Summary

Miriam Hughes is living on the streets when she is suddenly caught up in powers beyond her understanding or control. She will discover a secret destiny centuries in the making, and that even the best laid plans can fall to ruin.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

Miriam Hughes is 20 years-old, and would best be described as a scrapper. A high school class mate once referred to her as “95 pounds of whup-ass.” At barely 5 feet tall, she does not strike one as imposing, but the faded scars on her knuckles say differently. She’s learned early on how to defend herself, from playground bullies, fellow foster kids, her mother’s dealer. She’s been on the streets for just over 3 years, and her willingness to fight has saved her ass more than once.

Being homeless is soul-crushing and, at times, utterly disgusting, but it also means freedom. Nobody telling you where to go, when to be there. All that “captain of my destiny” crap makes her gag, but it’s kind of true. If you can manage to keep away from the pimps, the dealers, the psychos, the addicts, and the cops, it’s not that bad. At least, that’s what she tells herself. He, on the other hand, has never liked the situation.

**Why do you keep living like this?** He whispers in the spot in her head she tries to ignore. **You know you were meant for greater things. You just need to trust me, for once.**

**We’ve already had that dance** she whispers back, in her mind. That’s how I ended up here. Besides, I’m crazy and you’re not real.

**Just keep telling yourself that…**

The voice has been there for as long as she can remember. He never tells her to hurt herself, or anyone else. It is, for lack of a better word, soothing. A comforting balance to the constant anxiety in her life. He never talks down to her, or makes her feel like she wasn’t good enough. But sometimes…the things he says…

**One day, my little one….one day we will create something special, and the world will be forever doomed.**

He tells her things like that, and she thinks back to her last night in St. Agnes’. The priest. The loss of control.

**Never again.**

Then, she has the dream.

It’s always the same. A battlefield. Soldiers on horseback with swords, so it must be a few hundred years ago. Two massive armies facing off. Bodies and blood everywhere.

Leading the charge of one side is a man that looks close to her age. Tall, kind-of muscular, handsome. She doesn’t know his name, only that he is ecstatic. He is fulfilling his destiny as his father’s son. Both his parents are very proud.

His mother sits on her horse, surrounded by her guards, on a hill overlooking the battle. Her eyes, once blue like Miri’s, are now black, as though her pupils are too large. It was part of the change when she assumed the mantle of Profanus Mater. Miri doesn’t know what that means, other than it’s Latin.

The fight seems to go on forever until there is a sudden rush of movement toward the front line. Out of nowhere, a spear strikes the general in his side, angled towards his heart. He is dead before he hits the ground.
The inhuman shriek that escapes his mother, who once was named Rachel, is deafening. He is her only child, as his birth ruined her from giving him half-siblings. Her guards’ horses begin to scream and buck, some just run away in terror, dragging their riders with them.

Before her most trusted counselor can reach her, she is off her horse and running into the battle. No one dares touch this grieving harpy, this wraith trodding upon the bodies of other mothers’ sons.

She reaches his body and drops to her knees. She cradles him in her arms, as if he wasn’t a grown man and still a small child, pulling at her skirts with perpetually dirty fingers. Her mouth is wide open, but no sound emerges. Her body convulses in pain, her tears dripping on to his face, cutting tiny rivulets in the blood smeared across his mouth.

Suddenly, she throws her head back and screams, but the voice is no longer her own. It is deeper, distorted. The soldiers fighting nearest her piss themselves in terror, and abandon their positions, fleeing the battlefield. The stupid ones, the ones that stay until it is too late to escape, watch as the black of her irises expanding to encompass her entire eye, and the pupils begin to glow red. Black spidery veins appear up her neck, and they spread across her face. Some of the men cross themselves, and fall to their knees to pray. It will not save them.

Behind her, the very air itself begins to shimmer, as though a heat mirage was forming. It begins to stretch and bubble, like wax. Her counselor watches with a mix of excitement and horror as a mist begins to appear in the center of the apparition. It starts to change color, a dark reddish-purple. It almost appears to be dripping, as though reality was wounded and this is its lifeblood.

The woman is now dwarfed by this roiling, nightmarish haze. In an instant, it collapses in on itself, and is replaced by what Miri can only describe as a black hole. It looks a lot like the special effects from a sci-fi show she saw when she was a kid. Utterly black, with waves of intense heat radiating out. There are noises spilling from it, as well. Countless screams. Inhuman growling and snarling. And laughter.

It is the very gates of Hell itself, and the woman has opened them willingly.

Without warning, some kind of creature emerges. It walks on all fours, similar to a human, but it is solid black, with a long tail that ends in a diamond shape. It has claws and horns. It moves like a big cat, maybe a panther. It sniffs the air for a moment, licks its lips with a forked tongue, and smiles before leaping at the remaining soldiers. More come shambling out of the portal(?) and take off across the field, chasing down and tearing the men apart. Some find more interest in the already-dead, but ultimately decide live prey is more fun.

From the edge of the field, the counselor can only watch as the woman sits motionless while the world seems to come apart around her. She is oblivious to everything, including his cries to stop, to come to him. In the distance he hears a command given, in a language he doesn’t understand, but Miri somehow knows it.

_Pfelie._ German for “arrows”.

On the opposite side of the field, there is an entire legion of men on a hillside, the only distinguishable feature their longbows.

He screams at her to get down, but she won’t hear him. He runs towards her, tripping over bodies and slipping in the muck, until he hears another command.

_Feuer._ “Fire.”
He does his best to duck behind a pile of corpses, and the sound of thousands of arrows thwacking their marks fills him with terror. One finds its home in his left shoulder blade, not strong enough to penetrate bone but still shockingly painful. It is nothing compared to what he sees when he sits up.

Memoriam, consort of the devil, mother to the Antichrist. She is riddled with arrows, mostly concentrated in her belly. She gasps, blood welling from her mouth, and the black hole begins to shrink. The creatures, ghouls, begin to scream and writhe, the connection with their home, their master, beginning to disappear. The remaining soldiers cut them down, slaughtering them like cattle.

The counselor makes his way to her, catching her before she hits the ground. He holds her gently, wipes the blood from her lips.

*Please* he begs.

*Do not leave me.*

She looks up at him, the blackness leaving her eyes, which have returned to their original blue. She does not smile. Her last breathe comes with a whisper.

*I will find you again…Copia.*

She dies. The hole closes. Miri wakes up, trying not to scream, as the scar on her left foot itches and burns.
Chapter 2

The diner on Tate and 11th gives out free breakfast burritos to the local homeless, and Miri is there at 7 am sharp to get hers. Eggs, sausage, bacon, peppers, onions, potatoes, mushrooms, and cheese. It’s almost as big as her forearm, with several packets of hot sauce stuffed into the bag, as well. While she’s waiting her turn, Fancy Pete comes over to her. She has no idea where these guys get their names, were they pirates at some point?

You got place to stay tonight? he asks.

Nah. It’s supposed to be nice, it’s not going to rain until the weekend, I hear.

No, girl his face suddenly very serious. You don’t want to be on the streets tonight.

Why? Is something going down?

Blood moon. He points at the sky. A lunar eclipse during a full moon, close to the first day of fall, according to the papers.

Ok…so what’s the big deal? We’re in the middle of a city, it’s not like it’s going to be too dark to see.

Nah….that ain’t it. You weren’t around for the last one, were you?

She has to think for a second. I have no idea when the last one was, so maybe?

It was almost 2 years ago now…back when I was still camping on MLK. I managed to get a room at that men’s shelter on 19th, but some of my friends were still out that night. Most of them didn’t make it.

What do you mean, ‘didn’t make it’? They got arrested?

They just gone. Snatched up. The few that were still there the next day, they hid in dumpsters. Said there was a group of people moving through, all in black, with old-fashioned dress shoes on. They was clackin’ on the pavement, cuz they was running after people. Catchin’ them. They don’t come back.

That’s….really weird. She decides to go along with whatever ‘Nam flashback he was experiencing.

Promise me you’ll get somewhere safe tonight, child. Old buzzards like me won’t be around forever to watch out for you.

Ok, I’ll try the place over on Rosedale. Her turn for food was finally up. She took the paper bag and started to walk away.

If you can’t run Pete says pray you end up like the lucky ones.

What lucky ones?

The ones that didn’t have a chance to scream.

10:17 pm. The clock outside the bank on Rosedale is usually correct. Unsurprisingly, there were no
beds available at the shelter. Miri scrounged up some change and called a few of the others. No such luck. Seems like a lot of people were spooked by the eclipse and didn’t want to take their chances on the street tonight. It was supposed to reach totality at 11:32 pm, so she still had time to get over to Robinson, where the Chinese and Indian restaurants are. If Pete’s friends managed to avoid detection by hiding in garbage (assuming any of this actually happened) then the alley behind would be a good hiding place.

She nestles in between overflowing trash cans filled with what used to be curry, sesame chicken, what looks like a million pounds of cooked rice. It fucking stinks, and she wishes she didn’t believe in this crap.

*He wasn’t lying to you* He says. *Something is coming, and I can help you, but you have to let me in.*

*Remember what happened the last time we did that?* she shivers to herself.

*It saved your life, didn’t it? I’m not asking for total control, but I can make you move faster than you can. You can trust me. I will not let anything harm you ever again.*

She sighs in annoyance, knowing that she’s going to give in to him. She always does, sooner or later.

The employees of the Chinese place start filing out the back door. She knows it closes at 10, so it must be getting close to 11:30. As they walk out of earshot, she realizes it’s actually very quiet. It’s not a terribly busy neighborhood, but there’s usually traffic and people moving around this time of night. It’s never this quiet, even when it’s supposed to rain.

This isn’t good.

*Just follow my lead, and you’ll be fine* He says.

She starts to feel that familiar “swimmy” feeling, as she calls it. When she feels like she’s floating inside her body, not actually a part of it. Her body stands up and begins walking down one of the side alleys between buildings, her feet dragging slightly. He still hasn’t figured out how feet are supposed to move.

*If I need to run, we’re in deep shit* she thinks.

*I’ll just make you fly.*

*Hard pass on that, thanks.*

*They are faster than you know.*

*Wait…you know who these people are? What are they doing?*

He stops answering. He takes them down twisty back alleys, an underground parking garage, up one fire escape and down another.

*Don’t you think I was safer back at the Chinese place? The smell of the rotting food should be enough to discourage anyone from -*

*They will smell you from a mile away. They know your scent. They’ve been looking for you for a long time, and they will not stop until they find you. The scent of bad Chinese will not keep them from finding you.*

Now she is afraid, properly terrified. She begins to wonder if He can pull this off, when her body
suddenly jerks to a stop. There’s a sound nearby, of several pairs of clacking shoes. Whimpering. A weird sound, like a raccoon mated with a bird. Then a short scream, cut off suddenly.

*They’re right over there* she thinks, trying desperately to run in the opposite direction. *They’re right fucking there.*

Don’t panic He says. It will do you no good.

I need to run. I need to get away.

Then let’s go.

Her legs begin moving faster than she ever thought possible. Taking corners at ridiculous speed, she tries to hold her hands out to stop herself from falling, but there’s no need. He keeps her from falling. Her lungs are burning, she’s pouring sweat from everywhere, but He keeps her moving.

ENOUGH! I can’t fucking breathe! Hide and give me a second!

They turn into a dead end alley and He finally stops. He doesn’t give back control, but she can at least catch her breath for a moment.

*Do you think we’re safe?* she asks.

Before He can answer, she hears someone behind her. Someone with clacking shoes. Just one person, not the entire group. Whoever it is, they’re loudly sniffing the air in front of them. She can’t turn around, so she assumes the wet sound that follows is them tasting the air. For a split second, she’s glad she doesn’t have control over her body; otherwise, she may have just pissed herself in fear.

The figure moves closer, creeping towards her turned back. It makes that weird sound again, a chittering rodent/chirping bird sound. Like it’s asking a question. Her body suddenly begins to turn around to face it.

*WHAT ARE YOU DOING?! IT CAN SEE ME!* she screams at Him internally.

Look at him He says.

Tears filling her eyes, she looks at the thing that has pursued them for miles. It’s a man, not very tall and very thin. Impossibly skinny legs. He’s dressed all in black; black shoes with white covers (are those called spats? she thinks) dotted with blood, black pants, a long-sleeved black t-shirt under a black dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, black suspenders, and what looks like a black ski-mask. Over the top half of face is a silver mask. It looks like a gargoyle.

Or a demon.

He has long fingers, which end in, for lack of a better word, claws. Long nails with blood crusted under them. He brings one up to his mouth and, with exaggerated movements, lets his wide tongue spill out and licks the side of his hand. He smiles at her, but not a friendly smile.

A “dinnertime” smile.

Before she can react, her body lurches again, and her brain is now on fire. The voice is now trying to take over the rest of her.

*NO! NOT NOW! I can’t fight this thing, even with you in control!*
You don’t have to fight him He says. He just needs to know who you are. He doesn’t realize what he’s done, and he will be punished for it later. For now, a small display will suffice.

Everything inside is burning. It feels like lava flowing in every vein, especially into her face and eyes. Her shoe makes a scraping sound on the ground, and she realizes she’s floating. Barely an inch off the ground, but still floating. She looks at the man in the alley, and some kind of realization suddenly hits him. His hand drops and he begins to shake.

He’s afraid. Their eyes meet, his a strange golden hue, and he looks like he’s going to cry.

DEW! a voice shouts from the end of the alley. WHAT THE FUCKIN’ ‘EL ARE YOU DOIN’?! It’s another man, dressed the exact same way, but with no long sleeves under his button-down shirt. He’s taller than the first, with a broad chest and strong legs. He jogs up to them, not looking at Miri.

You don’t play with the food ‘ere he says, with a British accent. You wait until we take ‘em home.

Then he turns to Miri.

His jaw drops, and she can see the glint of a silver tooth in his mouth. He reaches up to his neck and grasps the hanging necklace. It looks like some kind of upside down cross. He wears a ring on each hand, a bracelet around his left wrist. They make a tinkling sound as his hands shake against the cross.

Master…we-we didn’t know you were so close he stutters.

The voice uncontrollably erupts from her mouth.

AETHER. MY CHILD. ALL IS WELL. SHE IS UNHURT.

YOU SONOVABITCH she screams inside. YOU KNEW WHAT WAS GOING ON, YOU LED ME STRAIGHT TO THEM ON PURPOSE! She began to struggle as best she could, her limbs flopping and flailing, her face twisting in a painful grimace.

Stop that He says. You know it’s useless to resist. The two men watch as she fights against the force inside, amazed at their luck to witness this firsthand.

He knows her too well. She simply doesn’t have the strength to fight him, never has. Her body goes limp, still floating, and she passes out.

The tall one carefully walks up to her, and plucks her body out of the air. He holds her very gently, like she was made of glass, and walks back down the alley, with Dew, the short one, following.

They walk a few blocks until they come to the black rental truck. The back is full of ghouls and their prey, bound and gagged. The tall one gets into the passenger side, folding Miri into his lap like she was a small child. Dew gets behind the wheel, neglecting to put on his seat belt.

You’re gonna get us stopped if you don’t put that on the tall ghoul chides.

Dew maintains eye contact as he slowly, deliberately puts on his seat belt.

Next time, you can fucking walk back he snarls.
Chapter 3

This time, the dream doesn’t come. As Miri slowly wakes up, she hears people milling around softly. She’s on a bed of some kind. With a real pillow, not the cheap, shitty pillows that they have at the shelters. She moves her feet and hands a little, relieved that she has control back. The voice is quiet for now.

_I think our guest is finally waking up_ a man says. She opens her eyes slowly, and there’s an older man in a white coat at the foot of the bed. He looks kind of like Dick Van Dyke, like someone’s grandpa. He has a clipboard in his hands, and flips through a few pieces of paper before looking at her again.

Miri looks around the room. Several hospital beds with curtained dividers, tray tables, and an IV pole next to her. There’s a needle in the back of her left hand, attached to a bag on the pole. Ringer’s Lactate, it says. She knows they give that to people in the hospital, so that must be where she is.

_I know what you’re thinking_ the man says, _but this is not a hospital. Not really. Just the infirmary._

_How long?_ she manages to squeak out.

2 days he says. He offers her his hand to shake. _Doctor Williams, but everybody just calls me Doc._

_Nice to meet you, Doc. What’s wrong with me?_

_Wrong with you? Other than some dehydration and malnutrition, and a rather unfortunate case of head lice that we’ve already treated, you’re just fine._

_Ok….so where am I?_

_The abbey’s infirmary._

She gives him an incredulous look. _I’m in an abbey? With a bunch of nuns? Why?_

_Well, they brought you in._ At “they”, he gestures towards the door. Standing on either side are the two men from the alley. Their sleeves are unrolled, their spats immaculate white.

She recoils in fear, but Doc is quick to reassure her. _They’re not going to hurt you, nobody here is. They are here for your protection. You are here of your own free will, and you can leave whenever you’d like. However, there is someone that wants to speak to you before you go. I’ve already let her know you’re awake, she should be on her way._

_What do I need protection from?_

_Right now, the siblings and ghouls are very curious and excited to see you. Gossip spreads like wildfire around here, and apparently everybody knows what was supposed to be kept a secret._

_Siblings?_

_Brothers and Sisters of Sin._

…..wait, what? Miri suddenly got the feeling this wasn’t like St. Agatha’s.

_This isn’t a Catholic abbey? Like, with priests and a monsignor?_
We use a similar hierarchy structure, but no; we are not Catholic.

Ok…then…?

The other guy. We worship the other guy.

This….is a devil-worshipping abbey?

Exactly.

Miri threw her head back and laughed hysterically. Are you fucking kidding me?

‘Fraid not, sweetheart the tall ghoul says.

Miri looks at him as he smiles and cracks his knuckles. His tail uncoils from behind him and… waves? at her.

OHHHH SHIT. She claps her hand over her mouth. Now it’s his turn to laugh.

HA! Betchya ‘aven’t seen that on the streets, eh? She shakes her head no.

Miriam, this is Aether Doc points to the tall ghoul and Dewdrop. The shorter ghoul holds up his right hand in a weird gesture, like a peace sign but with his fingers together.

What’s that mean? she asks.

Hail Satan, basically.

What are you, 14 years-old? she asks. Aether cackles madly while Dewdrop stomps his left foot angrily.

NO.

She looks between the three men with incredulity when she hears a door open on the other side of the curtain. What the fuck kind of place is this?

A place for those not welcome in the light says a woman behind the curtain. She slowly walks around it, using a cane for support. She has short, grey hair and a pleasant smile. She’s dressed in a black ladies suit, with a white dress shirt.

She gestures to the end of the bed. May I?

Miri pulls up her feet so there’s room for her to sit, and that’s when she realizes she’s in a hospital gown. She remembers Doc saying they treated her for lice, so that means her clothes are probably in the trash or burned. So much for sneaking out.

You may call me Sister Imperator she says. My official title is Guardian of the Faith, but in reality, I am in charge of this abbey and I care for all the souls within it.

So, like, Mother Superior?

In a way, yes. This is not a sanctuary for women only, however. There are plenty of men here, as well.

Doesn’t that cause problems?
With what?

Celibacy?

The Sister chuckles. *We have no such rules regarding the lives of our congregation or Siblings of Sin. We live by the Seven Deadly Sins, we do not punish or admonish anyone for it.*

*Ok…sounds cool. Why am I here?*

The Sister reaches over and takes Miri’s hands. *You are very special. You know that, don’t you? I’ve heard that before.*

*The voice in your head, yes?*

Miri’s eyes go wide. She’s never told anybody about Him. Ever.

*You’re surprised that we know about Him? How could we not? We worship Him.*

Miri begins to shake uncontrollably, her eyes welling up. *I’m not crazy….?*

*My dear, you never have been. You were chosen at birth for a great and terrible destiny. ..and what’s that?*

*Lucifer has chosen you to help lead his church. And one day, you will bear his son.*

Miri is stunned for a few seconds. She’s about to tip her head back and cackle at this weird old lady, and then stops.

*I knew you wouldn’t believe me if I told you He says.*

The Sister smiles wisely at her. *The mark, the dreams, it’s all connected. You've never been crazy, only chosen for greatness.*

Miri looks down at her hands, and her head snaps back up suddenly.

*What mark?*

The old women puts her hand on Miri’s left foot. *The scar on your foot.*

Miri moves her foot out from under the blankets and looks at it. On the heel, there’s a small figure-8 shaped scar. She’s had it her whole life. Her mother told her she’d stepped on something when she was learning to walk, and it’s just there forever.

*My mom said….she drifts off. Because the word of a junkie is trustworthy? He asks her.*

*How did you know about the dreams?* she asks Sister.

*You’re not the only one he’s chosen over the centuries. Many have come after the death of Rachel, whose death you relive in your dreams. Unfortunately, they have met rather…tragic ends.*

*This does not fill me with confidence.*
Oh, it was nothing we did she assures Miri. Many of them thought as you did, that they were crazy, they were hearing a voice that wasn’t there, they were dreaming of the end of the world and thought they were possessed. Technically, they were. And so are you.

Miri’s mind flashed back to all the times she’s lost control of herself, whether by choice or not. But… I’m not hurting myself. I’m not all gross, like in The Exorcist.

The Sister giggles at this. Of course not! How can you be expected to help lead a church or raise a son if you’re bruised and battered and flopping all over the place? Think of it this way: Christians, especially Catholics, hold a special place in their hearts for the Virgin Mary. She is worshipped and venerated as the mother of their savior. Why would we not treat the mother of ours the same way?

Don’t I…need to actually give birth first?

Not at all. In fact, He will not impregnate you without your explicit consent first. This isn’t Rosemary’s Baby, there will be no crowd of naked old fuddy-duddys staring while you are taken against your will. If you choose not to accept this gift, you are free to leave as soon as Doc has medically cleared you. A car will take you back into the city, and we will never contact you again. But know this: here, you have a family. You have people that will love you and care for your every need, no questions asked. You will never be hungry or cold or lonesome again. Can you say the same will be true if you go back to that life? On the streets?

For once in her life, Miri is speechless.

Tell you what: take today and tonight to think about it. I have to insist that you stay here, in the infirmary. The amount of people that are aware of your presence has grown dramatically, and I worry that you will not be given a moment’s rest if we have you stay in your own room. Two ghouls will stay posted at the door at all times, so no one will bother you. We can have whatever food you want sent up; even a tv, if you’d like. Just take some time to consider what we’re offering you, what He’s offering you. If you still decide to leave, you can leave.

The old woman slowly gets to her feet, balancing on her cane. I believe we’re having carbonara tonight. Papa’s favorite. You should really try it. With that, she slowly makes her way back behind the curtain and out the door.
Chapter 4

Miri turns on the bathroom light and looks in the mirror. They’ve scrubbed her head pretty hard with the lice treatment, so her hair is super tangled and fucked up. She’s glad they didn’t just shave her bald. She manages to get it all combed out, and it probably looks the best it has in years. Lack of decent food and access to a shower tends to do a number on your looks. The circles under her eyes aren’t too bad right now, since she’s had a chance to catch up on sleep. Her teeth still look great. That’s the only thing she’s insisted on taking care of while on the streets. If your teeth look like hell, it’s all over.

She’s wearing the clothes they gave her, what looks like a funeral dress. Luckily, it’s floor-length; she hasn’t shaved her legs in months. One of the nurses says everybody but Papa - whoever that is - wears black or red, so she won’t look out of place.

Trying to have a conversation with yourself over a life-changing, possibly world-changing decision is difficult when there’s a third party with a vested interest trying to butt in. Every time she tries to weigh pros and cons, He pipes up.

_You can only spend 30 days in that women’s shelter in winter, you know. After that, you have to wait 30 days to get a bed again. Winters here are pretty cold. Remember the time you had to steal those boots?_ 

_Freddie Z is down a few girls. Perhaps they’re in jail, maybe they’ve wised up and moved on, but it’s going to hurt his bottom line soon. He’s already approached you a few times, and the last time, he didn’t take ‘no’ very well. What’s to stop him from just taking you off the street and putting you in his stable?_ 

_Your mother is still out there, somewhere, probably looking for you. She will do everything in her power to make you believe she’s changed, to convince you to come home. It’s understandable, wanting to be with your mother. How long will it last, though?_

Miri slams her hands on the sink. _Shut the fuck up and let me think._

An idea suddenly occurs to her. She leaves the bathroom and goes back into the main room of the infirmary. The ghouls are still standing by the door, shuffling from foot to foot.

She takes a chair, places it in front of the ghouls, and sits in it. _Sell me on this_ she says.

They exchange a look, then turn back to her.

_Convince me to stay. Tell me why helping play a part in Revelations is a good idea._

Aether scratches the back of his head and shrugs. Dewdrop plays with his fingernails and does the same.

_Ok, let’s start with something simple: what the fuck is a ghoul, anyway?_

Now they perk up.

_I saw them in the dream, but they seemed more animal than human. Why are you two walking around, wearing clothes, speaking?_ She barely has the last word out of her mouth before Aether starts speaking.
That’s our true form, but it can’t last ’ere, not in this reality. We ‘ave to take on human hosts in order to survive. The priests discovered a way to do it right ’round the time electricity was discovered. Our hosts had to study for years before they were chosen to accept us. A little bit of ‘em remains; foods they liked, favorite sports—

Shitty accents Dewdrop offers.

You fuckin’ wot, mate? Aether snarls and rips off his mask. He looks shockingly normal, aside from the numerous ear piercings, nose ring, and very prominent sideburns.

Dewdrop responds in kind by pulling off his own mask. Golden-blond hair is pulled back from his face in a long braid that extends under his shirt collar. His eyes appear more greenish-yellow than gold in this light, and Miri can’t help but giggle a little at his mustache. It looks like Tom Selleck’s when he was on Magnum PI in the 80’s.

The two men face off against each other, one with at least 50 pounds of muscle and a few inches on the other. If they fight, there’s no question who would win.

A nurse walks into the room with a tray in her hands, a small cup with a pill and a glass of water balancing on it. Would you two go measure your dicks somewhere else? This is a hospital, for Lucifer’s sake! She serves them the nastiest look possible, which turns sweet when she looks at Miri.

Hiii there, I’m Sister Lydia. Doc says you need to take this multi-vitamin because you look a little anemic. If these two douche-nozzles keep bothering you, I’ll make sure they get put on bathroom duty for a month.

Bathroom duty?

Ghouls do the heavy lifting, so to speak. Maintenance work around the abbey, helping with landscaping, taking care of the vehicles, all sorts of things. They don’t like cleaning bathrooms, though. Although this one she points at Dewdrop seems to enjoy eating soap, so maybe he won’t mind.

IT WAS ONE TIME he exclaims. It looked like cheese!

Sitting on the counter of a sink? In the bathroom?

Go give someone an enema!

Don’t threaten me with a good time she smirks. She takes the empty cup and water glass from Miri, hissing ASSHOLE under her breath at Dewdrop as she leaves the room.

I like that girl Miri thinks to herself.

Spaghetti carbonara is fantastic. Who knew that putting bacon in pasta was a good idea. Then again, there aren’t many situations that aren’t improved by bacon.

Miri watches old reruns on a small tv they brought up for her. She eats carbonara while watching Cheers. She finds it funny that, after everything she’s been through in the last 72 hours, there are still normal things in the world like pasta and sitcoms.

After curfew, the ghouls take their posts outside. Aether and Dewdrop have been replaced by two almost-identical ghouls, one she thinks is called Rain. She is now alone in the infirmary.
She goes to the window overlooking the woods outside. She can barely see the lights of the city from here. Doc says they’re about an hour outside the city, but it seems like the trees are doing their best to hide the abbey grounds from the world. It’s completely pitch black outside.

She sits down in a chair in front of the window. Show yourself she commands Him. We’re going to discuss this, face to face.

How would you like me to appear? He asks. Young? Old?

Something familiar and non-threatening.

A man steps from the shadows and places a chair across from her. He looks exactly like that actor from the newer Batman movies, the guy who played the Scarecrow. She’s trying not to get distracted by how attractive He looks.

That’s not fair, you took that right from my head.

He shrugs. Cheap shot.

She leans forward in her chair, staring Him right in the eye. This is the devil she reminds herself. Charlie Daniels ain’t got shit on me.

He chuckles. I always liked that song.

Tell me she says in a thousand words or less why I should do this. You claim you know me better than I know myself. Convince me.

He looks out the window, like He’s suddenly very interested in what’s happening in the sky. There’s nothing, though. Not a cloud. Just stars and the occasional plane flying overhead.

He looks back at Miri, with what a casual observer could almost mistake for love. She knows, at best, it’s lukewarm affection. How much could someone love each individual ant in an ant farm?

He leans forward towards her. I will give you the chance to be the mother you never had. You can give the love you always wanted to receive, and hopefully realize that none of it was your fault. It was all her. She’s the broken one. You were always the stronger, and you can pass that strength on to our son, because he will need it. The entire world will want him dead, and he can only stand against them if he has that same strength.

I’ve seen what happens to your son she says. Every night. I see him cut down, in front of his mother, like he was nothing.

That was a different time He says, waving His hand. Rachel did very little in raising him, that job was left to the priests and generals of my army. Women were not allowed such liberties at that time.

Horseshit. You could command them to do whatever the hell you wanted, and they would do it. If you’d said, ‘let the woman raise her son’ they’d have backed off and shut their mouths. But you never did.

And I was wrong not to. He looks up at her, those piercing blue eyes boring into her. I admit it now, I was wrong. I will not make the same mistake again.

How do I know I can trust you on this?

Have I ever let you down? Have I ever betrayed you? Have I ever done anything other than protect
and care for you? Whenever you’ve needed me, I’ve been right there. Can Christians say the same for God? They beg and plead and he can’t even be bothered to say ‘no’. He says nothing. He lets children die horrible, painful deaths while men who would gladly violate them die snug in their beds of old age. He lets the faithful die of starvation while gluttonous false preachers steal their money and buy another private jet.

This isn’t really the issue-

Yes, it is. You still have that fear in you, what they taught you at St. Agnes’. A “home” full of hypocrites and reprobates. Telling you to fear a god that just doesn’t care. You need to realize that there are far worse things out there than me. And he is one of them. You don’t need to fear him; he needs to fear you.

They sit in silence for a few minutes. She chews at the inside of her bottom lip. He goes back to looking out the window. Tentatively, He reaches out for her hands. She holds them out for Him to take.

This choice is yours and yours alone. No one can make it for you. No one is trying to make it for you. Can you say the same for the other side? Do you really believe they care for you like I do?

You’re just looking for a broodmare.

No, I want more! I want someone that stands up to me, that doesn’t cower in fear of me…a partner. I want someone that can handle anything that comes with this, no matter what it is. I mean, look at you. Do you know who I am, who I really am? I’m the snake, the goat, son of perdition, Most Unclean. And you’re sitting here, letting me hold your hands and having a conversation like I was someone you met in a coffee shop. I chose you because I knew you would be amazing.

Well…you’ve been here my entire life. I have no memories of anything before you. When they say, ‘better the devil you know than the devil you don’t’…that actually means something. Sometimes I wonder if you’ve been telling me what I want to hear all along. If that was really true, you wouldn’t leave the choice up to me. Just out of curiosity…what will you do if I say no?

He looks down at their hands. He rubs his thumbs across the little scar patches on her knuckles, reminders of harder times.

I will be sad. Disappointed. But it is your life, nobody can live it for you. All I can do is hope that you join me. That’s it.

And He’s gone. She’s alone in the infirmary again.

Don’t decide until morning she tells herself.
Are you there? Miri whispers in her head upon waking.

Where else would I be?

I dunno, sitting on a throne made of human bones, surrounded by flames?

You watched way too much tv as a child.

Undoubtedly. I have some questions I need answered before I really make up my mind.

Ok, fire away.

How would...how does the whole...impregnation thing work. I mean, do you just show up in a body, and we....ya know...

You're 20 years old, you can use the big words.

OK FINE. Do we actually have sex in order for me to get pregnant?

No. I will enter a vessel of your choosing and you have intercourse with them.

By vessel, you mean a real person.

Yes. Or even a ghoul, if you're so inclined. I know your heart sped up a bit when Aether took his mask off yesterday.

STOP. THAT.

I've been teasing you about your hormonal outbursts since you began puberty, do you really expect me to stop now?

Whatever. Will I be able to have other children? Rachel wasn't.

That was due to the barbaric nature of medicine at the time, especially when it came to women’s reproductive health. If the same complications occurred now, it would be a minor inconvenience, not a potential death sentence.

Wow. Ok.

Is that all?

Not quite. You know my history, like....my entire history.

Yes, and?

What if I...meet someone...

.....and?

What if I want to be with someone, as in, for the rest of my life?

Once you assume the mantle, you will be accompanied by high ranking members of the clergy for the rest of your life, if you should ever leave the compound. If you do meet someone, it is quite likely
that it’s already a member of the congregation. They will understand your obligations to the church. On the off-chance that they don’t, they aren’t worthy of your time and they should not be here.

That’s sort of a relief.

The limits on your movements are merely for your safety. I’m certain that numerous Brothers and ghouls would volunteer to accompany you outside, anywhere you’d like to go. No one would be able to touch you.

Let’s not put the horse before the cart. I’m still on the fence.

What else could I possibly say to convince you?

That I’m not letting you down if I say no. That you won’t leave me here alone.

I cannot leave you. We are bound together, until your death. And even if you say no now, you are still very young. There will be time to reconsider.

But that lady, the Sister, she said-

I know what she said, but who are you going to listen to: me or her?

Ok, fine.

They will be coming soon for your answer. I suggest you either go back to sleep or make a decision.

I’ve made my decision.

Very well.

8 am sharp. That’s the time at which Sister Imperator said she’d back, and there’s no sign yet. Maybe she overestimated how fast she could walk first thing in the morning.

