps of air — not breathing, but stoking her innards with firefighter — that go on and on until he can scarcely believe she has the strength for them. Her eyes remain fixed on his face, like those of an exhausted swimmer on a receding shoreline. He does not know whether she can feel his hands on her forehead and cheek. He does not know whether it is an act of faithfulness to her or a betrayal of the dignity she never lost, but he clings to her, holds her, as the centuries whirlpool above them.

From eons past comes the livid thunder of the Burning City, clouds bellying out in the heat, half the sky black with smoke, the bloodied dawn just barely visible. The collapsed walls and sunken roads clash cater-cornered, the foundations of buildings creaking ominously like the diaphragm of some aged creature at its last breath.

Alucard hisses smoke through his teeth as a bent figure, cowled in darkness, reaches out a gnarled, brown hand to him... a gesture of help, a plea for mercy. A hood of shadow slides back to reveal the wizened face... blue eyes, withered, coffee-colored complexion, flaxen hair seasoned closer to silver.

An old woman... imploring him to change the future...

And in that future, her wings beat wide, stirring a gale of fire and ice to which she seems entirely insensible. Her lips retract in an expansive gesture of suffering that encompasses Alucard as well as the millions of souls trapped at his center.

Across the piazza, he hears a girl screaming.

The smoke from his burning body rises in the Princess's eyes. Fire as red as her hair.

She will try to make sense of a world where her God's favor can no longer be taken for granted, where neither kings nor heroes can be trusted, but both still are needed.

With luck, there will be mercy for her; if not, Alucard knows this child will do what she can to make it.

He settles his grip.

The pain makes him think not of endings.
But of all the days to come.

"I am sorry, Integra." When he speaks her name, at last, it makes a sound like glass breaking. "I am sorry for leaving you alone."

The very last regret, finally laid to rest.

Shahrazad looks at Alucard in silence for an interminable moment, before a profoundly mournful expression darkens her face. She shakes her head.

"Would you have it any other way?"

He supports his master as she falls into his arms.

Wincing, his scalded forelimbs shaking, he moves a dry stalk of hair from where it has fallen on her brow.

He knows there is no afterlife. No lurid landscapes, no bright, boiling hell, no azure heaven constellated with golden stars. He knows it all turns to nothingness, in the end.

But he finds he no longer fears there will be a remnant of himself adrift within the void. Left conscious by some random fluke... everywhere and nowhere. A solitary speck of his soul enduring, left trapped and wanting.

He feels, for the first time in centuries, in eternities... whole.

Integra's wings flail as she holds herself in front of his heavy-lidded face.

"Kill me..." Her parted mouth, incandescent with flame, burns against his skin, but the rest of her is so terribly cold. "Die..." she orders him.

It will end, then, how it began.

In fire.

But this time...

This time...

Hers is an command he can obey.

"Yes, my Master."

"No."

Alucard falls upon her. He rips open her guts and they spill with a rank smell across the broken cobbles. He tears out her throat and throws it into the darkness like so much poisoned meat.

He can only experience his actions passively, as if from some remove.

Finally, he begins to weep.

The cauldron of fire in her innards overspills. The calcium-colored crust covering the piazza throbs
with heat, glowing near-radioactive with light.

Alucard and Integra are both engulfed by the roll of flame as the ground beneath their feet tumbles away. She falls with her mind and mouth burning.

Integra Fairbrook Wingates Hellsing has kept many silences, but she is unquiet in death.

Beneath him, a few skeins of ice hold the first red rays of sunrise. They glitter like seams of fire, twining through the dark opaqueness of the city, murmuring amidst funereal plumes of smoke and steam.

"How lovely... this sunlight which I forsook so many centuries ago..."

Every time he dies, it is the same vision that greets his eyes.

"Integra..."

He listens for an almost forgotten sound within himself, as if his heart, which long ago ceased to flutter in his chest, has gently begun to beat again.

He basks in an explosion of radiance that overawes the entirety of nature for a brief moment, aglow with grace. Humbled beyond thought, his head bows before the break of day.

It is the most beautiful dawn he has ever seen.

The sun rises.

Alucard dies as the world is born again.

**Carthage**

**Tunis Governorate, Tunisia**

**2217 AD**

Cartago sparkled under a fine glaze of crimson, smearing the ashen tents that housed the soldiers inside the Byrsa's walls. The sunrise illuminated the city of palaces and mosques, casting a coronal haze over the silent fountains and the imperial gates. One by one, the great doorways of the cathedral gleamed like mirrors, reflecting the rising sun.

A young woman, an old soldier, walked across the desert, the sun at her back. Her footprints created ammonite patterns in the sand; they spiral in serpentine undulations, towards a complicated center of mass. The air felt alive with creeping uncertainty. Something undefinable, as vague as a half-remembered dream in the hinterlands of her mind, caused her pause. She grew still before the Utica Gate, falling behind in what was to be, she suspected, her final journey, an Exodus under the auspices of a God who must surely be very weary of her and her interminable crusades.

But then time seemed to taper to a palpitating point, and vanished.

She froze.

A memory — a new memory — crept upon her like the glory of the dawn.
She felt a fluttering in her stomach, the sudden vertigo making her lightheaded.

Something had changed...

She felt divorced from her body, as though she had been reduced to a single wavelength of consciousness spreading out through space, over the earth and into the heavens, free from the gravitation that bound pain and suffering to the world.

She hardly recognized the sensation as hope, for she had been so long without it...

She clutched her chest, raised to her toes by a flash of indescribable happiness, immediately followed by sorrow.

"My Master," she heard herself say. The emotions ran so deep and strong she thought she might burst from them. She laughed at the same time her eyes filled with tears.

Seras smiled through her sobs.

She knew she marched to her death.

And yet.

And yet...

She had never felt such joy.

"You came home."

Chapter End Notes

How does one begin to write from the perspective of a creature that is basically Schrödinger's Cat? Hell if I know.
Shantih shantih shantih...

Chapter Summary

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Luke 23:34

Chapter Notes

(anyone figure out the chapter titles?)

Thank you for sticking with me over the last six months! This story got me through the first year of my Ph.D., so that has to count for something, right? (Although I realized only recently I'm working towards the same Ph.D. as Brother Philippos and that was... kinda disappointing. Couldn't Hoopy get one of the cool inquisitors?? — at least WWW and I lecture on the same topics, haha!)

It's been a long (sometimes slog-y) show of it but your feedback, critique, and support has meant the world to me, and I'm forever grateful.

all my love,
Hoopy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three Days Later

Crying.

The sound rose out of the darkness like a jagged, rotten tooth. It was horrible, out of balance. It carried too much weight, converging on a singularity whose gravity seemed impossible to escape.

The voice was heavy with pain and fear.

Alarmed, he realized it belonged to a child. A boy… crying.

He knew that voice… recognized...

"P-p-please... it hurts…"

Some vague comprehension crept along the inside of his chest, accompanied by a deeper thrill of blind terror. He stumbled through the shadows towards the voice.

But the wails broke suddenly, clinging to the silence, before the muffled sobs turned to screams…

Screams of pain… no.
Worse than pain.

Loneliness, betrayal, confusion…

The sound escalated, shrieking upwards into higher pitches, higher volumes.

He listened, paralyzed by his own horror and revulsion.

A dream.

Someone, he thought, must hear this.

Someone… they must…

Just a dream.

He should do…

He finds the body of a boy. He crouches over the corpse, crying quietly, making no secret of it.

He should do something.

He touches the child's face, something so kind and delicate and gentle… lost forever.

He should.

Cold, dead, blue-white.

The screaming stopped, prematurely and permanently.

Wasn't real.

Serene but lifeless.

He buried his face in his hands.

Just a…

The boy's skull crumbles and breaks apart as he brushes a thatch of straw-colored hair back from his brow.

He screamed.

He screamed until he thought his throat might wither.

Until...

"I think you had better wake up now, Bureau Director."

Instead, he kept his eyes firmly and intractably shut.

The image of the dead child — a boy in papal vestments, pearly chasuble stained crimson — spun slowly and agonizingly in his brain, in monochrome, liked a jammed projector playing an endless loop of old film. It was a horrifying image, ultimately unreal, but there was still a kernel of disquiet buried deep in his subconscious.

It had been so vivid, like a fragment of an old memory, an echo of experience… or perhaps a
He was so terribly frightened, then, to open his eyes; the pain in his head was so great, he was afraid *there might be too little of his eyes left to open*. Bloody bundles of twitching muscle fibers and severed optical nerves. He shuddered at the thought.

But he couldn't live without his eyes; he couldn't do his duty… couldn't protect His Holiness…

Petros let the lids roll open slowly.

There was nothing wrong with his eyes.

Regardless, the low, dull ache remained. He grit his teeth against the pain spreading up his back and shoulders and thundering like a freight train in his head.

His gums were bleeding. They always bled when he was in a vicious mood, or doing something exceptionally physical.

Or both.

The blood tasted watery in his mouth.

The lower part of his face was covered by a transparent blue mask, a thick, ridged tube connecting it to a ventilator at the side of the bed. The appliance wheezed at regular intervals, a steady beat in which Petros found some small smidgeon of order and reassurance. The cannula on the back of each hand fed to a saline drip, wires patched to his chest led to the heart monitor, and thin red electrodes ringed his forehead — a bloodless crown of thorns.

"There you are, Director. Back in the land of the living in more ways than one, no? My word, but you have had a rough time of it, haven't you?"

Who in the blazes…

Grunting bodily, Petros eased himself into a sitting position, fairly certain that every muscle in his body protested the movement. He blinked sleep from his eyes, attempting to distinguish the figure idling quietly by his bedside; the newcomer's hair was dark, the color of obsidian, and it reflected blue in the harsh fluorescence. Feathery locks fell just below his ears — the line of his bangs looked sharp enough to open an envelope. His face was pinched and interrogative, and his brows arched sardonically over thin, half-lidded eyes so black and shiny that a hundred points of light reflected at their centers.

Petros's stomach rose and fell disconcertingly. He must have pulled a face, going green with nausea, for the visitor tutted infuriatingly.

"I wouldn't move too much, if I were you, Director," said a voice as smooth as eggshell, as malignant as cancer. "We can't have you being sick all over yourself, now can we? You'll aspirate into your ventilator."

Petros, stubborn to the point of bullishly difficult, tried to turn his head. An incandescent burst of pain danced along the bone his skull with deceptive grace, striking delicate blows against the backs of his eyes and doing precious little to alleviate the immediate impulse to vomit.

Perched above him, arms looped behind his back, Brother Matthias smiled serenely, vacuously.
"What frightfully poor taste that would be," he marveled, "for you to expire, here in the hospital, after you've survived such hardship. Bathetic, almost. If it were a work of theater, I'd demand compensation for the wasted time and money."

Petros's gaze didn't stray from Matthaios... not that there was anything else in the ward capable of holding his attention. It was a soulless place, its sterility sharpened by the pervasive smell of disinfectant and refracted by the painfully bright white walls...

"The last time I was forced to suffer through a script of such saccharine sensibilities, I took the playwright's life in recompense. Do you remember, Petros?"