No ghouls on the door, at least not inside the infirmary. The only person Miri has seen in the last 12 hours was a nurse that removed her IV and brought her dinner, and Doc a short while ago. Asking how she was feeling, if she wanted breakfast. Hopefully someone gets here soon she thought or I’m breaking into whatever stash they keep around for diabetics.

The door opens, and the Sister steps in very slowly, still relying on the cane. Miri makes a mental note to ask her what happened, this doesn’t look like typical old person cane usage.

Well. How did you sleep?

Great. Probably the best sleep I’ve had in several years.

Good, good. The Sister twists the cane handle in her hand for a moment, then gives Miri an apologetic smile.

I know I dropped a bit of a bombshell on you yesterday, but-

I’ll do it.

The old woman blinks for a moment, like she’s not sure Miri was speaking English. I’m sorry, what?
I said I’ll do it. Under one condition.

Sister’s face lights up like Christmas or whatever the hell holiday devil worshippers celebrate, and she looks like she might keel over.

An-anything! Name it!

Miri stands up and walks over to her. She stares her right in the eye.

I have the right to leave any time I want. If I’m not pregnant, or already have a baby, I can pack my things and go, whenever I want. No guards, nothing. And no ghouls sent to hunt me down. That’s it.

The old woman looks like she’s about to object when Miri interrupts.

I’ve managed to survive with the devil on my shoulder just fine. You need me a lot more than I need you, and you know it.

She has them over a barrel, and the Sister knows it.

By your command, Your Grace the Sister bows her head.

Miri laughs. Ok, please don’t do that again, that’s just…weird. I’m not royalty or anything.

Oh, but you are. You’re the future mother of our savior. You’ll be worshipped, venerated. Looked upon as a living saint.

Miri couldn’t sound more unenthusiastic. Great.

Sister waved her hand in front of her. No need to worry about all that yet! You have a lot to catch up on. We have months of work ahead of us first.

Catch up on what?

My dear, do you know how long it takes to become a nun in the Catholic Church?

No idea, but they always seem older than dirt, so I’m guessing several years?

Sister throws her head back and laughs at the observation. Quite true! At least 10 years.

Miri’s jaw drops. Holy shit. No pun intended, sorry.

You need to at least become familiar on the history and founding of our church, our works, our plans for the future. You will need to learn to read, write, and speak Latin-

Oh my god, why? Miri thinks back to being taught Latin at St. Agnes’. Any small mistake, and you got whacked with something hard.

Almost all of the books you’ll need to study are in Latin. It has been a longtime project to translate them into English, but…it’s a bit time-consuming and there are always other matter to attend to.

Like sacrificing virgins and drinking goat’s blood?

The Sister just looks at her.

That was a joke…

I know. Part of my job is keeping everyone on their toes.
Miri nods thoughtfully, then looks around the room, tapping her foot.

*So when’s breakfast?*
Chapter 6

After Imperator scuttles away to report the good news to Papa - Miri still has no idea who that is - it’s finally time to leave the infirmary for breakfast. Due to the gossip-mongering still happening, she has to have at least one ghoul with her, to run interference. Apparently, Aether and Dewdrop volunteered, and neither would cave, so they’re both going. It’s a good thing, too. The halls of this place are confusing and identical. She’ll have to remember to ask for a map.

The dining hall is pretty much what you would expect. Lots of long tables, with Siblings in various forms of black dress clothes scattered here and there. When she enters the room with the two ghouls, everything stops. Everyone looks. She couldn’t be more self-conscious than if she were naked.

_Eat your food_ Dew yells, making them all jump. The way they shrink from him when he walks by makes Miri wonder just what kind of reputation he has, but it must not be a friendly one. There is a smaller table at one end of the room, separate from the rest. Aether pulls a chair down off the table and pulls it out for her. _This is the high clergy’s table_ he says. _Even if you’re alone, you’re supposed to sit ‘ere._

She sits down at the table, and almost instantly, two Sisters with a cart filled with bowls and plates of food come running over. Practically every breakfast food you can think of, they have. _If there’s anything you want, they’ll break their arses to make it for you._

Miri smiles at the Sisters and thanks them, they bow their heads and hurry their cart back to the kitchen. No doubt armed with fuel for the rumor mill. She takes a plate and some silverware, and is about to decide what to take, when the two ghouls begin to walk away.

_Wait…where are you going?_ Dewdrop looks back over his shoulder. _We’re not allowed to eat at this table._

_What the fuck is this, Alabama 1960? I’m not sitting here by myself._

Aether fidgets with his rings for a moment. _We’ll get in trouble with Imperator if we do._

_If I’m supposed to be some hoity-toity super-important person around here, I get to say who sits with me. Put your asses in chairs. That’s an order._

They reluctantly sit down on either side of her, painfully aware of all the whispers and stares in their direction.

_Now…for Christ’s sake, someone pass me the eggs._

After breakfast, they escort Miri to her temporary quarters. Someone’s going to clean out and redecorate a series of rooms for her, but it will take time. At least she has her own bathroom in her new room. Plenty of the other Siblings have to share a floor-wide bathroom.

She tells the ghouls not to stand guard outside the door. They look at each other like she’s insane, but she says it draws too much attention. If nobody knows what room she’s in, they won’t be able to bother her, right? They finally leave, and she takes her time checking out her new space.

It’s small, but not as small as some of the shelters she’s stayed in. A single bed, a chair, a desk, a small bookcase. The bathroom is tiny; just a sink, toilet, and shower stall. One window, the view is -
surprise, surprise - more woods. It’s like this place just grew out of the forest ground, like a mushroom. *It’s not much* she thinks *but it’s mine.*

She decides to lay down and take a nap, since she hasn’t done it in years.

She has a dream, but not the one she’s expecting.

Miri is outside the abbey, but still on the grounds. It’s a courtyard of some kind, between the network of buildings. There are raised flowerbeds everywhere, more flowers than she’s ever seen in her life. There are low stone benches, and the walkway is paved with gray flagstones.

She’s never been here before, but she knows where she’s supposed to go. There’s a path leading to a secluded garden patch off to one side, with a statue in the middle. It’s a woman in a long dress, one hand on her stomach. She looks familiar, but Miri just can’t quite place her.

*I’m not terribly fond of it* a female voice says. *They didn’t get my nose right.*

Miri turns to her right, and there she is. Rachel. She’s wearing a long white dress, very similar to the statue. She looks younger than she does in the other dream, more carefree, less anxious.

*Come. Sit with me.* She gestures to a bench in front of the statue. Miri sits, and notices the plaque at the base of the statue.

In very large letters: **MEMORIAM, THE UNHOLY MOTHER.**

*Were you scared?* Miri asks.

*Oh, terrified, of course. I was a miller’s daughter. I couldn’t even read or write until after I joined the church. I was a sheltered little girl. The only comfort I had was His voice, His presence. I had to hide it for so long, for fear that my family would cast me out, or worse, tell the constable. I would be tried for witchcraft and either burned or hanged. When the church finally came for me, with priests and soldiers, I was more afraid of what would happen to me if I didn’t go.*

*Would you do it again?*

*In a heartbeat.*

Miri hesitated. *You have a more...personal...question?*

*Yeah. What was...”the act” like?*

The expression on Rachel’s face bordered on dreamy. *Not as strange or uncomfortable as you’ve imagined. I chose a handsome soldier that I had noticed. He was very gentle and sweet. He whispered things in my ear only our Dark Lord would have known, and it was like He was here, in the flesh. It was wonderful.*

*I see.*

*In time, you will be more open to these things. You just need to remember that they want you to embrace who you really are. Every one that has come before them, all they’ve ever wanted was to make you fit into their little box, what their view of you was. Here, there is no box. There is only your potential, and that could be limitless.*

Miri realizes her cheeks are wet. She touches her face, and there are tears. *Why couldn’t you have been my mother* she asks.
Rachel smiles wistfully. *Because* she says *who, then, would be here for him?*

*Him who?*

Miri wakes, the sun shining down on her through the window. Her pillow is damp.
It’s nearly dinnertime, and Miri is exhausted. She can’t remember the last time she read this much in one sitting. A huge stack of books and several papers stapled together, care of a Sister Holly. Required reading from Sister Imperator she says, handing Miri the papers. It’s basically the Cliff Notes version, just the basics you need to know before tomorrow.

What’s going on tomorrow?

All the members of the high clergy will be here. They want to meet with you, and you can’t walk in there clueless. If the books are too boring, just study the pages. Better to be somewhat prepared than not at all.

Holly is right, the books are dry and boring. It’s also difficult to concentrate, since she keeps hearing what sounds like a band rehearsing. There’s really loud guitars and drums, so a rock or metal band? How fitting, “Satanic” music played by actual devil worshippers.

She gives up on the books and decides to go with the shortcut.

After reading and re-reading the pages numerous times, she has gleaned the following information:

This church is older than any Christian church in history.

They did not copy Catholicism with their hierarchy structure; the Catholics copied them.

The leader of the church is called a Papa. The current head is named Papa Emeritus Zero or Papa Nihil. There doesn’t seem to be any record of how old he is, but he sounds…unnaturally old. Only a son of the current Papa can become the next Papa. Nihil had 3 sons, all of which became Papas, but they’re now dead. He has no other children. The line of succession has not been broken for what looks like 9,000 years, which makes Miri’s jaw drop to the floor.

9,000 years? This can’t be real.

Her official title, once her initiation and ascension - whatever that is - are complete, will be Memoriam, Unholy Mother of the Church. Just like Rachel. Her role will be mostly symbolic. All she has to do is be present for black Masses and rituals and church gatherings. Just sit there and look important, basically. Doesn’t sound too hard.

When she gets to the section on initiation into the church, that’s where things get…uncomfortable. Apparently, the ceremony involves stripping down to nothing, getting Satanic/demonic symbols painted on your body in goat’s blood, then going into a ritual chamber and having sex with a member of the high clergy. Well, no. Not exactly. She rereads an underlined section, no doubt highlighted by Holly.

“The initiate must achieve sexual orgasm in order to seal the sacrament and complete the ritual. The method in which orgasm is achieved does not matter.”

At least there’s no requirement to actually have sex with these people. Miri pictures the “Satanists” from Rosemary’s Baby, a bunch of saggy and wrinkly old fuckers. I suppose, if I have to, I can just close my eyes and let one go down on me. Provided they don’t drop dead of a heart attack first.

No information on ascension. Probably another ritual where something equally weird happens. She’s really hoping there’s no actual human sacrifices or anything, no way in Hell she’s going to
participate in that.

She’s about to start on one of the few books in English, when a sudden booming choir of voices startles her so badly, she drops the book.

**BELIAL**

**BEHEMOTH**

**BEELZEBUB**

….what the fuck is that?

**AZMODEUS**

**SATANAS**

**LUCIFER**

Then the drums and guitar start in, and she realizes it’s a backing track to a song. She can’t really understand any of the lyrics until it gets to the chorus.

*Did….did they really just sing “hail santa”? It sounds like “hail santa”. Maybe they’re reading the lyrics wrong.*

The volume of the music suddenly drops drastically. Miri guesses that someone had the PA turned up a bit too loud and got their asses chewed.

She decides to skip dinner in favor of an early bedtime. She takes a shower, her first in who knows how long. She stands under the water until her fingers look like an old woman’s, they’re so pruney. Once she gets out, she clears the fog from her mirror and looks at herself. Long hair, so dark reddish-brown it’s almost black, a black chandelier tattoo that runs under both breasts, a 3 inch-long scar on her left side. All familiar landmarks.

Once she’s wrapped a towel around her hair and is ready for bed, she walks back into the bedroom and realizes she has no pajamas. Her backpack is long gone, probably still sitting in that godforsaken alley. Not that she had any clothes decent enough to wear after taking a shower, anyway.

She considers putting on another towel and sneaking down to hall to ask if she can borrow some clothes when she notices a box barely sticking out from under the bed. She nudges it with her foot and it slides out. It’s one of those under-the-bed storage boxes, and it’s filled with all kinds of black clothes. A sweater, some t-shirts, two more dresses.

The bag at the bottom brings tears to her eyes. A pack of brand new underwear. On the street, these things are worth their weight in gold. It’s one of the first pieces of clothing that gets ruined living out there, right after socks. You either risk going commando or just keep wearing the same disgusting pair until they just disintegrate. They haven’t been washed yet, but she doesn’t care. She tears it open and puts on a pair. Combined with a t-shirt, she’s all set.

Even with a towel on her head and someone else’s clothes on, she falls asleep instantly. There are no dreams.
Why didn’t you ask for a map, dumbass?

If she had a watch, Miri would have some idea of how horribly late she was for this big meeting. She mentally kicks herself for sending the ghouls away the day before, they definitely would’ve got her there on time. These stupid hallways all look the same she thinks. Gray stone and old paintings of demons and people being brutally murdered. Fantastic.

After turning what she thinks is the same corner for the millionth time, there it is. The courtyard from her dream. The flowers are different, though. Since it’s fall, the beds are filled with chrysanthemums, pansies, a purple flower that looks like a sunflower, and black-eyed Susans. Someone takes very good care of this garden.

She half-remembers the way to the statue, but she’s already late as it is. As she looks around for an idea of where to go, something snags her hair. It’s the stupid headpiece thing that Holly brought her to wear. It’s kind of like a veil she says. It’s not 100% required, but it would definitely win you some points with the clergy members. Some of them are sticklers for rank emblems.

Rank?

Initiates are on the low end of the totem pole, they’re expected to be kind of subservient and very respectful towards their elders. The women wear these headpieces, the men wear a grucifix pin on their shoulder. You already outrank all of them, but since you haven’t officially been initiated, it would show them that you’re not completely up your own ass. Not that anybody thinks you are!

No worries. It wouldn’t hurt to be knocked down a peg or too, just so I don’t go thinking too much of myself.

When you’re in there, watch out for the bald guy with the stupid soul patch. He’s a creep.

Will do.

This headpiece is basically a headband with a piece of black fabric attached, and the fabric goes around your hair in the back. It fastens together with velcro, and that’s what keeps getting stuck in her hair. She can’t even get it out of her hair, it’s just stuck in there. Between being lost, being late, and her hair getting pulled, she’s about to cry out of frustration. She finally gives it one good yank, and it comes free.

SON OF A BITCH. She looks at it and shakes it in her hand. You little piece of shit.

Y-you don’t really need to wear that, you know. A male voice from the direction of the statue. It’s just a formality. Many of the girls abandon them all over the abbey.

Miri turns, and it might be the strangest person she’s seen here yet. A cardinal, dressed in a black cassock, black biretta, black leather gloves with that upside-down cross - the grucifix - on them. He’s even got a big, glittery one hanging on his chest, and the symbol is printed on his fascia. The outfit isn’t the problem: it’s his face that’s putting her off. Black makeup in huge circles around his eyes, like some kind of weird panda, and on his upper lip. His right eye, sea-foam green. His left, a completely white iris. Not cloudy, like cataracts. Just white.

He shuffles over to her, and holds out his hand, pointing at the headpiece. May I? he asks.

Ok...she hands it to him, and he inspects it carefully. Now that he’s closer, she notices he smells like
flowers. Not the flowers in the garden, but like dried flowers. Dead flowers. It’s not a bad smell, it’s just not something you would associate with a man. A flower shop, maybe. He’s not very tall, or maybe it just seems that way because his shoulders are hunched. He seems befuddled by the headpiece.

After turning it over several times in his hands, the Cardinal has had enough. *Ah, fuck it* he exclaims and throws it on the ground. He kicks at it until it disappears under a bench. *I think they’re stupid, anyway. Let the ladies wear the same pin as the guys, eh?*

Miri can’t help but laugh at this strange man. He smiles when she laughs, and immediately looks down while his cheeks turn pink. He extends his hand like he wants to shake hers, but when she offers it, he takes it and very gently places a kiss on the back.

*I am Cardinal Copia. You must be Miriam, yes?*

That name. It’s from her dream. She cannot believe her luck, this must be a descendant of that man. If this church keeps the same kind of records that Catholics do, maybe he’s got information on his ancestor and Rachel. Something that can help her to avoid making whatever mistakes led to that day.

*Yes, but I’ve always been called Miri. Only the nuns at St. Agnes’ ever called me Miriam, and it was only when they were pissed at me. Which was pretty much all the time* she chuckles.

A slightly nervous laugh erupts from his mouth and his cheeks turn even more pink. He clears his throat.

*Well…it appears we are running late for this big to-do. Would you walk with me?*
Chapter 8

So…what do you think of… Copia waves his hand, referring to the abbey.

It’s…intimidating. Very beautiful, but seriously intimidating.

He leans over to her and lowers his voice. Do you know something ironic? Or at least sort-of funny?

No…what?

This actually used to be a cloistered abbey. It sat empty for decades before we acquired it.

Why was it empty?

His voice drops even lower. Apparently…the local diocese was hit with a lawsuit for a very, very sizable amount. I’m sure you can figure out why. They settled out of court to save face, but they could no longer pay the property taxes, and the county foreclosed on it. When the sheriff came to evict, everyone was gone.

They just up and left it? Where did they go?

He shrugs and gesticulates with his hands for a moment. Where do you think they went?

Knowing how they operate…probably reassigned to other places.

Two priests were defrocked, the nuns were all sent out of state, and the monsignor was promoted to bishop.

That’s usually how it goes. Wait….how do you know what happened?

He stands up straight and waves his hand a bit. What is it with Italians and their hand-waving?

I guess you could say…I have ways of finding out things. Information can be very valuable to some people. For instance, maybe a high-ranking member of the clergy has been hiding what he is really doing on his trips to Thailand. Perhaps, instead of spreading our Dark Lord’s word, he’s spending his considerable stipend renting children for his own…disgusting predilections.

Oh my god, are you serious? One of the people in this meeting is a pedo?

Indeed. Lust is the sin that is celebrated most in the church, but any act has to be consensual. Freedom of thought and deed are most important to us, especially when it comes to lust, but a child…they cannot understand this. They are innocent in these things. We teach them to trust adults, but when that trust is violated…unforgivable.

So why don’t you turn him in? To the cops? To Papa?

Ehhhh he waves his hands again. I don’t actually have proof. I can’t just say these things.

Then how do you know?

Let’s just say….I have eyes and ears everywhere.

Miri raises an eyebrow. Everywhere?
Well, not in the bathrooms! He looks a little offended, puts his hand on his chest like a Southern belle. I would never.

Miri can’t help but smirk at this weird guy. He’s so awkward, it’s almost painful, but he seems to be ok.

Ok, ok, I believe you. I’m just glad I have my own bathroom.

He suddenly erupts in a very girlish giggle before slapping his hand over his mouth. Scusami.

They continue walking until they reach a set of very large wooden doors. This is the building the congregation likes to call ‘the inner sanctum’ but it’s really just Papa’s quarters and a dining room he uses for meetings. He is... frail, and the less distance he has to walk, the better.

He moves to open the door, and Miri hesitates.

You have nothing to be afraid of. They won’t hurt you. I will not allow it.

He opens the door, steps aside so she can enter first, then closes the door behind them.

Inside the ‘inner sanctum’ it is almost completely dark. You’d never know it was broad daylight outside. No windows, just candelabras with lots of black candles on the walls. Some accent tables here and there with very small lamps, they’re barely brighter than the candles.

Copia gently takes Miri’s left elbow. This way he says.

He must be used to wandering around here in the dark she figures. There’s no way anybody could find their way around here on their own.

They turn at a corner, and the wall ahead of them has to be at least 20 feet high. There appears to be a family tree of some sort painted on it, starting near the ceiling. There are thousands of names. Father to son, for generation after generation.

The Emeritus line Copia says. Every single Papa in history is listed here.

Miri leans in closer to see the names in the dim light. About 3 feet from the floor, there is it: Emeritus Nihil, followed by Emeritus I, Emeritus II, and Emeritus III. All 3 deceased. Even though she hasn’t met him yet, she feels sorry for Nihil. To have your children succeed you and then fail…and you’re left behind without an heir. So sad.

Copia taps her on the shoulder. Come, come. We’re so very late.

Well it’s not like they can start without me, can they?

No, but they still won’t be very happy. Best not to keep them waiting.

He picks up his pace, and Miri follows behind. They turn another corner, and standing outside another set of doors is Imperator, flanked by two men in black suits, tapping her foot and looking at her watch. Where on Earth have you been, Cardinal? The meeting was set for 9 am sharp.

He raises his hands again in what appears to be his typical fashion. I stop by the garden to check the flowers, it was a bit cold last night, yes?

Miri peeks her head around him. Actually, I made him later. I got lost and just happened to bump into him. He had to help me find my way here.
Imperator’s face suddenly lights up. *Oh, well, nobody's going to mind if you’re a little late!*

*So it’s like that, huh?* Miri thinks.

Imperator turns around and nods for the men to open the doors to the dining room.

The room is not terribly large, but there is a giant circular wooden table in the center. Several chairs are placed around it, and almost all are taken. Average looking people dressed in black. They all turn and stare at Miri, who is paying no attention to them. She’s looking at the giant mural on the wall behind them.

It appears to be a recreation of the battle from her dream. It paints the Antichrist in a much more favorable light, he looks bigger and more capable with his sword. Obviously not designed by someone who was there. Miri wonders if maybe she should ask someone to make it more accurate, when a wheezy voice calls out.

*Miss Hughes! At last, you are here!*

She looks down from the mural, and shuffling into the room from the opposite side is an old man that seems beyond old. He’s fucking ancient. His hair, what’s left of it, is pure white, long and scraggily. He has what looks like skull paint on his face. He wears robes and a mitre very similar to the Catholic Pope, but his has pictures of dragons and demons on it, along with the crucifix. He has two men in suits on either side of him, holding their hands out, like they’re waiting for him to fall. He’s dragging an oxygen machine on a little cart, the mask in one hand. Both his eyes are clouded over with cataracts, and she wonders how he manages to see her. Or anything else, for that matter.

She walks over to meet him at the table, since he might keel over if he tries to walk to the door.

He holds up one hand and waves it while rattling off something in Italian. Seriously, what is it with these people and their hand gestures?

She has no idea how to respond, until Copia steps forward to translate. *He says he is so very excited that you are here, it brings a…warmness? to his heart.*

*Sì! Sì, scusami! My English, I forget when I get excite! Come, sit by me!*

He holds out his free hand for her to take, and he guides her to a chair at the table. He struggles to sit down, his bulky robes and oxygen getting in the way, but once he’s situated, he turns to Miri and smiles.

*You are ok? You sleep well, eat good? Is nice here for you?*

*Yeah, it’s been very nice so far, thank you.*

*Perfezionare! Good, good!*

Imperator clears her throat and looks at Papa. Seems like the old man has trouble staying on task. She’s sitting on the other side of him, while Copia stands between them but behind their chairs. There is no seat at the table for him.

Miri looks around the table at the other clergy members. Some seem very interested in her, some seem bored, and one guy looks like this meeting is not worth his time. He’s bald, with a soul patch thing under his bottom lip. Must be the jerk Holly warned her about.

Imperator clears her throat again, and stands up. *As you all know, the role of Unholy Mother has*
been vacant for some centuries, despite numerous attempts to locate those chosen or to achieve successful ascension. However, I believe we have found our true electi, who will help guide the church into the next millennia. Hail Satan!

The others follow suit, Copia frowns slightly, and Papa just waves his hand in agreement.

Now Imperator says, sitting back down. Miri, why don’t you tell us about yourself? Start at the beginning, as far back as you can remember.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

If you've made it this far....you haven't looked hard enough to find something decent to read.

TW for abuse ahead...

I don’t remember my father. My mom always told me that he had seen me a few times when I was really little, but who knows if that’s true or not. She’s never been what you could call ‘reliable’. Shit, I don’t even know if you could really call her a mother, despite the fact that she gave birth to me. I was more like a pet to her, something that she felt obligated to keep alive, than a child. That’s probably why she thought it would be ok to keep me with her wherever she went. Motels, back alleys, crack houses, didn’t matter.

I think I was about 3 or 4 the first time CPS took me away. Our power had been turned off because she spent the money on drugs yet again, and I was found wandering in the road in the middle of the night. I was afraid of the dark, and there were streetlights outside. Thus began the cycle. She’d get busted with drugs or for neglect, I’d go to a foster place while she either got rehab or jail time. Once she was out, they’d send me back to her, and things would be good for a while. I remember there were actual dinners, trips to the park, running through a sprinkler in summer. Inevitably, she’d start using again. Then there wouldn’t be any money for food or a place to live. Then CPS would come and we’d do it all over again.

The last straw was when I was about 13. I came home from school, and she was out of it on the couch. Just sitting there, almost falling off the damn thing, staring off into the distance. I heard a noise coming from the other room, and this guy that I’d seen driving past the house a few times came out. She could barely get the words out, but apparently this was her dealer. He’d made a house call, but she didn’t have any money to pay him, so he was expecting…a different form of payment. He gave me this really gross look, and grabbed his crotch. I was instantly nauseated and about to piss myself, so I told them I needed to use the bathroom first. I snuck the cordless phone in there with me and called 911.

He figured out pretty quickly what I was doing and broke the door open. He started dragging me out, and I grabbed whatever I could off the bathroom counter to use as a weapon. There was a pair of really sharp cuticle scissors, and I managed to grab those. He pulled me up by my collar and showed me a small folding knife and told me I’d better tell the cops it was a prank or else he’d use it on me.

At that point, I’d had enough. Of everything. I thought it would be better to go out fighting than just sit and take any more of this crap. So I stabbed him in the neck with the scissors. It wasn’t anywhere near fatal, but bad enough that he let go of me. He swung out with the knife and sliced me in the side. Not very deep, but I still have a scar there. I managed to get away from him long enough to get out the front door and run screaming into the street. The cops showed up, took him away, and the whole time my mom just sat on the couch, high as a kite.

This time, she was charged with a ton of stuff, including exploitation/prostitution of a child. They gave her 8 years, but she could be out in 5 on good behavior. I didn’t have to testify in court, I gave
video testimony and they just played that in court. I was there when she was sentenced, she kept
alternating between crying and asking me to forgive her, and yelling at me for turning her in. Once
they took her away, I officially became a ward of the state. They couldn’t locate my father.

The next two years I spent in 3 different foster homes. The last one seemed ok at first, but it started to
come weird as time went on. They started accusing me of stuff, like sneaking guys into the house after
they were asleep. It was pretty creepy. One day, I was walking home from a friend’s house, when this
guy I thought was cute rolled up on his bike. He asked if I wanted to go hang out at this park that
was on the way home. I said sure, and we played on the playground equipment for a while. We
started kissing on the swings, and that’s when the cops showed up. I guess they were really bored or
something, because they gave that kid a verbal thrashing, then put me in the car to take me home.
Wouldn’t even let me walk, and it wasn’t curfew yet. They dropped me off, and my foster parents
were looking at me like I’d just blown the entire high school football team on the lawn. They
wouldn’t speak to me, and that was ok by me. The next day, when I got out of school, my social
worker was waiting for me and there was a big ol’ plastic garbage bag full of my stuff in the
backseat. Assholes wouldn’t even let me back in their house to get my things. Told CPS I was a ‘bad
seed’ and that I was ‘corrupting the innocence’ of their younger foster children. That’s when I got
sent to St. Agnes’.

That would be St. Agnes’ Children’s Home, correct? Imperator asked.

That’s the place. Or Hell on Earth, if you actually lived there.

What was wrong with it? one of the women at the table asked.

Just your stereotypical Catholic group home. Lots of Bible study, going to Mass all the time, being
force-fed Latin, cold showers and getting whipped with a stick if you weren’t their perfect idea of a
good Catholic girl. Joke’s on them; I was never baptized into any church anyway.

I should probably apologize in advance, but all this church’s similarities with the Catholic church
really put me off when I first got here, it’s not anything anyone here has said or done. I’ve just got
such a bad taste in my mouth from being there, I have a hard time not associating everything with
that place.

Copia stepped forward slightly. Something..happened there, didn’t it? Something bad.

Miri shot him an accusatory look, which made him visibly cower for a second. She tried to smile as
an apology, but her face just wasn’t having it.

See? That place ruined everybody that ever made it out of there.

What happen? Papa asked. We do not judge, we just want to know.

Miri closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

There was this younger priest that had recently been transferred. We figured it was because the
younger ones move around a lot so they can get plenty of experience working with different parishes.
He seemed like an ok guy, just kind of quiet, spent a lot of time in his quarters. Over time, though…
there were more and more whispers, more than usual. Someone saw him in one of the girl’s
bathrooms, he claimed the men’s room had been closed for cleaning. Someone else saw him in the
laundry, poking through the girl’s laundry like he was looking for something particular. Lots of
lingering looks, hand kept too long on a shoulder.
Because I’m a pain in the ass, I suggested we start keeping a record of everything seen and heard, all of it. I started writing it in a notebook that I kept inside my pillowcase at night, and I carried it with me during the day, so there was no way anybody else was getting their hands on it. The only problem with that was, it would be easy for a Sister to snatch it from me in class. And one of them did. But she gave it right back to me. Like she already knew about everything written in it, and didn’t care. And he probably knew, as well.

The other girls were warning me to try and lock my door or barricade myself in my room, since he’d been trying to get into other girls’ rooms at night. I told them not to worry, he wouldn’t be so brazen as to try and attack us in our rooms, right?

That night, I was lying in bed, just starting to fall asleep, when I could hear someone messing with my doorknob. I did lock it, but there’s a master key somewhere, and it probably wouldn’t be difficult for a priest to get his hands on it.

When the knob turned, I just froze up. I couldn’t move, I couldn’t even breathe. I tried to pretend I was asleep, like that would actually deter him from whatever he had planned. He bent over my bed, and grabbed my shoulder.

It sounds really dumb…but I think He actually stopped time for me. He said He could save me from this, but I would have to let Him have total control. Not for long, just enough to get out of this mess. I decided to take my chances with Him.

When it happens, it feels so weird and foreign. It’s like you’re floating in a pool inside your own body. The worst part is when He needs my eyes or voice. Then it burns like acid all the way up my neck, into my face. It must change how I look, too, because that priest suddenly looked like he’d been shot.

We rolled over in bed and started speaking to him. I honestly couldn’t understand what I was hearing, it was so distorted and inhuman, but I got the gist. Basically, ‘fuck off and leave the girls alone’. He just looked dazed for a second, then turned around and shuffled out of the room.

Once We were alone, He gave control back. I wanted to throw up, cry, scream, anything to get rid of that feeling, but He immediately started nagging at me. We need to get out, he said. It’s not safe here for you anymore, you need to go. Go where? I asked. I have nowhere to go. The streets are safer, at this point, He said. At least there you’re free. No repressed old women punishing you for being female, no disgusting old men leering at you. No useless God being shoved down your throat.

So I left. Just got out of bed, shoved everything I could into a garbage bag and went out the window. I left the book behind, though. Just in case.

A few days later, I caught sight of a headline in the paper. ‘Pedo Priest Commits Suicide’. Apparently, he’d gone back to his quarters, locked himself in, stripped down in the bathroom, and tried to cut off his own dick with a letter opener. He must have hit some major artery, because they found him just sitting propped up against the bathroom wall. He bled out in seconds.

That is not what I wanted…but I was relieved.

I spent the next 3 years going back and forth between the streets and various shelters. At first the name of the game was ‘avoid the cops until you’re 18’. Ironically enough, I actually got arrested for vagrancy 2 weeks after my birthday. Spent a night in jail, it wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. At least it was indoors and I got fed.

After that, it was ‘just stay alive’. ‘Try not to get arrested.’ ‘Keep brushing your teeth.’ I was actually
planning on hitchhiking to get down south, once it warmed up again in the spring. Maybe I shouldn’t have waited, heh.

That’s it. That’s me.
Chapter 10

The room sat in silence for a few moments. *I read about that priest* a woman at the table said. *I thought it was probably worse than they were reporting, but I had no idea…*

*Oh, who cares?!* Baldy suddenly erupts. *Boo hoo, tragic upbringing, too bad so sad. Someone comes in with a sob story, and we’re supposed to believe they’re the next Mother? Please! How do we know she isn’t just another looney tunes? What proof do we have that any of this is true?*

Papa leans forward. *She has the mark of our Lord.*

*On her foot! Do you know how many kids get scars on their feet from running around barefoot? Just because she happens to have a scar that looks like His symbol doesn’t mean she’s the one.*

Miri gives the man a sour look. *What the hell is your problem? I didn’t ask to get chased through the city and carried off by ghouls. That and she points to Imperator and the other missing people is something we’ll be talking about in the future. I want to know what happened to them.*

*Oh, like anybody cares about the homeless. Flea-infested drug addicts, the lot of them.*

*What is your problem here, huh? Is there someone else you think is more ‘worthy’ or whatever to be in this position? Someone that you’ve got your hooks in, so maybe you can influence them and the direction of the church?*

*You are better at this than you thought* He whispers. *Look at how quickly you’re picking up on his ulterior motives. He is protesting quite ferociously, though…what else makes a man act like that? Maybe…fear?*

Miri tips her head at the man slightly. *Are you…afraid of something? Do you have something to hide?*

The man suddenly twitches in his seat and the color begins to drain from his face. *No! Of course not!* *What would I have to be afraid of?*

Imperator leans forward in her seat. *Bishop Johns…do you have something to confess?*

*The Bishop continues to flounder and sputter while angrily gesturing at Miri. S-he’s trying to divide us, and in these trying times, our unity is more important than ever! We cannot allow ourselves to be-*

Miri suddenly sees an image in her mind. He is showing her the Bishop in his room here in the abbey. He’s looking at a Deep Web site dedicated to child prostitutes in Thailand. Some of the photos turn her stomach and she gags.

*You ok?* Papa turns to her. *You need water?*

She shakes her head and looks at the Bishop. He’s sweating, fidgeting. He couldn’t look more guilty. Then she quickly glances at Copia. A barely perceptible nod, and the corners of his mouth turn up slightly. This is the guy he was talking about.