The words held him in a tighter grasp than if Matthaios had physically grabbed him. The Director pushed his own voice out of his mouth as though it had been reluctantly clinging to the back of his throat: "The official report," he croaked, "details how Archbishop D'Annunzio took his own life—"

"By means of a cyanide capsule, hmm? I had to force the old sod's jaw closed, but he bit down on it, eventually. Although that chore was positively enjoyable compared to the later task of having to pick slivers of his broken teeth out of my cassock…"

His nostrils flared, fogging the surface of the ventilator mask. "You lying piece of—"

"Oh, don't be so naive, Reverence. It's unbecoming. You ought to know by now that there is no transparency. It cannot exist. Surveillance doesn't go both ways. There are those who watch, and those who are watched; the powerful, and the powerless. Those who rule have a vested interest in shaping the perceptions of those they wish to rule, Director. And if blood must be shed on the altar to ensure the continuity of that perception, then so be it."

"By what warrant?" demanded Petros. "How does the Lord benefit from such wanton, indiscriminate carnage? That is not faith; it is imposture!"

"God once asked Abraham to sacrifice his own son, Isaac, on Moria," he countered. "And the angel of the Lord called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time, and said, By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son…"

"Take it from a former military man, Excellency... a temple is worth a dozen tanks, and the Bread of Christ a thousand bullets. A member of a militia, carrying a gun, might control a small unarmed crowd only for as long as he stands at their head and waves the barrel in their general direction. However, a single priest can put a policeman inside the head of every member of their flock, for ever."

"Power not presence, Petros. Power is not being seen… power is the indomitable belief that someone is always watching. Power... is faith."

Petros was quite literally steaming, the chill of the hospital's ventilation striking off his flushed skin.

"Have you ever heard of an air embolism, Director?"

Under vastly different circumstances, Petros might have frowned at the abrupt change in subject. But an acute awareness of the cannulas fixed to the back of each hand had most every rational thought frozen in impotent horror.

"It occurs when oxygen or nitrogen enters an artery. These air bubbles can travel to your brain, heart, or lungs and cause respiratory failure. An air embolism can sometimes occur if your lung is
compromised after an accident — from broken ribs, perhaps, or a plunge into an icy river. You might be put on a breathing ventilator. And if one forced air into a damaged vein or artery…"

Before Matthaios managed another word, Petros flung the blue mask from his face, the plastic clattering as it hit the floor somewhere behind their heads. He tore out both intravenous lines; blood seeped from the backs of his hands, leaving stigmatic holes like the wounds of Christ, staining the starchy bedsheets.

Matthaios snickered, a glitter of genuine amusement in the face of Petros's desperate bid at self-preservation.

He probably took some perverse pleasure in watching his superior jerk and twitch to every thinly-veiled threat.

Matthaios was worse than von Lohengrin.

"As the late Archbishop would no doubt testify… accidents have been known to happen."

He laughed at that, while Petros managed only a stunted shuffle back on the mattress; the Chief Inquisitor stared, almost dumbfounded, at a man who was, despite appearances to the contrary, totally sincere. A sadistic, twisted mind… but not an insane one. There was something deeply rational about Matthaios's behavior that set Petros's teeth screaming.

"I confess you are a difficult man for me to understand." He crossed his arms and propped a foot on the wall, as at ease as a seminary student debating apocrypha. "You are widely regarded as the most violent man in the Vatican… the Knight of Destruction, no less. You are the paragon to which most of our holy order aspires, and yet… you pass pity around indiscriminately, making no distinction between the worthy and the unworthy. Mercy as you would have it practiced is, in the eyes of the Bureau, a military weakness, and in the eyes of God, a moral infirmity."

"And what would you know about God and mercy, Matthaios?" snarled Petros scathingly.

"We are the sword-arms of the same beast, you and I. You enjoy the official power of the Holy See — tacit in the functions of your office — while I enjoy its implicit sanction. But fear and violence remain the choice weapons of us both. QED," he concluded, "we pledge our loyalty to entities whose laws are written by bloodshed and enforced by the same. Thus it ever was, so ever shall it be.

"Therein lies your particular species of paradox… the hypocriticalness, one might say. You may preach a fine philosophy, Petros, but over and over again, you fail to supplement it with any kind of tactical carry-through." Matthaios's eyes narrowed slightly, and he added, waving a hand airily: "Naturally, it is always easiest to judge where one is ignorant — a mistake we made about you, and one that you'll find we have striven to correct — but it seems that your idealism has turned you foolhardy. His Eminence ought to have dismissed you months ago, particularly after that mess in Carthage, and yet, with a stupefying inertia, you persist. Ah…" Matthaios's voice trailed off as an odd expression crossed his face. "Speaking of persistence… that reminds me…"

Petros's heart pounded as the shorter inquisitor reached into the pocket of his robe. Matthaios extracted something, but kept it curled in his fist, shielding it from view until the moment he tossed it towards Petros's outstretched hand. The Bureau Director was forced to catch it or drop it.

Physically, the silver was warm from the batting of Matthaios's pockets, but it had a cold lining that was almost icy, and Petros flinched from the sudden sting against his palm. Something about it unsettled; it was not an object he cared to hold.
When he rationalized what, exactly, it was, he tasted something alkaline at the back of his mouth, and his face fought a grimace against the flavor.

It was a delicate silver chain, the length looped through a crucifix filigreed with a crest of crossed swords, a crown sitting between their hilts.

It was a rosary.

Petros went white.

Esther Blanchett's rosary.

"I trust," murmured Matthaios, his small smile registering more as a smirk, "that you will find a good home for that, Bureau Director."

No secrets, then.

Matthaios knew...

Understanding dawned, and with it came an unbidden mental image of the Moroccan Demon stripping the rosary from the girl in the dungeons of Castello di Signa... depriving her of that last physical connection to God, like snipping a phone line.

Anger scorched Petros's cheeks, appalled at his underling's audacity.

"Is human dignity," he growled, the danger Matthaios presented to his own safety momentarily forgotten, "and human life so cheap that the rights protecting it can be bargained away to appease your every appetite?"

A shrug. "We are both men of God, Petros. The difference between us... is merely our willingness to sacrifice Isaac.

"Ask yourself, Director: is it better to make a votive offering of a pure soul, or to show mercy, and in so doing pardon, an evil one?"

"I believe it is better, Brother Matthaios, to cease this line of questioning."

Matthaios's mouth snapped shut. Petros swallowed very deliberately, his throat skipping.

Both men stared — Matthaios with submission, Petros with shock — at the figure standing in the doorway.

The newcomer was august and dignified... beautiful in the same way a blade or bayonet might be beautiful. She was at least as tall as Matthaios, narrow waisted with long arms and legs. A smooth, symmetrical face looked as if it had been carved from ivory, pale and serene. She kept a thatch of glossy silver hair bound about the brows with a crimson cornet — emblazoned with the hammer and lightning of the Vineam Domini. The veil of her habit framed her face, rendering her features all the more austere; her eyes, curiously round and slightly too large, were so somber they were almost stormy, the color of ocean swells as they attempted the long, slow erosion of a breakwater.

"Brother Matthaios," said Sister Paula Souwauski, her tone vaguely chiding, "might I remind you that are under mandate to cease communication with the Bureau Director until after Cardinal di Medici has delivered his debrief."

A thin thread of distaste seamed her voice, too fine for anyone who wasn't terribly familiar with her
temperament to catch.

Matthaios missed it. Petros did not.

"My humblest apologies, Vice Chief," capitulated Matthaios, bowing deferentially to the Lady of Death. "Is His Eminence ready for his audience?"

"Yes. Please wait for us in the conference room. The Director and I will be along presently."

"Very good, Sister."

If Paula intuited the threat posed by Matthaios's presence, she didn't seem particularly concerned by it. A complex expression flashed across Petros's face, then — compounded of confidence and pride at the Vice Chief's handling of Matthaios, along with a little half-suppressed and worried edge that wondered if Sister Paula's apparent disinterest might not, in fact, be genuine.

That she really didn't care for or about Petros's fate as much as he might hope.

After Matthaios departed, the door to the ward banging shut behind him, the Chief Inquisitor's thin seam of a mouth tugged into a slight smile... ominous, humorless. He managed to maneuver himself to his feet, pausing only to allow the static behind his eyes to subside. He swayed slightly, taking in desperate pulls of air to dispel the wave of dizziness, tasting blood and saliva guttering down his throat. When he spoke, his voice forced itself in thin bursts between hard breaths: "Sister Paula… what are you doing here…"

She barely glanced up. "A delicate political matter has arisen concerning the Kingdom of Albion. His Holiness requested the guidance of his advisors, and the Concistoro was forced to recall His Eminence and Her Grace the Duchess of Milan immediately to Rome. In lieu of his presence, Cardinal di Medici had entrusted me with escorting you to your mandatory interview, during which time you will be expected to account for your actions over the past week." Her eyes combed him from head to foot in a precise, efficient sweep. "Are you able to walk?"

Pale, dehydrated cheeks flushed pink. Determined to salvage some of his battered pride, Petros reached small loop of elastic from the bedside before combing through the wind-blown, greasy blue tangles falling around his face, trying not to sorrow over the profuse number of split ends. Small strands lost themselves inside larger ones, dipping in and under and out of an increasingly intricate design.

A single silver eyebrow rose. "You will re-injure your arm doing that."

"I will not stand before my superior looking like Abel Nightroad," he grouched. "Would you rather do it yourself?"

"I do not know how to braid hair."

"Then kindly keep your peace, Sister Paula."

"Very well, sir."

Petros guided his hair back from his forehead, and by some miracle, the haphazard braid stayed in place. He righted himself, feeling his broken ribs grind together. Aside from a quick gasp of air, he was able to marshal his expression against the pain.

"Let's go," he growled.
"Sir."

The Vice Chief fell into step beside him. His pace was uncertain, slipping from tiny, mincing tiptoe to sweeping strides, whereas Paula maintained a frustratingly constant, parade-perfect pace.

Still, he couldn't help but notice a certain air about her, like the coiled tension of a metal spring: compressed, watching, waiting, her face buried in the shadows of her cornet. There was a look in her eyes that he thought he recognized, that of someone who wanted to keep conversation to a minimum, so as not to voice aloud that which she would rather leave unspoken.

Whether by intuition or paranoia, Petros could not tell, but Paula's presence in Florence troubled him in much the same way Matthaios's fixation on his intravenous line had troubled him; her gaze remained fixed on the middle distance and would not stir, as though beholding a spectacle from afar.

The further they proceeded down the corridor, the more Petros was struck by the slightly bewildering conviction that Paula was deliberately avoiding eye contact.

He felt frustrated and angry. Sad too, as he seized upon a credible explanation.

A danger fundamental to Cardinal di Medici's schemes and stratagems lay in an absolute dependency on a secrecy which, once blown, became a fatal liability. Such a breach of trust had spelled Brother Bartholomaios's death several months ago; of course, it had been Sforza and Iqus who had executed the inquisitor, but Petros harbored little doubt that it had been within Cardinal di Medici's power to intervene, and Cardinal di Medici had, instead, done nothing. Petros's wholesale scuppering of His Eminence's objectives regarding Blanchett and the Orden struck Petros as untenable. He knew no duplicitous apparatus could function if some employee decided which secrets to preserve and which to let fly... who determined on his own recognizance when to look in the other direction...

And when to intervene.

And Petros had done so thrice.

He had once saved a vam—a Methuselian nobleman, hardly more than a child, from being burnt and blistered by the rising sun over Carthage. The unwonted show of mercy had left in its wake a long, unsettled ambivalence.