*It’s you* she says, disgust dripping from her voice. *You’re the one spending the church’s money fucking little kids overseas, you piece of shit.*
Everyone turns to look at him, as his sputtering renders him speechless. His face is now turning red again, and he looks like he’s going to explode.

Y-y-you-! He spins around to face Copia. **YOU AND YOUR FUCKING RATS!**

He bolts out of his chair, and Copia immediately backpedals away from the table. Before the Bishop can take a step, something forces him back into his chair and he brings his hands to his throat. He can’t breathe. It’s almost like a scene out of Star Wars, with Vader Force-choking someone.

Don’t hurt him Miri begs Him. **He should be punished, but not like this.**

He needs to fear and respect you He says. If he doesn’t, the others will follow suit, and your position will mean nothing. If you have no support, there is nothing to stop them from removing you… permanently. They all need to fear you. And this will show them why.

The familiar floating feeling returns, the burning in her veins. Before she completely loses control, she turns and looks to Papa, to Copia. **I’m sorry I’m so sorry I’m so-**

And then there is no more her. Now it is Them.

The black veins stretch across Their face, Their eyes go black, and They sit up straight in Their chair.

**Johns. Do you really have so little faith in your master? Did you really think I would not know of your…hobby? No one here is without sin: it is the cornerstone of our faith. But you…you have violated one of our most basic tenets: do not harm children. What do you have to say for yourself?**

The Bishop, no longer choking, cannot manage to get out a single useful syllable. The only sound is of urine streaming off his chair and onto the floor.

**Hmph. As I thought. I had considered, for a time, that it was your jealousy towards Copia’s promotion that was the cause of your behavior. Now I see...you’re just a sniveling asshole. Take him.**

The two men in suits pick him up from his chair and carry him, kicking and screaming, out of the room. His screams echo down the hallway until there is nothing.

They turn to Papa and smile. **Nihil, old friend.**

**Your Infernal Majesty.** Papa returns the smile and extends his hand to Them. They take it and grasp it warmly.

**Nihil…you must see it. She is older than her years, but still so innocent. Her heart is true, but she will need your guidance. Will you help her? Not for me, but for her, for the church?**

Papa nods as strongly as he’s able. **Si, padrè empio. Your will is ours.**

**You’ve always been such a good friend, Nihil. I know you won’t let me down.**

They turn their attention to Copia. Deep inside, Miri yells at Him. **Leave him alone! He’s a nice person, for fuck’s sake.**

**There’s far more to him than you realize, my dear. You will learn this in time.**
Copia.

He bows his head in reverence. Master.

Your work ethic is exceptional as of late. Keep up the good work. Oh, and the garden is looking beautiful. Miri is enjoying it immensely.

Copia bows his head even further, and his face is flushed with embarrassment.

They look around the table at the other clergy members. Some have their heads bowed, some can’t stop staring at Them, one is praying quietly in a rather…erotic way. Grinding against her chair.

Please stop that. Save it for your quarters.

The lady gives a small moan of acknowledgement. Ew. Can we avoid her, if at all possible?

Miri starts to feel the grip of His control loosen, and They speak one last time.

Know that I am watching, that I am listening. She will be our Unholy Mother, and together we will lead this church, and the world itself, into a new era.

He lets go, and Miri’s body convulses slightly as she regains control. She gasps for air and clutches the arms of her chair tightly.

She remains still for a moment, and then bursts into tears. She places the side of her face on the table and sobs uncontrollably.

I can’t….I’m sorry…

Papa leans over towards her with his arms open. Is ok, little one. Is ok.

She leans against him with her head against his chest. His breathing is wheezy, and his robes smell musty. He wraps his arms around her and pats her back, like he was burping a baby. She considers for a second how he must have held his own children like this at one point, and sobs even harder.

Perhaps we do enough for today he tells everyone. Is a lot for one person. We give her time, ok?

They all nod in agreement, and get up from their chairs. Papa signals one of the men in suits. Per favore, help her back to her room. She needs rest. Oh! And take a map, for Christ’s sake. We don’t want her getting lost again!

Miri barely wakes up in time for dinner. After that whole disaster, she’s carried back to her room and put to bed. She tries to apologize to Papa for causing a scene, but he just waves his hand again. Is no problema! Always nice to visit with the Dark Lord!

She’s starving, and the smell of food reaches all the way to her room, but she doesn’t want to go down there. If it was just a rumor before, it’s all-out fact now. ‘Unholy Mother is here. She got possessed and shit. Got Johns busted for being a perv.’ Great, she can just hear it now.

She decides not to be a total recluse and go to dinner anyway. When she opens the door, two of the guys in suits from earlier are waiting outside. She must have missed the part where they said Papa was going to speak at dinner, to officially announce her arrival, and she was going to sit at the big kids’ table. She rushes to brush her hair out and try not to look like she literally just woke up, and follows the men to the dining room.
It’s a repeat of breakfast yesterday, except there are probably hundreds of people in the dining hall. Even more eyes on her now. There’s tablecloths and candles on all the tables, super fancy. So many girls are wearing that stupid headpiece, and she feels strangely naked without it. She wonders if anybody found it under that bench. Copia probably went back and grabbed it, since it seems like the whole courtyard garden is his project.

The men lead her to the small table she sat at previously, Imperator and Nihil and the other clergy, minus Bishop Perv and Copia, are already sitting. Imperator pats the chair next to her, so she knows where she’s supposed to sit.

After a few minutes, Papa slowly rises to his feet and the noise stops. He pulls some note cards out of his robe pocket, and a few hard candies fall out as well. A smattering of giggles from the other tables. He drones on for a bit in a mix of Italian and bad English until Miri hears him say her name, and her head snaps up. Someone at the next table laughs sharply, and Imperator shoots a death glare that would make even Satan’s balls shrivel up.

Eventually Papa starts to wind down, and Imperator stands up. Thank you, Papa, for your warm words of welcome. Now, because this is a special occasion, we will have a song before dinner is served.

A few people groan with hunger, but the others seem excited. This must be the band that Miri heard practicing the other day, but it was pretty loud music to play in a crowded dining hall. A side door opens, and Copia, followed by two ghouls carrying acoustic guitars walk in. Miri suddenly notices the two stools and microphone stand off to the side. The ghouls sit down, and she recognizes them. Aether on the left, with a light brown guitar, Dewdrop on the right, with a white guitar. Copia has ditched his biretta, but he remains otherwise encased in black.

He steps up to the mic, and turns back for a second to say something to Dew, who gives a non-committal shrug before sitting on his stool. Miri starts to feel pre-emptive second-hand embarrassment for Copia. What if he’s terrible? She gets the feeling he’s already a bit of a laughing-stock, and she hates the idea of everybody getting their jollies from his awkwardness.

The guitars start in, and she could almost swear it was a Metallica song. It sounds a lot like the intro to Nothing Else Matters, but not as depressing. Copia turns to the mic, and a voice much deeper than she was expecting comes out. A strong, confident voice, perfectly in key.

After a few lines, she notices movement at the corner of her eyes. It’s Holly and Lydia, sitting together at the next table. They’re motioning to her mouth, pushing up on their lower jaws as nonchalantly as they can. That’s when she notices her own mouth hanging wide open in disbelief. She closes it as quickly as she can, but there’s a very good chance everybody has seen it. Everybody but the performers.

The ghouls are paying close attention to their intricate playing, and Copia sings with his eyes closed. He seems completely entranced in the song, moving his hands gently, like he’s conducting an imaginary choir. As it goes on, he seems to get more and more comfortable, tapping the heel of his foot in time with the song. It was almost like the person Miri met in the courtyard garden had been copied and replaced with a more...attractive version. She can’t believe that thought even crossed her mind. He’s got like, at least 20 years on me. He’s got worry lines so deep, he could use them to hold his wallet and keys. He was really nice to me earlier, sure, but…what the hell?

You need to be careful He says out of nowhere. There is much, much more to him than you can imagine. Tread carefully.

The song ends, and everybody applauds and cheers. It signals the kitchen staff to finally start
bringing out food, and everybody’s stomachs seem to growl in unison. Copia takes his seat on the other side of Papa. Miri tries to lean over to compliment his singing, but there is too much noise. Instead, she ends up getting an earful from Imperator about her schedule. Latin lessons, history lessons, occult and herbalism stuff. That sounds interesting, but the Latin just sounds horrible and boring. Don’t worry, Cardinal Copia said he would set aside time to tutor you himself. He is the church’s most experienced Latin scholar, there probably isn’t anyone more suited to it than him.

Well…maybe it won’t be so bad.
Chapter 11

It’s like high school all over again, Miri thinks as she drags herself down to the library. It’s not that she had to get up so early; it’s the fact that apparently this abbey doubles as a giant fuck motel. All night long, all she heard was moaning and gasping and grunting.

I need to remember to ask for some earplugs.

Now that she finally has a map of this place, she’s able to find her way to the library pretty quickly. It’s probably a massive room, but with all the bookshelves not lined up evenly, and books covering almost every available surface, it ends up looking like an old bookstore. It smells dusty and old, but it’s comforting. Miri wonders how warm it will be in here this winter, since the rest of the place is already getting a little chilly.

Imperator told her how to get to Copia’s office in the back, but now that she’s here, it doesn’t really make much sense. She just keeps walking towards what she thinks is the back of the library until she reaches an old wooden door against the back wall. She tries the handle, but it’s locked. She gives it an annoyed look, and notices a weird feeling on her ankles. It feels like cold air coming from under the door. Before she has a chance to think about where this door goes, there’s a hand on her shoulder.

Don’t worry about that door, it just goes to storage. Full of old, smelly books. Copia, in full goth mode, smiles at her. My office is over there. He points in the opposite direction, and she can see two doors, one of which says OFFICE on it. Duh. What’s the other door?

My rooms, for sleeping and such. I don’t like to be too far away from my work, in case I can’t sleep. Don’t want to waste time.

Miri thinks that’s a bit sad, doesn’t he have any hobbies?

So…are you ready for Latin? He awkwardly smiles and raises his eyebrows.

She tries her hardest to summon some kind of enthusiasm but fails. Sure.

After deciding on what type of instruction would work best (a combination of lecturing and reading, taking notes on both) they finally get down to the actual lessons. Miri is relieved to discover Copia makes a much better teacher than the nuns at St. Agnes’. He doesn’t talk down to her or make it more complicated than it needs to be. It is a very difficult language, and he seems to appreciate just how hard it is for a beginner.

After an hour of first principles, he suggests a break so Miri can stretch her legs, as the old wooden chairs in the library are not very forgiving. When she comes back, he’s writing practice sentences on a chalkboard that he probably dragged out of that storage room. She figures, since he’s doing that, maybe he can answer some questions for her.

Can I ask you a few things?

About Latin? Of course-

No. About…church stuff.

Oh. Well. I suppose so, if you did not want to ask Sister Imperator. What would you like to know?
What happened to all the people that the ghouls rounded up? I know they’ve done it more than once. Where did they go?

He sets down the chalk on the edge of the board and turns around. He lowers his voice and has a somewhat resigned look on his face.

The ghouls…they may be in human bodies now, but they still keep their animal instincts. They have a very strong hunting instinct, and if it is not satiated, they will lash out and attack others around them. There is small game in the woods around us, but it does not satisfy them. They prefer...bigger animals.

Like humans?

Yes. Like humans. However, we don’t want them going after members of the congregation. The church has made a…mutually beneficial arrangement with the city. If we help them…eliminate…a certain number of homeless individuals…they look the other way. Then there are more resources for those that remain in the city, and the ghouls have something to chase.

Miri can’t believe what she’s hearing. So you’re telling me that, in exchange for making the city’s statistics on homelessness better, they let you snatch people off the street, bring them out here to the woods, and the ghouls chase them for shits and giggles?

They don’t just chase. They eat.

She tries to imagine the ghouls she knows, burly Aether and slender Dewdrop, running through the woods on all fours, chasing some poor bum that can’t make it 20 years before collapsing. Tearing at him with claws and fangs.

That’s gonna change once I’m…in position? Is that the right phrase?

If you take that away, they will attack and devour everyone here. They are outnumbered, but that does not matter when they are filled with bloodlust.

Oh.

Yes. It is not the best of situations, but it is better than the alternative. Was there anything else?

Yeah. What happened to Papa’s sons?

A very tragic accident. They were gathered in Dante’s - that’s Emeritus the 3rd - his room, playing cards. There was some kind of accident with the heat in his room, and they were all found the next day, still sitting around the table. Carbon monoxide poisoning, they said. Probably just drifted off to sleep, no pain. Papa Nihil was devastated, of course. Especially since he had no more progeny.

That’s something else I was wondering. If there’s nobody in the Emeritus line to succeed him, who becomes Papa when he’s gone?

I will.

Her eyebrows raise in surprise. You? You’re the next Papa?

He nods solemnly. It was a difficult decision for Papa, but I am honored that he believes in my ability to lead. Even if I am not.

That’s a huge responsibility. Why do they have you teaching me Latin, then?
Oh, that is not all I do. I have been working on translating old Latin texts and scrolls for quite some time. I do not know if I will ever complete it. I also maintain the library, almost all by myself. I may need to request an assistant at some point, because - he gestures at the tables - it is getting away from me a bit.

I could help you with it. It’s not like I’m doing anything else with my time.

No! You need to concentrate on your studies. You have years of work to catch up on, and not much time.

Why do I not have much time?

We perform initiation rituals on the new moon, the one for this month and next month are already taken, so the soonest you can perform the rite is 3 months from the day after tomorrow.

3 months to complete several years worth of work?

Unfortunately. But! Because your role will be largely ceremonial, you won’t need to know many of the things the Siblings have to study in order to be initiated. If you can just get the basics down, we’ll call it good. We’ll worry about the rest later. Now, let’s get back to work.

That night, when Miri finally returns to her room, there’s a little white box on her bed. Her jaw drops in disbelief. It’s a brand new iPhone, fully charged but with no cell service. Of course not, who would she call? There is a note under the box.

I know it can be a bit ‘busy’ at night, and it can be hard to sleep. I did not know what kind of music you prefer, so I just loaded all the most popular albums. I also took the liberty of loading all our band’s albums, as well. Then you will be able to sing along with the rest of the congregation.

C.

She swipes through the music library, deleting things she knows she will never listen to. She comes across a band she’s never heard of before. Ghost. That must be the church’s band. She plugs in the earbuds and selects a song from an album called Opus Eponymous. Doesn’t that mean self-titled? Why didn’t they just call it ‘Ghost’ then? Weirdos.

The song is called Ritual, and she immediately wonders when this album was made. It sounds like it was recorded in the 70’s. She checks the date, and it’s from barely a decade ago. Must have used some old production methods to get it to sound that way, then. The singer doesn’t sound quite like Copia, though. Maybe that’s also studio magic?

She goes about getting ready for bed, and creates a playlist with all of Ghost’s albums. She puts in the earbuds and cranks the volume. Anything’s better than horny caterwauling all night.

The first week goes by surprisingly fast. Miri no longer uses the map, now that she has memorized numerous landmarks around the abbey. A certain statue here, a painting there, a chunk of tile missing from the floor from a ghoul fight that got out of hand.

Things here are weird, but no less weird than sleeping behind a dumpster or bathing in a gas station bathroom. There is a schedule to everything, and the routine is comforting. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Study time, classes, outdoor activities. Lights out at 10, which everybody apparently
calls ‘fuck o’clock’.

Sunday Mass is actually held on Saturday night at midnight. Everybody is allowed 2 hours Saturday afternoons for naps, to avoid people drifting off during the service, but there’s always a few here and there that are caught snoring or with their heads drooping. Even Papa doesn’t make it very far into the service, and he’s snorting away in his chair near the altar. Miri’s Latin is still very rudimentary, so she only picks up one or two words per sentence. When someone drones on and on for 20 minutes in Latin, it’s difficult for her to stay awake too.

After her first Mass, she tells Imperator that she would like to have some kind of chore to perform. I feel like an asshole, just studying all day and not helping with anything. Does the kitchen need any help?

Imperator directs her to the head of kitchen duties, who immediately puts her to work washing dishes the next morning. Breakfast is still served at 8 am on Mondays, so everybody is a little crabby after having been up until 2 am for Mass. Miri just puts her hair up in a bun, straps on an apron, and goes to work. Of course, there are more whispers and stares.

She gets two plates with messages written in ketchup: NICE HAIR and SCRUB HARDER. She turns around, and there are her ghouls at a table with several other ghouls and Siblings. They give her very girly waves hello. She flips them off while sticking her tongue out, and they fall into very fake feminine hysterics. Clutching the pearls and everything.

Once that’s over, it’s back to the library for more mind-numbing Latin. Copia does his best to make it interesting - usually by teaching her incredibly rude things to say - but it’s still a slog to get through.

The next day, he asks her if she minds having a lesson outdoors, which she’s totally fine with. They go out to the courtyard and sit in the small corner with the statue of Rachel for their lesson. He’s obviously trying not to look at the statue.

Does it weird you out?

Hmm? What?

The statue. You don’t seem to like looking at it.

Oh, no. It’s just...I spend a lot of time in the garden. I’ve always loved working with flowers as a hobby. Sometimes...the light plays tricks on my eyes and it looks like the statue moves. I know it is a trick, but still...

I wonder how Imperator knew that I’ve dreamed about her, about how she died.

He shrugs. Sometimes, Papa has prophetic dreams. Maybe he was told.

It’s too bad he couldn’t have forseen the death of his sons. Maybe he could have stopped it.

Maybe.
Chapter 12

A couple of weeks go by, and Miri’s attempts to find out more about Rachel, and the Copia she knew go nowhere. The Cardinal ducks, avoids, and pretends not to hear her leading questions, and she’s considering just giving up until after her initiation. Maybe once she’s actually a church member, he’ll open up more.

There are times when he seems totally alien, so awkward and unsure. He makes jokes that fall flat, and he can’t seem to figure out why, because he was sure he had the idioms right. Other times, it seems like he’s outright flirting with her, strutting back and forth in front of the chalkboard, the Latin flowing out of his mouth like music. He’ll turn on his heel suddenly, and when she isn’t copying down what he’s saying because she’s staring at him, he makes silly noises to snap her out of it. He makes her blush a lot, and she wishes she wasn’t so desperate for the approval.

She goes down to the library for her lesson one day, and Copia isn’t there. She looks in his office, knocks on the door of his room, nobody there. A Sister, apparently looking for some book on calligraphy, says that the Cardinal left a note on the chalkboard that he had band practice today and he might be late. He assigned some reading and exercises for her to get started on. After the Sister leaves the library, Miri decides to be sneaky and go spy on band practice.

She hasn’t heard any practicing since the time it almost blew her eardrums out, so it’s a bit difficult figuring out where exactly they’re doing it. She remembers a series of rooms on the map called ‘choir rooms’ so maybe that’s where they are.

As she heads in that direction, the sound of bass and drums becomes louder and louder, to the point where she can feel it in her chest. The choir room they’re using is huge, with multiple doors to enter. She cracks one open as little as possible to gauge how loud it is, and it’s almost deafening. She closes the door in a hurry, making sure there was nobody around to see her. She takes a tissue from her pocket, tears it in half, then sticks a half in each ear. It’s better than nothing.

She opens the door a crack again, and realizes that nobody inside can see her. There are stacks of gear boxes and amps in front of the door, and she can just barely slide in between them and the wall, but she can get in the room and close the door behind her.

They’re playing something incredibly loud and heavy, the bass drum hammering away on every beat. She peeks around the edge of an amp, and the room is filled with people. 3 guitar players, a bassist, drummer, two female ghouls on keyboards. She recognizes Aether and Dewdrop immediately. At the mic, of course, is Copia. He’s not wearing a cassock this time, just casual clothes. It’s a black leather jacket with the grucifix emblem on the shoulder, a black clerical shirt with no white tab collar, and black pants. The clothes are…very form-fitting. She’s come to enjoy spending time with the Cardinal during her lessons, and she’s feeling really weird seeing him like this. Her face is getting warm and her stomach doesn’t feel so great.

She doesn’t really have time to focus on that, because once he beings to sing, his voice is overpowering. The song is in a slightly higher range, so he ends up sounding more like the voice on the first record than he did at dinner that one night.

‘Can you hear the thunder…’

This song is so good, it’s ridiculous. She makes a mental note to let Copia know that, but only if it
seems like she won’t get in trouble for eavesdropping on practice. She gets the feeling, from the way the room is set up, that they don’t like people watching them practice. The music suddenly gets quiet, and the chorus hits.

‘I can feel the thunder that’s breaking in your heart…I can see through the scars inside you.’

It makes her weak in the knees, and she has to grab the amp to keep from falling over. Copia’s voice suddenly sounds so fragile, like he’s in pain. She wants to run to him and hold him, which makes her face burn with embarrassment. Calm down, fangirl. Get control of yourself.

The song goes back to very heavy on the next verse and her weird hormonal urges have subsided for the time being. She gets a bit too into it, though, and bumps the amp in front of her. It jiggles a bit, but it doesn’t seem like anybody noticed. She peeks around the edge again, and her blood runs cold.

Copia is looking directly at her, directly in her left eye sticking out around the edge of the amp.

‘Can’t you see that you’re lost….can’t you see that you’re lost without me?’

He sings the chorus again, staring at her as he sings. At first, he looked irritated, but his expression has changed.

He’s singing the chorus to her.

She can’t breathe or move. She’s scared he’s going to be angry at her, but she’s also melting internally at the thought of someone, especially him, singing to her. He finishes the chorus, and steps back from mic as the guitar solo begins. He tips his head down slightly and to the side, as if to ask ‘What do you think you’re doing?’

She waits until he’s turned his back during the solo, and creeps back out the door, closing it as quietly as possible. Even as she runs back to the library, she can hear his voice echoing through the halls.

Miri gets to work on the assignments Copia gave her, and tries to make herself as small as humanly possible. Hopefully practice continues for a while, and she can just leave her work when she’s done. No such luck, though. She hears his footfalls approaching, and she sinks farther down in her seat.

I’ll be with you in un attimo, Miriam!

He walks down the aisle past the table, and turns to go into his quarters. He must be pissed if he’s calling her Miriam. She sits and sweats for a few minutes, trying desperately to get more work completed, but her hand is shaking. Surely he can’t actually punish her, right? He isn’t Papa yet. What could he possibly do, make her write lines? She could go to Imperator to complain, but then she’d end up looking like the asshole. Just suck it up, girl. Take your lumps.

Copia sits down at the table in the seat across from hers. He folds his hands together and just looks at her expectantly. She looks up at him for just a second, then back down at her work, cheeks burning.

I left you instructions and you ignored them.

Yes.

Why?
Because...she mumbles because she can’t bear to hear herself say it out loud.

I’m sorry, what?

She throws her pencil down on the table. Because I wanted to hear you sing, ok? You have an amazing voice, I like to listen to it, is that ok?

Now he’s the one blushing. Well....thank you.

You’re welcome. Now, what’s my punishment?

You were expecting punishment?

Well, yeah. I disobeyed, therefore, I get punished. What do I have to do?

Hmmm....you know the men’s bathroom at the other end of this floor? It was fucking disgusting, sometimes she couldn’t even stand to walk past it.

Are you serious?

No, I just like giving you shit. Finish your work and you can go.

She can’t stop her face from breaking into a huge smile. You’re an asshole.

He smiles back. That’s why they pay me the big money.

More weeks pass by, and now on top of everything else, Miri has to start preparing for her ritual. Imperator asks to meet her in the anteroom just off the cathedral. When she arrives, the Sister has a clipboard with a checklist. She wants Miri to practice certain parts of the ritual several times prior to the real deal.

You will enter the anteroom and remove all clothing she reads from the list. The Sisters chosen as your attendants will paint the appropriate symbols on your body with the goat’s blood, and they will place the ceremonial cloak on you. Then you will exit the room into the cathedral.

They step out into the huge room, which still looks imposing in broad daylight.

You will step over to this section of the altar, light the candles in the correct order, and answer the questions posed to you in the affirmative. That means you say yes.

I understand.

Then you will come over to the altar bed. She gestures to a low-sitting platform that looks big enough to hold a king-size mattress. Miri has been wondering what that was for.

You will disrobe, lay down on the altar, and commencing the sealing of the sacrament. Have you chosen your partner for the ritual yet?

Miri has been dreading this part. There are a few people she has in mind. A couple of the men weren’t too gross, and she didn’t discount the women either. She’s never been with a woman, but maybe one would be nice and gentle and understanding of her…situation.

And, of course, there was always Copia. Thinking of him that way made her face get hot. She would never admit it to anyone, could barely admit it to herself, but there were times during their lessons where she thought about kissing him. Sometimes she imagines him pressing her against a bookshelf
in the back of the library and sticking his hands up her dress. She thinks about what he looks like
naked, and her face burns.

Sometimes, at night, when other people are getting down, she turns down her music so she can hear
them over it. Especially the songs that Copia sings. The combination of moans and his voice drive
her so mad, she barely has to touch herself and she cums so hard she can’t breathe for a few seconds.

She clenches her fists, digging her fingernails into her palms, to try and shake these thoughts away,
because Imperator was still going on and on about something.

And, of course, you’ll receive a full physical from Doc prior to the ritual. He will need a full sexual
history and samples for an STD test-

Oh…that’s….not necessary.

Of course it is! The sexual health of our congregation is not something to be neglected.

No, I just mean….I’m not…I’ve never…you know.

Imperator just looks at her.

I’m still a virgin, ok? I never really even fooled around that much when I was still in high school.
Once I was on the street, it wasn’t safe to put yourself in such a vulnerable position, so….I just never
did it. I’m not saving myself for marriage or anything. It just wasn’t important.

Imperator smiles gently. So that’s why you’ve been so anxious any time the ritual is mentioned. I’m
sure, once you have selected your partner, that they would be willing to discuss any concerns and
make you feel as comfortable as possible. Remember, only an orgasm needs to occur; there does not
have to be penetration if you aren’t ready yet.

Miri relaxes a little. That’s….a huge relief. I just hope whomever I choose is that understanding.

Consent is a cornerstone of our faith, after all.

Nema to that.
Chapter 13

3 weeks before her ritual, Miri is starting to go a bit crazy. She decides, since it seems to be such a distraction, to stop getting herself off at night. And during the day. No orgasms until the ritual. She wants to make sure that she’s good and ready, and it’ll be over before she knows it.

With that in mind, she is concentrating much harder on her Latin studies. If she fills her head with declensions and conjugations, there will be no room for dirty thoughts about Copia. Especially not thoughts about him resting his hand on her shoulder while he checks her work. Or thoughts about him wearing that leather jacket while practicing with the band. Or thoughts about him doing… anything, really. *Fuck, this is bad* she thinks to herself constantly.

*There is nothing wrong with sexual attraction* He chimes in. *It is in your very nature as animals to find one similar in some way, and to desire copulation.*

*Ok, thanks, Biology Teacher from Hell. I just…I just want to be around him all the time, is that wrong?*

*No, not at all. But I will remind you to be aware and wary. Do not take anything at face value.*

*You’re such a downer. I thought you were the party guy, the one everybody uses as an excuse to get high or cum.*

*Freedom is one thing. Deception is another. You can be free and still protect yourself. I want you to be safe and happy, that is all.*

*While I do appreciate that, you need to stop acting like my dad. You need to trust me, too.*

*Very well.*

It’s pouring rain outside, and everybody is miserable at being stuck inside. Miri doesn’t know how it’s possible, but it’s hot and muggy inside while it’s freezing outside. Any time she tries to open her window to get some cool air, the wind just blows rain back in her face. She can’t sleep, she’s not allowing herself to jerk off so she’s too exhausted to stay awake. It sounds like nobody else is having fun tonight either, all probably too sweaty to bother.

Miri decides that if she can’t sleep, she can at least study and maybe get ahead on her Latin work. It’s still a struggle, but some things are finally beginning to make sense. She looks through the books in her room, and remembers there was one that Copia told her about that sounded interesting. Old songs in Latin, but not hymns. More like folk songs. She figures, why not? Even if he’s not awake, she remembers where the book is. She slips on a sweater and her flip-flops and heads downstairs.

Almost all the lights are off in the library, since it’s late, but she knows her way around. She goes into one of the back rows, and manages to find the book easily. She takes it off the shelf, and is about to turn to leave, when she hears a noise.

A stifled moan.

Her eyes double in size, and she looks down the hall in the back. The door to Copia’s office is just barely open, and the light is on. She stands completely still, trying not to breathe or make any sound. She counts the seconds.
One...

Two...

And there it is again, with a breathy gasp. Coming from his office.

Her curiosity gets the better of her, and she slowly creeps towards the door. She’s suddenly thankful that she is wearing flip-flops and not dress shoes, she’s not making any noise whatsoever. Her heart is about to beat right out of her chest, and her hands are so sweaty they’re practically dripping. She clutches the book to her chest and grips it tightly. She takes the biggest breath she can without making noise, and looks through the door crack.

Copia is sitting at his desk, leaning back in his chair. At first glance, it looks like he’s sleeping. Then his brow knits and it’s obvious he’s not. He’s sweating, but so is everybody else. He suddenly bites his lower lip, and Miri cannot believe what she’s seeing.

His cassock is bundled up around his waist, and his pants are undone, but beyond that, she can’t see anything other than his ungloved fist moving up and down in his lap. His lips part slightly, and his breath starts coming in short pants. His hand gradually starts to move faster, the little gasps and moans becoming louder.

Miri shoots a look over her shoulder to double-check that nobody else is in the library. It’s dead silent. That’s the absolute last thing she needs at this moment. Her mind is racing, all her dirtiest fantasies suddenly bubbling up to the surface.

*I could go in there right now* she thinks. *I could tiptoe in, and have him in my mouth before he even knew I was there. I could get my underwear off before going in, and sit on his lap.*

*Then why don’t you* He asks.

*GET. OUT. This is not for you.*

*As you wish.*

She turns back to the scene in front of her, and Copia’s hand is moving even faster now. He’s trying to stifle his moans with his free hand, but it does very little. His back arches, his hips begin thrusting upwards, and his gasps suddenly start forming into words.

*Cazzo…oh…per favore…*

Miri’s face gets hotter and hotter as she watches. *If I’m going to make a move* she thinks *I need to do it now. To hell with the ritual.*

She places her hand on the door and is about to push it open when his gasps suddenly become desperate.

*Ohh…please…Miriam…*

He sits forward so quickly she thinks he’s going to fall out of his chair. His jaw drops open and his body begins convulsing as he cums onto the floor in front of his chair. He groans deeply from his chest as he milks every last drop from his body. His face is bright red, who knows if it’s from exertion or shame.

She cannot move. She needs to move. He’s going to clean up the mess and see her if she doesn’t move. Her desire and disbelief have frozen her in place, so He takes control of her for only a
moment. Just enough to turn her around and get her moving quietly out of the library. She manages to place the book she was holding on a table near the door. Once she’s in the hallway, she finds the strength to move her legs on her own again, and she runs.

*I have to get out of here. I have to get outside, now.*

The sound of Miri’s flip-flops slapping across the floor echoes throughout the entire floor. She runs down the stairs almost too fast, but maintains her footing as she jumps down onto the landing. She continues to the dining hall, and into the kitchen. She slams herself into the door that leads out to the dumpsters, and is finally outside.

She somehow forgot that it was still pouring rain, and she’s instantly soaked. It’s freezing cold, but it’s what she needs right now. Anything to cool down her face and her body. As far as she’s concerned, they’ve both betrayed her, reacting more than she would’ve liked to Copia’s little show upstairs.

She stands in the dark, in the rain, letting it fall right in her face when she hears someone clear their throat. She whirls around, and there’s Dewdrop standing just under the edge of the roof, avoiding the rain. He’s smoking a cigarette, without his mask, his hair no longer braided. It hangs almost all the way down to his waist, like a true lead guitarist. His eyes glow in the dark.

*Don’t you have a shower in your room?* he asks.

*Ha ha, really funny. I forgot it was raining.*

*How could you forget? It’s been raining all day and night. Has something captured your attention so completely that you just…forgot the weather?*

*I…guess you could say that.*

*Anything that you’d like to talk about?*

Her mouth hangs open for a moment. *No. Not something I feel like discussing with anybody.*

*Suit yourself* he shrugs.

She moves to stand next to him under the awning to escape the rain. He offers her a drag off his cigarette and she politely waves him off.

*So…* he says conversationally. *Your ritual is coming up soon. Got someone picked out?*

* Fucking hell, does everybody know about this?*

*It’s a hotbed of gossip and fucking around here, of course everybody knows.*

She sighs angrily. *No, I haven’t picked anybody yet. I’m still considering my options.*

*What’s to consider? Pick one and think about someone else while you fuck them. Easy.*

She looks at him like he’s insane, mouth agape. *Maybe that’s how it works for some people, but not me, sorry.*

He smiles and shrugs again. *It’s just sex. If you get off, what does it matter?*

*It matters to me. I don’t have to explain myself to anybody.*
Really? He takes one last drag and throws the cigarette into a puddle. You’re going to be our Unholy Mother soon. Everyone will be looking to you for guidance, seeing as how you have our Master’s ear at all times. Everything you say or do will be picked apart for meaning, and you will have to explain yourself. Lest you be tragically misunderstood.

She hasn’t noticed he’s moved very close to her, she’s so irritated with what he’s saying. She turns to tell him off, and he’s so close she has to crane her neck up to look at him. She blinks in surprise, and he takes advantage of the opportunity. He firmly grabs her head between his hands and kisses her.

Miri’s first instinct is to push him away, but it’s quickly drowned out by her raging desire. At this point, her body doesn’t care who it receives attention from, it just wants it. She grabs handfuls of his shirt and pulls him closer, the kiss deepening. She tastes smoke and ash on his tongue as it swirls around hers. His mustache tickles her upper lip, and she tries to pull away. He tightens his grip on her head, one hand moving down her back to press her closer. She releases her grip on his shirt, and tries to push away at his chest. He’s starting to growl and gnaw on her bottom lip, like he’s no longer trying to kiss her, but trying to eat her. She breaks free of the kiss, rears her head back and says STOP.

Dewdrop flies backwards several feet into the mud, limbs going everywhere. He’s almost instantly on all fours, growling and baring fangs at her.

She hadn’t used her hands to push him back. She stands there, looking at her hands, like there was something wrong with them.

He chuckles menacingly. Looks like Master has given you a gift. If you want to live long enough to use it again, you should go inside.

Miri doesn’t have to be told twice. She bolts inside to the kitchen and locks the door behind her. Dew can find a different way inside.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The last week before the ritual does not start well. Miri only leaves her room for Latin lessons, meals, and kitchen duties. The day after the rainstorm, Miri is washing dishes as usual, when she pulls a plate down off the stack to be washed. FORGIVE ME in ketchup. Hot tears well up in her eyes, and she jams the plate into the sink water. I thought were were friends, Dew.

He truly is sorry He says. This is his nature as a ghoul. Always hungry for everything. Food, sex, the rush of adrenaline. If he really wanted to hurt you, you never would have made it inside. He cared enough to hold back.

I can’t look at him. I don’t know if I ever will be able to again.

That’s fine. He’ll wait.

Latin lessons are torture now. Miri has a very difficult time looking Copia in the eye, after seeing him in such a state the night before. He’s still the same quiet, awkward person that he was before, but now she can’t help but look at him in a completely different light. Her fantasies are almost out of control at this point.

She’s already chosen him as her ritual partner, but she doesn’t have to say anything until the day before. There will be a meeting with the clergy, and they will finalize everything. Until then, she just needs to keep her shit together as best she can.

Copia has even noticed that she’s not herself. Is everything ok? You seem…distracted.

Just nervous about the ritual, that’s all. I usually get nervous about important things until right before it happens, and then I’m fine. I just need to get to that point, then I’ll be ok.

Are you sure it has nothing to do with…one of your friends?

She looks up from her work. What do you mean?

He does his usual hand wave. You know rumors run like horses around here. The story is that Dewdrop tried to…force you…and you humiliated him.

I guess you could say that. Her face is burning again, and she looks down.

I don’t need to know details…but if you ever need someone to talk to, you know I am always here for you.

She tries her best to smile and thanks him.

Two days left. Miri wants to pull her hair out, she is frustrated and tired beyond belief. The music no longer helps her sleep, the noises of everybody else is like nails on a chalkboard. All she can do is lay in bed and run over a million thoughts over and over. A thought suddenly occurs to her.

What’s really behind that door in the library? Why would a storage room have cold air seeping out from under the door? Wouldn’t cold air come from below, like a cellar?
She scrambles out of bed, in just an oversized sweater and sleeping shorts, throws on a pair of slip-on shoes, and sneaks into the library. It’s dark, the doors to both Copia’s office and quarters are closed. If she does this right, he’ll never even know she was here.

She approaches the door and tries the handle. Still locked.

*You can open this door* He says. *The ability you used on Dewdrop still applies here. You just have to feel the door lock and make it move the way you want.*

She places her hand on the handle, and she can see the lock mechanism in her mind. She pictures the bolt twisting in place, and very slowly, it turns. She tries the handle again, and the door opens.

It’s not a storage room. It’s a set of stairs, descending into the dark. There are lanterns kept in a closet in the library, in case of a power outage, and she grabs one and lights it. She’s really hoping this isn’t some kind of prison or dungeon, but she’ll never know if she doesn’t check it out.

Stone steps that seem to never end, going around and around and around until it’s pitch blackness above and below. She has no idea how long she’s been going down the stairs until it finally levels out. There’s a small landing, which leads to a narrow hallway. There is a door at the end. She’s never been more terrified or excited in her entire life. She only hopes that this newfound power comes if she needs it in a hurry.

Holding up the lantern, she walks down the hall slowly, listening for anything weird or threatening. There’s nothing. Absolute silence.

She walks up to the door, and the handle here is locked too. She tries the same trick again, and the door unlocks. *Guess I never have to worry about losing keys again.*

The room is very dark and still, with no light switch. She holds up the lantern, and almost bumps into a table. There is a chair, a bookcase to the right, and in front of the table is what looks like a display case. It is made of very thick glass and steel, and looks almost unbreakable. There are several books in it, laying side by side. They have to be at least several hundred years old. The covers and bindings look like real leather or animal skin of some kind. The case must be protecting them from the elements, they’ll probably just crumble to dust otherwise. The words stamped into the covers appears to be Italian.

*Too bad they’re locked in there, I’m curious as to what they are.*

*Check the bookshelf over there* He says. *Someone translated them at some point.*

She checks the shelf, and sure enough, there’s a book called The Plague Diaries, Translated into English. *Oh, boy. A first-hand account of the Black Plague? How old are those books?*

*The Black Plague struck Italy in 1348. Do the math.*

*Jesus Christ. Over 650 years old. No wonder they’re locked in boxes.*

She opens the translation and starts to read.

‘My name is Vincenzo Copia. I have received this journal as a gift from my mother, on today my 18th birthday.’
Miri almost drops the book in surprise. *This has to be the guy from the dream. He must be our Copia’s ancestor, going by how ancient the books are.*

She continues reading. He lives in a small village outside Genoa, and his family is very excited, because he’s about to enter the seminary to become a priest. *Guess that didn’t last, if he had children.*

*Many members of the Catholic clergy have sired bastards* He says.

*Ok, ok. Let’s leave the hypocrisy of the Catholic church for another time.*

This Copia seems to be a very innocent and pious young man. So happy to serve his community and his God. His faith is unwavering. Miri feels a twinge of pity, considering what is coming for him.

He enters seminary and takes his vows when he is 20. Once again, family so proud to have a son that’s a priest. He takes up residence in the local church, where he spends his free time tending to the gardens and making pets out of the rats.

*Wow…I guess some things really do run in the family. The rats thing is…weird.* Miri’s mind flashes back to Bishop Johns’ accusation: *YOU AND YOUR FUCKING RATS!*

Everything seems to be going great for Vincenzo, until early 1348. People in Genoa are getting sick. Lots of people. So much pain and death. It makes him very sad, and he prays for their souls. He’s very glad that he and his family are outside the city. It is a sparsely populated area, so the chance that anyone he knows would get sick is small.

One day, he notices some new rats amongst the group that he takes care of. They must have come in from the fields, because of the cold weather. Once he realizes where they actually came from, it is too late.

People in his village begin to get sick. They develop fevers and some vomit blood. Black boils start appearing in armpits and necks. The village doctor quickly becomes overwhelmed, and asks the priests to assist with the dying. Soon, the church halls are filled with the dead and dying. They do their best to keep them comfortable, but there is nothing anyone can do.

The doctor dies. The monsignor dies. Vincenzo’s mother dies, followed quickly by his father and older brothers. Everybody around him dies.

He prays to his God to deliver him from what he believes is the pestilence predicted in Revelations. He has been a faithful servant, what have these people done to deserve this? The only thing he has left are his rats, and eventually, they succumb as well.

Miri has to stop reading for a second. She feels so sad for this poor bastard. To have your entire world yanked out from under you in a matter of weeks, your entire family dead, and you’re left completely alone…she wonders if this guy didn’t just lose his mind towards the end.

When he finally begins to get sick, Vincenzo goes from distraught to angry. His entries suddenly include curse words, all directed at God. He has a serious crisis of faith, bolstered by the fact that he has outlived his village and only now gets sick. He punctures his plague boils (*FUCKING GROSS* Miri can’t help but yell) and smears the oozing pus on the cross on his bedroom wall. *Why the hell would he write that down? Shouldn’t he be dead by this point?*

There’s a gap of about a month, and then the entries resume. *This is impossible* she thinks. *He should be dead. Everybody that got the plague died within a week or two. There’s no way he could survive it.*
But he did. His entries after this are much less emotional and very detailed.

He knew he was dying. He didn’t want to die alone, so he summoned all of his remaining strength in order to get to the nave and die amongst the bodies of his family. He didn’t make it. He fell in the courtyard, unable to get to his feet. He screamed and cursed at God, damning him for ignoring the faithful. How dare you he sobbed.

Suddenly there was a light in front of him. A woman, shining as bright as the sun, in a white gown. Her countenance was too bright to make out clearly, but he could tell she was smiling at him. She held out her hands to him, and he tried to crawl to her, but his body was no longer responding. He thought for a moment that she was the Virgin Mary, but then he noticed the dress. It was streaked with blood. Then she disappears.

An unknown voice appears in his head. He will not hear you, and even if he chooses to, he will never respond. He has abandoned his children. He leaves you to die screaming in filth. I will never abandon you.

The Adversary. Il Diavolo.

Yes, Vincenzo. Serve me, and you will not taste death. You will have power beyond your wildest imagination. But...you must complete a task for me.

At this point, he was willing to do anything to spite the God that had turned its back on him. Anything you ask, I will do.

This is not the plague of Revelations. That has yet to pass. When it does, you will be the one to spread it. You will become Pestilence, the Plague Bringer, the Dark Rider. When it is time for this world to die, you will strike the first blow.

He shudders at the thought of bringing about the end of the world, but if it stops the pain, he will do anything. Anything to spite the God that he served and was betrayed by.

Who is the woman he asks.

She is the Unholy Mother of my church. She will bear my son, who will weaken the kingdoms of men, and prepare the world for my rule. You will serve her until I command otherwise. She must be kept safe, at all costs. Will you do this?

He swears allegiance in the same way he took his vows: on his knees, hands clasped together, tears in his eyes.

Miri feels a swell of anger at Him. You took advantage of a dying man, you piece of shit.

Does it look like I took advantage? He places an image in her mind, like playing a movie in her head.

A thin, malnourished man, kneeling in a courtyard. His robes torn and filthy. Streaks of tears run down his flushed cheeks. He looks up at the sky. His eyes are green, but the left one suddenly fades to white.

It’s the same man. It’s her Copia. He’s younger, no mustache, his hair is longer, but it’s still him.

Miri throws the book across the room and grabs the edge of the table for balance. She feels like she’s going to pass out. I told you there was more to him He says.

YOU KNEW she yells at the empty room. YOU KNEW ALL ALONG. YOU-FUCKING-PIECE-
OF-SHIT each pause accentuated by her fist slamming into the table.

You needed to find out for yourself, I cannot just tell you everything all at once.

I gotta get out of here she gasps, suddenly feeling very claustrophobic. She leaves the book on the floor, grabs her lantern, and leaves the room. She closes the door, and when she turns around, she screams.

Copia is standing in the hallway behind her, a second lantern hung on a hook on the wall. His eyes are incredibly dark and intense. His hands are clenched into fists.

Miri’s back hits the door as she cowers in front of him. She remembers that he is sworn to serve her, but she’s not actually the Unholy Mother yet. She doesn’t want to use her new ability to send him flying, but she prepares herself for the worst.

Chapter End Notes

Aw shit sons, it's about to get real up in this piece.

Dirty things from here on out!
Chapter 15

You are not supposed to be here. Miri never thought Copia would be capable of fury, but he seems full of it now. The way he’s glaring at her makes her feel like a sheep in front of a wolf.

Those things are not for you.

She’s about to apologize, beg for forgiveness, when a thought occurs to her. Wait. He’s not Papa. He’s not my boss. I don’t have to answer to anybody but Him, and He told me to read the damn thing.

She pulls herself up to her full height. Who do you think you are?

He blinks for a second and his look changes from anger to confusion. Wh-

How dare you tell me where I can and can’t go. ‘Not for you’? Kiss my fucking ass. We’re supposed to run this shit together someday, and you’re keeping things from me? Really huge, important things? What the fuck is wrong with you? How am I supposed to trust you wh-

She stops. In the lantern’s light, she can see something glittering in his eyes. Tears. She’s made him cry. His lower lip trembles slightly. He refuses to blink, letting the tears spill over and run down his cheeks.

Miri forgets her anger and indignation, she even forgets her awkwardness and attraction to him, and does the only thing she can think of. She steps forward quickly, and wraps her arms around his neck, pulling him close.

I’m so sorry she whispers into his ear. I can’t imagine how hard this has been, how lonely…

Copia hesitates for a moment, probably out of shock, then wraps his arms around her. He buries his face in her shoulder, and takes a shaky deep breath.

I guess I never realized that…we’re basically in the same boat. Given a position of power, and we have to give up everything for it.

She feels his head nod in agreement against her shoulder, and he turns his face into the crook of her neck. He takes a deep breath and sighs against her skin. This hug is starting to feel like it’s gone on for way too long, but neither of them seems to care.

Miri shifts her hips slightly as she prepares to pull away, and something pokes her. What the hell is that? Her breath catches in her throat when she realizes what it is.

It’s him. He’s hard. She notices that his hands are clutching her tightly, and he’s quivering a little. It’s now or never, girl. If you’re gonna do this, better do it now.

She snakes one hand up the back of his neck, weaving her fingers into his hair. She pulls back just far enough to see his face, and before he can ask what she’s doing, she presses her lips to his.

Every nerve in her body sparks like fireworks. She moans quietly against his lips, and he clutches her even tighter. He brings one hand up to cradle the back of her head. She breaks the kiss, gasping for breath, and touches her forehead to his. They’re both shaking and breathing hard.

Before Miri can say anything, Copia lifts her off her feet and puts her back up against the nearest
wall of the hallway. He presses his whole body against her, and she can feel that he’s even harder than he was a moment ago. He kisses her this time, gently prying open her mouth with his tongue, swirling it around hers. She grabs at his shoulders as he runs his hands up and down her sides. He grabs her knee and lifts her leg up while burying his face in her neck, nibbling and kissing, his mustache tickling her skin.

Miri can’t believe this is actually happening, she’s imagined this scenario thousands of times, but never like this. The scent of dead flowers fills her nose, he’s so close to her, he’s literally right here where she can touch him. If he wasn’t pinning her to the wall, she would collapse, her knees are so weak.

_Do you know how often I have prayed for this?_ he whispers in her ear. _How many times I’ve wanted to touch you like this?_ He brings his knee up between her legs, grinding his kneecap into her flesh, and she lets out a moan that echoes down the entire hallway. She slaps a hand over her mouth to stifle the noise, but he yanks it away.

_No…no, topolino…I need to hear you…please._ He sucks her earlobe into his mouth and gently bites it. A shiver runs through her body. He makes his way back down her neck, and pulls the neck of her sweater down to lick and suck at her collarbone. At the same time, the other hand sneaks under the shirt to grab her breast, a leather-covered thumb grazing across her nipple.

She gasps and arches her back away from the wall, her hip grinding against his erection. He pushes back just as hard, and he lets out a whimper. Miri presses her forehead to his again.

_Can I tell you a secret?_ she whispers. He nods enthusiastically.

_His face flushes even deeper, but she’s not sure if it’s from embarrassment or lust._ _Oh, really_ he says. _You saw that, and said nothing? Why not?_

She shrugs and smiles, her cheeks turning red.

_You enjoyed it, didn’t you? Like you’re enjoying yourself now?_ He moves his knee away from her, and places his fingers against her opening through her clothes. Her shorts are instantly soaked, and it seeps right through to his gloved fingertips. She moans again, ashamed of all the noise she’s making, but she wants him to know what he does to her.

_You are so ready. We could be upstairs in just a few minutes, you know. My room, my bed, is not far. I could be inside you so quickly…_

_Her stomach drops and she feels like she’s going to pass out. Stand up to him_ her internal voice tells her. _If you want to wait for the ritual, say so now! Don’t just do it because he’s got you all worked up!_

_She clears her throat. Actually…we can’t. At least, not yet. I’m…abstaining until the ritual._

_He pulls away and looks at her in disbelief. Really? Why is that?_

_I’ve never had ritual sex in a Satanic cathedral, and I’m a little apprehensive about the whole thing. I’d like to make sure that…my need outweighs my nervousness and I can get off without too much trouble._

_He pushes some stray hairs behind her ear and trails his finger down her neck. And who have you chosen to make you cum?_

_You’re going to be in the same meeting as me tomorrow. You can find out then, with the rest of the_
clergy.

His mouth drops open in shock, but he’s still smiling. You are going to make me wait?

You were gonna have to wait anyway. Unless you’re suddenly not interested….

No! No..I’m…very interested. He sighs. As you wish.

She suddenly notices how cold it is in the cellar and pulls her sweater tighter around herself. I’d like to go back to my room now.

So you can go to sleep and not stick your hand down your pants?

She can’t help but laugh. Pretty much, yeah.

They take the lanterns and head up the stairs. When they reach the landing at the top, he pulls her close for one more kiss. It’s softer now, not as aggressive as before. Let me tell you something he says. Some food for thought, yes? After you go back to your room, I will take off my clothes…and lay down on my bed….and imagine your mouth on this. He takes her hand and guides it to his cock, still mostly hard. She instinctually squeezes it a little, and he gasps.

Now…I dare you to not touch yourself at the thought of that.

You are so dirty she says, smirking. She gently pushes him away, and turns to leave. Tomorrow morning, then.

Miri can’t get back to her room fast enough. She strips off her pajamas, the shorts now totally soaked, and gets into the shower. She makes it as cold as she can tolerate, and just stands under it for a while. She has no idea how she’s going to make it through the next two days, but as long as she and Copia aren’t alone together anywhere, it should be fine. She climbs into bed and puts in her earbuds, selecting all music except for Ghost. If she hears his voice at all between now and the morning…who knows what could happen?
The day before the ritual. Miri wonders if it’s possible for her guts to completely seize up from anxiety, but at the same time, it feels like a weight has been lifted from her. No more awkward pining for Copia. He wants her just as badly as she wants him, maybe more. Armed with this knowledge, she feels like a badass bitch.

She struts down to the kitchen for breakfast duty, smiling at everybody that passes. While she’s washing, she gets another plate full of ketchup. DETAILS it says. She turns around, and there’s Aether, with a table full of ghouls motioning to her excitedly. She doesn’t understand what they mean, until she realizes Copia is sitting at the clergy table. Aether points at her, makes the universal sign for fucking with his hands, then points to Copia. Miri can’t stop her eyes from widening, but she follows it up with a glare and mouths NO. He points to her again, then to his nose, then to Copia. Now she gets it. The ghouls smell him on her.

The look she gives them says there will be no details, and they should keep their mouths shut.

The clergy meeting is immediately after breakfast service, so Miri doesn’t have time to go back to her room and change. Sweaty with stringy hair and pruney hands, it is. Part of her hopes to run into Copia on the way there, and part of her doesn’t. She honestly has no idea how she’s going to react to seeing him again.

She manages to find her way down the windy hallways to Papa’s dining room, where she can hear people talking. Luckily, she’s not the last person to arrive.

Miri! How are you! Is been so busy, no time to visit Papa exclaims as she walks up to the table.

I’m fine, Papa. It has been busy, but hopefully it’ll calm down after tomorrow.

Ehhhh he makes a weird, non-committal noise. Don’t worry, we will discuss it after ritual.

She hears rushed footsteps in the hallway outside, and realizes who the straggler is. Forgive me, Papa Copia says, slightly out of breath. A Brother was in need of a certain book, and he couldn’t find it, and-

The sight of her seems to have rendered him speechless for a moment. Ahem…good morning, Miri.

Good morning, Cardinal. She tries to smile politely, but both of their faces are turning pink. She hopes they can manage to hold it together long enough to finish this meeting, and not alert everybody to what’s happened between them.

Imperator clears her throat, puts on a pair of reading glasses, and opens a binder full of pages. So she says, pointedly. Final meeting regarding initiation. Miri, I gather you have been studying and practicing for tomorrow night?

Miri nods to the affirmative. I have it memorized.

Very good. And…as far as your partner, have you chosen someone?

Miri hesitates for a moment. Yes, I have.

Excellent! And who is it?
Miri would prefer to crawl into a deep hole and die at this point, but she’s here now - might as well make the best of it.

The Cardinal.

She makes sure she’s looking at Imperator when she says this, because she knows if she looks at Copia she’ll either burst into laughter or die of embarrassment. It also means she’ll miss seeing the looks of shock or surprise on the other faces, but she’ll just have to get over it.

Copia sputters for a second before recovering. *Thank you, Miri. It would be an honor.*

Imperator and Papa look at him, then at each other. It almost looks like they’re trying to suppress laughter.

*Just so you’re aware, Miri. This will be the Cardinal’s first initiation ceremony that he has performed, other than his own. Is this acceptable?*

*Yes, perfectly acceptable. Fitting that it’s a first for both of us.* She smiles, knowing that he’s probably dying inside and wants to bury himself in his own hole somewhere.

Everybody around the table seems to have understood her reference, smiling and nodding to themselves. Everybody except Papa.

*What? Did I miss-what?*

Imperator just pats his arm reassuringly. *I will explain it later, Papa.*

*Now, as for ritual preparations. Starting at 11 pm tonight, you will be spending a full 24 hours in total isolation. No verbal or physical contact with any one. Your meals will be brought to your door and left outside. If there is anything you need, you must write it down and slip it under the door. Someone will respond to your request immediately. You may do whatever you choose during this time. Meditate, study, sleep, it is up to you. Most initiates use it as a time to reflect on what they want to give the church, and what they want to receive from it as well. The time is yours to use as you please.*

*I understand.*

Imperator claps her binder shut. *I think that covers everything. We will reconvene in a week to begin discussing the ascension ritual. Thank you all.*

As everybody gets out of their chairs, Miri notices Copia trying to make a beeline for her. She turns quickly and speedwalks out of the room.

*Miri! Miri, slow down!* He tries to whisper loudly at her, but she keeps walking. She’s trying so hard not to just burst into laughter at the idea of him trying to walk fast in that cassock.

She turns a corner, and has to slow down or she’ll fall. He takes that opportunity to grab her by the waist and pull her into an empty classroom. He spins her around to face him, and grabs her by the shoulders.

*Wh-wh….why didn’t you tell me last night that you….you know….you’re- A virgin? You can say it, it’s not a bad word.*

*Ok, yes, a virgin. Why did you say nothing?*
Miri looks down and fidgets for a moment. *It makes me look like a prude, like I didn’t want to do anything because I was saving myself or something. I’m not. I just...figured the ritual was as good a time as any to get it over with. And...after last night...she steps closer to him and looks up into his eyes. I’m glad I chose you. I actually made up my mind after your little...show...in your office.*

_Huh. And yet, you were making me wait._ He brings his hand up to her chin and tips her face up towards his.

_Well, it’s no fun if I don’t make you work for it._ She gives him a big, toothy grin.

Copia looks like he’s not sure if he wants to slap her or kiss her. After a moment, he smiles and kisses her; one hand caressing the side of her face, the other moving down to grab her ass and pull her close to him.

_Careful she says, around his bottom lip. You still have to go back to the library. That’s a long way to walk with an obvious hard-on._

He growls at her and places one last gentle kiss on her lips before taking a step backwards. He gestures towards the door. _You go first. It will look suspicious if we come out at the same time, although I think the gossip hounds know everything by now._

_The ghouls smell you on me she says. That’s how they know._

His shoulders slump a little, like he wanted to keep this just between them and now it’s ruined.

She takes one of his hands, squeezes it, and whispers _It’s fine._

He looks at her with those mismatched eyes, and she gets that fluttery feeling in her stomach. _I’ll see you tomorrow night._

He nods. _It’s a date._

After spending a few months living amongst a few hundred other people, Miri thought the isolation period would be great. Nobody bothering her, no chores, no work that has to be done. She can just chill out and relax.

Within two hours, she’s ready to pull her hair out. She can hear people talking in the halls, talking outside, and she’s not supposed to even look at them. She tries to sleep, but just ends up laying there. She tries to read, but she can’t concentrate on anything for more than a few sentences. She can’t decide what music she wants to listen to, so she doesn’t listen to anything. She’s bored to the point of tears.

_Maybe you should actually do what Imperator said and reflect_ He says. _What do you want to bring to the church, and what do you want to receive?_

_I’m basically bringing my uterus and receiving a son, and possibly more psychic powers. What is there to reflect on?_

_That you still want to do this._

_I already said yes several times, did I?_

_Yes, but now you feel something for Copia. Whether it is love or lust, it is a possible hindrance. Can you carry a child that does not belong to whom you love? Would he have an expectation of your_
faithfulness, despite knowing what you are destined for? These are important things to consider.

For fuck’s sake, I haven’t even slept with him yet. Just let me…I don’t know.

Let you what?

Let me enjoy something that doesn’t directly involve you, for a change.

As you wish.

The night crawls by. Miri is awakened by a knock on her door, and she notices the sun is up. Must be breakfast time.

She opens her door, and there’s a tray with her favorite breakfast foods on it. She quickly yanks it inside and closes the door before she sees anyone. As she takes her plate off the tray, she notices a piece of paper under it. Someone’s breaking the rules she thinks.

She unfolds it, and immediately recognizes the handwriting.

Thinking of you.

C.

She holds it up to her nose and inhales deeply. Dead flowers. She places it under her pillow.

At 10 pm, Miri takes the most thorough shower she’s ever had. She carefully shaves every stray hair she can find, in places she doesn’t want them to be. She dries and brushes her hair, it manages to look decent. She puts on one of her plain black dresses and sits on her bed to wait.

At 11 pm, two Sisters knock on her door. This is it.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

It's the big moment, kiddos.

Be warned: this chapter contains graphic descriptions of oral sex, penetrative sex, and loss of virginity. If these things bother you, feel free to skip this chapter.

Satanists will probably notice that I lifted a few things from them, but I share a birthday with Anton Lavey, so I think I get a pass.

The walk down to the cathedral seems to take forever. For this time of night, even though 10 pm is “lights out, dicks out”, it’s strangely quiet. Like they’re all waiting for something.

Once they’ve reached the cathedral, the Sisters guide Miri to a small room off to the side. It’s very warm and dark, with what looks like a buffet warmer on a table. There is a red and gold hooded robe hanging next to it.

She is instructed to take off all her clothes, and stand on a small sheet of plastic on the floor next to the table. She does so, and one of the Sisters folds her clothes nicely, putting them aside. Once she is on the plastic, they produce two paintbrushes. One lifts the cover of the food warmer, and a strong, coppery smell wafts out. Goat’s blood, kept warm so it doesn’t coagulate.

Miri silently hopes goat is on the dinner menu tomorrow. Otherwise, what a waste.

The girls dip their brushes into the blood, and begin to paint the required alchemical symbols on her body. Sulphur on her chest, water and fire on her arms, what felt like Mercury on her back, between her shoulders. They must have done this more than once, because the symbols look perfect and are not drippy. One brings over a pedestal fan and points it directly at her, to dry the blood faster. The other brings a folding chair over, so Miri can sit while they wait.

There is no clock or window in the room, and Miri has no idea how long it is until midnight. After what seems like a few minutes, she notices her body is shaking. She feels lightheaded and her stomach is turning. One of the Sisters notices her visibly shudder and tries to reassure her.

It can stop whenever you want. No one will be angry if you aren’t comfortable.

It’s not that Miri says. I want to do this, I’m just…I dunno. Scared a little? Excited? Nervous? All of the above?

I wouldn’t worry that much, the other Sister comments. This is the Cardinal’s first ritual as a member of the high clergy, I’m sure he’s just as nervous. She and the other girl look at each other and giggle.

It doesn’t exactly fill Miri with confidence.

Suddenly a small chime goes off. The girls straighten up and get very serious. One goes to grab Miri’s chair, the other gets the robe. The two of them gently remove it from the hanger and help Miri place her arms in the sleeves. It feels much heavier than it looks, and it weighs her down. She tries to
close the snaps on it, but the sleeves are so heavy she can’t lift her arms that high. Good thing she doesn’t have to light any candles over her head.

The Sisters walk her over to the other door, the one that leads into the cathedral. They both wish her luck, and open the door. Miri steps through, and it closes behind her.

The main cathedral is pitch black, with the exception of a few well-placed lit candelabras. They seem to be lighting a path to the altar, so she follows them. The enormous room is so quiet, it’s actually quite frightening. Every little sound seems to echo forever.

She slowly makes her way to the altar, where the ritual candles and knife are sitting. Behind it is the altar bed, the platform now holding a king size mattress with a black cover. Miri’s knees are now shaking, and she thinks she might actually fall over, when a door on the other side opens.

Out shuffles Copia, in a matching red and gold robe. He passes by a table that appears to have another buffet warmer on it, but with towels instead of paintbrushes. Miri tries not to think about what those are for.

She’s so used to seeing Copia in his cassock with the massive grucifix, he looks so weird without it. He seems to be just as nervous as her, maybe more.

He finally makes it to the altar, shyly smiling at her before gesturing to the candles and inverted pentagram. The grounding candle is already lit, they pick it up together and light the other candles in order. They manage not to tip anything over or spill wax, which is miraculous, considering how much their hands are shaking. Then they recite the church’s version of Our Father, in Latin, and Miri feels pretty proud of herself for not messing it up once.

Next, Copia picks up the ritual knife and holds out his hand. She places her hand in his, and he pokes the end of her finger with it, hard enough to draw blood. She hisses and winces in pain, and blood starts to run down her finger. Copia guides her hand to the pentagram and together they paint the same symbols she has on her body. As her hand moves, she recites the vow:

Prince of Darkness, hear us
I believe in one Prince, Satan, who reigns over this Earth,
And in one Law which triumphs over all. I believe in one Church
Our Church to Satan, and in one Word which triumphs over all:
The Word of ecstasy. And I believe in the Law of the Aeon,
Which is sacrifice, and in the letting of blood
For which I shed no tears since I give praise to my Prince
The fire-giver and look forward to his reign
And the pleasures that are to come

She feels like a moron, reciting this out loud, especially in front of anybody else, but this is what’s required. Once it’s done, Copia extinguishes all the candles except the grounding one. He takes Miri’s hand, with the cut finger, and holds it up to his face. The finger is now only oozing a single drop of blood. He places the end of the finger in his mouth, gently sucking and running the tip of his tongue over the cut.

The slight contact with his tongue sends a shiver through her entire body, and a small moan escapes her lips. She’s suddenly very aware of her pulse throbbing between her legs. He seems aware of it too, as he quickly removes her finger and kisses her roughly. She can taste her own blood on his tongue, and she grabs at him, trying to pull him closer. He snatches the side of her robe in his fist, twisting it, and yanks her close. She can feel his erection stirring through the heavy fabric and gently runs her hand across it. He lets out an almost inaudible whimper, sliding his hand down between
them to cup her sex in his palm.

Miri jolts at the contact, breaking the kiss and her gasp echoes loudly through the empty room. She lets her head fall onto Copia’s chest as she holds his shoulders for support. He chuckles into her ear.

*Where is all the nervousness? Did it just disappear? Fly away like a bird?*

She looks up at him, and he’s got this stupid look of fake confusion on his face. She can’t help but laugh at him.

*Shut up* she says playfully. *It’s not my fault you have this effect on me.*

*Oh? And what effect is that?* He begins moving his fingers side to side, back and forth across her folds, one fingertip barely teasing at her opening, and she can hear the wet sounds of her own moisture coating his fingers.

*Ohh, that effect* he says. He brings his hand up to his mouth, sucking the liquid from his fingertips.

Miri feels her body become heavy as lead with desire. She’s so desperate for him, she decides she’s fine with just laying down and letting him fuck her senseless, to hell with the pain.

Copia takes her hands and leads her to the end of the altar bed, where there’s a small step-stool leading up to the mattress. *Someone probably tripped or fell trying to get on the damn thing at some point* she thinks. *Safety first, kids.*

He gently squeezes her hands before letting go and turning his back to her. He takes a deep breath and begins unsnapping his robe. Embarrassment suddenly makes her face hot, and she tries not to look at him while she begins to undo her own robe. That deep-seated shame and discomfort, the idea of not letting anybody look at you this way that was enforced so much as a child, will not subside. The only way she can manage to take off the robe is by telling herself that he’s probably just as self-conscious, and they can be nervous weirdos together.

They let their robes drop to the floor, and he turns around to look at her. She still can’t look at him, and instead looks up at the ceiling, fists clenched at her sides. She hears him take a very shaky deep breath, he probably wasn’t expecting her to have a large tattoo under her breasts.

*Mio Dio* he whispers. *Perfezionare.*

Miri lets out a harsh exhale. *Hardly.*

*No..no. Don’t say that. To me, this is true. Even this* and he gently runs his finger over the long knife scar on her side.

Now it is her turn to have trouble breathing. She tips her head back down to look at him. She refuses to cast her eyes any farther down than she needs to. She knows if she looks down and sees what felt like an enormous hard cock, she’s going to freeze up and that’s it. Do not pass go, do not collect $200. It’s over.

Instead, she focuses on his chest and shoulders. Little freckles peppered here and there, very fine hair just under his collarbones, a few large moles that stand out against his pale skin. She presses her face to his chest and breathes in his flowery smell. She can feel his heartbeat hammering away in her forehead.

He places a gentle kiss on the top of her head, and steps backwards, out of the way of the steps. She takes his cue, moving up the steps until she is standing at the edge of the mattress. She bends down
and crawls onto it, trying desperately to keep her legs together and ass down, so he can’t see any of her yet. She lays down on her side, and immediately curls into an almost fetal position. He lays down next to her, and she still refuses to look down at the rest of his body.

Miri looks into his mismatched eyes, his gaze almost like he’s witnessing some kind of miracle unfolding. He pushes a few strands of hair off her shoulder, barely touching her skin as he runs his fingers up and down her arm. This only goes as far as you want he says. If you don’t want any of me inside you, this is fine. Whatever you need.