In István, he had risked his life to rescue another Methuselah who had, not several days previously, tried to kill him... because Petros had known her persecution was unjust, because Archbishop D'Annunzio had broken the oath he swore before God in his desire to stoke the fires of blasphemous conflict... and because Petros could not abide the deliberate immolation of innocents, regardless of their species.

And, finally, when Petros had happened upon young Blanchett in the sensory deprivation tank, for the first time in his life, his imagination grasped the height and depth of the horrors his own holy order was capable of inflicting on the least deserving.

Petros believed the Lord to be just, forgiving, and merciful. His God was one who had bled and whose heart had been broken, who understood the sanctifying power of love and sacrifice. He told His disciples not to resist evil, but to embrace their enemies, and when smitten on one cheek to turn the other.

If such convictions marked him a heretic in the eyes of a single prelate, regardless of his political
influence... then so be it.

If Cardinal di Medici's endeavors ran counter to the gospels, then Petros could not, in good conscience, count himself an accessory to those endeavors.

Matthaios had been wrong; his faith stemmed neither from an obligation of obedience nor from a fear of damnation; nor a desire to appear more righteous than others; nor because God demanded it.

And certainly not from something so base as a wish for power.

It was Petros's duty to care for all of creation, both visible and invisible. To honor God by urging His ministry with disinterested fidelity.

If he spoke in the tongues of men or of angels, but had not love, then he was nothing.

In an instant, the haze cleared from Petros's mind. For the first time, he knew for certain what Paula's presence portended... why Matthaios had seemed so insufferably peacock proud of himself. Why he had been smiling with that vicious and exhilarating arrogance.

Numb disbelief gave way to a pragmatic acceptance. There had been too much death and suffering and pain packed into the past few days.

Tragedy, especially his own, had lost its potency, becoming only sad and still.

"May I ask you one thing, Paula?"

If she was surprised at the jettisoning of her honorific, she gave no indication of the fact.

"... If you must."

"Are you here to kill me?"

Her pace faltered the smallest fraction; she touched her thumb to her forefinger, above her hips, where her set of crescent moon knives rested in their scabbards. For a person as supernaturally composed as the Vice Chief, the physical reaction was akin to a shout or scream.

To Petros, it was as if he had just asked her to do the impossible, to stop breathing or to still her own heart.

_How practical..._

_His Eminence has summoned to Florence the only person who can kill me._

Petros was shocked to find within himself, imagining this, not much emotion, just a cold thrill at being a witness, a kind of bleak wonder at facing a silence that was, in itself, all the answer he needed.

"Very well," murmured Petros.

Paula's forehead furrowed and her lips pursed. "Director..."

"I am content. It is a good death, to be vanquished by your hand."

She looked up, holding his gaze for the first time. There were dark patches under her eyes, vivid against the bone-china paleness of her face. "You fool, Petros."
"Indeed."

"You knew, Chief." She blinked with practiced calm, speaking with insistence: "You knew what your actions would augur."

"Yes, I did."

"Then why..."

"Because I am weak," said Petros, and he smiled to prove it. His words were no longer pitched to his usual rousing volume; he was acutely aware of how weary, how exhausted, he sounded.

There was another long silence bereft of the tension which characterized the first. It was broken only by the sound of Paula's heels, resounding in short, rapid bursts.

Something like a sigh passed her lips.

"If this is weakness," she murmured, "then I pray grace will never grant me strength."

Petros shot her an astonished glance and was surprised to find her shifting with uneasy embarrassment.

"The Cardinal is expecting us, sir," she muttered, looking at the floor.

The hospital's communication room was narrow and tall with walls and floor of polished hardwood and a ceiling that was three-quarters glass skylight. The surfaces of each of the three inward-curving walls were covered in instrumentation, with scarcely an inch between one flickering display and the next. When the door closed behind Paula, the unhealthy sounds of the hospital were almost soundproofed out. In the sudden hush, Petros heard his heart ratcheting to a fever pitch against his sternum. He thought he might feel better if he tried to take a deep breath, but found he couldn't, his broken ribs inhibiting the movement. The best he could manage was a shallow hiss of air.

Brother Matthaios prodded at a row of stippled controls below a cluster of small triangular displays. As the Uriel's pilot, and as a former military man, he was the best suited of the three inquisitors to work the hospital's equipment.

A deep purr rose from the depths of the machinery; the screens and indicator displays flashed and then steadied. The voice of the computer proclaimed: "Palazzo Apostolico, Rome. Cardinal Francesco di Medici."

"Well met, Eminence." Matthaios gave each word the euphony of sacred chapter.

A moment later the scowling face of Cardinal di Medici appeared on the screen. He looked as ill-humored as ever, his eyebrows lowered, lending him the appearance of perpetual frustrated impatience. The Cardinal turned his head towards Petros, and it seemed to the Chief Inquisitor like the slowest action he had seen in his lifetime. His Eminence's expression grew suddenly strained, his eyes lighting unnervingly.

Petros flattened the feeling in his stomach and said nothing.

"A few matters have arisen which I believe are best addressed immediately, Reverences," intoned Cardinal di Medici; his voice seemed distant, almost fuzzy, in contrast to the screen's clarity. "How fare your injuries, Brother Petros?"
"I... will recover, Eminence. Dr. Lauricella has given me six months." His face was set and solemn, caught stark in the glare from the projector. "However, I expect I will be able to return to my holy mission in six weeks."

"Your diligence, as ever, does you credit." The Cardinal spoke casually but, to Petros's surprise, quite sincerely. The Bureau Director prided himself on his ability to read expressions — a useful faculty for someone of his profession — but the look on Francesco's face, in that moment, was utterly inexplicable. "You will forgive Sister Paula's taciturnity, however I have every intention of treating this forum as an official inquiry into the incidents which have transpired over the past week, and the security of this information must remain guarded."

"I understand, Your Grace." The Chief Inquisitor's teeth were clenched so hard, his skull ached. He imagined himself to be caught in the heart of a complex labyrinth of argument and counter-argument, a vocal maze where every syllable was laden with deep inflections and meanings.

And he was completely inept at navigating any of it. Politicking and double-talk had never been Petros's area of expertise.

Moreover, he was in no hurry to prolong the inevitable. He fought the urge to ask why Cardinal di Medici had not yet dispensed with the niceties and ordered Sister Paula to cut him down, but he knew such a query would be the coward's way out.

Petros Orsini had consigned himself to his fate from the moment he swore an oath to Father Nightroad, before God, that he would save the Lady Saint; his soul was prepared, but that did not mean he ought to die in ignorance, still questioning Cardinal di Medici's intentions.

"From my understanding, despite your injuries, there was much to admire in your actions," the Duke of Florence said with a faint countenance Petros couldn't parse, try as he might. "Your forthright initiative and the scrupulous care with which you executed your duty bespoke an earnestness of, shall we say, intent. However, because the AX, as the furtive, contemptible delinquents are so often wont to do, have elected to keep their own council, I have yet to hear any lucid account of what, exactly, precipitated the second kidnapping of the Lady Saint... and why you alone were the one to shoulder the burden of her recovery, Petros."

"It was purely an impulse of disinterested obligation on my part, Eminence," said Petros, very carefully. "I did my duty for God and the Church."

"And yet you knew enough of the particulars surrounding the girl's vanishment to deduce her location and make the necessary martial preparations. Hardly disinterestedness at all. Of everyone in the Inquisition, you appear to me to be the most conversant in the details."

Damnation... a misstep. A muscle fired in Petros's jaw, his stomach churning with nausea and his chest going tight.

"Or is it that your mind has since been addled?" His Eminence inclined his head, shadow scoring his features. "Had I lived through your recent experiences, I expect I might suffer a similar crisis of recollection."

Petros mulled this over, looking for hidden barbs — and for hidden meanings.

A frown creased Paula's marble forehead. "With your permission, Your Grace."

Cardinal di Medici arched an eyebrow, knitting his hands together. "Go on, Vice Chief."

"When I spoke with the chief surgeon, she listed as preeminent among the Bureau Director's
injuries a form of hypoxia called ischemic encephalopathy, a complication of cardiac arrest catalyzed by cold water shock. It is not unheard of for patients suffering from hypoxia to experience significant memory loss. The Director has suffered a trauma, sir."

*Bless you, Paula...*

Petros held his breath for a moment, recognizing a reprieve. He chose his next words deliberately lest the Cardinal decide he was through with his indulgences:

"While it is true that have no recollection of what happened after I fell into the river," he began, cautiously, "I am able to call to mind the events leading up to the moment I lost consciousness." Petros seized on a useful diversion. "Including the role AX had to play."

"Which is?"

"I determined the likelihood extremely high that Cardinal Sforza and her adherents were well in hand to mount a rescue attempt of their own; however, due to the circumstances surrounding the Saint's disappearance as well the fact that both departments were operating within the borders of the Tuscan duchy, I deemed it in the Bureau's best interests to minimize the involvement of Her Grace the Duchess of Milan and her agents. For the sake of protecting our security, and ensuring Your Eminence's political autonomy, I acted alone."

Petros went on after a moment, "Since it is the duty of the Church to frustrate the machinations of all heretics and traitors, and as it seemed expedient to secure the Saint under my own power, I decided to act. It appears to have worked, at least for a time."

"For a time... you are referring to the conflict in the Palazzo Santissima Annunziata three nights ago." Petros had expected Cardinal di Medici's reply to come slowly, sunk in consideration. Instead, his voice was almost inordinately strong and forceful. Strident, as though he was trying to hide something.

*You needn't bother, Your Eminence,* thought Petros grimly, bristling with suppressed anger and resentment.

*I already know."

"Yes, Your Grace. One Dietrich von Lohengrin, a noted Orden extremist — and the man whom I believe is partially responsible for the Saint's kidnapping — attempted lay siege to the hospital where she was convalescing."

"The name of Lohengrin is familiar to me. A thorn in the Vatican's side ever since Caterina's people scraped that blasted Blanchett girl out of the Hungarian Marquisate. I trust he was swiftly dealt with."

*Il Ruinante* took a breath, composing himself, wanting desperately to continue, but somehow knowing the moment called for silence.

Swiftly dealt with...

Petros thought back to the night he had regained consciousness, three days ago. He remembered the small, red-headed figure racing from his bedside... tilting and swaying under the weight of his Screamers as she carried it into battle. Her face had been blanched, tired and drawn but fiercely determined; full of fear, of revulsion, of apprehension, of admiration...

Of love.
Something inside Petros had jarred, that night... an obstreperous urge had seized him — he had, if for however brief an instant, seriously considered barring the girl from leaving the hospital, though he doubted either force or persuasion would have kept her from rushing to her protector's aid.

Esther Blanchett's courage was sometimes frightening for its ability to blind the girl to all risk... her bravery had a tendency to become foolhardiness under unfavorable conditions.

It was a merciless instinct... her regard, her love, for her comrades... something that went far beyond military talent, or duty, or even courage. Those things, Petros knew without conceit, he, too, possessed in plenty. But he lacked that deeply personal compulsion, as indomitable as the faith of any inquisitorial knight, colder than winter itself... a fierce, selfless protectiveness that no sane person, least of all those who cared about her, would ever willingly rouse.

Simple for the reason that it was so self destructive...