I need you she says, taking his hand and placing it on her breast. He squeezes, and her hand tightens on his wrist. More. He squeezes harder, and her high-pitched moan echoes even louder than before. He slowly, carefully rolls her onto her back so he can latch his mouth onto her nipple. Her hands move up to his head, gently cradling it while she runs her fingers through his hair. His tongue swirls around her nipple, his teeth grazing it in little bites.

It’s like someone connected a live wire between there and her opening, for every movement there is a corresponding reaction in her muscles, contracting and relaxing, as though he was touching her there already. It’s so intense, she thinks she might actually cum just from this. She tries to slow her breathing and relax, she doesn’t want it to be over so quickly.

She concentrates so much on her breathing that she doesn’t notice Copia slipping his hand down between her legs again. He only runs his fingers along the outside again, testing to see if she’s any wetter. She is, but not enough yet. He releases his hand and mouth from her chest, and begins to kiss and lick a path down her body. When he reaches the scar on her side, he looks up at her while he runs the tip of his tongue up and down the raised line. Never again he whispers. Nobody will ever hurt you again. I promise this.

The tenderness of this gesture brings tears to her eyes, and she has to look away. He continues downward, hands on her hips, until he reaches the top of her mound. She only trimmed there, not wanting to risk cuts or razor burn, and he rubs his nose over the scratchy patch of hair, breathing in her scent. He exhales roughly, his breath hot on her skin. Her thighs are still clamped together, mostly out of embarrassment. Nobody has seen her there since she was probably an infant, and nobody has seen her like this.

He looks up at her, a twinge of concern in his eyes. Just look at me he says. Keep looking at me, nothing else. She locks eyes with him and doesn’t look away.

He sits up slightly and moves his hands to the sides of her thighs. He gently lifts her legs so her knees are bent. Then he places his hands on the backs of her thighs and very gently begins to pull her legs apart. Her whole body begins to shake, and he pauses. Keep looking at me he reminds her. She nods, and he continues to coax her legs open. Disgusted with her own self-consciousness, Miri takes a deep breath and lets her legs drop open.

She wasn’t expecting Copia to moan so loudly when seeing her swollen flesh for the first time, and she covers her eyes with the palms of her hands.

I’m sorry, cara he says quickly. I just…I wasn’t expecting....

Expecting what?

Expecting to be so hungry for you. He suddenly leans down and his mouth is on her.

She yells in surprise and pleasure, her hands instantly grabbing his head, all shame and embarrassment forgotten. There’s nothing now but his lips, teeth, and tongue moving over her most
sensitive parts. Sucking and nibbling at her folds, the tip of his tongue gently lapping at her wetness. She lets go of his head and grabs his wrists instead, so she doesn’t accidentally smother him or pull out his hair.

His tongue travels upwards slightly, and he ponders the little nub of flesh barely protruding from a hood of skin. He looks up at her as he barely touches it with his tongue. Her whole body jolts, her hips bucking up at him uncontrollably. Her breath is now coming in huge gasps, and she thinks she might pass out.

Too much? he asks.

A little bit she manages to say.

Instead of putting his tongue directly on her clit, he uses his lips to move the hood over it, back and forth, much like the way she touches herself. The heat and wetness of his mouth makes it infinitely more intense than any time she’s ever gotten herself off.

Miri doesn’t even notice the amount of noise she’s making now. All she can concentrate on is how fucking good this feels, the tension starting to build deep in her. Copia suddenly stops what he’s doing and moves away slightly. She makes a sound of disappointment, and then gasps as he pushes his tongue inside her. There’s a slight sting at the opening, which quickly fades as the combined wetness makes it easier for his tongue to go deeper. The tip of his nose grinds into her clit with every thrust of his tongue, and she wonders if people have actually died from being so turned on.

Oh my god…oh my god…she whispers over and over. He swirls his tongue inside her, and her hips thrust so hard she worries she might break his face. He withdraws, and begins planting small kisses on the insides of her upper thighs, paying special attention in the crooks of her legs.

Please she begs. Please don’t stop.

I need to breathe he laughs. You don’t want me to die down here, do you?

There’s worse ways to go.

He chuckles and his mouth returns to the hood, slowly moving it back and forth again. In seconds, she is whimpering again, her legs shaking. She misses the attention on her opening, and is about to push him back down when there’s suddenly another twinge of pain there, along with pressure. He’s slipped a finger inside, just one, but it feels like all of them. He doesn’t move it at first, so she can adjust to the feeling. It feels foreign and welcome all at the same time. Her instincts tell her to move her hips a little, and when she does, his finger slides halfway out and back in again. It brushes against something inside, and she’s stunned it feels so good.

Is this ok? he asks, slowly moving his hand in time with her hips.

Yes! she cries out, wanton moans spilling from her mouth.

He starts to move faster, fucking her gently while he works her hood and clit with his tongue. After a few seconds, it just isn’t enough. She needs more.

Another she gasps. Another one…

He slowly pulls his finger out, only to push back in with two. The increase in stretching and pressure still stings, but she’s making herself enjoy it. If she’s afraid of it, she’ll only tighten up and that will make the pain worse. His fingers run over a spot inside that makes her want to bear down and pull his fingers as deep as possible.
The combination of external stimulation and internal pressure makes her feel like she’s being yanked back and forth, being dragged over a line of pure pleasure and back again. The tension is building even higher now, the muscles in her thighs and pelvis starting to quiver.

*Oh god* she moans. *I’m so close…really, really close…*

*Then seal the sacrament, cara mia…cum for Him.*

His hand and mouth move faster in tandem, the flesh between them feeling like a giant raw nerve. He hums around her clit, his fingers making a slippery sound as they move in and out. Her body simply can’t take any more, and the tension releases in a giant pulse of energy and pleasure. Her leg muscles stiffen and her toes point, she grabs handfuls of the mattress cover and yanks as her fists clench. The muscles in her pelvis contract so hard, it’s almost painful, and she wails so loud she wonders if the light fixtures will fall from the ceiling.

As Miri starts to come down, she becomes aware that Copia is still working away down there, trying to coax more out of her. She puts her hands on his head and gently pushes away at it. *I’m done* she pants. *You did it.*

He withdraws his fingers, another sting but she doesn’t care. He looks up at her and smiles. *No, you did it. I merely assisted.* He brings his fingers up to his mouth to suck her juices off them, and the look on his face suggests it’s one of his favorite things to taste. She reaches for him, to have him lay down with her, but when he tries to move to the side, she traps him between her thighs. *I don’t think so* she says.

He looks at her warily, and slowly lowers himself down on top of her. His cock, now throbbing hard and leaking, is sandwiched between their bellies. She moves her legs open wider so his hips rest on hers, and they wrap their arms around each other. She kisses him, tasting herself on his lips. It’s kind of a weird, dark taste, not much different than the few times she’d given blow jobs as a teenager.

*Copia is slightly thrusting his hips at her, his cock sliding between them easily. Miri slips her hand between them, running her finger through the pre cum on her stomach, and sticks her finger in her mouth. It’s salty, like she remembers, but with a hint of…honey? More flowers* she thinks to herself.

He stares at her intently as she sucks at her fingers. His jaw drops and he moans when she grabs his cock in her hand. It’s slippery and hot, thick veins rippling through it. She can’t even get her hand all the way around it, but she still wants it inside her. She tips her hips up at him, and slips it down between their pelvises so the tip rests against her opening.

He pushes her hand away and takes his cock into his own hand. He rubs the tip up and down her folds slowly, coaxing as much moisture out of their bodies as possible. She runs her hands up and down his arms, feeling the tension building in his muscles as he tries to be gentle. She’s never wanted something so badly in her entire life, than to be penetrated by him at this very moment. It has to be him, no one else.

She brings her hands to his face, running her thumbs over his cheekbones and lips. *Please* she whispers. *I want this. Don’t you?*

He rubs his face against her hand, his mustache scratching her palm. *So much…*

*Then do it.*

He lowers himself down to kiss her, propping his body up on his elbows. He slips one arm under her back, cradling her head in his hand. The other hand goes back to his cock, pressing its tip against
Relax your legs as much as you can he says. Just let them lie open.

She nods and relaxes as best she can, but they still twitch with anxiety. He presses closer, the tip almost slipping inside. Take a deep breath, let it out slow.

She takes a shaky deep breath in through her nose, and lets it out slowly through her mouth.

Good. Another.

She takes another breath, more steady this time, and when it’s halfway out of her lungs, he moves and in one thrust, he’s halfway inside her.

She cries out in pain and surprise. The stinging is sharp this time, almost like tearing. The pressure of being even partially filled is so intense, she feels like she can’t breathe. Copia lowers himself down the rest of the way, pressing little kisses next to her ear. Just breathe he says, his own breathing shaky. You’re ok, just breathe.

She nods, running her hands up and down his back and shoulders. She feels a slight ridge on the back of his left one. Where he was pierced by an arrow hundreds of years ago. She runs her finger over it, and he looks away. Look at me she says. There’s conflict in his eyes, like he wants to tell her everything but doesn’t know how. She pulls his head down to kiss his forehead with one hand, and moves the other down to his ass, digging her fingers into the muscle. She pulls as hard as she can, and it moves him all the way inside.

They both gasp from the sensation, foreheads pressed together. Copia lifts his head slightly to look at her, then slowly pulls back and thrusts into her gently. The slight impact of his lower belly bumping against her clit, while the soft skin of his balls rubs against her folds, is enough to make her whole body shiver.

Harder she whispers. He does as he’s told, pulling back and thrusting a little harder. She brings her hips up to meet his, and the impact is even more intense. His cock rubs against that same spot inside, and her moans become even more obscene. He squeezes the back of her head and turns it so she can’t look away.

You feel that? he asks as he rotates his hips slightly.

Yeah…

That’s me he says, a darkness permeating his voice. That’s me inside you…fucking you…He punctuates each pause with a thrust.

Keep fucking me, please she begs, pulling him down to wrap her arms and legs around him. Their pace increases with almost every thrust, going faster and harder until their bodies are slamming against each other, slick with sweat. Miri feels the same tension building again, but even more intense. The weight of Copia’s body on her, the knowledge that he’s buried deep within her, is almost enough to send her over the edge.

He buries his face in her neck, muttering something in Italian that she can’t understand. She looks up at the ceiling, at the giant murals of demons and angels fighting. She’s starting to get tired, her hip and thigh muscles aching from exertion. She considers asking him to stop so they can change positions, when he moves his lips back to her ear.

You feel so fucking good he whispers. It feels so good inside you…and he moans so erotically in her
ear that she knows that’s it. She’s going over the edge and that’s that.

Ohmygod, ohmygod, I’m gon-I’m gonna cum…I can’t stop it…

Then don’t he chuckles.

She digs her nails into his back, pulling her knees up so he can thrust even deeper, and the tension explodes within her. It feels like electrified wires running through her body instead of nerves. Every muscle is pushed to its limit, trying to contain the pleasure racing through her. She tries to bury her face into his shoulder so her screams are muffled, but he pulls her head away. The noise echoes off almost every surface in the room, repeating over and over.

She’s only barely aware that his thrusts have become sloppier, not as steady. He’s trying to hide his face from her as he gets close, but she won’t let him. She grabs his face with both hands and forces him to look at her. Look at me she growls.

Copia looks down at her, lips swollen, hair stuck to his face with sweat. She runs her thumb across his bottom lip, wipes a bead of sweat away from his temple. She slides both hands down his back, resting them on his hips. It’s ok she whispers. You can cum inside me, it’s ok.

Now that he has permission, he arches his back and thrusts even harder than before. He grabs handfuls of the mattress cover and uses that to stabilize himself as he rams his pelvis into hers. His mouth suddenly opens, and his eyes squeeze tightly shut, like he’s in pain. The moans of pleasure that come out are almost enough to make her cum again, but her muscles are just too tired. His entire body starts to quake as he shouts something in Italian, and his thrusts suddenly slow down and become more gentle. At the same time, Miri feels a warm pulsing sensation deep inside, followed by something wet. Knowing that she did this to him, she made him cum, makes her heart race and adds to the fluttery feeling in her stomach.

Copia finally stops thrusting and collapses on top of her, panting heavily. She smooths his hair back from his face, and lightly runs her hands across his shoulders. They lay joined together for a while, letting their breathing return to normal. Eventually, Copia raises his head from Miri’s shoulder to look at her. They’re both red-faced, sweaty, tired, their hair sticking up all over the place. She opens her eyes and puts her hands over them, laughing.

What’s so funny? he asks.

She shrugs. All my anxiety. So dumb and pointless.

But you are happy?

She looks down at him and his dark puppy-dog eyes. Very.

He places a gentle kiss on her lips and runs his fingertips across her cheek. Now comes the unfortunate part.

What part is that?

He raises himself up on his hands, and slowly pulls out of her. The full feeling is instantly replaced by a throbbing soreness that makes Miri squeeze her thighs together. She hisses through her teeth as she rolls onto her side. Don’t worry he says, patting her thigh. I’ll take care of you in just a moment.

He slowly gets to his feet and staggers to the table where the warmer and towels are sitting. The warmer is filled with water, and a great gout of steam plumes in the air when he removes the cover. He takes one of the small towels and dips it in the warm water, then wrings it back out. Miri closes
her eyes to give him some semblance of privacy while he cleans up, but before she does, she catches a glimpse of his completely naked body. The hair at the base of his dick is matted to his skin with her blood. She squeezes her thighs even tighter together, worrying that she’s seriously injured something.

She suddenly feels something touching her leg, and it’s him, armed with another clean cloth. He motions for her to roll, and she slowly moves onto her back again. He bends her legs up and apart slightly, then takes the cloth and gently cleans away the streaks of blood and semen on the insides of her thighs. It stings when it moves over her folds, they’re so swollen and irritated. Once he’s done, he folds it over and places it directly on her. *Just keep it there for a few minutes, it will feel better.*

She puts her hand on the cloth to hold it in place and lowers her legs. He sits next to her for a while, just running his hand up and down her leg, looking at her. She starts to get very self-conscious and covers her face. *What, I can’t look at you?* he asks.

She’s smiling so hard she can’t really speak, but he seems satisfied with that as answer. After a few minutes, he sighs heavily. *I hate to do this, but…I need to go.*

*Go where?*

*I actually have to fill out paperwork detailing the success of the ritual. One of the things nobody thinks about: how much paperwork these things create. As Papa’s right-hand man, it falls to me to make sure it gets done. Even if I would much rather be doing something else.*

*Well, that sucks. It can’t wait until morning?*

*You have to meet with Papa right after breakfast tomorrow, and I have to meet with him before that. There won’t be time.*

*Hmm. Disappointed.*

*I know, cara. The next few days will be busy for us both, but…I want to see you like this again.* He runs his hand up her side and grazes her breast with his thumb.

*How about tomorrow?*

*You need to give your body time to heal. If I have not come to see you in 3 days, come to my office.*

*Ok. I’ll miss you* she says, smiling.

*And I, you.*

He places another gentle kiss on her lips before getting to his feet and holding out his hands for her to take. He helps her to her feet and she sways for a second, her legs like jelly.

*If you call for the Sisters, they will help you back.*

*I’ll give it a try before I start yelling.*

He hands her the heavy robe before pulling his own back on. Once she has it on, he snaps it closed for her.

*Don’t forget to blow out the last candle* he teases.

Before she can reply, he kisses her one last time, sweeping his tongue into her mouth quickly. She rests her hand on his hip, squeezing a little then pushing him away.
Go do your paperwork she says.

He gives her a silly bow before turning and disappearing back into the darkness.

She slowly makes her way back to the anteroom, where the Sisters are waiting. Without a word, they help her take off the robe and put her clothes back on. They walk with her all the way back to her room, and wish her a good night.

She barely manages to get undressed again, and gets into the shower. The goat’s blood symbols have mostly been washed away by sweat, but she can’t see the one on her back to be sure. She scrubs everything she can reach without having to use her legs. They are beyond sore, and her privates feel like they’ve had every inch of skin rubbed off. She gently washes herself with her soap-covered hand, and it comes away pink with blood. I guess another round tomorrow isn’t a good idea she thinks.

Once she’s done, she drags her pajamas on and collapses on top of her covers. She’s asleep in seconds.
Chapter 18

The morning after, Miri thinks she should’ve requested a wheelchair. Her entire body is so sore, she can barely roll over to get out of bed, let alone walk. She hobbles to the bathroom and it’s like someone poured acid over her privates. She manages to get out of her pajamas and into her new clothes. Now that she has passed initiation, she gets to wear something that looks like a nun’s habit, but is more form-fitting and has a shorter skirt. It’s still black, so she’s fine with it.

It takes her 20 minutes to walk down to the dining room for breakfast, a walk that usually only takes 5. She’s been excused from kitchen duty for today, since they knew she was up late for the ritual. The typical stares from the others are there again, but when they see her wearing the typical Sisters outfit, they all break into big smiles. Apparently they’re happy she passed.

She sits at the clergy table, and one of the girls from the kitchen runs out to ask what she wants. Just a lemon poppyseed muffin and a glass of milk today. She doesn’t really have an appetite, despite her exertion the night before. It’s hard to think about food when just sitting is almost agony.

Once she has her muffin and milk, she just picks at it and eats little bits. She doesn’t have to meet Papa for a little while yet, and her mind keeps replaying the events from the night before. Copia’s kisses, his hands on her, the weight of his body pressed against her. The look on his face when he thrust inside her the first time. She feels her face getting flushed again, and drinks down the entire glass of milk at once. When she sets it down, there’s a loud clunk in the chair next to her. She doesn’t need to look to know it’s Dewdrop.

He’s eating an apple, in a really loud and sloppy way. She actually hasn’t spoken to him since the night he kissed her and then tried to eat her. She doesn’t really know what he’s doing, so she just keeps picking at her muffin.

So….Copia, huh? he finally asks.

Yeah.

A lot of people didn’t think he could pull it off.

Well, he did, obviously. More than once.

Hmph. Good for him. And you.

She nods, still refusing to look at him.

There’s another clunk on her other side, she looks and it’s Aether. He seems very concerned, placing a hand on her shoulder. You alright then?

Yeah…just tired and a bit sore…why?

He and Dew share a look over her head.

Well…we can smell the blood.

Now she understands. They must think Copia did a real number on her, if she’s bleeding the next day.

Bleeding is supposed to be normal after the first time, you know.

She almost bursts out laughing at the look of surprise and realization on Aether’s face. She finally
turns to look at Dew, and his look is of pure shock and disbelief.

*Now that we’ve had this lovely, embarrassing moment, I have to go see Papa.* She struggles a little to get out of her chair, and they’re both instantly trying to help her, like she’s an invalid.

*Thank you, but..I’ve got this.*

As she walks out of the dining hall, she hears Aether call, *Feel better soon!* It is immediately followed by the sound of a smack against the back of his head.

Papa isn’t waiting for her in the dining room when she reaches his quarters. One of his guards asks her to follow him, as they head down more dark, winding hallways. They finally come to a room filled with candlelight, he bows and excuses himself.

Inside, the walls are covered with paintings, drawings, sketches, almost every inch reachable is covered. There are sculptures and busts on pedestals against the walls. Miri isn’t sure if this is a miniature art museum or just storage for all the weird art around the church. Papa is sitting down off to one side, taking a breath from his oxygen mask.

*Ah! Good morning, Miri. I hear you completed the ritual with flying colors. Congratulazioni! The Cardinal did a good job, yes?*

She bows her head slightly, smiling and trying not to blush.

*We didn’t think he had it in him, so nervous all the time, he is. But - he pulls himself up to standing - sometimes people surprise you. Come! I want to show you this.*

He gestures his hand around the room at all the art. Now that she’s had a chance to stop and look at it, Miri realizes it’s all of the same person. The art is obviously from differing time periods, in different styles, but it’s all the same subject. A woman with long hair, blue eyes, in a white gown streaked with blood. It’s Rachel, the way she appeared to Copia all those years ago in Italy.

*Who painted all these?* she asks.

*Copia. It is a long story, but you should know. He -*

*I know about his deal with the devil. What he is now, what he’s supposed to do.*

Papa looks at her for a moment. *Oh? And how is that? Did he tell you?*

She looks down at her feet. *Not exactly…I broke into the archives in the library and found the books.*

*Ah. Well, you must not have read them all, or else you would have seen his…obsession with our Unholy Mother.*

*I know he was commanded to serve her, and he was with her when she died. When did he paint these?*

*After she died. No cameras back then, no way to remember her but this.*

*It does seem a bit…excessive.*

*Oh, it was quite obvious to everybody that he was infatuated with her. He always did as she asked, no hesitation. He once told me she was the light of his salvation, and he never wished to do anything that would turn her light away from him. When she died…he spent centuries working behind scenes,*
studying and preserving the old texts. He shut himself off from the entire world for such a long time, when the church asked him to come to America and assist our mission here, it was difficult...for us and him. He wouldn’t look at people, you could barely hear him speak.

Miri swallows the lump in her throat, her heart breaking for Copia a little. She’d had no idea Rachel had meant so much to him. I can’t imagine how he reacted when he found out I was here.

He looked like he’d seen a ghost. Then he locked himself in his office for two days. He only came out when Imperator suggested he teach you Latin.

He turns to her suddenly, and places a hand on her shoulder.

I say this because I care and I worry...I worry that he only sees Rachel when he looks at you, and it clouds his mind. He is not serving you, only his memory of her.

She rests her hand on top of his and smiles. I appreciate that, Papa. Trust me - if I think he’s stuck in the past, I’ve got ways to remind him where he is.

He returns the smile. I do not doubt this, Sister.

With all the excitement surrounding her ritual, Miri didn’t even notice that it was only a few days until Christmas. There weren’t any trees or decorations put up around the church, so she assumes they don’t celebrate it, until she overhears someone talking about the Solstice Mass. Of course they would celebrate the darkest day of the year.

Holly and Lydia approach her on the way to the cathedral, obviously wanting details of her ritual, but she wants to save herself and Copia any further embarrassment. When they approach the doors, she notices the congregation isn’t filing into the sanctuary, they’re all going through an adjacent room first.

Oh, that’s right Holly says. You haven’t been here for the Veneration of the Relics. You have to be a member or a Sibling in order to participate. Come on.

Miri slowly files into the next room with the rest of the crowd, and she realizes what relics they’re referring to. There are three giant glass boxes, much like the ones holding Copia’s journals in the archives. These don’t contain books, though.

Each one holds a body.

3 men, all dressed in different papal robes and mitres, laid out in glass boxes inlaid with gold. Nihil’s sons.

When the members stop at the first box, Emeritus the First, they smile and place gentle kisses on the box. His skull paint doesn’t hide the fact that he looks ancient, which really makes Miri wonder how old his father is.

At the second box, Emeritus the Second, people seem to be more cautious, like they expect him to wake up at any moment. Miri agrees, he looks really intimidating, even in death.

The third box seems to get the most reaction out of the crowd. Emeritus the Third, who vaguely resembles Elvis, even with the skull paint. He’s obviously the most attractive of the three, and apparently the most popular with the female members of the congregation. Several women sob uncontrollably as they pass by, some even throw themselves onto the box and have to be pulled off by Brothers. Miri leans down to get a better look. While his two older half-brothers are bald as
cueballs, the Third has thick black hair brushed away from his face. His face paint isn’t as off-putting as the others.

_No wonder they're so upset_ she thinks. _He looks like a rock star._

The crowd is now pushing them out of the room and into the sanctuary of the cathedral. Papa is already sitting in his chair near the altar, head down. Miri thinks he’s asleep until she sees him raise a hand to his face and dab at his eyes. Her heart breaks for him, this inhumanly-old man, the bodies of his children on display.

She takes her place next to Imperator in the chancel, hoping that this Mass will be a little bit more exciting than the others. The bishops tend to be incredibly dry and boring, and when Papa speaks, almost nobody can understand what he’s saying.

Just then, the door to one of the anterooms opens, and Copia emerges. He’s wearing a red biretta and cassock now, very similar in color to the ceremonial robes they had worn the other night. Miri blushes and looks away, trying not to look at the altar as well.

It doesn’t seem to matter what the situation is, if he’s standing at a microphone, all of Copia’s insecurities seem to vanish. He speaks loud and clear, with affect and confidence. He holds the congregation’s attention quite well, although most of them are probably just waiting to see if he stumbles or falls apart. He doesn’t, though. A stage is a stage, and if he can impress and enthrall a crowd on one, he can do it on any other.

Before she knows it, the Mass is over. In the time it takes her to stand up from her seat, Copia has disappeared through the door again.
It is now Christmas Eve, which is apparently an excuse to party. The dining hall has been transformed into a giant dance hall, with the tables and chairs pushed back to the walls. Ridiculous death metal is blaring from a stereo, and the Siblings are drunkenly attempting slam dancing.

Miri cries with laughter as she watches a group of female ghouls attempting the Macarena to one of the songs. None of them are doing the moves in the right order, their tempo is off, and one seems to think pelvic thrusts is one of the moves. It’s absolutely ridiculous, and she really wishes someone had a camera.

She wanders over to the table that is serving as the bar, but the ghoul manning it, the tall one they call Mountain, refuses to let her have anything alcoholic. I know you’re not 21 yet he says. The law is the law.

What the fuck, you’re such a bummer she teases.

He shakes his head. Copia would have me flogged if I let you drink.

Speaking of him, where is he? You’d think he would show up just to have a laugh. I haven’t heard from him in days.

He’s behind on something, he’s been putting in a lot of late nights in his office. Maybe if you ask him to come down, he’ll take a break for a change.

The library is dead silent, as usual, and the light is on in Copia’s office. Miri peeks in the door, and he’s at his desk, scribbling away in a book while looking at what looks like loose pages torn from another book. Translating Latin, no doubt. He doesn’t notice her at the door, or when she walks into the room and stands in front of his desk.

She stands quietly, not moving, while he continues writing. His concentration intensifies for a moment, and he sticks his tongue out of the corner of his mouth as he carefully writes something down. The sight of it ignites that familiar heat between her legs, and she decides to do something about it.

She slowly walks around to the side of his desk, and gently raps her fist on the surface. It startles him, and he jumps in his chair. When he sees it’s her, his cheeks flush and he looks down shyly at his hands. She carefully picks up the papers on the end of his desk and sets them down on a nearby table. Now that there’s space, she sits down on the surface, her feet dangling in the air. He leans back in his chair, finally looking at her, with his hands folded in his lap. He looks mildly amused and curious as to what she’s doing.

She doesn’t make a sound as she reaches down to the hem of her skirt and slowly begins to inch it up her legs. Copia’s eyes move from her face down to her hands, and they widen. He takes a deep breath and lets it out shakily. She continues to slowly pull it up, bit by bit, until it reaches the top of her stockings. Then she stops.

Copia is staring at her thighs so intently, he doesn’t even notice she’s stopped. He’s in his own little world, until Miri clears her throat, the sound a bit loud in the silent room. He looks up at her, at the expectant look on her face, and he finally gets the point. In an instant, he’s out of his chair, pushing
between her legs, grabbing her face as he kisses her deeply. She can’t help but moan into his mouth, clutching at the crucifix hanging on his chest.

Miri wraps her legs around him, pulling him closer, as he desperately struggles to remove his gloves. Once they’re off, he haphazardly throws them to the side, one hand moving up her thigh and then between her legs. He gasps in shock when he realizes she’s not wearing underwear. She had stopped in her room to take them off, just in case. He makes a little whimpering noise when he feels how wet she already is, and he easily slides a finger inside her.

She breaks the kiss, tipping her head back and sighing loudly. He seems to panic for a second. D-did I hurt you? I can’t you dare stop.

No, and don’t you dare stop. She pulls him close again, kissing and sucking on his swollen bottom lip. He breaks away, withdrawing his finger and bringing it up to his mouth. Before he can react, she grabs his hand and puts the finger in her own mouth, swirling her tongue around it, then slowly pulling it out. The look of amazement on his face is almost comical.

While he stands there in shock, Miri starts pulling up the front of his cassock so she can reach his pants. She has the button and zipper undone, and has his pants and underwear pushed halfway down his ass before he snaps out of it. He roughly grabs her waist and yanks her close to him, her wetness rubbing off on his exposed lower belly. He pulls her skirt all the way up to her waist, then gently pushes her away, indicating he wants her on her back. She lies back on the desk, biting her lower lip in anticipation.

Copia finishes pulling his clothes down enough so his cock bobs free from them, several drops of pre-cum already dripping from the tip. He moves Miri’s legs up and back so he has a clear view of her flesh. There’s no sign of any damage done by his rigorous deflowering several nights earlier, and he sighs with relief. He gently thrusts the tip of his cock against her folds, spreading their mutual wetness up and down his length. The sensation, combined with the way she’s looking at him, wanton and ready, is too much. He grabs her waist and slowly thrusts inside her, only giving her a few seconds to adjust.

She lets out a small cry, the stretch burning a little, but the feeling of him filling her up overrides any discomfort. It’s even more intense than the first time, since she’s much less anxious and his position is allowing him to thrust deeper. His cock keeps rubbing over that sensitive spot inside, and she knows she isn’t going to last very long. One hand grabs the edge of the desk, the other his lower arm, as he thrusts at a steady pace.

Miri leans her head back against the desk, already gasping and moaning, when she notices something. The door she pants. It’s sti-still open…

Fuck it, let them hear Copia grunts. Let them hear how good we are together…ohh….

His thrusts pick up speed, the idea of someone eavesdropping on them having an obvious effect on him. She feels the familiar tension in her pelvis building higher and higher, much faster than before. She barely has a chance to formulate words.

Oh, fuck! Fuck…I’m so close, so close…..see what you do to me? She looks up at him, her eyelids so heavy with lust she can barely keep them open. He bites his lower lip in concentration as he moves one hand from her waist, down between them, and just barely rubs at her clit with his thumb.

That little bit of stimulation is all it takes, and she’s cumming so hard she can’t make a sound. Back arching off the desk, legs shaking, her hand squeezing Copia’s arm so hard, she worries it’ll bruise. Her eyes are clamped shut, and she can barely hear him moaning in response to her muscles.
convulsing around him. When it’s over, she looks up at him, still thrusting but now the sound of their coupling is quite loud.

He looks at her, smiling and spent, and that’s what drives him over the edge. He groans loudly, thrusting fiercely for a few seconds, then he withdraws completely. He bends her right leg back towards her, so her knee is almost hitting her chest, stroking himself frantically, and she feels hot fluid pulsating onto the back of her thigh. He deftly reaches into one of his desk drawers and grabs some tissues, wiping the mess off her leg before it can drip onto the desk or her clothes.

Gasping for breath, Copia bends over and rests his head on her stomach. She runs her hands through his hair, and rubs at his shoulders.

*This is much more fun than Latin* she sighs. He looks up at her, slightly annoyed, and they both burst into laughter.

*Would you rather have…anatomy lessons, than Latin lessons?*

*If they’re anything like this, absolutely. You could always teach me how to say things like, ‘fuck my mouth’ in Latin.*

He shoots her a rather devious look.

*What, are you ready again? So soon?*

*For you, cara….I am always ready.*
Chapter 20

Christmas Day, after their “lesson”, Miri climbs off Copia’s lap and can’t seem to find her underwear. Where the hell did it go?

He laughs as he pulls his pants back up. The room isn’t that big, they couldn’t have gone far.

Maybe you shouldn’t have just thrown them wherever.

He shrugs. Maybe you shouldn’t get me so hard so fast, all the blood gone from my brain and I don’t think.

She shoots him a look as she bends down to look under a table. I don’t have to get you hard at all.

He pouts, sticking his bottom lip out so far a bird could land on it. You wouldn’t do that to me, would you?

If you keep losing my underwear, maybe.

He throws his hands in the air and gets up to help her look. Under the edge of a bookshelf, she sees a scrap of fabric. There they are! She reaches for them, but they suddenly disappear from sight. Like they were being dragged away.

She jolts upright and slowly backs away from the shelf. Copia….what was it that Johns said…about rats?

Oh, those sneaky little buggers. He rushes over and pulls the shelf away from the wall. There’s a hole where the wall meets the floor, and the fabric is just barely poking out from it. He bends down and makes a noise like ‘tsch-tsch’ and wiggles his fingers in front of the hole. Come out, now. Don’t be rude.

Something furry squeezes through the hole, and he catches it in his hands. It’s a big brown rat, with her underwear clutched in its mouth. Miri recoils from it, clasping her hands to her chest. She’s used to rats, they were all over the dumpsters and trash cans in the alleys near restaurants, but she never really wanted to get close to them.

It’s ok Copia says, petting the rat gently. You need to stop taking things that don’t belong to you. That is incredibly rude, Fredo.

The rat’s name is Fredo? She can’t believe he’s actually named it.

Yes. I name all my rats.

How many are there?

Four. Elizabeth, Antonio, Vito, and Fredo here.

Do you…feed them?

Feed them, train them, give them someplace warm to sleep when it’s cold. In return, they do things for me.

What kind of things?
Remember how I said I have eyes and ears everywhere? He holds up Fredo and wiggles him a little. He plucks the underwear from the rat’s mouth and hands it back to Miri.

But..they’re rats. How…

I can understand them, and they understand me. Part of the deal, you see. In Italy, the rats spread the plague with the fleas they carried. If I am to do the same, I need to command them. For now, I only ask them to watch and listen inside the church. They go everywhere..which…is how I knew you weren’t sleeping well when you first arrived. Too much noise at night. Th-they didn’t tell me anything else, just that you weren’t sleeping. He quickly tries to recover so it doesn’t sound like he’s been spying on her.

That’s still pretty creepy.

I know, I know…I didn’t mean it to be dirty, I just….I wanted to make sure you were happy here. That’s all.

The rat looks at her expectantly, rubbing his little paws together. I think he would like a snack. There’s a container of treats in my desk, could you get it for me?

Miri opens the top drawer, and there’s a little plastic tub with pellets in it. She brings it over and opens it up. They don’t smell too great, but rats don’t really have the finest of palates.

Take one Copia says. He’ll take it from you if he feels comfortable enough.

She holds a pellet out to the rat, and he gently sniffs at it. He reaches up with his tiny little paws and takes it, then shoves it in his mouth.

Good boy, Fredo. Molto buona. He scratches the top of the rat’s head, and Miri could almost swear it smiled at him.

He bends down and places the rat back on the floor. Okie dokie, off you go! Fredo scurries away through the hole in the wall and is gone.

Are we ever going to talk about it? Miri asks.

Talk about what? Copia asks as he pushes the shelf back into place, avoiding her gaze.

The plague? The rats? You’re….almost 700 years old?

690. But, who’s counting? He shrugs.

She suddenly throws her arms around his neck and holds him close. He rests his chin on her shoulder while returning the embrace.

It doesn’t matter to me she says. It is what it is. I just want to be with you for as long as possible. That’s it.

He sighs deeply into her shoulder. I want that, as well.

Their “lessons” continue after this. Sometimes they’re quiet, their bodies wrapped around each other, whispering and cooing as they ride out their orgasms together. Sometimes they’re loud, like the first time Copia takes her from behind. The angle of his thrusts are so intense, Miri has to bury her face in his pillow to scream, otherwise someone will think she’s being murdered. He makes her cum 3 times in less than 5 minutes, and she has to beg him to stop, her body unable to withstand any more.
Sometimes, on Sundays, she follows him back to his room after Mass. They spend the entire night alternating between fucking and talking about everything they can think of. She tells him about all the fights she’d been in at school, in foster homes, all the ones that left scars on her knuckles from broken teeth.

One night, he surprises her. Did you know I was married?

She rolls over in disbelief. No…nobody told me that.

He nods. Emelia. I met her a few years after…you know. I was traveling the continent, spreading the Dark Lord’s Word, especially in the small villages that had lost so many to the plague. That’s where I met her. She was innocent and perfect. I never told her my secret.

What happened to her?

Died. Thrown from a horse. At least it was quick.

She nuzzles her face in his chest. I’m sorry.

He sighs. My only regret is that I could not give her children. Part of the deal, as well.

She looks up at him. Remind me again why you chose this over dying?

He kisses the top of her head. Vendetta, il mio amore.

And after that?

I do not know. I will find out when I get there.

A few days later, on a random weekday afternoon, Copia comes to her room. Miri was attempting a nap after her herbalism class, but he has other things in mind. She forces him onto his back on her bed, freeing his cock and pushing aside her underwear.

She loves to see him like this, head thrown back, mouth open. Unable to concentrate on anything other than her body bouncing up and down on him. She places a finger in his mouth, and he sucks on it greedily. She follows it with a kiss, grabbing his tongue between her teeth and gently pulling. The only rule for being in her room is he needs to be quiet, and he’s doing his best not to moan too loudly. She tells him he’s a good boy, and his fingers dig into her hips. He likes to hear things like that.

She sits back up and continues to rotate her hips, taking him as deep as she can, when she hears something by the door. In a split second, she realizes he must not have closed it tightly when he came in. It’s open just barely a crack, but she can see something.


Miri almost freezes for a second, but Copia is still thrusting up into her, and she has to keep moving. She doesn’t want to him to know they’re being watched. She keeps her eyes locked on Dew’s, not looking away. She grinds her hips into Copia’s, turning his face away from the door. She moves faster and faster, trying to get this over with, so Dew will leave and she can deal with her embarrassment.

She can feel Copia’s cock starting to throb harder, meaning he’s getting close. She bounces harder,
letting her body weight drag her down onto him and back up again. The impact on her clit combined
with the look in Dew’s eyes finally breaks her, and her body shudders uncontrollably. She clamps
her hand down over her mouth so she doesn’t scream, and she doesn’t look away from him.

_Is this what you wanted?_ she thinks. _You wanted to see me like this? Here you go._

Dewdrop slowly backs away from the door, and when he’s far enough away, Miri can see his entire
body is shaking. Before she can blink, he’s running down the hall, his footsteps barely audible.

She collapses on Copia’s chest, trying to wipe away tears so he doesn’t see them. She’s wracked
with guilt, for wishing for a second that it was Dew under her.

That night, she hears inhuman shrieks in the woods, far away. It wakes her up, and she’s suddenly
afraid. Not for herself, but for him. He’s running around out there, doing god knows what, he’s
probably going to end up getting shot by a hunter or a cop. There’s no point in trying to go back to
sleep, she’s too worried. She doesn’t know what to do with herself, so she gets out of bed, slips on
her shoes, and goes down to the ghoul’s quarters.

It’s basically like dorm rooms, two ghouls to a room. Of course, Dewdrop shares a room with
Aether. They act so much like brothers, obviously they share a room. She knocks on the door, but
doesn’t bother waiting for Aether to answer, and she just walks in. He’s sitting on his bed reading,
without his mask on. His brown eyes fly open in surprise, and he gives her a big, toothy smile.

_‘ello! What brings you here?_

She plops herself down on the other bed. _Do you know where Dew is?_

He shrugs. _He’s usually up pretty late, he likes looking at the stars. He just stands there and thinks,
for hours, sometimes. I just know not to bother ‘im._

_Something…happened earlier, he came to my room and saw…something, and I think he’s really
upset._

_Was this something you and the dear Cardinal ruining your sheets?_

_OH MY GOD_ she groans and buries her face in her hands. _Does everybody know?_

_Pretty much, but there’s so much fucking going on around ‘ere, nobody cares. They won’t say
anything to Copia, they don’t want ‘im to drop dead of shock. They won’t say anything to you, cos
they don’t want you to zap them with whatever you hit Dew with a few weeks ago._

She looks up from her hands. _He told you about that?_

He nods. _Ever since he got your scent up his nose, he’s ‘aving a ‘ard time thinkin’ ‘bout anything
else. He thought, maybe if you ‘ooked up, he could get it out of ‘is system. But Copia got to you first.
The only person he’s mad at is ‘imself. He knows he ruined it when he kissed you down by the
kitchen._

She sighs at the memory of his hands on her, his tongue in her mouth. She feels guilty that it still
excites her. Tears form in the corners of her eyes, and she angrily wipes at them.

_Hey….Aether puts down his book, and sits down next to her. No need for that, no need. Dew does
this all the time, he’ll be back in the morning, right as rain._ He puts his arm around her shoulders.
She leans over and rests her head on his chest. It takes a few seconds, but she starts to realize his
heart is pounding. She looks up at him, and there’s nothing but kindness in his eyes. A switch flicks
in her head, and she remembers the first time she saw him unmasked. How her heart raced.

She puts her hand up to his face, and pulls him down into a kiss. He seems surprised at first, but quickly warms up to the idea. As she deepens the kiss, he leans back on the bed, pulling her with him, on top of him. He runs his hands up and down her back, then under her shirt. When he realizes she’s not wearing anything under it, he runs his hands up her sides and slips them onto her breasts.

She sits up, gasping for air, as he squeezes his giant hands on her chest. *God* she gasps *what the fuck is wrong with me?*

He tries to stifle a giggle. *You’re young, you’ve finally discovered sex, and there’s a wide selection of cock available to you 24/7. It’s normal to want to….browse…so to speak. Nobody takes it personally if someone has multiple partners.*

*Maybe I don’t want that* she whispers, as she unconsciously grinds on his pelvis, his cock slowly coming to life.

*It sure feels like you do.*

Tears prick at her eyes again, guilt and desire and anger all boiling inside. She can’t take any more of it, and gives in.

She puts her hand between them and squeezes his half-hard cock. *Fine,* she growls through her teeth.

He’s so much bigger than Copia, so big she never thought it would fit, but he’s very gentle and patient. His pace is slow and measured, and it eventually does fit. He covers her in kisses and feathery strokes of his fingers. She asks him to go faster, and he ignores her. She tries to move her hips faster against him, and he just holds her down with one hand. *It’s not always a race, love.*

He continues at a slow, steady pace, always checking her reaction to ensure he’s not causing any pain. Miri starts to feel really self-conscious under his gaze, so she pulls him down on top of her. He wraps his arms around her, burying his face in her hair.

*You smell heavenly* he says.

She runs her hands up and down his arms, his back, marveling at the amount of rock-hard muscle under his skin. She even runs her hand over his bald head, shaved completely smooth. He feels so comforting and safe, but it doesn’t feel quite like she belongs here.

Once she cums, silently quivering against him, his thrusts start to pick up slightly. She recognizes the telltale throbbing of his cock inside, but there’s another sensation that’s unfamiliar. Something at the base, as he gets closer. It feels like it’s…getting bigger?

*Fuck…fuck, I’m gonna cum, I’m gonna cum inside you….ohh, Miri…and the base of his cock suddenly swells to an almost painful size. He stops thrusting as he cums, and she realizes he can’t thrust. He’s stuck.*

*What the hell?* She reaches down between them, and sure enough, he’s swollen up so much he can’t pull out.

*Sorry* he gasps. *I should’ve warned you about that. Ghouls…we’re kind of like dogs that way. It’s called knotting. It swells up when we cum, and we just have to wait a bit until we come down. Then it’ll let me pull out.*
Is the point of that similar to…?

Breeding, yeah. To make sure it stays in long enough.

Oh….that’s…really weird.

He chuckles as he kisses her. *I’m sorry. I honestly wasn’t expecting to have a shag tonight. I guess I got a little carried away.*

A few moments later, she feels the swelling release almost instantly, and Aether sighs contentedly. He pulls out of her, and a large puddle of cum just runs everywhere.

*Oh god, I’m sorry* Miri says, trying to get up in a hurry. He just laughs. *No worries, sweetheart. I’ve got a spare set. Laundry tomorrow, anyways.* He hands her some tissues so she doesn’t completely cover her clothes with jizz.

Once she’s dressed, and he’s pulled his boxers back on, he goes to open the door for her. *That’s not necessary* she says.

*I know. Don’t care.* He smiles and bends down to give her a somewhat chaste kiss. *Don’t beat yourself up about these things.* Then he boops her nose with his finger.

She blinks for a second, then laughs. *Well…goodnight.*

*Goodnight, your highness* he says, bowing in an over-dramatized manner.

She walks back to her room, the dark pit of guilt slowly growing in her stomach. She has to tell Copia.
Chapter 21

Before dawn, Miri calls down to the infirmary and asks to have Doc meet her there as soon as he can. He's waiting for her when she gets there, with a look of concern.

Is everything ok? How are you feeling?

I'm fine, but I was wondering...I know you said you keep all kinds of medications on-hand...do you have any kind of...morning-after pill?

He looks relieved, and walks over to a room with a digital keypad near the handle of the door. Indeed we do! We should probably buy stock in it, considering how much we go through a month...

He enters a code on the keypad and the door pops open. He turns on the light, rows upon rows of medications inside the tiny room. He looks around for a moment, then finds what he's looking for. Here we go, Plan B. Ol' Reliable, I call it.

It would've helped if I'd had a Plan A she mutters to herself.

He hands her the box, and closes the door. Make sure you read all the instructions before you take it, all the drug interactions and everything. Would you like to take some condoms with you, for next time?

Sure...just in case.

After she's taken the pill, and stashed the condoms in her room, Miri goes to the library. It's still early, breakfast isn't for another 2 hours, so she knows Copia will still be in bed. She slowly opens the door to his room and peeks in.

He's laying on his side, his breathing loud but steady. His foot twitches every so often, like a dog dreaming of chasing squirrels.

She walks up to the side of the bed and looks down at him. His makeup is gone, but dark purplish circles are still visible under his eyes. She's not sure if it's from a lack of sleep or just rubbing the paint off too hard.

She carefully climbs onto the bed next to him, trying not to jostle him too much. She brushes some loose hairs out of his face, and he wrinkles his nose in his sleep. She gently plants a kiss on his bottom lip, and he lets out a sleepy moan.

Cara mia? What time is it?

Still early. I needed to see you.

He lifts the covers so she can slide underneath. You are always welcome here, even if I'm sleeping.

I know she whispers, threading her fingers through his chest hair. She nuzzles her face into it and takes a shaky deep breath.

What is it, topolino? What is wrong? He looks down at her, a look of mild panic in his eyes.

She tries to wipe away her tears quickly, but her voice betrays her. I fucked up. I fucked up big time. I'm so sorry she sobs into his chest.
No, no, no. Talk to me, what has happened? It is not as bad as you think.

She looks up at him, this weird, quiet man that has never been anything but kind and supportive, and she's about to break his heart. She tells him everything, about Dew in the doorway, about going to see Aether and what happened between them. She can barely speak by the end, her sobs wracking her body and contorting her face. When she's done, she looks up to see Copia's reaction.

He's looking at her with a look of...amusement? He laughs and wipes the tears from her cheeks. Is that what you're so worried about? That I would be angry with you taking pleasure in other men?

Well...yeah...I mean, it's not like we've made some kind of agreement to be exclusive, but...

Lust is natural and healthy. It is practically a commandment here. I admit, I am...curious about your experience with Aether. He's a big boy, in lots of ways. I can see why you'd be attracted to him. In the future, all I ask is that you tell me about it after you see him. Or others.

I don't think there will be a next time. It was kind of weird.

Ohh....so I have you all to myself then? He smiles and gently thrusts his hips at her. She can feel the beginnings of his erection stirring.

She lets out a little gasp. I'm yours to do with as you please she whispers.

Before she can say anything, he's on his knees and flipping her onto her stomach, face down into a pillow. As I please, hmm?

In seconds, her dress is hiked up to her armpits, her underwear pulled down to her knees. Ass in the air, she's completely exposed to him. He rubs the leaky tip of his cock around and around her opening, until he thinks she's ready.

You know something? he asks, as he places a few kisses on her exposed back. I'm going to fuck that Catholic guilt right out of you. As many times as it takes. Are you ready?

Her legs are already shaking, and she can barely speak, she's so lightheaded with lust.

Ye-yes...

Yes, what?

Yes, please she moans and he hilts himself in one thrust. She lets out a long, deep groan into the pillow, gripping it tightly in both hands.

Some might be bigger....or stronger...or younger...maybe even more handsome....but nobody will ever make you feel..ahh...make you feel the way I do...will they?

No...she moans into the pillow.

I'm sorry, I didn't understand you...

She lifts her face off the pillow. I said no-FUCK she exclaims. His changes his angle just slightly, and it feels so good she could cry. Please...please, baby, I'm so close already...

Good he purrs, thrusting just a little faster. He groans loudly when her body shudders around him. Very nice...a good start. But I think we can do better, yes?
A while later, Copia brings Miri a glass of water and a cool, wet cloth for her privates. She feels like she just ran a marathon, but with sandpaper against her crotch. He helps her sit up to take a sip, as she's too weak to sit up on her own. She lays back down and rubs her face against the pillow.

_Is that better?_ he asks.

_Much better._ Her throat is terribly dry from all the screaming. She winces in embarrassment at one particular moment. She'd repeatedly screamed at him to 'fill her up' as he was about to cum.

_THAT was very...enthusiastic._

_Oh, god...shut up._ She turns her face away and laughs.

He lays down next to her, pushing her hair back and tracing little shapes in her bare shoulder with his fingers. _You should sleep. I'll make excuses for your classes and kitchen duties today._

She mumbles something he doesn't quite catch, and is asleep in moments.

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Sometime later, Miri hears the sound of chirping and chittering, but it isn't birds. She opens her eyes, and there's a black rat on the bed next to her. It's standing on its hind legs, yammering away at her, like it expects her to understand. _Slow your roll, little guy_ she mumbles as she rubs her eyes. _Your dude is around here somewhere._

She sits up in bed and calls for Copia. _Un secondo!_ he calls from his office. He walks in quickly, no cassock, just a shirt and pants. _Vito! What do you have for me, mio amico? _

The rat runs to the end of the bed and jumps into his hands. It continues to squeak at him for several seconds, then it holds up its hands, like its begging for food. He takes a small container off his bookshelf, and digs out a treat for the rat. Once it has the treat, it jumps out of his hands and runs out the door.

_What was that all about?_

_Apparently, Papa and Imperator would like to see you about the ascension ritual. She knocked on your door earlier, but obviously you were not there. They can't seem to figure out where you are._

_Are they going to have a problem with me being here? As in, with you?_

He shrugs. _I don't think so, but just to be safe...don't talk about it._

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It takes Miri a lot longer than it should to get to Papa's quarters. Thanks to Copia, she's back to walking with her legs clamped together.

Imperator and Papa are waiting for her at the table in the usual room. They are alone.

_Miri! So nice to see you again!_ Papa is always so happy to see her, she can't help but think of him as a grandfatherly figure now. Imperator nods politely, her giant binder open on the table in front of her.

_Now then_ she says, reading from the book. _The time has come to discuss the ascension ritual. We would like to perform it on the Saturday closest to the spring solstice._

_Vernal Solstice this year is -_ she checks a calendar in the binder - _March 20, a Wednesday. The Saturday prior is the day before St. Patrick's Day; the celebration that night, combined with Sunday's festivities, would no doubt send_
several Siblings to the hospital with alcohol poisoning. The next Saturday will suffice, March 23rd.

Okay, sounds good. I've been waiting for someone to give me some information on the ritual, what to expect, all that jazz.

Papa suddenly looks sad, and Imperator clears her throat before removing her glasses.

I will be completely honest with you, Miri. The last 6 times the Church has attempted an ascension ritual, it has failed.

What do you mean by 'failed'?

They died.

The bottom drops out of Miri's stomach and her hands feel tingly. Wha...what the hell happens in this ritual, the-they fucking died?!

The point of the ritual is for the woman to cast off her former life and enter into a life of darkness as the mother of the Antichrist. In order to do that, she is ritually sacrificed in view of the congregation, and reborn into the arms of Lucifer. The last half-dozen times...they didn't survive the process.

What happened to the Mothers before that? After Rachel.

There hasn't been an Unholy Mother since her. Prior to these women, the chosen ones were institutionalized, burned or hung as witches, or they simply chose to end their own lives instead of accepting their potential destiny.

Miri feels sick. Why are you telling me this now? When it's still 2 months away? So I can spend my last weeks in misery?

Papa takes Miri’s hand. We believe you will survive. You have been through more than all those women combined. You are strong, much stronger than you know. He believes in you, and so do we.

She takes a deep breath, and an idea occurs to her. Wait...why isn't Copia at this meeting? Shouldn't he be involved in this too, being a member of the clergy?

Papa and Imperator share a look. He's the one conducting the ceremony. He has to perform the sacrifice.

Miri snatches her hand back and digs her nails into her palms, willing herself to not break down. Does he know about this?

Imperator raises her eyebrows. He's assisted with the last 6 ceremonies. He knows, as Papa's second, that the responsibility is now his. He's known the entire time you've been here.
Chapter 22

Miri somehow manages to make it through the rest of the meeting, but the moment she leaves the room, she runs.

She finds the nearest bathroom outside of Papa's quarters and throws up in the toilet. She's sweating and shaking, and wants to scream.

*Keep breathing* she tells herself. *Just keep breathing.*

She splashes water on her face at the sink, and looks at herself in the mirror. Her face is pasty white, she does not look well. She dries her face off with a paper towel, and tries to calmly walk back to her room. If she can just hold it together long enough, she can go cry and scream into her pillow all night.

As she's starting up the stairs, a young Sister stops her. *I'm sorry to bother you, but the Cardinal asked me to have you come to his office when you have a chance?*

Miri tries her absolute best to stay calm as she walks to the library. Every possible emotion roils through her, but anger seems to take hold the most. As she stomps through the library, books suddenly fly off the tables as she passes, papers spilling all over. The door to the archives shakes on its hinges, like someone is on the other side trying to open it. She turns down the hall towards Copia's office, and the door almost comes off the hinges before she even gets near it.

She slowly walks up to the doorway, trying to calm herself down, before turning and looking into the room. Copia is standing there, holding a book in his hands, with what appears to be everything from the top of his desk strewn across the floor. His eyes are like saucers, and he's shaking.

*You...* she has trouble making sounds come out, she's so beyond furious. *You knew.*

She stomps over the mess on the floor, and once she's close enough, she starts hitting his arm with a closed fist.

*YOU. FUCKING. KNEW. ALL ALONG.* She keeps hitting him, driving him farther back into the room. He drops the book and tries to grab at her flailing hands.

*Miri! Miri! Tesoro, please-*

He manages to grab her hands and hold them tightly so she can't throw any more punches. He pulls her tight to his chest, and she screams violently into his face. She quickly runs out of breath, and collapses against him, sobbing.

*I'm gonna die* she cries pitifully. *You're supposed to kill me, and I'm gonna die.*

They both drop to their knees, and he wraps his arms around her.

*Listen to me, topolino...listen. I have seen what happens when the ritual fails, and do you know why it failed? They did not have faith. When it came down to the moment, they did not believe in themselves, in the power they could hold. You have already had a taste of that power, and you've showed more control over it than they ever had. I did not say anything because I know you will succeed, and I did not wish to cause you any more pain or worry. I just wanted us to...enjoy whatever time we have together. However long it shall be.*
Miri has managed to stop crying at this point, and is just listening to Copia's heartbeat. It's pounding wildly as he strokes her hair. She reaches up and pulls him down into a soft kiss. *Make love to me...please....*

This time is slow and soft: gentle thrusts and whispers, tears streaming from Miri's eyes as Copia takes his time worshipping her body. He holds her tightly, moving so slowly, it's almost agonizing. Every kiss feels like electricity sparking on her skin. She keeps trying to look away, so he can't see her at her most vulnerable, but he holds her head still between his hands. She tries to look anywhere other than his mismatched eyes, but when she does, there's tears in them. They flow down his cheeks and drip onto hers. He touches his forehead to hers.

*I will not let you fail. I cannot be without you.*

The next morning, Miri's back on dishwashing duty. While she's up to her elbows in water, one of the other clergy members comes up to her. Marla, she thinks her name is. *Are you busy later? she asks.*

*Um...no, not that I know of. I can blow off my afternoon lessons, if it's something important.*

*Would you like to make a trip into the city?*

Miri's jaw drops. *Y-yeah, that would be great. I haven't been outside the grounds in...months, actually, now that I think about it.*

*I have to make a quarterly visit to one of our banks, I thought maybe you'd like a change of scenery. One thing, though: you have to take bodyguards with you.*

Miri rolls her eyes and sighs dramatically. *I seriously doubt anybody's out to get me.*

*Nevertheless, we can't take any chances. Would you like your ghouls to accompany us?*

She remembers back to the last time she saw either of them: Dew, watching her fuck Copia in her room, and Aether, who she fucked in his and Dew's room.

*Um.....ok. As long as they're cool with it.*
Miri thinks this may be the most awkward car trip she has ever been on. A Brother whose name she didn't catch is driving, Margo is riding shotgun, and she is sandwiched in the back seat, between Aether and Dewdrop. *Can I possibly make myself any smaller?* she thinks to herself, cheeks burning. It seems like things are just fine between the two ghouls, and Aether is his normal friendly self, but she is in no way comfortable sitting next to Dew.

For the first half of the drive, she just stares straight ahead, not acknowledging his presence. That seems fine with him, as he's turned away looking out the window. He and Aether chirp back and forth occasionally, in their weird ghoul language. After a while, the typical bumping and swaying of the car's movement, combined with not speaking or looking at anything, makes her drowsy and before she knows it, she's dozing off.

Her head automatically lolls onto Aether's right arm, and he places his hand on her knee so she's more propped up. Dew, not to be outdone, places his hand on her other knee. Miri is still somewhat awake, and wondering what the hell these two are playing at. It's some kind of game between them, and she's the playing field. Each of them slowly starts working the hands on her knees up her legs, trying not to alert her to what they're doing, but also trying to see who can get to her crotch the fastest without waking her up.

The car suddenly takes a steep curve to the left, and Miri takes advantage of the shift in movement. She lets her body lean away from Aether, and lets it fall right into Dew. The sudden weight on his arm causes him to dig his claws into Miri's thigh, not enough to break the skin, but it definitely hurts. She grits her teeth and looks up at him, shooting daggers from her eyes.

His eyes are more green than usual today, and somewhat softer looking. He retracts his claws and rubs his fingertips over where they dug in. The look on his face is cold, as always, but tinged with remorse instead of annoyance. It seems like he's trying to apologize, not just for her leg, but for watching her without permission.

She's tired of being angry at him, especially when he knows he fucked up. She looks down at his lips, then back to his eyes, hoping he catches her meaning. He does, and he leans down to place a gentle kiss on her lips. Miri suddenly fees a tugging on her left leg. She turns, and Aether is giving her his best puppy-dog impression. She can't help but smile, and leans over to kiss him as well. They spend the rest of the car ride with Miri holding hands with both of them.

*It's the weirdest sort of deja vu, being back your hometown after being away for so long* Miri thinks. *She wants to point out so many places and things, but none of them are nice. There's the place I was almost arrested for theft? There's the alley where I peed behind a dumpster? Not so much.*

The bank Margo needs to visit is a few blocks from the last place Miri was squatting before the eclipse, and she feels horribly embarrassed to be back. She plans to just stay in the car, nobody will see her, and she can go back to pretending none of it ever happened. Unfortunately, Dewdrop is bored. Really bored. He's tapping his feet and fidgeting with his shirt cuffs, just generally being annoying.

*Can't you control yourself?* Miri asks. *We're not gonna be here all that long.*

*I don't like being cooped up, that's all.* Fuck it he says, opening the door and climbing out. Before Miri can grab him to pull him back in, Aether's getting out on his side as well. *Don't worry, I'll keep*
an eye on 'im, make sure he doesn't wander too far.

The idea of the two of them hanging out in one of her old neighborhoods, especially one where they stalked and kidnapped defenseless homeless people, fills her with dread. After punching the back of the driver's seat, she undoes her seatbelt and gets out as well.

It still looks and smells the same. It's like someone just hit pause on the whole area and hit resume once she got back. She looks for the ghouls, and they're halfway down the block, looking around like they're at Disneyland. Miri forgets that they almost never leave the church's compound, and this is probably the most exiting thing to happen in some time.

She jogs to catch up with them, but they're busy trying to look down nearby alleys. Hey, isn't this where we met? Aether points to a dead-end alley.

She looks, and honestly can't tell if that's the same alley. I have no idea. I don't really count that as our first meeting, I wasn't really there, you know?

Yeah, 'spose so.

PRAISE JESUS, IT'S A MIRACLE someone yells from the corner. It's Fancy Pete, still pushing a shopping cart full of whatever belongings he still has, plus other random crap.

Miri wants to just shrivel up and die, but plasters a big smile on her face. Hey....how's it goin', man?

Good lord, child. We thought they got you fo' sho'. You just up and disappeared, along with almost everybody south of 17th.

Well...obviously, I'm ok! Doing just fine!

He shifts his attention from Miri to the ghouls. Luckily, they're not wearing masks out in public. Just their usual black clothes with ties and fitted jackets. Now that she thinks about it, they almost look like priests, except for the grucifix symbols on their jackets.

These your new friends? They look more like bodyguards.

She laughs nervously. Just friends. We're all members of a church, and we pretty much keep to ourselves, that's why you haven't seen me around.

I see...huh. He eyes up the ghouls suspiciously, like they're about to pull out weapons or something. Then he perks up for a moment. I almost forgot! He turns around and starts rooting through his cart. I found it over behind that Chinese place, and I just knew I should hold onto it, just in case.

From underneath some old blankets, he pulls out a backpack. Her backpack. She'd completely forgotten it when she was running from Dewdrop that night.

Her jaw drops in surprise. Oh my god, I can't believe you found it. Thank you so much.

I didn't go pokin' around in there, now, so it should be just as you left it.

She's about to clutch it to her chest when she remembers what she was like when she first got to the church. Covered in lice. Maybe that's a bad idea.

Just then, Margo and the Brother exit the bank. Time to head back she calls.

Miri says her goodbyes to Pete, the ghouls nod to him, and they move back to the car. She asks the Brother to open the trunk, and throws the backpack inside.
Once they're heading back out of town, Aether asks her what's in there. *Honestly? A bunch of lice-ridden clothes, a toothbrush and some toothpaste, and a plastic bag full of spare change.*

What are you gonna do with it, once we're home?

*Burn it. If you want to pick the coins out of the ashes, you're welcome to them.*
Chapter 24

The weather finally warms up enough that everybody wants to spend more time outside, which means spring flowers need planting in the courtyard. Copia is kneeling on one of those spongy pads in a flowerbed, gardening gloves covered in dirt, pausing every so often to wipe beads of sweat off his forehead with his arm.

He’s chosen some plants that will eventually bloom yellow and white and pink, but right now, they’re all still just green shoots. The flowerbeds have already been turned and fertilized, now it’s time for planting. He meticulously digs small holes equal distances apart for each individual plant.

Miri doesn’t really give a shit about flowers or gardening, but the weather is nice and she enjoys seeing him do something he loves. She also enjoys ogling his behind as he works bent over in the dirt, and so do a few other Sisters that are walking through. She catches them looking, and they smile and giggle amongst themselves as they walk by. Lust is definitely everybody’s favorite sin around here.

The sound of numerous pairs of shoes running suddenly gets louder and louder, until a group of people come bursting out the door. Miss! Miss! You have to come quick! a young Brother pants, as though he just ran up a dozen flights of stairs.

What is happening, Brother? Is something wrong? Copia sits up from the flowerbed, looking concerned.

He nods. The county sheriff is here, he’s brought a detective from town with him. They want to see Miss.

Miri and Copia share a panicked look. What happened in town the other day? he asks.

Nothing! We got out of the car for a second, I saw someone I used to know and he gave me my old backpack. I threw it in the incinerator the second we got back, it was probably crawling with bugs.

He starts to pull off his gloves. Go see what they want, I will be along shortly. She nods, and follows the crowd of Siblings.

Once they get close to the front offices, she tries to shoo the Siblings away, insisting she can take care of this herself. They refuse to leave, some are even talking about fighting the cops if they try to take her away. Let’s all just calm down, ok? Remember, these guys have guns? Keep your hands in full view, no sudden movements. And for fuck’s sake, keep the ghouls out of here.

She pushes through the doors that lead to the entryway, and two men are speaking to Imperator. One is obviously a county cop, brown polyester uniform and about a dozen different things hanging off his belt, along with a very prominent service weapon. The other is an older man in a rumpled suit, who looks vaguely familiar to her. It takes her a second, but she remembers. He arrested her just after her 18th birthday.
Her area of town was under his jurisdiction, so she’d seen him around quite a bit. He always seemed like a good guy, trying to help out the homeless guys when he could. He’d bring toiletries and socks, he’d try to get them rooms in shelters when they knew it was going to be really cold. Definitely took the “serve” part of “protect and serve” seriously.

He seems to be somewhat relieved to see her. Imperator begins to make introductions, when he stops her. I already know this young lady, actually. She hasn’t been seen in a while, and I’m glad it’s for a good reason.

Miri smiles politely. Is that the only reason for your visit?

Imperator gestures towards a room down the hall. Perhaps we’d all be more comfortable discussing this in private? She looks over Miri’s shoulder, and Miri turns. A pretty sizable crowd of Siblings and ghouls are crammed against the doors, desperately trying to listen in.

Good idea she says.

Once they are settled in a small conference room, the sheriff removes his sunglasses and lays them on the table. Ladies, I’m glad you gave us the opportunity to sit down today. I’d like to make clear: nobody is in any kind of trouble with the law. That’s not why we’re here.

Imperator doesn’t seem fazed in the least, but Miri slumps a little in relief. Of course not, sheriff. To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit today?

He turns to the detective, whose name Miri feels horrible about not remembering. He studies her for a second before speaking.

One of the regulars from your old neighborhood, Peter Hollis. I believe his street name is Fancy Pete?

Her heart sinks. Is he ok? I just saw him the other day.

Oh, he’s just fine. Still keepin’ on, as he would say. He actually came into the precinct of his own accord yesterday. Said he thought a friend was in trouble and needed help. He says you’ve been kidnapped by some kind of cult.

Miri blinks for moment, then bursts out laughing. That’s it? He thinks this is a cult and I’m being held against my will?

Well, the way he described your ‘friends’ made it sound like they were trying to keep you from running away.

Not in the least. If anything, I was trying to keep them from wandering off. They don’t get out much.

He leans back slightly in his chair, seemingly satisfied with her response. It wasn’t just his statement that prompted our little visit. Someone else has been asking around for you, for quite some time.

Imperator cocks her head. And who would that be?
Her parents. Mom’s been clean for a good while, her dad’s some hotshot business owner on the other side of the county. Got a lot of pull with local government. He’s been calling on her behalf almost every week for the last year, asking if Miriam’s been seen. I thought you’d just moved on, hitched out of the area, until Pete showed up saying you’d been kidnapped.

Miri’s blood has run cold. She refuses to believe her mother is actually clean, or if she is, that she’s going to stay that way for long. As for her father...basically a glorified sperm donor. Good for him that he’s got money, she doesn’t need it.

And has he said why he needs to find her? Imperator asks. Does someone need an organ transplant or something?

So far, he just seems like a concerned father, probably trying to make up for missed time. With your permission, we’d like to let them know you’re safe. We don’t have to tell them where you are, just that you’re ok and they can stop looking.

Imperator smiles politely at them, but Miri recognizes the twinge of condescension in her voice. Thank you very much, gentleman. We greatly appreciate yo-

You can tell them where I am.

Imperator shoots her a look that says ‘are you crazy’.

I haven’t seen my mother in 7 years. I don’t remember ever seeing my father. Maybe seeing them one last time will settle things between us, and we can all move on with our lives.