That night, Petros had known, with an icy shiver which somehow, perversely, only made him respect Blanchett still more deeply, that hers was a determination which would not — could not — relent or rest. The dangers be damned.

He had recognized her as only another holy warrior could — he saw in her a similar vein of loyalty... of temperance and courage. Yet he also knew in that moment that for all his own victories in battle, he was not and never had been her equal. As a force of brute strength, yes. As the sword which would execute vengeance for the covenant, yes.

But Esther Blanchett, by virtue of the compassion and gentleness Petros did not himself possess, was the embodiment of God's absolution.

And so will I go forth unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish...

"Yes," said Petros finally. "Yes, Eminence, I believe von Lohengrin was dispatched. However, due to my injuries, I am unable to confirm the outcome of the battle."

"AX will likely have that information," supplied Paula dutifully.

"Far be it from me to give the impression of impertinence, Director," said Matthaios mildly, putting his oar in; "but did you not state, earlier, that Ibn Lohengrin was, in your own words, only partially responsible for the Saint's kidnapping...?" Under the severe horizon of his hair, his narrow eyes looked shrewd and capable. "Partially...?"

"I did not misspeak, Brother Matthaios," said Petros, tone glacial. "Your Grace," he ignored his subordinate completely, "I trust you are aware that I recovered Blanchett at the Castello di Signa... an installation which falls under the direct jurisdiction of the Ministry of Papal Doctrine. Moreover, the Orden operatives under von Lohengrin's command knew of her whereabouts and were well-equipped for the extreme weather conditions."

"You're suggesting they had help?"

"I am suggesting nothing, Your Grace. A suggestion implies uncertainty, and I have no doubt that Esther Blanchett's kidnapping would have been impossible unless Rosenkreutz had the inside assistance of a high-ranking Carabinere or inquisitorial officer."

"Brother Petros, if you mean to suggest the Department of Inquisition is somehow responsible for what happened, then I would caution you to choose your next words with great care."

"I am a mere soldier," said Petros demurely, his head bowed. "It is not my intention to levy
baseless accusations against the Bureau, and I have neither the wit nor the wisdom for deceit."

"And yet here you stand engaging in conjectures which directly contradict the testimonies you delivered when you assumed this holy office, Petros... testimonies wherein you vouched for the character and capability of your subordinates in order that they might serve as inquisitors."

While Petros felt no qualms about being ill-mannered to Matthaios, years of service as well as his natural ecclesiastical deference meant he was reluctant to treat the Cardinal in the same way. "With respect, Your Grace, that is not entirely accurate." Petros managed to muster something of his usual stentorian tone. "There are three officers in the Department of Inquisition, two still living, whose ordination I did not personally vouchsafe.

"The first was Brother Bartholomaios, formally Duo Iqus HC-IIX, whose body and combat memory were appropriated by the Bureau following the Garibaldi Rebellion. The second was Brother Philippus, whose elevation from the laity class to the clergy I opposed on the grounds of fundamental incompatibilities in his personality. The third," He released an injured sigh and raised his head so that all in the room could see his haggard expression, face set in grim determination, "is Brother Matthaios."

Petros, vaguely disquieted by his superior's uncharacteristic stoicism up until that point, was relieved to see the image of Cardinal di Medici quiver in the frame of the screen. Beneath it, there was a dark sort of silence, as if the room had been holding in air for so long that it had forgotten how to breathe.

In Petros's peripheries, Paula's hand fell to the hilt of her knife.

The space felt like a shrine, a sanctum of desperate, almost holy quiet broken only by the frantic beating of Petros's heart beneath his ribs. For a paranoid moment, he felt certain that everyone could hear it...

It was Matthaios who spoke first. Smoothly, he disturbed the hallowed silence, making the sacrilege seem easy. "Do you mean to accuse me of orchestrating the entire affair, Director? Forgive my rudeness, but I don't recall your personal sponsorship ever constituting the measure and standard of our loyalty to the Church."

"You're quite correct, Matthaios. I am but a humble knight. I do not presume to suggest my testimony amounts to an act of pure credence, logically immune to any verification." Petros considered his next words carefully, ignoring the anxiety gripping claws into his belly and concentrating instead on his righteous anger... the last bastion of his courage. "However," he ventured, "I believe a deposition from His Eminence is the only thing that will prove, or disprove, your innocence."

Faintly nonplussed, Matthaios let his eyebrows dance questioningly. Paula's lips were twisted and her countenance had gone gray. Vague indignation, perhaps surprise, turned the Cardinal's complexion ruddy.

The Chief Inquisitor's vision had grown tight, tunneled. He barely registered the three other clergy at its edges.

He had taken a huge risk by shifting the terms of the conversation... a gamble. But Petros was no minister or statesman, no accomplished rhetorician; he couldn't debate his way out of a confessional, much less navigate the complicated politicking of the Duke of Florence's caliber.

He was a soldier, and in any military engagement, a calculated risk constituted a wager, a shot in
the dark, commanders made when they were unable to determine what else to do. When the
gamble worked in his favor, his decision-making was blazoned as strategic genius.

When it didn't work in his favor, the commander rarely survived long enough to cogitate on his
stupidity.

Only time would tell whether the odds were working in Petros's favor.

Each of Francesco's breaths rattled in agitation behind the ropey ladder of his throat. His gaze
fastened on Petros, gray eyes like two short metal bolts — pupils pale and reptilian, almost slitted.

"My deposition..." he parroted sepulchrally.

_O Heavenly Father, Grant to your Knight the serenity of mind to accept that which cannot be
changed; courage to change that which can be changed, and wisdom to know the one from the
other... Amen..._

Petros tried to picture in his mind patterns of total order, a private world of angles and straight
lines, sanity and uniformity. A prism through which to split confusion into clarity...

"My Lord Cardinal," said Petros quietly, "approximately three days ago, two Orden terrorists
ambushed myself and Dr. Wordsworth of the AX in the Piazza Santo Spirito, in broad daylight, in
the middle of the Oltrarno district. One of those terrorists was von Lohengrin himself... the other
was the man the Carabinieri know by the alias _Magician_, the Inquisitorial Bureau's Public Enemy
Number Two."

Petros recognized the Duke of Florence's barely suppressed wrath — he registered Sister Paula
stirring in his peripheries, making no effort to hide the fact her gloved hands were resting on her
weapons.

If his hunch proved wrong now... Paula wouldn't leave him alive long enough to regret it.

Petros pressed on regardless: "Our counterattack was interrupted, however, by the arrival of
Brother Matthaios and the Carabinieri under his command. His intervention allowed for the retreat
of the terrorists. He refused to engage them in battle, and in so doing, granted both individuals
clemency in their escape... one of whom would go on to threaten the life of the Lady Saint as well
as the patients and staff of the Ospedale degli Innocenti."

Sister Paula instantly froze, hand hovering in midair, waiting patiently for further elaboration that
never came. Her eyes darted between the looming presence of the Cardinal on the projector screen
and the small, black-haired inquisitor; the latter's perennially cordial expression looked suddenly
strained.

"When I demanded an explanation, Brother Matthaios justified his actions by invoking the office
of Your Eminence. According to him," announced Petros, "you, Your Grace, gave him the order to
spare the terrorists."

He turned his head and stared hopelessly into the face of death.

"For the sake of the Ministry of Papal Doctrine and the Department of Inquisition... and as the
Director of that same institution, I must know... did you issue the command, Eminence? Did you
order Brother Matthaios to protect members of the Rosenkreutz Orden?"

Everything depended on that single question, one sweeping blow of accusation. Petros had played
his hand; there would be no second chances. He had been dreading this moment — he felt exactly
as he had once done as a child, sitting on a bench, tossing pebbles into the golden ribbon of the Tiber, watching them descend, with grave finality, to the riverbed.

He felt no pain, no fear... just a slow, sinking sense of despair, swathing his head like cotton and muffling his mind like deep sleep. He had little strength left. He had no weapons; he had no allies.

_Il Ruinante_ stood still, silent and consigned, and waited for it to end.

One way or another.

But then something stirred on the Cardinal's face — a mere muscle twitch, moving slowly from mouth to eye, at the slowest crawl imaginable. Not hurrying. Not harried.

Almost... obliging.

"No."

Time ground to a halt inside Petros's skull. There was the taste, the stench, the warmth of blood in his mouth — his gums hemorrhaging again — but it had coagulated, as though frozen in a single instant.

"No, Brother Petros... I gave Brother Matthaios no such order."

Matthaios's features lost their sour sense of humor and became glacial. His rattish face seemed to bloat, no longer with arrogance but fear. "Eminence...?"

"Sister Paula..." began the Duke of Florence; there was an uncharacteristic coolness in his manner which Petros found both admirable and alarmingly callous, "place Brother Matthaios under arrest on the charges of kidnapping, conspiracy, and treason against His Holiness, the Holy Roman Catholic Church, and the Vatican Papal State."

"That is—!"

"You used your inquisitorial influence to commandeer the Castello di Signa installation and kidnap Sister Esther. You deliberately spared the lives of two Orden operatives in order that they might assume custody of the Lady Saint. It is only thanks to Brother Petros’s intervention that the truth — and your treachery — has come to light." The Duke of Florence’s face was flat but his eyes were alive and fiery. His pupils were sky-dark, sparkling with cruelty. "You will be held in our custody before your formal inquisition at the Castel Sant’Angelo. May God have mercy on your soul."

Grave pity was, decided Petros, far worse than Francesco's renowned fury.

In the next instant, the projector screen went dark.

"Amen," intoned Sister Paula, if possible, even chillier than their superior. She drew both enormous knives, describing twin crescents across her midriff and holding the blades at arm's length, edges leveled in Matthaios’s direction.

The Vice Chief, noted Petros, had positioned herself between her target and the only exit, and without Uriel, Matthaios could not hope to match Paula in one-on-one combat.

A growl cut them both momentarily short — Matthaios's voice, laced with bestial aggression.

Neither the Chief nor the Vice Chief had ever heard that streak of blatant violence before.
"Damn," he swore; there was a certain hurt in his words — but not enough to hide the malice. Petros's hackles stood on end as the small man's movements grew less open, more cautious. He took short, cramped paces, pressing hands to the wall as though probing for a weakness in the plaster. "How utterly careless of me."

"It would be in your best interest to submit to arrest calmly and quietly, Brother," said Sister Paula with irreproachable calm. "If you resist—"

"Sister Paula!" cried Petros, eyes bulging; his arm shot out, halting the Vice Chief in her forward momentum. She collided with his forearm and the grafted skin on his burns chaffed painfully. "The ground...!"

Paula's eyes widened as a column of light erupted from under Matthaios's feet, bubbling towards the ceiling like the cloud of an active volcano. The hospital's usual disinfectant scent was tinged with something sick — a noxious, chemical odor, like sulphur, which made Petros's flesh shudder. A complex geometric pattern rose from the floor — an invisible energy burning an apotropaic, five-pointed star with collinear edges into the stone, as though pressed there by an electric branding iron.

"What in Heaven..." snarled Petros, hearing his voice brimming not so much with confusion as with an awful suspicion. "A pentacle...?"

The interstitial light strobed violently, settling down as a swirling mist, tinged red by leaping and writhing will-o'-the-wisps on the fringes of the circle.

Suddenly, the pernicious vapors vanished. At the center of the circle, Matthaios creased and pleated in midair like paper origami, his slight figure folding to a point until he vanished.

What was left of him — smoke, shadow, the faint odor of rotten eggs — was carried away by the wind.

The floor was empty.

Brother Matthaios had vanished.

"Chief, remain here and contact His Eminence immediately," said Sister Paula severely, striding towards the door. "I will establish a perimeter and canvas—"

"No, Vice Chief."

She froze in the entryway. "I beg your pardon?"

Petros shook his head.

A deep, dark frown slanted across Paula's features, hardening like whetted carbide. "His escape corroborates your accusations, Director: Brother Matthaios has been conspiring with heretics and apostates. If you are suggesting—"

"I recognized the symbol on the floor," barked Petros impatiently, shooting his second in command a glance packed with pain and suppressed irritation. "The same sigil appeared under the Magician and von Lohengrin before they made their escape from the Piazza Santo Spirito."

"Sorcery. Witchcraft." Her shoulders sank forward and her fringe fell over her face, obscuring her eyes. "Matthaios will burn for this."
"No, Vice Chief, he will not."

"Why."

_Paula..._

_Because Matthaios never conspired with the Orden._

_Because the Cardinal lied, and abandoned one of his top officers, in order to save his own hide._

Petros felt something, though he knew not what, twist beneath his ribs. Fear...

_Because he had vague, indistinct memories — confused hallucinations, mixing past reality with present fantasy — of a blazing bright figure, hovering on six outstretched wings, suspended above the freezing cold water and the horror and the gore... a true manifestation of divine wrath in the moment when Petros knew he was going die._

Because every time he thought of the Orden, he remembered, at the edges of his mind, the vision of the seraphim in white and gold, and trembled with a horror that was nameless, non-communicable.

_Absolute._

"Because," said Petros quietly, in a tone that brooked no discussion,

"Paula... Matthaios is already dead."

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**Elsewhere**

The man who called himself Matthaios lurched from the shadows, dropping unceremoniously into the middle of an abandoned alleyway. He groaned bodily, clutching his midsection. He immediately turned his head to the side and vomited all over the cobbles, bile steaming against the snow. He bowed over his knees and took slow, deep breaths.

"Well done, Eminence," he seethed through the sick, swiping at the back of his mouth. He spat into the gutter. "Clever, cunning old bastard."

He had been sacrificed... a mere pawn on the chessboard of Francesco's statecraft. How damnably humiliating... tossed aside in favor of a lumbering oaf like Orsini, who was as stupid as he was loud...

"Still smart enough to ask the right questions, however," sneered Matthaios. "Damnation."

If he ever saw the Bureau Director again, Matthaios would take his time with him.

He mastered his temper with some effort, setting aside more murderous impulses as he took stock of his situation. Something, some force, had yanked him from the hospital; a form of Old World technology, no doubt, which meant his supposed rescuers were either criminals or vampires.

That was all well and good, he supposed. He imagined some bloodshed might improve his mood considerably...

But once he lurched to his feet, Matthaios felt unaccountably shackled — still nauseous, but dizzy and languid, too. Florence — if he was even still in Florence — felt tight around him. He no longer had any way of gauging where he was: the alleyway was endless and meandering, the buildings
close and distracting. His probing eyes alighted on fragments of architecture, on signs and symbols, shapes in the distance, but no movement, no sound.

The only defining landmark to catch Matthaios's jaded eye was a statue at the center of the square... encrusted in ice, almost defeated by the weather. A pair of effigies... and not particularly good ones, at that. Competent but uninspired — a bronzed, bare-chested angel, holding a lowered spear, staring into the sky. His face had been obliterated, eroded by persistent snow and rock salt. A second angel knelt at the first's feet, his wings torn and ragged. His head was held low, shielded, and unlike his fellow, most of his expression was still, ostensibly, intact, the carved mien plainly visible. Matthaios saw in it fear, hatred, the humiliation of shattered ego, pain, guilt.

But mostly fear... staring down at an infinite abyss, terrified.

The angels Michael and Lucifer, he surmised. The triumph of righteousness and purity over ambition, false pride and evil intent.

From Matthaios's perspective, it appeared as though Michael was stabbing Lucifer in the back.

"You got him, Isaak! Oh, good show!"

Matthaios stiffened. Every hair on his neck stood on end.

"I apologize for the nausea, Inquisitor. Spatial displacement can be rather jarring for those unaccustomed to it. Although... I don't suppose you will have to suffer the discomfort for much longer..."

He stopped, listening, half-suspicious, half-fascinated, searching for their source of the pair of voices. He turned towards the sound of footsteps, the weight of two bodies cracking the lacquer of the ice.

They appeared almost as suddenly as Matthaios had.

The mouth of the alleyway framed a tall, willowy man, stooping slightly, his flesh too pale, features too precise, too pristine to be genuinely attractive. Matthaios estimated that he was in his mid-twenties, though something worn in his face suggested he was much, much older. At odds with both these observations, however, was the fact that the youthful sparkle in his eyes and the innocent smile wouldn't have looked out of place on a toddler. His appearance careened towards the unkempt, enhanced by the uncombed mess of champagne gold hair and gnawed fingernails. He was dressed plainly in faded cotton trousers and a baggy, off-white shirt which, Matthaios noted neutrally, was wrongly buttoned.

The man stared at the inquisitor until the latter felt ever-so-slightly discomposed. Matthaios couldn't pin down what it was, exactly, about the figure that disturbed him. Perhaps something in the way he moved... his body language was loose and smooth, lacking the stiff, jerky movements most people affected when dealing with strangers, much less members of the Inquisition; Matthaios's uniform ought not to have communicated any false impressions, but the young man's eyes and mouth were so alive with insanity Matthaios doubted he comprehended what the Vineam Domini portended.

Madness was the principal panacea for cowardice, he supposed.

Suddenly, the young man seemed to lose interest and began gazing distractedly around the confines of the street.

"We've been expecting you, haven't we?" he said eventually. He smiled vaguely, dangerously
toothy. He was leaning in Matthaios's direction, swaying pendulously — but not paying him much attention.

"Indeed," responded the second figure; he was dressed entirely in black, so well-camouflaged with the shadowy corners of the street that Matthaios hadn't noticed him at first. He was incredibly tall, pale and sallow, thin to the point of emaciated. His black hair hung past his waist, individual strands hovering about his shoulders as though snatched by an invisible wind.

Pentacles, like the one that had appeared beneath Matthaios's feet, emblazoned the backs of his white gloves.

The inquisitor recognized him instantly.

_The Magician… the man from Oltrarno…_

_The Rosenkreutz Orden._

"We couldn't afford to leave your fate in the hands of the Inquisition, Mateo Vallejo," said the Magician idly, taking a drag from a pencil-thin cigarette.

Matthaios had grown so used to intrigue and intelligence-gathering during his tenure as an inquisitor that he failed to feel anything more than a flicker of disbelief at hearing his Christian name.

"After all, they might have let you live. Francesco di Medici can be slippery."

Vague disbelief turned to shock.

"You're the Moroccan Demon," added the blonde man, like a child trying to impress its parents with a newly learned scrap of knowledge.

Matthaios growled through clenched teeth: "You'll find I don't much care for that name, infidel."

"That's okay... because I don't much care for you, either."

Suddenly, a boiling wind, like a wall of searing air, buffeted the flesh of Matthaios face. His skin began to bubble and blacken, an instantaneous, cancerous necrosis, like a radiation burn; he smelled the rich pungency of hissing fat and roasting tissue and he threw his head up, breaking into a scream that endured for minutes, changing in neither pitch nor intensity.

The scream became a storm of noise, the walls of the alleyway blistering into static.

"You hurt them, Demon."

Pain lanced through his neck, jerking his head violently to one side. Matthaios howled, eyes streaming.

Then the blonde man was standing right in front of him, staring at the inquisitor with his smooth, vacant face and... and...

He... It wasn't human.

It might have looked human once. It even had a vaguely human shape and was wearing what remained of human clothes. It was a human body that had begun to decay. Flesh, bones, nerves, muscles, and organs all lost their rigid structure and were flowing, black and viscous, towards Matthaios. A thousand tiny mouths sucked impotently at the air, gnawing at chunks of ice,
dragging a trail of wet, sticky flesh in its wake.

"You hurt his friends… you made him sad. You made him suffer."

Thin, absurdly strong limbs grew out of the bulk of black flesh, clinging to Matthaios's back and shoulders, raising him slowly and painfully upright. The horrific creature held him in a scorching parody of an embrace.

"I can't bear to see Abel suffer."

Agony rushed through Matthaios, inundating every nerve, spreading to the furthest capillary reaches of his body. His flesh sang, hissing like an insect under a magnifying glass.

Nearby, the statue at the center of the street began to glow. It was melting. The heat welded Michael's arms to Lucifer's back, the latter's wings turning molten and sloughing onto the ground. Lucifer's face stretched, welling tear-like towards the cobbles. The snow sizzled against the bronze, turning instantly to steam.

Then the creature stood before him, its body clean and pearlescent where it crested the black, toothy viscera, a condescending smile quivering on its lips.

Three pairs of massive wings emerged from its back. Its face blurred, like a heat haze, resolving into a corona of living flame, constellated in hundreds... thousands of eyes no larger than the head of a pin.

Ofanim... Wheels of Galgallin...

It was a thing beyond love or hatred, beyond the beautiful or the monstrous. Beyond, finally, Matthaios's own power to comprehend or catalogue.

The creature leant forward, his fingers locking round Matthaios's neck. A rod of agony drove through bone and muscle and tissue and sinew and nerves, piercing his spine. He felt himself go rigid, his body stiffening soundlessly. The creature's thumb traced the flesh under his chin. Matthaios looked into his eyes and saw... nothing.

No pupils, no retina, no whites, no color.

Just... living blackness. Living filth... a million writhing, starving shadows.

In that eternal moment, immediately before his sanity was blasted to pieces, Matthaios knew he was going to die.

The slender hand around Matthaios's throat constricted with a single, fierce pressure.

His sight misted red, and the last thing the Moroccan Demon saw was the stone-carved smile on the blond man's face...

So beautiful...

In the second before his neck snapped.

Matthaios's black eyes were dim with distant joy, even as his head rolled across the ground at his feet...

Elsewhere
When he emerged from his conference, she was waiting for him.

Her brother approached the staircase at pace, the agitation as palpable as a mantle of static electricity before a thunderstorm. He grasped the handrail in a white-knuckled grip, stroking and squeezing the iron as if trying to push his fingers through to the stonework beneath. He pulled away abruptly, turning with equal sharpness as his gaze alighted on his younger half-sister. His fingers formed an accusative point, stabbing at her.

"I haven't time for—"

"You'll make the time, Francesco," countered Caterina Sforza, cool and composed. "If speaking with me is such drudgery, My Lord Brother, then I will walk with you."

A beat. "If you insist."

Their footsteps reverberated along the marble steps of the Scala Regia, a barrel-vaulted colonnade that ran from the Portone di Bronzo to the Apostolic Palace; the design of the staircase was such that the proportions necessarily grew narrower at the end of the vista, a telescoping effect that exaggerated the walking distance. It had always given Caterina a tremendous headache.

She didn't waste her time justifying her eavesdropping; Francesco would have done the exact same thing, given half a chance. "I trust the traitor has been apprehended?"