The men seem satisfied with the idea. Imperator thanks them for their time and sees them out. Miri feels like she’s going to pass out when a hand grabs her arm. It’s Copia, all cleaned up and changed back into his black cassock. Is everything ok?

Probably not. You’re going to meet my parents.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Hey kids, it's another one of *those* chapters.
TW for emotional abuse/gaslighting/rough trade

A few days later, Miri’s father calls the public relations office (she didn’t even know the church needed one) and arranges a time for her mother and him to come see her. The lady in the office asks her if she has a preference, and she just agrees to whatever is convenient for office staff.

In the days leading up to their visit, she can’t help but withdraw into herself. Part of her is desperate to believe that her mom is finally off the drugs and capable of a somewhat-normal relationship. She’s also curious to see how much, if at all, she is like her father. But she’s also extremely wary of the entire thing. She’s been let down so many times, she wants to play it safe and assume they’re overstating how clean her mother is, or how interested her father is in her.

One night, while Copia has his face buried between her legs, an idea suddenly occurs to her. **Oh my god** she exclaims.

_Hmmm_ Copia hums as he nibbles on her folds.

_You’re a good boy, but it’s not that._

He raises his eyebrows at her.

_What if they’re coming because they want me to leave with them?_

He props himself up on an elbow and looks at her. **Well…do you want to leave with them?**

She looks at him like he’s insane. *No. Despite facing almost-certain death, I don’t want to leave.*

He sighs dramatically. _I keep telling you, you have nothing to worry about. You’re different than those girls, better, smarter. Would I let you go through with it if I didn’t think you’d be alright?_

She pokes at him with her foot._I guess you’re right._

Now then… _If I have calmed your fears for the time being, I have work to get back to._

The day arrives, and Miri is so nervous she can’t even eat. Dewdrop and Aether, trying to be of some comfort, follow her around with random containers of food all day. Fruit, pastries, chocolate cookies, a sandwich. At one point, Dew even pulls a travel-size bottle of Jäger out of his pocket and offers it to her. Aether throws his hands up in annoyance and confusion. _Where the fuck did you get that?_ Dew just shrugs.

_I suppose I should be glad it wasn’t a bottle of soap_ Miri says, quickly trying to get out of range of Dew’s claws. He snarls at her, baring his teeth, but the corners of his mouth are turned up in a smile. As she walks off, she hears Aether lecturing Dew about American liquor laws.
The appointment is scheduled for between 1 and 3 pm, and band practice is also at 1 pm. Copia refuses to go so he can stay with Miri. *What if you need me? I don’t want to leave you alone with them.*

She places her hands on his shoulders. *I’m a big girl. I can do this. You have obligations, and if it gets too hairy, I’ll have someone come pull you out of practice, ok?*

He nods, pouting a little and letting his head droop. *Don’t fucking pout* she says. *One of these days, a bird’s gonna shit on your lip. Then what will you do?*

He can’t help but laugh. *I guess just shrivel up and die?*

*Not if I can help it.* She plants a soft kiss on his pouty bottom lip before sending him off to practice.

Nobody needs to call Miri to let her know they’ve arrived. She can hear the Siblings and ghouls downstairs chattering to each other. She takes a deep breath and leaves her room.

When they see her coming down the stairs, they all go silent. They line up against the walls in order to make space for her to walk. Some tentatively reach out a hand to comfort her. Some even bow to her as she passes. Part of her hopes her parents can see this, that she has people that already love and care about her, that she doesn’t need them anymore.

Imperator is standing at the end of the hall, waiting for her. She gestures to a door next to her. *They’re waiting for you in there* she says. *I will not be joining you. I have a feeling this is something you need to do yourself.*

Miri nods, swallowing a huge lump in her throat. Imperator grabs her hands and squeezes. *Whatever you decide….we’re always here for you.*

She walks away. Miri is alone. She turns the doorknob and enters.

For a second, she doesn’t recognize her mother. Laurel looks more like the earliest memories that Miri has of her, not like the haggard, sunken mummy that she was 7 years ago. She has to fight the urge to run to her, bury her head in her shoulder and beg to be taken home.

*You are home* she reminds herself.

Sitting next to Laurel is a man that looks vaguely familiar. She recognizes his dark hair, his nose, his ears. They’re hers.

Laurel’s hands fly to her face and she bursts into tears. Miri’s father, whose name she thinks is Dennis, stands up and opens his arms.

*Hey, kiddo. Got a hug for your dad?*

She stiffly walks over to him, letting him put his arms around her. *I can’t believe you’re all grown up now.*

*Maybe if you’d been there, you could’ve seen it firsthand.*

He sighs. *I have a lot to answer for, and I will, but first how about you say hi to your mom?*

He moves out of the way, and Laurel flings her arms around Miri. She holds her close, sobbing into her hair.
My baby… she whimpers. Miri lets her cry for a minute, then slowly disentangles herself.

Why don’t we sit down.

Laurel grabs a tissue from a nearby box and wipes her eyes and nose. Dennis rubs her back consolingly, and they both sit down.

So…. why are you here?

Her parents look at each other. Well, sweetie Dennis begins. I’m reaching a point in my life where…I have to take stock of things, and not being there for you and your mother has always been on my mind. Something that I always meant to resolve, especially when it comes to you. I should have been there. There’s no excuse. Even if things didn’t work out between me and Laurel, that’s no reason for you to not have a father.

Miri just looks at him.

He takes a deep breath and continues. After your mother and I split up, I met someone else. We’ve been married for nearly 15 years now. You have two younger half-sisters and a younger half-brother that would very much like to meet you.

Miri tries to keep her emotions under control. She’d always wanted to be a big sister, but who knows what those kids are like. Probably screaming hellions.

Ok, so… you’re here to propose a family reunion?

Something like that. You see…I own a few furniture stores in this area of the state. We do pretty well. So well, in fact, that I’m looking to expand out of state. I’ve also got several friends in local government, and they’re always telling me I should run for office. So that’s what I’m going to do. I’m running for mayor of the county seat.

Miri nods. That’s great. Good for you.

He looks down at his hands. What your dad is trying to say Laurel interjects, is that…the way things are these days… anybody running for office gets shoved into the public eye, and things they don’t want everybody to know suddenly become… very public.

Now the penny drops. Ohh, I see. So it would be bad if the potential voters discovered your illegitimate bastard with the criminal record? I doubt your name is even on my birth certificate, so how’s anybody going to figure that out?

He looks a little hurt. My name is on your birth certificate, Miriam Elise.

She suddenly feels like she’s been scolded by one of the nuns at St. Agnes’ again. She just barely makes out what sounds like a giggle on the other side of the door.

SHUT UP!

Silence on the other side, followed by a few angry whispers. Even though she hates eavesdropping, she’s glad someone has her back. She wishes she could have someone send for Copia now, but that would look really weird.

She turns back to her parents. Ok, so what’s the big deal? So they see you had a kid out of wedlock, before you ever met your wife. Whoopity doo. I’m not living on the streets anymore. I’m not getting into trouble. Besides, it’s a mayoral election. It’s not like you’re running for governor.
An illegitimate child living in a Satanic cult.

Miri feels the rumbles of anger building in her ears. This is not a cult. It is a church. They have theology classes and hold Mass every week. They donate time and money to charity. They’re involved in humanitarian efforts-

And they’ve also either blackmailed or bought every local government official, so they can carry out disgusting practices and spread the word of their master. My opponent in the race is one of these officials. I wonder what will happen once I’m elected and they all realize they don’t have to let this place... get away with whatever they want anymore.

Miri just barely hears feet scuffling in the hallway outside. If they’re half as angry as she is right now, there’s going to be a riot.

So. You plan on trying to shut this place down? They can move. There are other places they can go.

But not without you, right?

Laurel uncomfortably shifts in her chair. Whatever he’s about to say, she doesn’t seem to like it.

I overheard those people talking about you. Whispering your name like they worship you or something. You’re very important to them, aren’t you?

She sits up straight in her chair. Yes. And they’re important to me, too.

You don’t want them to suddenly find themselves without a place to go, do you?

She grits her teeth together. No, of course not.

He pauses for a moment. Perhaps... your time here has... confused you, made you believe in things that aren’t real. Maybe you need to see a doctor. Someone that specializes in.... reprogramming? Intensive inpatient treatment? I know some of the judges at the county level. Maybe if I present a sob story about my poor lost daughter, who got herself mixed up with the wrong kind of people, and she needs serious psychological help.... maybe one of them would be willing to sign a court order. One that renders you... incompetent. And places me and your mother in charge.

Call his bluff. He says. Miri hasn’t heard his voice in weeks, and it’s just what she needs at this moment. He’s trying to frighten you into leaving with your mother. Call him out on it. He can’t hurt you.

Her anger is at such a boiling point, her nails are leaving bloody half-moon shapes in her palms. She feels like she’s either going to explode or the whole compound will. More shuffling feet outside the door, this time combined with ghoulish chittering and trilling. If Dewdrop hears any of this... he’ll tear them apart.

She takes a deep breath. You want me to leave here willingly?

He nods. I believe that’s what’s best for you, and your mother. She wants you to come home so badly.

Laurel finally speaks up. I have a steady job now, and a nice place for both of us. She reaches her hand across the table towards Miri. I just want you to come home, sweetie. Where you belong.

The rumbling in Miri’s ears is only getting louder. She can barely hear her own heartbeat over it. She notices the chairs and table are vibrating slightly, and she knows she’s starting to lose control over
her power.

She takes another deep breath and looks at her father. Do you know how she ended up in prison the last time, at least the one time I know about? Hmm?

He gives her a confused look, and Laurel suddenly turns red with shame.

SHE PIMPED ME OUT TO HER DEALER! I WAS THIRTEEN YEARS OLD! I GOT FUCKING STABBED! AND SHE JUST SAT THERE! She yanks up the side of her shirt and shows her father the knife scar on her belly. There’s a muted roaring sound outside the door, the sounds of a struggle. Aether’s voice, saying not now, not here, brother.

And you want me to leave with her? For as long as I can remember, this is part of the cycle. Mom gets clean, we have a home, she gets high again, we don’t have a home, I go live somewhere else, she goes to jail or rehab, and we do it all over again. I’m not doing this again. I cannot. Do this. Again.

He purses his lips together in anger. So you’re going to abandon your family for these… blasphemers, these…child rapists?

She stands up from her chair, and places her hands on the table. It’s shaking even more now, but they don’t seem to notice.

These people are my family. They have shown me more love and respect than either of you have in my entire life. And if you think-

Her chair suddenly scrapes against the floor and crashes against the wall behind her. Her parents jump backwards out of their chairs, which also slam against the walls.

If you really think I will let you do anything to harm them….or take me away from them….then I am not your child.

The sound of rumbling and static is so loud in her ears, it’s almost deafening. Laurel is desperately grasping at something under the collar of her shirt, most likely a crucifix. Dennis is holding out his hands, like he’s trying to protect himself from something.

The door flies open, and beyond it is Papa. The table and chairs stop vibrating. Everybody in the hallway is standing back, giving him a wide berth. Beyond him, she can barely see Copia in his red cassock, looking pale and horrified.

Papa takes a hit off his oxygen and hangs the mask back on the tank.

I’m so sorry that I was not here to greet you personally. But now that I am….get the fuck out of my church.

He slowly turns around and heads back down the hallway. Once the shuffling of his feet has dissipated, Miri turns back to her parents. They’re clutching at each others hands in fear, and they look at her like she’s a total stranger.

She doesn’t bother saying goodbye. As she leaves the room, she can still feel the rage and pain and sadness boiling inside. She uses her power like a wall around her, pushing everybody in the hallway to the sides and away from her.

I just need to scream she tells herself. I just need to get someplace where I can scream and I’ll be ok. Nobody will get hurt.
She walks as fast as possible to the complete opposite side of the compound, towards the band practice rooms. They’re heavily soundproofed, so she can let it out and not shatter windows or eardrums. The door to the room flies open before her, and it slams itself shut once she’s inside.

She drops to her knees in the middle of the empty room and lets loose a horrible shriek. Part dying animal, part angry demon. She tries to focus all her power, all the anguish, out through her mouth, until she runs out of breath. It doesn’t work. She gasps in a huge breath and it’s like the air itself is full of horror. She doesn’t hear the door to the room open and close again.

She bends over, touching her forehead to the floor, sobbing. *They can’t do this, please tell me they can’t do this* she cries to Him.

*It is always a possibility* He says. She knows His policy is to never lie to her, but just once, she wishes He would.

Suddenly there’s a hand on her shoulder, and she jumps. It’s Copia, out of breath from trying to catch up with her, his eyes watering. The people outside the room probably filled him in on what was going on.

She leaps to her feet and throws her arms around his neck, desperately pressing her lips to his. He clutches her tightly, much more intensely than ever before. She breaks the kiss just long enough to take a breath and mutter *fuck me* before sucking his bottom lip between hers.

R-right now? He’s obviously turned on, but he seems hesitant.

*Please. I can’t stand feeling like this. Make me feel something else, anything else, I don’t care.* Please. She grabs at his shoulders, his chest, anything she can dig her fingers into, to show how badly she wants it.

He pulls her close for another kiss, easily sliding his tongue around hers, and backs her up until they reach a table. He reaches under her skirt to pull down her underwear, while she scrabbles and paws at his fly. He tries to touch her, to prepare her, but she slaps his hands away.

*No* she snaps. *I don’t care if it hurts. Just fuck me, please.*

He moans as he lifts her onto the table, yanking her underwear off the rest of the way and pushing up her skirt. She wraps her legs around his waist, locking them together behind him. He grabs his leaking cock and places the tip right at her entrance.

*Please* she begs. *Please, I need it so bad…please…*

In one thrust, he’s buried to the hilt inside her. She’s not really wet enough or relaxed enough for this, but this is what she wants. She screams through gritted teeth as he slams into her, over and over, just like she wanted.

He buries his face in her neck, kissing and sucking at the tender skin. He moves up to her ear and sucks her earlobe into his mouth, nibbling on it. *Those fucking idiots* he mutters. *They can’t ever take you away from us, don’t they realize that?*

*No….oh god…* she moans.

His thrusts increase in speed. *They’ll never take you away….not ever….*

Her pants and gasps are echoing loudly in the room, but she doesn’t care. The pain/pleasure of him fucking her so hard is consuming her every thought. She knew he could be rough at times, but this is going beyond that. It’s almost as if he’s taking his anger at her parents out on her.
They don’t deserve you he growls. They don’t love you like we do….like I do.

His hips suddenly stutter and his pace slows to a crawl. Miri reaches up and pulls his head away from her neck. The look on his face is pure surprise, like he had no idea he was going to say that.

*Say it again* she whispers, her lower lip trembling. She traces her thumbs around the edges of his mouth, across his mustache, then rests her forehead against his. She can’t stand to look at him, or her heart will burst. *Please.*

A long moment passes.

*I love you* he whispers, his breath hot on her face. His hips speed up again, his fingers dig into her hips. He’s completely losing control, fucking her so furiously she almost can’t breathe.

She pushes her hand into his hair and pulls his head back slightly, so he can see her face. Tears streaming down her cheeks, eyelids heavy, lips swollen. A look of utter surprise and joy. *I love you* she manages to whisper.

He groans loudly, wrapping his arms around her. He pushes her head down onto his shoulder, and her body just goes limp. He keeps repeating those words in her ear, over and over.

*I love you….I love you….*

She digs her nails into the back of his shoulders as she cum, sobbing and clenching around him. He barely pulls out in time, making a mess on the floor under the table.

They very carefully make their way back to the library. Anyone that sees them assumes that she’s leaning heavily on him because she’s upset and emotionally drained. While that is true, it’s also because she’s so sore she can barely walk, but it’s easier to focus on the physical pain.

Once they’re in Copia’s room, he draws her a warm bath. He helps her undress and get into the tub. He stays with her the entire time, fetching whatever she needs, brushing sweaty strands of hair from her face. When she’s done, he helps dry her off, and gives her a baggy shirt to wear. She manages to shuffle to the bed and lay down, utterly exhausted. He undresses and lays down with her. He wraps his arms around her and she’s asleep in seconds.

What seemed to be the worst day of her life might have suddenly turned into the best.
March 9th. Two weeks until ascension. The days seem to be flying by now. Miri’s days are filled with dress fittings, rehearsals, meeting with the weird guy that’s renovating a set of rooms just for her. Apparently the last resident was Emeritus the 3rd, and since he and his brothers died in that room, it had been stripped almost down to the studs. After being asked to make decisions about everything from flooring to what she wants painted on the ceiling, Miri thinks she’d be happy if there was just a bed and a table in there.

Things have been different with Copia as well. Since their mutual expression of their true feelings, he’s been more open about their relationship. He’s not afraid to hold her hand as they walk down the halls, or to be seen kissing her cheek. Miri still blushes like crazy, and he teases her mercilessly about it. What is it, tesoro? Would you rather they think we’re miserable? It’s fun to make them jealous, yes?

He lets her attend band practice, which thrills her to no end. At first, it’s a little awkward, since Aether and Dewdrop’s rivalry extends to everything, including music. She just hopes that none of them have ever sat down and compared notes on her.

They tell her they’re going to play a new song they’ve been working on, and at first, it sounds amazing. Then, as the lyrics go on, she starts to detect a theme.

Oh, no. Oh, please, no. Tell me he’s not actually singing about-

THEM RRRRRATSSSS

Oh, for fuck’s sake. He’s actually singing about rats.

The song is great, and she makes sure to tell them that, but she secretly wants to tell Copia it’s not the best idea to write songs about your pets.

His behavior in public isn’t the only thing that’s changed. His libido seems to have increased, as well. When they’re alone, she’s lucky if she has 5 minutes to try and hold a conversation before he’s putting his hand up her dress or putting her hand on his crotch. She’s given him so many blowjobs lately, she’s started carrying lip balm at all times.

One time, when she’s waiting in his office for him, she notices there are no calendars, no day planners, nothing that would give away the date. She wonders if maybe he’s trying to avoid thinking about the inevitable, which would explain the lack of conversation as of late. She doesn’t bring it up, in order to avoid causing him any more anxiety, but she is still afraid.

I just want to spend whatever time I have left with him. That’s all.

March 16th. One week until ascension. Between the ceremony and tomorrow’s St. Patrick’s Day party, things are even more insane. A literal truck full of alcohol has been delivered, and the kitchen is busy making huge vats full of corned beef and cabbage, along with hundreds of shamrock-shaped cookies. Miri has been informed that, despite her upcoming title, she will not be allowed to attend the party after midnight. The level of drunken debauchery will be unheard of, and they don’t want to risk her getting sick or hurt in the mayhem. She thinks they’re overselling it a bit, but just to be safe, she agrees.

People start drinking after breakfast and don’t stop. All day long, the church is filled with drunken
singing and laughter. The revelers seem to be able to keep it together long enough to eat dinner and behave decently, but once the “official” party starts, all bets are off. Miri doesn’t even make it to midnight; once some of the ghouls start stripping their clothes off, wrapping their tails around people, and appear to be close to performing actual sex acts, she calls it a night.

On her way upstairs, she sees Copia with a visiting bishop, already on his 4th glass of red wine. He’s very engrossed in their conversation, gesticulating wildly. She’s happy to see him enjoying himself, and decides not to bother him, not even for a kiss goodnight.

Once she’s been in bed for a couple of hours, the sound of her doorknob rattling wakes her. She assumes it’s Copia, sneaking in for some drunken fooling around, and unlocks it with her powers. She doesn’t roll over at first, but when she notices the distinct lack of the flowery smell, she cautiously looks over her shoulder.

It’s Dewdrop, without his mask. His eyes glow bright in the dark room.

Her heart starts to pound as he walks closer to the bed. She hated to admit it, but she had fantasized about him off and on since that night in the rain. He had only made small moves since then, either from the fear of her power or the fear of rejection.

He quietly approaches the bed, and she rolls over to look at him. He doesn’t make a sound as he climbs onto the bed and lays alongside her, resting his head on her chest. If she didn’t know any better, she’d say it seems like he wants comfort, not sex. She brings her arms up around him, gently stroking his hair. She turns her head slightly so she can rest the side of her face on top of his head. He smells smoky, like a campfire.

After a minute, she notices he’s trembling all over. Hey…she whispers. What’s wrong?

He can’t even look at her. He just crawls farther up the bed and buries his face in her neck. She feels his lips moving against her neck, but he’s not kissing her. He starts to shake more and more, and that’s when she realizes he’s holding his breath. There’s suddenly wetness on her neck.

Tears. He’s holding his breath so she doesn’t know he’s crying.

She sighs. It’s ok, Dew she says, rubbing his back. You can let go. It’s just me here.

He finally takes a deep, shaky breath and the exhale is a high-pitched keen that breaks her heart. His entire body is racked with sobs, and he squeezes her so tight she almost can’t breathe.

She tries to shush him, comfort him, but there’s nothing for it. He just needs to cry himself out. It takes a while, but she keeps stroking his head and shoulders in an attempt to soothe him. Once his breathing has returned to normal, and his body stops shaking, she gently takes his hand and moves it towards her groin.

Did you want to…? she whispers.

No he says, moving his hand away. Not now, not like this.

She nods in agreement. You’re welcome to stay anyway.

He settles in, resting his head alongside hers on the pillow. They fall asleep almost immediately.

The next morning, he’s gone when she wakes up. She takes a shower and gets dressed for breakfast. On her way there, she hears familiar voices in what sounds like an argument down a side hallway.
She pokes her head around the corner a little, and it’s Dew and Copia, having a quiet but heated exchange. Dew looks upset, and Copia is resting a hand on his shoulder, trying to convince him of something. She can’t understand anything they’re saying, but there’s something about it that instinctually feels bad. Like something isn’t right.

You need to trust your instincts more often He says, suddenly.

Where the hell have you been? Roasting non-believers on a stick over a fire?

You haven’t really needed me until now. And after today, you will need me more than ever.
Chapter 27

Miri manages to snag some portable breakfast items from the kitchen, then finds a quiet corner of the courtyard to eat and have a long overdue talk with Him.

_Something is definitely wrong_ she whispers. _I had a bad feeling about all of this, but now it’s even worse._

*I need you to understand something* He says. _I am not as all-powerful as you seem to think. I can only do so much, and most of it is influence. You will ask me, ‘why didn’t you do something’ or ‘why didn’t you stop this’ and all I can tell you is that I simply cannot. Think of it like chess: certain pieces can only move in certain directions. I am like the knight, I can only move in so many ways. Most people are pawns, only able to move one space at a time, but they dream of being the King. They think the King is the most powerful piece on the board, when it is actually the most vulnerable. The most powerful is the Queen. She can move anywhere, at any time. That is you._

_Are you telling me to leave?_

_I’m telling you that you have the power here. If you choose to stay and face what comes, or to run for your life, either one is up to you._

_I haven’t come this far, just to quit. And where would I go, anyway? Back to my parents? They’ve already threatened to lock me up._

_Then there is only the path in front of you._

_She sighs. The only thing that comforts me in all of this is that you think I’m going to make it. You wouldn’t have put me in this spot if you didn’t think I’d survive._

_To be completely honest, I thought the others would make it, as well. Imagine my surprise when they didn’t._

_Didn’t you whisper to them, like you do to me?_

_Yes. But someone whispered louder._

_Her eyes go wide. Someone’s working against you?_

_For a very long time._

_Who here would do that? And why?_

_It’s always the same reason. Power. Control. The chance to wear the crown. To be loved and adored. Or feared._

_You know who it is, don’t you?_

_Of course._

_Are you going to tell me who it is?_

_I’ll show you._

Miri sneaks quietly into the library, and finds a corner to hide in. Copia locks the library when he
goes to lunch, and He claims everything she needs to know is here, so she waits until there is no chance of being interrupted.

After a few minutes, Copia leaves his office, closing the door behind him. He shuffles out of the library, shoulders hunched in his typical way, and locks the door. Seeing him leaves butterflies in her stomach, right next to this horrible, sinking feeling. She doesn’t want it to be him, she desperately hopes it’s not him, but her instincts are telling her it can’t be anybody else.

_What the hell have you done_ she thinks.

She waits a few minutes, just to make sure he’s really gone, then comes out of hiding. _Ok...what am I looking for?_

_Don’t look for anything. Feel for it._

_What, like...rub my hands over the books?_

_No. Feel with your mind. Like you did with the locks._

_Oh, like the time you told me to break into the archives. See how well that turned out?_

_I have no control over your hormones. Your acts are your own._

She sighs, resting her hands on her hips. _Where do I start?_

_Just reach out and think. You’ll know when you find it._

She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes. _Ok, if I was written proof of a terrible conspiracy within a Satanic church, where would I be?_

She stands there for a few minutes, trying to keep her mind clear, when the fingertips of her left hand start tingling. She opens her eyes and looks down at them, she can’t see anything different about them. She moves her hand back and forth, and the tingling seems to get stronger if she points them towards the back hallway. Towards Copia’s office.

_Shit._

He left the office door unlocked. She steps inside, and the tingling intensifies. It’s like when your foot goes numb, and then you try to move it. She raises her hand and it starts to become painful. Wincing, she moves towards his desk. The feeling starts to go away. Not there. She turns around and moves towards his bookcase. It’s like her fingers are being submerged in acid.

Gasping, she moves her fingers in front of the books on the highest shelf. When she passes them in front of one really old-looking book, the pain goes all the way up her arm. _Bingo._

The pain stops as soon as she touches the book. She very carefully removes it, so she doesn’t disturb anything else on the shelf. It looks like a big volume of assorted stories in Latin, but when she opens it, it’s obviously a fake book. It has a huge compartment inside for storage, and there’s a book inside it.

_A journal?_

_You saw how many books he’s written over the years. Did you think he ever stopped?_

She doesn’t want to open it. She doesn’t even want to acknowledge that it exists. She picks up the smaller book and there are flashes of images in her head, like memories. Copia, sitting at his desk,
writing in the book. Scratching the head of his rats with one hand, a pen in the other.

She looks down at the floor, and there they are, standing on their hind legs, expecting treats. She gets a few out of the container, and hands them out.

*Let’s keep this a secret between us, huh guys?*

They seem to nod in agreement and scatter. That’s all she needs, them telling him that she was digging through his stuff. Hopefully their allegiance lies with whoever fed them last.

She sets the fake book on the desk, and opens the journal. It’s all written in Italian, just like the books in the archives.

*Well, shit. I can’t read this.*

*Just wait* He says, and after a moment, the letters start moving on the page. They seem to shimmer for a few seconds, and then the writing is English.

*Was that you?*

*You don’t have time to learn Italian.*

She realizes she really doesn’t have that much time, and starts skimming over the entries. Stuff about Emeritus the Third and how annoying Copia thinks he is. Full of himself, not that talented. How he seems to think being in charge of the Ghost project is just another excuse to party and collect women. He mentions having numerous conversations with Imperator, and how “something” needs to be done.

She sees another flash of memory. Copia and Imperator watching a recording of Emeritus the Third performing, apparently doing his best impression of a Satanic Elvis, and they are not impressed. She says she will talk to Nihil about a possible solution, but in the meantime, the Third is “suspended”.

Another flash. Imperator and Nihil talking in what looks like a mausoleum. She tells him his sons are all disappointments, and that new blood is needed to keep the project going, to spread the Dark Lord’s word even farther. He reluctantly agrees.

Another flash. Three men sitting around a table, playing Uno. One positively ancient-looking man, wrapped in a scarf and several sweaters. Another man in sunglasses, smoking a cigar. The third man, giggling deviously behind his cards. The three brothers. There is an unexpected knock at the door, and all three men look up in surprise. The Third, Dante, gets up to answer the door, and there is nobody there. Just darkness in the hallway outside. He turns back to his brothers and shrugs, and that’s when a pair of eyes light up in the darkness. Then another. And another. Three ghouls, dressed all in black, leap into the room and in seconds are on the men. Ripping and tearing at them, with teeth and claws. In less than a minute, it’s over. Blood everywhere. One ghoul holds up the severed head of Dante, licking his lips. Miri recognizes those eyes, those claws.

It’s Dewdrop.

She almost drops the book on the floor and tries not to retch. *Carbon monoxide poisoning, my ass. Did...did Nihil order this?*

His silence speaks volumes.

*Ohmygod ohmygod* she whispers. *He had his own sons murdered...because Imperator told him to?*
Who put the thought in her head?

She feels sick. Cold sweat is pouring down her back, but she needs to know everything. She reopens the book.

Once the Papas are dead, Copia is named successor to Nihil. He seems pretty smug and satisfied with himself, but it doesn’t last long. He knows that somewhere out there, a potential Unholy Mother is waiting to be found. She would be the only other person that could lead the church, and he doesn’t like the idea of having to share any power with anyone. He’s worked for far too long to have some stupid little girl interrupt his plans.

Which is why he’d made sure to get close enough to the previous half-dozen, just enough to sow a few seeds of doubt into their minds. Are you sure this is really what you want? No, I’m sure things will be just fine, no matter what you decide. You are stronger and more capable than the others that came before you. I believe in you.

Another flash. Copia and Dewdrop, standing on a street corner in the city. It looks like they’re near the bank that Margo visited on their trip into town. Copia is staring intently across the street, and Dew is trying to figure out what has captured his attention.

It’s her. She’s standing with a group of working girls, just talking, drinking out of a fountain cup. She looks grubby and tired, nothing too terrible. After seeing herself from this point of view, however, she sees why Copia is staring. At this distance, she looks a lot like Rachel. Similar hair, similar eye color. He writes that it was like seeing a ghost. He writes that he suddenly remembers how much he loved her, but then immediately curses himself for being weak.

Eventually she drops her empty cup in the garbage and bids her friends farewell. Once she’s far enough down the block, Copia points to the garbage can and Dew runs across the street to it. He gets the cup out of the can, and brings it back to Copia. He just looks down at it. Dew finally gets his message, and starts sniffing all over it. Take it to the others he tells Dew. Make sure they know the scent.

She remembers the night of the eclipse. How He said they knew her scent and were looking for her. She has to close the book for a moment and just focus on breathing. The ghouls were working under his orders to find me, not the church’s.

At this point, does it surprise you?

She doesn’t answer. She opens the book again. When the ghouls returned from their trip, they called him to the infirmary right away. Doc wasn’t there, just an incredibly intimidated nurse. She was pulling off Miri’s shoes and socks, and he saw the mark instantly. It was bright red, almost glowing. He writes that he almost wanted to chop off her entire foot and claim the whole thing was a mistake, and she could be thrown outside for hunting practice. What little love he had left inside for Rachel wouldn’t let him. It kept telling him that they could be partners, that they could share power. His cold, intellectual half refused. This will be the same as the others he wrote. Get close to her, make her dependent on me, feed into her insecurities and fears, and she will not survive ascension. Just like the others. I will be Papa soon enough, and then there will be no more Unholy Mothers.

It takes everything Miri has not to throw up everywhere. It isn’t just her heart that’s breaking, it’s all her organs. They feel like they’ve all turned cold and hard inside her. Tears threaten to spill from her eyes, but she quickly blinks them away. She doesn’t want to get anything on the book, in case Copia goes back to these pages at some point.

I am so sorry, my love, but you need to keep going. There’s even less time now.
She keeps reading, the waves of nausea and anguish washing over her, about his initial thoughts of her. He writes that she’s young, immature, not the smartest of the potentials, but determined to prove herself. He purposely says and does things to encourage a crush to develop. Even that rainy night in his office was orchestrated just for her. He openly hopes that Papa waits to die or name him the next Papa until after she’s dead. It isn’t until he catches her in the archives that the entries suddenly take a turn.

Now he begins arguing with himself, his emotional side conflicting with his rational side. He’s so lonely and starved for love, yet he’s so close to centuries of planning and scheming and backstabbing finally leading to his ultimate goal: ruling the church. The entries alternate between horrible comments about her, to what almost looks like poetry. Especially his thoughts on their first time together. *I have deflowered many virgins across the years, but none have given me as much pleasure or happiness as her.*

Another flash. That night, but from his point of view. She can’t stand to look at herself that way, so she focuses on him. He actually was concerned with how she felt, trying to give her as much pleasure as possible, trying not to hurt her too badly. For a moment, he actually believed that they could make it work, that they could rule together. As always, the rational side kept reminding him that there was only room at the top for one.

More flashes, coming faster. All the times they’d had sex, he was falling for her, more and more, despite himself. He even tries to sabotage the entire thing by telling Dew to meet him outside Miri’s room at a certain time. That was the time she saw him watching.

Now the anger starts to flare. The realization that he’s been manipulating her the entire time, that he’s the only reason why she was brought here, that he’s planning on killing her....

A low growl starts to emanate from her lips. She wants to tear the book in half, make everything burst into flames, open a sinkhole in the ground and send the entire compound screaming to Hell.

She skips to the last few entries. He’s dreading and anticipating the ritual. He feels stupid for having told her he loves her, but she’ll be gone soon, and it’ll all be forgotten in time.

Another flash. He’s alone in his office, speaking with Him. *Do you really think this will work out the way you want, Vincenzo?*

Copia suddenly looks angry. *Do not call me that name. That boy died a long time ago.*

*But in a lot of ways, you are still that boy. You are lashing out in pain, but at me instead of God.*

*God doesn’t play the game, you do. Your moves may be limited but mine are not. She will die, and any chance of stopping me will be destroyed.*

*And what exactly do you plan to do with all this power? You cannot get out of our deal. You will serve me as the Bringer of Plagues, it’s only a matter of time.*

*I am tired of serving others and you. Once I am Papa, I answer to no one but you. They will have to answer to me, for a change.*

*Well, then. Pride has always been my favorite sin.*

She closes the book. Her hands are shaking, her lips pursed and white with rage.
Now you know. I told you to be careful, but you humans need to see things for yourselves sometimes.

She puts the journal back into the fake book, and carefully slides it back into place on the bookshelf.

I need to get out of here.