"I have every confidence in Sister Paula's abilities when it comes to expunging heretics and other such treasonous filth." He twisted his head about and his features formed an expression that after a few seconds she guessed, by his tone, must be a sneer — it was difficult to tell in the crepuscular narrowness of the Scala. "I confess I'm surprised you, of all people, Caterina, would think to question the Vice Chief's capacity in these matters."

The Duchess of Milan felt gaunt and worn with a sudden frustration; she put the back of one hand over her mouth, whether to smother a scratchy cough or because her stomach threatened to turn she was unsure. Her brother's attempt at provocation was plainly obvious and patently juvenile, to boot.

Still, Caterina knew — and Francesco knew that she knew — that she had never fully recovered, either politically or spiritually, from the business with the Neue Vatican. The wound of Vaclav's absence had yet to scar over, and the official recognition of his disloyalty, his designation as a traitor, ensured the hurt would continue to plague her for some while yet.

Juvenile, yes. Ineffective... no.

"Yes, Paula conducted herself with admirable competence and rectitude on that occasion. If I came across as condescending, I beg your forgiveness, Francesco."

"You are forgiven. Now, if you'll excuse—"

"Though it is rather ignominious, is it not?" mused Caterina, leisurely skeptical, causing her brother to stop in his tracks. He was not by nature a sedate person, but he seemed, in that moment, in an uncommon hurry to be shut of her company. "Both the Ministry of Holy Affairs and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith playing host to two traitors within the span of as many years. When a community truly disintegrates, knitting it back together becomes a herculean, perhaps impossible, task. We have been consecrated to the service of God's flock; in an epoch of change, the Church remains the symbol of continuity; in a phase of disintegration, the element of cohesion; in times of mutability, the emblem of permanence. If we fail in that duty, the restoration
of virtue, trust, and cohesion between the Holy See and its congregation becomes exceedingly
difficult to restore."

"You needn't sermonize to me, Caterina." Francesco's effort at feigned nonchalance was gone,
swept away by a different set of dangerous, tense mannerisms. "If you have a point to make, I
suggest you make it. This situation in Albion requires my immediate attention."

"And here I labored under the belief that matters of state and foreign affairs fell within my
jurisdiction."

Francesco was positively bristling with impatience. Despite the bluster, however, Caterina intuited
that he was still carefully observant, mindful of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time and wise
to the fact that Caterina was stalling, deliberately trying to make him stumble.

"No matter..." She tucked a corkscrew of hair behind her ear, peering imperiously through the
smoked gold of her monocle lens. "Although it does cause one to wonder how Brother Matthaios
managed to take the entire Bureau by surprise. That he had the capital and resources necessary to
commandeer the Castello di Signa signals to me that he has enjoyed the financial and martial
support of the Orden for a not significant period of time. How, I wonder, has he succeeded in
evading the scrutiny of both your knights and yourself for so long..."

"The man is a spoil of war. As you well know, my knights are chosen from childhood for the
explicit purpose of assuming the role of inquisitors. In addition to their training, they each must
swear a vow of absolute loyalty and obedience to God and the Catholic Church. But—"

"But Matthaios did not undergo the indoctrination," finished Caterina. "He was a gun for hire, was
he not? A mercenary." She sniffed. "Just the sort, you believe, the Orden might be predisposed to
attract. I would like to say that I expected more forethought from a man of your military intuitions,
Francesco, but the truth of the matter is... you're more intelligent than this."

The silence that followed was tense and menacing and, thankfully, short.

"Speak plainly, Your Grace," snarled the Minister of the Doctrine, but his voice had lost some of
its force. Caterina studied his face, wondering how someone so infinitely clever could be so
infinitely stupid...

"I have every suspicion that you're not being entirely honest with me... Your Grace."

Her rival's complexion mottled to an alarming shade of crimson. Utter loathing was carved onto his
face — pure, near-bestial rage from which a lesser soul than Caterina Sforza would have fled in
terror. But the Duchess of Milan, who had been exposed to nearly thirty years of Francesco di
Medici's volcanic temper, remained unruffled.

"How dare you... how dare you come into this sacred hall, flinging accusations?"

"I have not yet made any accusations," said Caterina. "Perhaps it is your own guilt clamoring in
your ears, Francesco. Indeed, it does well to be careful of the actions we take, for there are always
unintended consequences. Sometimes they are serendipitous, other times they are appalling. We
must tread lightly in this world... until we are sure of foot." A triumphant, expectant crease
twitched like a dying thing in the corner of her eye. "You, my Lord Brother," she intoned, her voice
as serene as a high mountain lake, with nary a ripple to betray the terrible rage roiling in the depths,
"appear to have lost your balance."

There was something sleek and deadly and uniquely violent about Francesco di Medici in a fury, a
man working off his anger at a world he believed was doing its best to spite him. Her brother, Caterina reflected, not for the first time, had been born to the wrong age. The arrogant shuffle of his gait, his eyes fierce and open wide, his readiness to meet any obstacle with massive retaliation... all of those things belonged to the Dark Times.

To the battlefield, not to the basilica.

"Do you expect me to believe," Caterina whispered, her voice a reedy exercise that managed, despite its fragility, to drip acid, "that an inquisitor under your direct supervision, who, despite his reputation, was utterly devoted to God and the Church, and who demonstrated no disloyalty to the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith since he took holy orders, has in fact been allied with those apostates the entire time?"

His face, she thought, appeared terribly gaunt, gray with exhaustion and hatred. He had grown thinner, his high, articulated cheekbones sharper than before. Were it not for Francesco's height, he would have blown over in a stiff wind. If Caterina were in an entirely different scene of mind, she might have pitied him. As it was, she could barely muster the strength to master her own physical deterioration, much less her brother's.

"Just because you were too blind and dull-witted to rout out the traitor in your ranks," sneered Francesco, "does not mean I suffer from the same handicap, Sister Mine."

His mouth contorted uneasily, confirming for at least the dozenth time Caterina's suspicion that this was a man who indulged in the odd grin every couple of years but otherwise stuck rigidly to rigor mortis lip-twitches to convey the apotheosis of good humor.

But Caterina wasn't laughing.

She stared without blinking into Francesco's face, not missing the flicker of vindictive smugness that lurked in her brother's stormy eyes.

The Duchess of Milan used her teeth to pull her glove from her fingers, folding the pristine white fabric before tucking it into the folds of her crimson vestments.

Then she drew back her hand and slapped Francesco, hard, across the face.

The violent smack of flesh striking flesh echoed through the staircase.

His mouth opened slightly to reveal the whitest teeth she had ever seen, bared in a grimace as a drop of blood ran slowly down his chin from his mouth.

"Damn you," breathed the Duke of Florence, more a gesture of the lips than a sound. "How much—"

"Everything. I know everything, Francesco," Caterina seized great bundles of crimson silk, drawing her skirts tighter. She imagined her knuckles tensed and white. "Father Tres contacted me from the Ospedale degli Innocenti the moment Sister Esther and Brother Petros were recovered," she stated vehemently. She felt a dry cough skittering up her diaphragm, her chest heaving under the bones of her corset, a splitting headache sitting over her right eye as if it had been nailed there. "You traitorous bastard... how dare you..."

The Cardinal hissed: "I ought to have repurposed your little toy for parts after he murdered one of my inquisitors...!"

"You would harm a daughter of this Church, a friend to His Holiness..." She tasted acutely the pain
and fury and betrayal, swirled the acrid flavor around her mouth like wine gone sour. "You would lay a hand on one of my agents, Francesco, and with her, you would seek to supplant me? How dare you."

"You despise her, Caterina," snarled Francesco with hateful relish. "You would see her dead as soon as I."

"The key differences being, My Lord Brother," countered the Duchess of Milan, rounding on him in genuine anger, "that I would succeed where you have so spectacularly failed, and _I would not contract the task out to mankind's greatest enemy._"

"Rosenkreutz, Francesco..." The loathing with which she invested the name — both names — was difficult to ignore. "Do you despise me so much?" she asked quietly. She fought to keep her tone as bland as possible, ever the vision of composure, but Caterina had little doubt her brother caught a hundred subtle inflections: bitterness, confusion, curiosity. Foremost, however, was fury.

Perhaps it was just as well, Caterina tried to console herself. Despite her tendency to touch others with a projected sense of patient, rational calm, there was an outside possibility that any affected pacific stance may have antagonized her brother still further.

Regardless, he continued to stare down at her with a horrible expression on his face. There was no indication of shame or remorse... just sharp cunning, arrogant hatred and vicious hedonism. She met his gaze with equal hostility, but where Francesco radiated resentment, Caterina could manage only profound disappointment.

"Under your guidance," he seethed, "His Holiness presides over a Vatican State ruled by the weak and the small-minded, who are too stupid to _know_ they are weak and small-minded! Through your power politics and opportunism and your ridiculous vanities... by bluff, by coercion, you have championed a policy of complaisant indulgence for our enemies."

"Not all victories are won by the sword, Brother."

"You would have me give up the fight entirely! On behalf of what? Moral principles? And what of the higher order of things, which demands the punishment of sin? I know what evil is afraid of. Not your ethics, Caterina... not your preaching or moral treaties on life or dignity. Evil is afraid of _pain_, of mutilation, of suffering and at the end of the day, of death! The dog howls when it is badly wounded! Writhing on the ground and growling, watching the blood flow from its veins and arteries, seeing the bone that sticks out from a stump, feeling the cold as its guts escape its open belly! _That_ is the way to fight evil, Cardinal Sforza!"

"Regardless of your reasons, I cannot abide this show of disloyalty to the Mother Church, Duke of Florence. There will be consequences."

"Oh, you _will_ abide it, Your Grace." Caterina's instincts began to chatter dangerously as Francesco grew, suddenly, very still. A fine sheen of sweat glistened off his finely set muscles, a grim light catching his quicksilver eyes. She imagined the temperature in the room plummeting so fast and so far, Caterina was almost surprised her breath didn't come out in clouds.

"You will abide it... unless you would like it disseminated to the College of Cardinals that the Duchess of Milan is keeping a one-thousand-year-old genetic abomination in her charge."

She felt the freezing burn of ice against her throat. "What did you say?"

He took a few steps back down the Scala Regia, until he stood at eye-height. Even when his nose
was only a few inches from her face, she refused to surrender ground. "Abel Nightroad has loitered in your shadow since you were a little girl, Caterina," said Francesco with a softness that forecasted devastation. "Twenty years... and yet the man hasn't aged a day. Or did you think I wouldn't notice? Indeed, I might have dismissed the inconsistency as anomalous, perhaps serendipitous, in light of the services he has rendered the Church, but then I received a most disturbing report from Brother Petros three months ago... in Carthage."

Caterina clenched her teeth and turned her head aside, but knew she was too late to disguise the anger she felt.

"You are not the only one who has trained their dog to bark at every act of insubordination, Caterina."

So... the Director of the Inquisition let slip the secret, after all...

She ought to have had the bullish idiot executed years ago...

"A creature with a midnight-dark plumage, who can redirect electrostatic energy at will... a blood-drinker who feeds on the viscera of other blood-drinkers. The Director was exceedingly thorough with the details." He tut-tutted severely. "The AX professes to rid the world of monsters, Caterina, and yet it fosters in its care the biggest monster of them all."

The air was freezing, too much like death against her skin. "And yet you've said nothing in all this time." The disconcerting realization followed immediately after the statement, like thunder chasing a bolt of lightning. "Leverage, Francesco?"

"Insurance. I will keep your confidences, as you will keep mine."

"And if I don't?"

"Then the entire Holy See will know your greatest secret. It will spell the death of that beloved monstrosity of yours... and it will ruin you."

Greatest secret...

A sudden cognizance stopped her dead, as though by some impalpable intervention.

Abel's identity was not her greatest secret; it had never been.

If Brother Petros had told his superior about the Krusnik in Carthage, then why hadn't he disclosed knowledge of the Duchess of Milan's council with the Count of Memphis on the same occasion? Francesco knew nothing of Caterina's liaising with the Tsala Methsaluth; even Alec was oblivious to her intentions. It did not make sense for the Director to cherrypick the details of his report, especially when one such detail included the brokering of peace between the Vatican and its greatest enemy. Compared to the possibility of entente between Terran and Methuslah, Abel's Krusnik abilities seemed a largely inconsequential fact.

Unless...

It didn't take Caterina's genius or her being uncommonly familiar with the way her older brother's mind operated to put two and two together: Francesco had lied. Petros had disclosed nothing. The Director had played his knowledge close to his chest, for Abel and Ion's sakes as well as his own.

There were any number of ways for Cardinal di Medici to learn of the Krusnik... Matthaios in Estonia, or Paula in Brno. Abel valued tact and judiciousness above most other virtues when it
came to the use of his powers, but in times of great desperation, discretion tended to play second fiddle to a desire to protect his friends and comrades.

It was obvious to Caterina that Francesco no longer trusted his most powerful subordinate: the Bureau Director was too close to the AX. His recent record of service steered far too steeply in the direction of mercy rather than ruthlessness. He valued principals above loyalty, faith above blind obedience. Matthaios had been sacrificed simply because, between the two men, and in spite of his inconstancy, Petros was the more effective weapon. He was bigger, and stronger, and what he lacked in cleverness he more than made up for in passion and fervor.

But that fervor had proven a hindrance on more than one occasion — Caterina suspected Petros owed his loyalty to the Throne of Saint Peter far more than one Cardinal Francesco di Medici. And so long as the latter was barred from sitting on the former, Orsini would pose a problem.

By driving a wedge of distrust between the Chief Inquisitor and Caterina's AX, Francesco hoped to isolate Petros, to cast him adrift, so that when the Minister of the Doctrine finally flung the man aside, he would have no safe harbor towards which to swim.

What a waste, thought Caterina bitterly.

Regardless... the Concistoro could not learn of Abel. Caterina would surrender Esther Blanchett to the worst tortures of Matthaios's diseased little imagination a thousand times over before she relinquished her most powerful ally.

Caterina valued him more than her own life. She had for years, even if it was a hopeless, unreturned adoration that left her unfulfilled. Even if he had never touched her, not even in the most innocent way. Even if Abel had only looked, and smiled.

But she would protect that smile... and crush any who sought to wrest it from her.

Be it terrorist or Vampire... layperson or Lady Saint.

Francesco knew that. Caterina knew that he knew that.

She had to make it into something so secret she didn't even acknowledge it, and certainly didn't allow the likes of Abel Nightroad or Esther Blanchett to acknowledge it. Nor, Heaven forbid, act upon it. Francesco's betrayal belonged only to Caterina, and all the rage, all the shame, too, were hers alone.

Her burden to bear.

Francesco stood at the landing, his broad shoulders filling the doorway. He wore an expression they knew both well — the implacable one that meant Caterina could sooner carve through a mountain with a teaspoon than change his mind. They were both motionless.

Neither of them had won.

Yet both of them had lost.

And worse still... they were both left with that unshakable feeling nothing had been finished, either.

But even in their stubborn opposition, Caterina saw a singular connection, locked as they were in an eternal stalemate from which both wanted to break free but could not. Their cooperation would not be able to keep things perfect and unchanging, just as an open antagonism would not be able to destroy the other indefinitely.
Like particles in a cloud chamber, they would compete for supremacy, collide and clash and spin apart until one of them was forced to yield, if for however brief a time, or else fall together, immolated in mutual destruction.

"Did we always hate each other so, My Lord Brother..." she murmured. Her calm, her resignation, lent her, as it often did, an odd dignity.

Looking towards the Portone di Bronzo, Francesco raised a hand to his forehead, a shadow blocking out his eyes. Silence ruled for a long instant. The Duke of Florence stared at nothing with a bitter gaze, waiting for the moment to break.

"You would wrest from me my peerage, my political power, my voting bloc, even my own Knight," he said coldly, quietly, at a volume he rarely reached, even at mass. "The hatred is all I have left."

She inclined her head. "Not so. You have merely forgotten how to love. And that is a different sorrow."

And had she owned the words, the Duchess of Milan would have told the Duke of Florence what her heart intuited — that love and hatred often traveled the same road and sometimes, whether by grace or misfortune, they crossed paths and became each other's companions.

Caterina let the edge of her gown fall from her fingers. A sudden spasm of pain fired across the knuckles of her right hand, nearly making her gasp. She smothered it, until her head began to ache with the effort.

She turned from him, walking back the way she had come.

"I did not always hate you, Caterina."

She paused. The voice did not threaten or invite danger. If anything... it was wistful.

But it belonged to a ghost.

And Caterina did not believe in ghosts.

Her answer was delivered with her back to him.

"Perhaps not," she said. "But we will, I suspect, hate each other hereafter."

Cardinal Sforza strode away from her brother. She descended the Scala Regia and stopped at the door at the foot of the colonnade. Her fingers tightened around the handle reluctantly.

Step through, and live with the shame of having to absolve Francesco of his sins, by virtue of political necessity more than any prevenient grace.

Turn around, and face the possibility of losing the man she loved to the very same wheels of fortune she had set in motion...

The answer, to her, was patently obvious.

Caterina twisted the handle.

Elsewhere
Several stories beneath the slate cobbles of Rome, in a room so deep it might have once been a storm cellar, or a bomb shelter, and accessible only by means of a secret entrance built into the grotesques and vignettes and *impressi* of the mezzanine of the Palazzo Spada, there was a ward where a young woman slumbered.

What remained of her body was as red and raw as a shell wound, hers a battlefield birth of splintered bone, hot shrapnel, and glutinous blood, held together by a complex gestalt of machines and medicines and artificial intelligence programs, working around the clock to keep the young woman's slumber from slipping into something more permanent.

The secret ward had the metal bed-frames and onion paper sheets and plaster walls of a hospital room, but it lacked the traffic of one. There were no white coats carrying clipboards. No family members tipping back in forth in plastic chairs. No nurses bustling from bedside to bedside. No murmurings of the variety traditionally employed for hushed conversations and whispered diagnoses.

There were no projector screens or computer terminals in the room, no loudspeakers or communication stations...

So, in a way, the woman couldn't even visit herself.

Perhaps that, in itself, was a small mercy...

The young woman — thin, atrophied, almost corpse-like — lay propped upright on the room's single bed, positioned in the way people often fell asleep on trains or airships — her body stiff, one arm slightly higher than the other. Her hands folded demurely on her lap, her head falling towards one shoulder.

An entire hemisphere of her face was swathed in bandages, the linen sunken, as though portions of her skull had collapsed in on themselves.

William Walter Wordsworth remembered, with a vividness that was vicious and cruel in every detail, what lay beneath: skin blistered and shriveled. Exposed molars bared in a rictus grin. The eye a blackened ball and socket, staring blankly, oblivious to the room or the Professor's presence in it.

What little remained unobscured by the bandages was gray and purple — bruised — the bone structure was austerely angled, the cheekbones paring-knife sharp, the jaw broken in places. There were no smile lines around the mouth, no touch of softness anywhere.

Just a small mole, a raised beauty mark, on her hollowed cheek...

William plopped a fistful of flowers in a vase. The roots were only as wide as toothpicks. The blooms were marble-colored, as white as lather, a peaked face with a droopy mustache of petals.

"These are for you, darling," announced the Professor to the silence. "Their name is *aerides odorata*... 'children of the air'..."

She offered him no answer.

"Tres picked them out," he fibbed, finding some mainstay of comfort in his rambling. "An apology for being unable to pop down to see you himself... he's still operating in low-level diagnostic mode, you see. Von Lohengrin really did a number on him..."

She hadn't offered him an answer in nearly ten years.
The words failed, then. His breath caught, lodging like a cherry pit in his throat. He reached out his hands slowly, enfolding one of hers within them.

It was as dry as cork... as light as paper.

William had designed her computer-generated avatar to appear as she once had been, whole and alive; he had even programmed the simulation to age — her hair to silver, the crow's feet in the corners of her eyes to spread and deepen. To pale in fear, or blush in anger or embarrassment.

The rest of the Vatican saw the hologram every single day... their professional and personal relationships brokered entirely through the artificial intelligence network. A necessary interface to allow for human contact and communication, and to give the comatose patient the illusion of movement, of freedom.

But what William retained at the forefront of his mind — the image he had forced himself to tattoo forever on the inside of his skull — was that of the thin, gray figure in the bed, locked away beneath the bones of Rome...

There was a long stretch of awkward, but in some ways significant silence. It occurred to William then that he couldn't remember the last time he had felt uncomfortable in this woman's presence. But at that moment, the air between them seemed bloated with inevitability, like something about to snap and recoil with the painful kick of gunfire.

After a while, the Professor released his breath in one long, resigned sigh. He bowed his head, resting his chin on his chest.

He felt suddenly tired... beyond any tiredness he had ever felt before.

"You asked me, not so long ago," he began, coming to the end of his feeble digressiveness and wrinkling his face in embarrassment, "what it was I had been hiding from you. Why I was acting so strangely around Alucard, and I said I couldn't tell you…"

"I'm not who you think I am. Not… not entirely. Not anymore. I might have been, once. Something got lost along the way — lost to the deepest, blackest pits of my insides, and I'm not entirely sure I like what I've acquired in the interim… that vague intelligence clinging to ghosts of past times."

"I've heard it said that when a person experiences death, he glimpses in an instant his entire life right in front of his eyes, like a reverie." William sounded to himself as if he were trying out a new word, testing it for rightness. "Like... time travel, in a way. Operating in only one direction."

A metastasization across centuries, and in a way, Walter was very much like a cancer… a loathsome cluster of abnormal cells. Articulate in his pain, howling and shrieking, jerking and twisting in the gray matter of the Professor's brain.

A pentecost of bitter chuckles fell from his mouth — each one weak and breathless.

"But I'm not Alucard. I can't go back and forth. I can't change what happened in the past. I can only hear the screams…"

Saying the words aloud did little to stave off the emptiness growing in the space between his ribs. His skin felt as brittle as porcelain. So, for that matter, did his mind.

"By now you've already formed your own impressions," he murmured, a voice of pure abstraction. "You either believe that an act committed a lifetime ago defines a man, or you believe that a person's past has nothing to do with his future. Perhaps knowing more will make you think..."
differently of me, but it won't change what happened all those years ago, because some things you carry around as though they are a part of your blood and bones, and when that happens, there's nothing you can do to forget. It's almost a scientific precept, isn't it? It demands names and classifications, records and predictions. It engenders a determination to discover the truth, whatever that truth may turn out to be. Regardless of the fact that, in knowing grief, every facet of the truth has already been filtered through a veil of redactions and rejections and disbeliefs. The rational world has spun so completely out of its orbit, that there is no way to chart what might happen next.

"But however much I may confuse reality with the arbitrary divisions I have erected in an effort to make sense of that reality, in this openness and sincerity of investigation it bears some semblance to religion... understood in its deeper sense. I was convinced that if there was something divine in the universe, the only way I would be able to find it was through measurement, experimentation...

"Knowledge, especially in faith, is akin to science. And science binds... it does not divide. We seek knowledge not out of fear of the darkness but at a promise to gain clarity. This is our most intimate journey, like blind men, like moths at night... like children yearning...

"Steadily... we approach the point where what is unknown is not a blank in a book of definitions and classifications but a window in reality, a window whose name is not ignorance but wonder...

"I have yet to find that window, Kate... but I will." William's grip tightened around her frail hand. "I made you a promise."

Her voluminous sleeves were pinned up, showing a pair of wasted arms, chapped with cold and mottled with bruises. At his touch, he waited for her eyes to flutter open, to see him and smile, to chide him or bat his hand away.

It didn't happen.

Her hair was the color of straw, dry and dead. It crunched as he stroked it back from her face.

She had no more use for pain, for memory or regret. The latter was reserved for him alone; shamefully, selfishly, his mourning was less for his dear friend than it was for himself. He knew he would always grieve for the missed opportunities, the words unspoken or spoken in haste, the hole in his life and the unsettling of his soul. Every Nöel, he gazed upon the stillness of her repose and felt his own self-importance crack and the myth of his immortality fall to pieces.

"When you lose someone you—" Don't say it, you foolish old sod, Wordsworth... "care about, perhaps you lose a part of yourself, as well," he said. "Caterina and Abel dealt with it in their own ways, me in mine, and you in yours." He lifted his hand off her forehead. "Caterina remains suspicious of the world, Abel goes along with it, I avoid it, and you... you try to save it. In small ways. In... kind ways, Kate. Always so kind..."

"Your tea, Kate. Pots of tea... you find more comfort in the making than the drinking. Do you know... Beethoven wrote the Moonlight Sonata, his only opera and six symphonies when he was stone deaf. He heard the melodies take shape in his memory alone... beautiful music of which he himself could not partake."

The Professor shook his head once, his gaze not on the bed, but somewhere beyond.

The Professor closed his eyes.

"Sunny afternoons. Walking through the prefabricated glass factory buildings and huge exhibition halls. Bougainvillea… vines of bright pink flowers dancing over wrought-iron arbors. Variegated ferns, bleeding hearts, lemon and lilac trees. And the orchids…” He flashed her a small, sad smile, even though she could not see it. "A madhouse of colors and shapes: ruffles, pleats, corkscrews, blooms as big as fists, small as fingernails, smelling of honey, grass, citrus, cinnamon… every bloom was an inspiration. I often wonder if your flair for tea-making originated in those greenhouses, Kate… among the orchids…”

He expelled his remaining breath in a faint sigh. William felt that he ought to say something more, but there was nothing there. A cold lump in his throat and a blank mind in his skull. The scent of the flowers in the vase reminded him of his age, of his past. Things he wished not to remember.

Concentrating his mind and energies, William adjusted the stems in the water as though the motions would dislodge the fluvial knot jammed in his throat; it made him wonder if all things taken from their home too soon lost some of their bloom.

The past clung to him like the smell of white orchids...

William felt, then, a crystalline warmth moistening his eyes, barely wetting the pristine ivory of the flowers at her bedside.

He put his hand on her shoulder, bending down to kiss her gently on the forehead.

She smelled like vanilla, antiseptic, saline... and beneath it all, the faint odor of char.

"Happy Christmas, Kate," he said quietly. "I'm so sorry...

"I did the best I could."

---

**Elsewhere**

Abel Nightroad watched the sun set beyond the Arno.

Under the veil of long, wooly shadows, the buildings on either side of the river spread towards the north and south like great crimson serpents with rectangular scales, coppery under the sky with its taches of gold and red. From his vantage on the Ponte Vecchio, Abel could see what a maze Florence was — every house three stories high and each abutted to the next, the streets curved as if laid down on a whim, twisting without pattern or design.

He took a deep breath; the air the warmest it had been in weeks. The snow had stopped. The storms had passed. The priest's expression was calm and thoughtful, the light in his pale blue eyes neither triumphant nor defeated. Without the Krusnik ratcheting his bloodlust a fever pitch, the battle adrenaline had dimmed, as it often did, to a feeling empty and cold, like a hearth devoid even of ashes — geared to quiet, to contemplation.

He decided that sunrise and sunset both gave him a pleasantly sad feeling. The sunrise brought a wild, free sadness, full of daunting possibility; the sunset, a lonely yet comforting sense of closure. He indulged his agreeable melancholy as the earth turned under him, growing steadily darker, the white streets turning to flame as the twilight extinguished itself in its long westward slide.
In the thin, fading light, he thought the tendrils of cloud were the same color as Lilith's hair — as Esther's.

He turned to his companion, who was standing close enough that her hipbone had begun to dig into his thigh. He smiled wistfully, studying her expression from his high vantage. As always, he saw much on Miss Esther's face — an alchemy of nuances. But it was difficult, in that moment, to tell what, exactly, she was thinking. Her eyes seemed wide and tired... and Abel supposed she was, at that. He attempted for the past several hours to project calm and gentle camaraderie, allowing her the dignity of her own process.

She had barely managed three words in as many days... going silent in the wake of Alucard's sacrifice...

Too many times had Miss Esther been forced to mourn for the people she knew and loved. Too often.

It broke his heart.

He peered over the edge of his spectacles — Miss Esther's face was golden in the setting sun. She watched the river with the misty eyes of a daydreamer, glazed over with a sort of trance-like lacquer, as if in the middle of a revelation.

Or a vision.

As the stories went, Dante had been standing near the Ponte Vecchio one evening when he saw Beatrice coming along the Lungarno. He was a young man, she even younger. It was not their first meeting, nor their last, but that vision contained for the poet the whole of eternity, the connection between his soul and Heaven itself.

Abel suppressed a sigh.

He registered the slow turning of some inward tide, not unlike the shadows chasing after the sunset. He looked at the last of the crimson-colored water as, together, he and his dear friend retreated beneath the Ponte Vecchio's angled shadows.

"We ought to get back soon, Miss Esther," said Abel quietly. "We don't want to be late for Sister Kate's departure."

"Yes… yes." She paused and stared skyward. He could see the blush high on her cheeks, little black, quarter-moon smudges under her eyes, the flesh tissue-thin over her skull. She seemed so tragically diminished — aged. The realization chafed at him, making his chest ache. "A little longer, Father. Please?"

"Well… all right. I don't want you to catch cold."

"I'm fine. I just want to watch the sunset."

So they stood together, dusk like firelight churning in their eyes, as the world turned from gray to lavender and then to black. After an hour's silent vigil, chipped-glass stars began to glitter above their heads, crystalline in the hallowed dark. Below a girdle of purple dust, the silhouetted hillsides had been reduced to regiments of clean, flat shapes. It was, Abel thought, a bit like looking at a snowy postcard; the world seemed cleaner, somehow. Still and uncomplicated. The distant fragrance of pine resin was like burning incense — a balm of open sky and snow and moonlit nights.
He did not miss much about his old life... his *other* life.

But he did miss the stars.

There was, he decided, no finer place of worship than beneath the canopy of constellations, with the moon lifting a forehead over the horizon like an act of providence, earthbound congregations mining ephemeral love from the cold and distant lights.

His spectacles nearly sliding off his nose, Abel gazed up at the stars, as though he might find his answers emblazoned in the arbitrary patterns of light arching over his head. He lingered long enough to allow each mote of fire the chance to scratch a deep hole in the back of his retina.

He gazed at the second moon, the ARK, for, perhaps, a little longer.

He said a prayer for Élissa.

And for Lilith.

Without a word, he reached down and folded his hand around Miss Esther's — her skin was warm and soft, and he could feel her pulse throbbing steadily beneath his palm.

"I'm fine, Father," she chastised gently.

"Yes, I know."

The evening wind was faint, just enough to chill his skin and raise a fine layer of goosebumps. His companion's gaze, like his, had drifted to the stars. He imagined the gentle breeze buoying her upwards, lifting her hair in a coronal nimbus of red and raising her into the sky; even as he imagined it, she appeared to recede from him, her expression unaccountably distant, her pale face a glimpse of white surrounded by the boundless dark.

"I'm... fine..."

With a cringing shudder, she pulled her eyes away from whatever she alone could see.

"Esther..."

She cried out on the crest of a sob.

"Home..." she gasped, clutching at her chest. "He's home... he's home..."

"Oh, my dear Esther..."

The small endearment was entirely too effective: Miss Esther began to weep quietly, her body seized as though by a stutter, or a shiver, that would not let go. For a few long minutes he allowed her to cry, allowed her to agonize at the unfairness of the haphazard and tumultuous world, for the sheer emotional strain of a bedrock pain.

Her sense of loss was boundless, staggered across souls and centuries.

Just like...

"He made it, Father. He found his way..."

Just like Abel's own.
And yet...

There was joy there, too.

Grief and joy.

The peace of closure, the wonder of tracing two paths which crossed with the perfection of fulfilling a purpose that spanned lifetimes. Two people who had loved each other however imperfectly, who had tried to make a life together, however imperfectly...

Little lights twinkling into the high firmament, until they were lost among the stars.

How sad...

How exquisite.

Through her tears, Esther began to laugh gently.

It was a beautiful sound, as cool as the first drops of rain in autumn, as fresh as spring flowers, as young and as light as life.

"Home, Abel. He came home."

As Esther turned her head, laughing and crying, her face seemed to be glowing, as though reflecting the cosmos suspended above the world. The starlight on the river, the swaying of the bare tree branches in the wind, the slight rattle of the panes of glass in the old window frames... everything was too beautiful for words.

In an instant, Abel was enthralled at how miraculous it all was. Overwhelmed.

Everything... absolutely beautiful...

He pulled Esther into his arms, pressed his cheek against the sticky mess on her face. She wept into his cassock as he ran his fingers through her hair, held her tight, hugged her to him desperately.

He felt her smile against his chest, and he smiled too.

*L’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle...*

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**A long time ago...**

A man in red kneels before a woman in white, so close that his knees touch her toes. He sweeps his hands to his sides, lowering his head until the crown of his head brushes bare flesh, his hair falling like reams of heavy silk around his face, obscuring whatever expression lies hidden underneath.

He sinks into the bow, grateful beyond words for its familiarity and its soft comfort.

The woman hovers over him, perhaps waiting for a lead. They are close enough for him to feel her breath, and for her to notice the absence of his.

Neither one flinches at the intimacy.

"To think..." his voice is as smooth and defined and ageless as his face, "after all these years... I still have a proclivity for leaving you speechless."
Twin creases appear between her brows. Her nose is slightly chipped, bent at the center. Her arms are long, coffee-colored ropes that fray into hands.

"Mind your manners, servant."

Then his soft hair is under her fingers, and he hears her exhale, as if she has been holding her breath for years, and he knows nothing else.

He needs nothing else.

Integra smiles.

"Welcome home, Count."

Chapter End Notes

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