Then you need to move fast, he’s almost at the library door.

She bolts out of the office, closing the door behind her. She hears the key turning in the lock of the main door, and runs down an aisle. There’s no place to hide, but then she looks up. Like a little monkey, she scales up the shelves until she’s on the very top, way above Copia’s head. She doesn’t even breathe as he makes his way back to his office. She waits for a few minutes, just to make sure, then climbs back down the other side. Once down, she slips off her shoes and runs as fast as she can back to her room.

She immediately turns on the faucet and shower in her bathroom, any noise to cover up her angry screams and anguished sobs. She drops to her knees and cries so hard, she thinks she might just throw up all of her insides. Something suddenly taps her shoulder, and it’s Him. He’s using the same face as the first time they faced each other in the infirmary. Sharp blue eyes and cheekbones.

She reaches for Him this time, and He wraps His arms around her. She buries her face in His chest, He’s very warm and smells faintly like charcoal. He strokes her hair as she sobs, His lips brushing against her ear.

He sighs. I hate to see you in pain. I wish you didn’t have to know any of this, but I didn’t want you to end up like the others. What Copia thinks doesn’t matter, I’ve always known you were different from them. Special. I would be content with you at my side in Hell, but I would be even happier to see you raising our child.

His voice is so soothing in person, she almost forgets where she is. She wants to just curl up and spend forever in His arms. He taps her gently on the tip of her nose.

I can’t hold this form forever. And you can’t stay in here forever, either. If you’re going to fight, you need to start now.

And how do I do that?

You need allies. Once you have that, the rest is simple. Don’t let him win.

She sits up. One thing I don’t understand, and I’m sure you do. Why is he doing all this?

He’s spent the last several centuries answering to other people, letting them push him around, following their orders. Knowing the entire time that he possesses power beyond their imaginations. Knowing that he was more integral to my plans than any of them. It put a bit of a chip on his shoulder. Once his wife and Rachel were gone, he had nothing but time ahead of him.

She wipes the tears off her cheeks. It sounds lonely and sad. I feel sorry for him.

That’s a wise course of action. If he discovers you know of his plans, he’ll expect you to be angry. He won’t expect you to pity him. Or continue to love him. You do still love him, don’t you?

She nods, more tears threatening to spill over. I can’t help it. Even after learning all of this....she shrugs.

Then you are truly the next Mother. To be able to feel love and empathy for someone that wants you
dead...I knew it had to be you.
Miri spends the rest of the day in her room. Someone comes by to check on her, and she asks to have dinner in her room as well. Nobody questions it, probably assuming she’s overwhelmed with all the activity, on top of preparing for Saturday. She doesn’t feel like eating, but she forces herself to. She needs all her energy for the first part of her plan, which goes into effect tonight.

Step one: gather allies.

Two hours before curfew, she sneaks down to the ghoul quarters. As she approaches Aether and Dewdrop’s room, she can hear them chattering away in their own language. She still has no idea what any of it means, but she suddenly catches her own name in there, spoken by Dew. She doesn’t bother knocking, she just opens the door and walks in.

They both jump, and pretend that they weren’t just talking about her in some way. Well....*speak of the devil* Aether says, trying to look casual.

*Not quite, but close enough. I want to do something, and I need assistance.*

They look at each other, shrug, and look back at her.

*I want to go for a drive. Get out of here for a little bit, clear my head, see the sky for a change. I don’t have a license, and I’m supposed to have a chaperone of some sort. Which one of you wants to drive, and which one wants to be the bodyguard?*

They practically trip over themselves trying to get shoes on and get out the door. They sneak out a side door by the courtyard, where the landscaping truck is parked. Dew already had a spare copy of the keys, and Miri doesn’t ask why. He gets behind the wheel, she gets in the middle, and Aether squeezes his large frame into the passenger side.

*Where to?* Dew asks.

*I don’t know the area, I’m assuming you do. Where should we go to be alone?*

His pupils dilate slightly, and his cheeks turn a little pink. *I know a place.*

*Ok, let’s get the hell out of here.*

The roads near the compound are winding, heavily lined with giant trees and thick underbrush. No wonder they chose that place for the church. It’s already pitch black outside, and after almost 30 minutes of driving, Miri starts to wonder if Dew has any idea where he’s going. The roads begin to incline more and more, indicating that they’re driving up. He finally pulls the truck over to what looks like a small parking lot and turns off the engine.

*We’re here.* Before she can undo her seatbelt, he’s already out of the truck and putting down the tailgate.
Once she and Aether are out of the truck, they see what he wanted to show them. On the other side of the road is a huge drop-off, probably hundreds of feet down, and an enormous vista, overlooking miles and miles of forest. There’s no noise other than nocturnal insects and critters, probably raccoons or something. It’s so peaceful.

Aether points to the trees at the front of the truck. *Little boy’s room. Two seconds.*

Miri hoists herself up onto the tailgate and stretches out her legs. Dew quietly sits down next to her, practically in her lap, and begins nuzzling her neck.

*I know, Dew.*

*Know what?* His tongue flicks out of his mouth and just barely scrapes against her skin.

*About Copia. The Papas. I’ve seen it all.* She keeps her voice down, because if Aether doesn’t know yet, she doesn’t want it to be like this.

Dew slowly pulls back until she can see his eyes, glowing in the dark but no longer golden. Now they’re a pale green, almost sickly-looking. He’s breathing much heavier, and he starts shaking. He’s afraid.

She cups his face in her hands. *You seem to have grown a conscience, otherwise you would’ve denied everything. Help me.*

*I don’t know how I can he* whimpers. *If I betray him, and he finds out, he’ll tell Nihil what really happened that night. I’ll be torn to pieces.*

*I won’t let anything happen to you or Aether. If you can get a good amount of ghoul to stand behind me, he won’t be able to touch you. Since it was all his idea anyway, you can just say you were obeying orders. We’ll lock his ass in the catacombs, if we have to.*

Dew chuckles. *Put him in there with his rats.*

*That’s why I wanted to talk to you two outside the church, where little ears won’t hear us.*

He nods. *I’ll do whatever you want. Whatever I can.*

*You can kiss me, for starters.*

His lips are immediately on hers, his tongue gently forcing its way into her mouth. He deepens the kiss as he grazes her cheek with his knuckles, and she becomes so light-headed, she thinks she might pass out.

*Oi, starting without me, eh?* Aether calls from the front of the truck.

She breaks the kiss to turn her head, and Dew moves his lips to her neck. *What the hell was taking you so long? Were you communing with animals?*

He giggles. *No, just warming up a little.* She looks down, and his bulge is rather noticeable.

She makes a face at him. *You’re ridiculous.* She tries to say something else, but Dew’s tongue flickering on the spot where her neck and shoulder meet makes speech almost impossible. Aether doesn’t waste any time, tilting her head up so he can kiss her, as Dew lifts the back of her shirt up. He quickly unsnaps her bra, his right hand snaking around her front to grab her right breast, while Aether immediately grabs her left.
Being sandwiched between them, with both of them touching her at the same time, she can barely
keep her eyes open. They’re kissing her neck, between her shoulder blades. Hands are pushing up
her skirt, running up and down her thighs. Someone slips two fingers inside her, and she hears her
own voice echoing in the dark. She groipes blindly, looking for some part of one of them that she can
grab onto.

The fingers disappear. They gently lay her down in the back of the truck, her lower half almost
hanging off the tailgate. Dew is kissing her again, flicking the tip of his tongue against hers. Her legs
are suddenly pushed up and are resting against something. She feels fabric against the backs of her
legs, hands on her calves. She reaches out, and Aether grabs her hand.

It’s just me. Don’t worry, I know you can take it.

The tip of his cock is suddenly at her entrance, and before she can react he’s halfway in and thrusting
quickly. She moans loudly into Dew’s mouth, and he pulls away to whisper lewd things into her ear.

You love thick cocks, don’t you. Yeah, you do. They feel so good, fucking your tight little pussy,
yeah? That’s what I thought.

Between Aether slamming into her and Dew’s filth, she’s so close her body is almost convulsing.
She claws and grabs at Dew, trying to hold him close, so she has something to brace herself against
when she cumms. He buries his face in her neck again, and sneaks his right hand down to rub her clit.
It only takes a few seconds, and her entire body clenches in ecstasy, screams pouring from her
mouth.

She’s barely had a chance to come down, when Dew moves away slightly, making a lot of noise and
commotion. He gets up on his knees, and swings one leg over her chest so he’s almost sitting on her.

If you’re gonna leave your mouth open that wide, you should do something useful with it.

She looks down, and his cock is out and rock hard. It’s not as thick as she’s used to, but still a nice
length. She tries to bring her hands up to touch it, but he squeezes his thighs so her arms are pinned
at her side.

No, no. I’ll help you. He grabs her head on either side and guides it to the tip, and she licks at it,
rubbing her lips all over the head. His shuddery moans are music to her ears, and she brings her head
up to slide more of him into her mouth.

I said I’d do it he says impatiently, moving her head to where he wants it. He figures out quickly
how far is too far, so he doesn’t gag her by accident. Her eyes water and her jaw starts to ache as he
fucks her mouth, but she loves it. She starts sucking hard every time he pulls back, and it seems like
it’s all he can do to not just choke her to death with his dick.

Oh fuck...fuck, I’m getting real close...Dew, you about ready?

Miri looks up, and realizes that Aether’s got his hands on Dew’s shoulders, using him as leverage for
his thrusts. Dew grunts loudly, nodding his head.

Ok, then....on 3.....1.....2....oh shit.....3!

As Dew thrusts one last time, and the hot, salty liquid pulses into her mouth, Miri feels one leg being
thrown off Aether’s shoulder as he pulls out and cums on the ground under the tailgate.

Dew climbs off and lays down next to her, putting his clothes back together. Aether puts himself
back in his pants, and lays down on the other side. The three of them stare up at the sky, watching
the stars move incrementally.

_Aether...she says. We have something to talk to you about. It’s not good, but you’ll probably be less likely to freak out about it now._

_You’re not pregnant, are you?_ Even in almost total darkness, she can see the hilarious look of panic on his face.

_Uh, no. Not even remotely. Something is about to go down, and we need your help._

An hour later, after much screaming and shouting in Ghoulish, Aether is on board. He seems to have lost a good amount of trust in Dew, but they’ll deal with that later.

_So, what’s the plan, then?_

_According to Imperator, after the potential Mother gets...well...run through, basically...the ritual can’t be called a failure by anybody other than whoever’s performing it. So, in our case, it’ll be Copia. He’ll be super impatient and try to call it as soon as he can. You two need to make sure he doesn’t. If I’m just unconscious or something, even if my heart is only barely beating, or I just have the smallest sign of brain function, you have to keep him from stopping the ritual. Once it’s over, it’s over. Someone will take me out of there and throw me in an incinerator._

_They both give her an incredulous look. I haven’t seen one of these rituals yet, but...they don’t actually do that, do they?_ Aether suddenly looks heartbroken, like it’s finally sunk in that she might die without their help.

_That’s what Imperator told me. That’s why there aren’t any graves for them in the church cemetery. They weren’t worthy of burial here._

_Dew wraps his tail around her waist and pulls her close to his side. We’re not letting that happen. Are we, brother?_ He looks at Aether, who is thoughtfully chewing his bottom lip. Miri reaches up and turns his face towards her. There are tears threatening to spill from his eyes.

_Hey....I’m scared, too. That’s why I need you. Both of you._

_Aether leans down and rests his head on her shoulder. You’ve got us, then. To the end._

_They put the truck back where they found it, and somehow manage to sneak back to their respective areas without being caught. Miri stops at her door, and an idea occurs to her. Instead of going in, she heads to the library. The door is locked, but that means nothing to her now. She walks quietly to the back, to Copia’s quarters._
Before going into his room, she stops.

_Hey....are you there?_

_Always. What do you need?_

_Show me the worst._

_Worst what?_

_The worst of what he’s done. I want a reminder before I go in there and forget why I’m angry._

A memory flashes. Bishop Johns, chained up in what looks like a dungeon. Manacles around his ankles, wrists, and his neck. Copia’s rats are chewing away at the soft skin at both wrists and his face. Most of his nose, lips, and ears are gone. He’s still alive. And conscious.

It seems like he’s beyond the ability to speak, but Copia is not at a loss for words.

_Me and my fucking rats, yes? Tsk tsk tsk. You shouldn’t have said that._

He turns to leave, and Johns begins screaming hysterically. Copia ignores him, and walks away.

Miri shudders and fights back the urge to gag. While the man deserved to be punished, that was not what she had in mind.

She tiptoes into Copia’s room, stopping at the side of the bed. He’s sleeping on his back, dead to the world. If it wasn’t for the fact that he can’t die, she would smother or strangle him right here. Take the letter opener off his desk and stab him in the throat. Or stab him right in the heart.

The idea of him dead, of never seeing him again, fills her with sadness so quickly, she has to bite her fist to keep from crying. She waits a moment, taking deep breaths, until she’s calm again. Once pulled together, she carefully climbs onto the other side of the bed, and slips under the covers. She’s still a little sore from earlier, but she honestly thinks this will be the last time she’ll ever share his bed. The tears almost start again, but she thinks of Johns’ mutilated face, and the sadness disappears.

She moves down the bed, gently grasping Copia’s pajama bottoms and sliding them down until his dick is free. It’s impressive even when it’s not hard, and her mouth can’t help but water. Using her tongue and lips, she slowly teases it to life, making sure she’s gentle enough to not wake him yet. It gets bigger and bigger, the throbbing against her lips enough to make her wet again.

When she finally takes him into her mouth, trying to swallow him down as much as she can, that’s when he lets out a soft moan. Still mostly asleep, his hands brush across her face, not realizing he isn’t dreaming it. He unconsciously thrusts his hips up at her, and she pulls her mouth away. His cock is fully hard now, bobbing in time with his heartbeat. He reaches down with his hands again, wrapping one around his shaft and stroking gently. She lets him do that for a little bit, until she decides she’s had enough.

She grabs him by the wrist and pulls his hand away. When he tries to move it back, she won’t let him. This finally wakes him up enough to look down and lift up the covers.

_Cara? Wh-_  

_Shut up._ She climbs up to him fast, crushing her mouth onto his. The taste of his lips is intoxicating to her, and she has to fight away the thought that she’ll never kiss them again. She quickly sits up, pulling her underwear to the side, and guides him into her.
His surprised moans only add more fuel to her internal power trip, making her ride him harder and faster. Before long, she’s bouncing as forcefully as she can on his cock, their breath being forced out of them by the impact of their bodies. She doesn’t even care if she gets off at this point. She wants him to get off, but as painfully as possible. Unfortunately, it doesn’t seem to be having the desired effect. If he’s in pain, he’s enjoying it.

She lays down on top of him, burying her face in his neck and thrusting her hips back on him as hard as she can. In this position, she won’t last long, but if it helps him think she doesn’t suspect anything, fine. He bends his knees and starts thrusting back against her, and that’s all it takes. She screams into his pillow, right next to his ear, as she clenches around him.

Between the ghouls and this, she’s completely exhausted. She lets her whole body go limp while he keeps fucking her. Feeling him thrust into her, the way his hands grip her, his undecipherable Italian whispers...she knows that some part of him really does love her, doesn’t want this to end, but she wishes he was strong enough to be able to change his fucking mind.

His thrusting becomes more intense, and he whispers how much he loves her, how good she makes him feel, and it makes her sick. She doesn’t respond, but he’s so far gone, he doesn’t notice. One final deep thrust and she feels him cum, his whole body tensing under her. After he catches his breath, he finally turns to look at her. He frowns and wipes at her cheek.

_Cara, are you ok? What makes you cry?_

She wipes at her cheeks, trying to play it off. _I’m ok, it just hurt a little bit towards the end. I didn’t want to say anything because you were so close-

_No, no. I’m sorry, I get carried away, you know I don’t mean to hurt you._ He pulls her close and kisses her forehead. She grits her teeth together to stop herself from yelling _LIAR_ and punching his face in.

She gently pulls away from him, excusing herself to the bathroom to get cleaned up. After she closes the door and turns on the light, she looks at herself in the mirror. She wants to spit in her own face, but it won’t help anything. She takes her time cleaning up, hoping that Copia will fall back asleep before she’s done. No such luck, though. He’s just barely awake when she gets out, and pats the bed next to him. _Sleep here tonight?_

_She puts on her fakest nice smile. It’s my last night sleeping in my room. Tomorrow they’re moving me to the new rooms. There’s supposed to be a four-poster bed in there. Plenty of room for both of us._

_Ah, that sounds nice. Tomorrow night, maybe._ And then he’s asleep.

She lets the smile fade from her face, and gives him two middle fingers up before tiptoeing out of the room again.

She showers thoroughly in her bathroom before climbing into bed. She checks the clock on the table next to her. It’s after midnight Tuesday.

_4 days until I die._
Chapter 29

Tuesday morning. Miri’s breakfast is brought to her room, and shortly after she finishes, two of the men in suits come to move her to her new rooms. She only has one box of some clothes and books, so she carries it while flanked by the men. She’s told that once she gets to her room, she will not be leaving it again until the ritual on Saturday. That’s not a problem for her, as she specifically requested a laptop in the room, for watching Netflix or whatever. Her meals will be brought to her, and she’ll have minimal contact until Saturday. All for security reasons, of course. There’s dozens of visiting clergy and big donors to the organization coming, and they have no way of protecting her unless she stays put.

The rooms are on the ground floor, in an area she’s never been in before. Once she sees the rooms, she realizes why those were chosen for her. There are no windows or other doors. *Isn’t this a fire hazard* she thinks to herself. *Then again, who’s going to complain?*

The walls are covered in thick, dark gray wallpaper, the floors are solid stone, covered with expensive brocade rugs. There’s a sitting area, with a table and chairs. An ornate fireplace with a sofa. A vanity and chair, with brushes and combs already sitting on the surface. At the very back, against the wall, a giant, black four-poster bed, like something from the House of Usher. Thick black curtains hang from each post, so at least she can close them and have another line of defense from the outside world.

Off to the side, there’s an enormous bathroom. A shower with one of those rain nozzles, so it feels like you’re getting rained on. A black jacuzzi tub with dozens of jets. There’s even a bidet, which she can’t even look at, because she thinks it’s hilarious. *Because making sure my asshole is clean enough to eat off of is a priority.*

Once she’s had a chance to put away her things, she dismisses the guards, and they go back to standing outside the door. She crawls into the king-size bed and goes back to sleep.

Copia tries to see her after lunch, before he makes the trip over to the Grand Hall. It’s a building a few hundred yards away from the main compound, where they have the really big parties. There will be a banquet Saturday night, and of course, Ghost will be playing for the revelers afterwards. That’s why he hasn’t been around much the last few days, he’s had to work with lighting directors and sound technicians and stage designers, making sure that the show is as close to perfect as possible. The guards won’t let him in, obviously, so he asks them to let her know he stopped by. Once he leaves, she pokes her head out of the door.

*When he comes back, because he will, if he should give you any kind of note or paper he wants you to give to me…..tear it up once he’s out of earshot.*

The men nod. *As you command, Miss.*

Thanks to Netflix and Reddit and a ton of other crap websites, the days pass by pretty quickly. Miri has only seen or spoken to the men stationed outside her door. She can get food whenever she wants, she can lay in bed in her underwear all day, or take an hour-long shower. She’s enjoying not having to be up early for kitchen duty, or having to carry heavy books to the library for Latin lessons, or hearing the whispers as she walks by groups of Siblings.

The only drawback is that she misses physical contact. She wishes she could have someone bring
one or both of her ghouls to her room, but she knows the guards would say it’s too risky. When she gets bored or lonely, she crawls under the covers and sticks her hands down her pants, thinking about her last night with all 3 men. It’s all incredibly hot in her mind, but the only thing that gets her off is her thoughts of Copia. His eyes, half-closed in desire. His plump bottom lip swollen from kissing. His hair falling in his face. The smell of dead flowers. His mustache tickling her neck. His hands gripping her waist. Most of all, it’s the memory of his entire body on top of her, the weight and heat of it, feeling muscles rippling under his skin as he fucked her. She cries every time she makes herself cum, partly from heartbreak and partly from the shame of knowing she still loves him.

By Friday night, she’s starting to wish she doesn’t survive the ritual. It’s better than living with this horrible knowledge and the fact that she was so gullible, so desperate to believe that someone thought she was so special.

*I still believe it* He says.

*I know you do, but you’re not here. Not really.*

She feels her bed shift slightly, and it startles her. He’s there, in His human form. He’s shirtless, and she almost screams when she lifts up the covers to discover He’s actually completely naked.

*What the hell are you doing?! That’s weird!*  

*What, you don’t like how this looks? Remember, I can read your mind.*

She sighs, defeated. *You can’t…do anything with it, though.*

*No…but I can at least hold you like this.*

She lays back down on her side, motioning for Him to be the big spoon to her little spoon. His skin is just as warm as she remembers, His hands still soft but strong. *Where were you two days ago, when I was so bored I was jerking off all day?*

*You know how it is. Lots of things on my plate. Listening to the prayers of teenage boys who’ve discovered heavy metal. Torturing serial killers in Hell. The usual.*

She looks over her shoulder at Him, and He has a dumb look plastered on His face.

*If you weren’t you, I’d punch you right now.*

He laughs. *If I were not me, you’d either be dead or having a much stranger experience than you currently are.*

*I honestly don’t think this could get much stranger, and please don’t say or do anything to prove me wrong. Just let me try to….exist for a little bit without anything weird…please?*

*As you wish.*

He wraps His arms around her, pressing His body against the back of hers.*How long would you like me to stay?*

*As long as you can. Preferably until I fall asleep.*

*It shall be done.*

*Can’t you just say ‘ok’ like normal people? Stop your Shakespearean drama and just talk normally.*
Ok.

Thank you.

He nestles His face into her hair and breathes deeply. *You really are perfect, do you realize that?*

But she’s already asleep.

Saturday morning. The guards spend almost 10 minutes knocking on her door before finally coming in to make sure she’s still alive. She practically jumps out of bed when they call her name. They’ve brought her breakfast, but it’s not what she was expecting.

It’s some kind of protein shake thing, with chocolate and bananas and peanut butter. It’s good, but she wonders why no actual breakfast. The guards share a look, and one looks down while the other speaks.

*They don’t want you to have solid food…beforehand. If…things go wrong…it gets…messy.*

*You mean, they don’t want to deal with cleaning up after me should I lose control of my bowels upon death?*

*Basically…yeah.*

*This day’s off to a great start already, boys.*

The ritual is at 1 pm. She tries to remember why that time exactly, probably something to do with the position of the sun and planets or something. At 11, a group of Sisters, along with Imperator, shows up. They’re there to do her makeup and hair, and to help her get dressed. Imperator is there to supervise the entire process. Miri asks why they’re worried about hair and makeup for something like this.

*Because, my dear, for many of our guests today, this is their first time seeing you. A good first impression goes a long way.*

*Because that’s important* Miri sarcastically thinks to herself. Now that she knows what Imperator has been up to behind the scenes, she can’t help but want to strangle the old woman.

*Not yet* she tells herself. *Not yet.*

Her makeup is simple and understated, her hair pulled back in a partial ponytail. She thinks she looks like she’s about to do a photoshoot for a religious magazine. Then they unpack the dress.

It’s white, with a long line of buttons going from the neck all the way down to the navel. Long sleeves, a solid back, and the skirt drags on the floor, even after she puts it on. *I suppose it won’t drag so bad once I get the shoes on* she says.

*Oh, there aren’t any shoes* Imperator says.

Miri looks up at her from her chair. *No shoes?*

*No. You’re to walk to the cathedral and complete the ritual barefoot.*

.........OK.
It’s almost 12:45 by the time they finish futzing around with her, and they leave to go take their seats in the sanctuary. Not long after that, the guards open the door. *Your chaperones are here.*

She walks to the door, and there’s Aether and Dewdrop, in their finest black suits and silver masks. They both find themselves speechless at how she looks, and she can’t help but blush a little.

They start the long walk to the cathedral, leaving her guards behind. *So…how are we looking, gentleman?*

*The fire and water ghouls stand with us* Dew says. *I left air and earth up to Aether.*

She turns to the other ghoul. *Are there no other aether ghouls?*

*’Fraid not. I’m the only one represented on this plane, at the moment. About half the air ghouls are with us, but earth…they prefer to stay neutral. See where things land.*

*The point is* Dew interjects *we have enough to protect you. If Copia tries to call things too early, they will put themselves between him and you. Try to buy you as much time as possible.*

She nods, trying to slow her breathing. She only just realizes that she’s been hyperventilating a little. Nausea is slowly creeping up her throat, cold sweat running down her back and thighs.

*What did you tell them? When you asked them to side with us?*

Dew shrugs. *Basically, you were worried that Copia was gonna fuck it up, and you wanted to make sure someone would stand up to him and keep him from killing you with his incompetence.*

*Not too far from the truth, there.*

They arrive at the cathedral doors. There’s two men at the doors, as usual. It sounds like there’s a million people inside. Miri casts a look down the hall, at the room where the bodies of the Papas are kept on display. *I’m so sorry, guys* she thinks. *I’m gonna try and make this right, I swear.*

She reaches up and grabs each ghoul by the hand. *Just in case I trip or faint.*

They both squeeze her hands in support. She nods to the guards, and they open the doors.

Miri never realized just how many people could fit inside the sanctuary, because there has to be thousands of people in the room. Every pew is stuffed full, people standing along the outside edge of the room, elbow to elbow. Now she’s suddenly struck with stage fright. This many people, staring at her as she walks down the impossibly long aisle….

Aether and Dew each take a step forward, which means she has to as well. She tries to pick a spot at the end to focus on, so she can block everything else out. She can see Papa sitting in his chair, and there’s now a second one next to it. One for her. She keeps her eyes on it as they walk, ignoring everything else.

As she gets closer to the altar, she notices what looks like a small bench covered in red cloth. That’s where she’s supposed to stand. When she sees it, her arms start to shake, making the ghouls’ arms shake as well. It takes a good deal of their strength to keep them from wobbling.

Once they reach the bench, Copia, whom Miri didn’t even notice until now, rises from his seat. He’s wearing the red official attire again, which seems weird to her, unless he’s not planning on getting any blood on him. He stands in front of the bench, facing them. He offers an invocation to the congregation and visitors, welcoming them to such a monumental occasion. He launches into a some
what long and indulgent prayer in Latin, before finally bowing slightly to her and stepping aside.

She takes a deep breath and steps forward to the bench. She lets go of the ghouls’ hands long enough to take a step up onto it, and turn around to face the crowd. She doesn’t look at any of their faces, only down the aisle to the doors.

Copia begins the Latin incantations for the ritual, but she barely pays attention to what he’s saying. He pauses for a second, and nods to the ghouls. Each one takes her by the hand, and places their other hands in her armpits, to support her in case she falls. She’s struggling to take measured breaths, but forces herself to. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Slowly. She starts to feel a little better, until she sees a Brother come forward with a velvet pillow. Resting on top of it is the knife.

If it had been small, like a dagger, she wouldn’t have been too worried. This looks like something you would use to butcher a large animal. She looks at Copia, and his reaction is not reassuring. He looks completely unaffected. Like he’s performing weekly Mass or something. She looks up, back at the doors, and she sees Him. He’s standing there, smiling, with His hands in His pockets.

Her breathing comes easier now. She even smiles back a little. A thought suddenly occurs to her. The other ghouls need to believe that Copia is capable of messing this whole thing up. What if she could cause some kind of distraction, something to catch him off guard?

She lets go of her ghoul’s hands and reaches up to her throat. She slowly begins to unbutton the dress, starting at the top. It would be a shame to not only have to clean blood out of it, but have to repair a knife hole as well. She keeps going, button after button, pausing for a moment when she reaches her cleavage. She’s not wearing a bra under the dress, but considering how lust is the most popular sin, she doubts anybody will care if some of her breasts are showing.

Finally Copia looks up from his clasped hands, and realizes what she’s doing. His face almost instantly turns the same color as his clothing, and it’s obvious. Miri just ignores him, keeps looking towards the door as she keeps undoing the buttons. The murmurs of confusion amongst the crowd drown out his attempts at clearing his throat to get her attention, but she stops once she’s down to the last few buttons. She holds her hands back out for the ghouls to take, and they grab them tightly.

She finally looks down at Copia, and she almost laughs at his look of confusion and annoyance. Like he thinks she isn’t taking this seriously. He sighs, then turns to the Brother holding the pillow and picks up the knife. Miri looks back at the doors, a small smile upon her lips. She’s not sure why, but she’s suddenly filled with confidence that this whole thing will turn out ok. It’ll all be fine.

Copia turns to face her, knife in hand. He tentatively places the tip against her skin, where he plans to strike. Just below where her ribcage ends. She knows enough about anatomy that there’s a massive artery right in that area, and it’s easy to bleed to death if it’s damaged. That’s probably what he’s hoping for.

He lines up the knife to his mark. Miri’s face breaks into an even wider smile. As he leans back slightly on one foot, she whispers to him.

*Checkmate.*

He can’t stop the momentum of his body, and the knife plunges to the hilt in her. Strangely enough, there is no pain. Only pressure, like someone standing on her chest. The cold sweat returns with a vengeance, her muscles starting to turn to jelly. She feels the ghouls trying to keep her standing, but her legs aren’t working anymore. She manages to lock her knees together, when she notices a tickle in her throat. She coughs to clear it, but it feels like she’s drooling. She looks down and there’s blood dripping from her lips. He must have punctured the lower part of a lung, as well.
Miri tries to take a deep breath, but it just makes her cough even harder. More blood dribbles from her mouth and she doesn’t even try to stop it. Her lower jaw is chattering, like she’s either feverish or freezing, and she looks down at Copia with the most withering stare she can manage. His face is distorted with smugness and vindication.

shitshitshitshit I’m dying I’m dying if he pulls that out I’m dead she thinks.

Don’t worry He says from behind her. I’ll catch you if you fall.

Her chest is really starting to hurt now, the pressure is getting stronger and stronger, like a dam about to burst. She starts to gag on the blood coming out of her mouth, when Copia grabs the knife handle and pulls it out in one smooth motion.

From the inch-wide hole it’s made in her abdomen, a literal fountain of dark red blood pours out in giant spurts, in time with her heartbeat. Now there is pain, searing and piercing, spreading all through her body. A gout of blood pours from her mouth, running down the front of her. She tries to squeeze the ghouls’ hands, but she has no strength left. She’s so cold and so tired, she just wants to sleep. This was all a bad dream, and it’ll be over when she wakes up.

Miri’s head flops back on her neck, and as her vision starts to fade, the last thing she sees is Him standing behind her, waiting to catch her. Her body falls backwards slightly, but when the ghouls try to keep her from falling, they realize they don’t have to. She is suspended in air, just like the night they met her.

Her feet dangle above the bench, her toes just barely touching it. They release her arms, and they hang at her sides. Her back is arched slightly, the streaks of blood on her dress made much more visible. Her head is tipped all the way back, eyes barely open.

She is dead.

I told you I’d catch you He says. Now, let’s get to work.
Nothing.
Literally nothing.
Like the feeling you have in the millisecond before you begin to wake up.
Weightless.
Complete darkness.
No thoughts. No movements.
Just the void.
Is this really what being dead is like? I’m already bored.
Just wait. His voice is everywhere, all at once.
Wait for what?
I want you to picture something. If you could be in any place, any point in time, where do you want to be right now?
Before she even realizes she had an idea, a light begins to shine. Very faint at first, but slowly growing brighter. Then the ground beneath her becomes visible. Stone bricks, with tufts of grass growing between them. What looks like walls emerge from the fog, also stone. It looks like an old ruined building, but everything is fuzzy, like a telescope that hasn’t been adjusted properly.
Now there are sounds. Birds, insects, wind rustling the branches of trees. Barely audible below it all, a voice. A young man, sobbing pitifully, his breathing wet and phlegmy.
As she concentrates, the scene comes into focus. It’s the courtyard of the church in the little village outside Genoa, in 1348. The young man is Copia, his 20 year-old self. He is filthy and skeletal. He is dying and he is angry.
Seeing him like this is more painful than the knife. It’s too much for her to take.
I want you to realize something. The person you see before you, that is the Copia you know. At the heart of it all, he is still this boy: scared and angry at his God. If you could do anything to stop this, what would you do?
Love him. Tell him everything’s going to be ok.
Then go to him.
She moves closer, which is strange, since she has no corporeal form. She thinks of every happy moment she’s ever had with him, from him swearing at her headpiece, to him brushing a hair out of her face, to countless moments where he was just smiling at her. She lets the memories fill her with so much love, she just cannot contain it any longer, and it emanates from her like light. It reflects off of him, and when he looks up at her, he’s terrified. She smiles at him, holding her hands out to him, but she can’t reach him.
He struggles to raise a hand towards her, and everything goes black again.

Silence.

Wait….wait a second….was that real?

What do you think?

She remembers the flash of memory he showed her months ago. Copia, reaching out towards a vision of a woman in a white, bloodied dress. Light was shining from her so brightly that he could barely make out her face. Blue eyes, long dark hair, a gentle smile.

It wasn’t Rachel he saw. It was her.

Her mind is spinning so fast, she can’t understand what’s happening.

Did….did you know that wasn’t Rachel?

Yes. However, I did not know when you were to be born, or where. Over the centuries, I chose women that closely resembled you, and Rachel was the only one that was eager and willing to assume the role.

How did she survive the ritual?

There was no ritual then. It was something Copia devised, a way to keep anyone from replacing her. They could be murdered under the guise of "ritual sacrifice" and nobody would be the wiser. Some part of him believed no one could, or should, follow in her footsteps. Anyway. After she and my son died, I tasked the church with continuing the search for the woman from the vision. Every time, I was convinced that they were the one, and every time, I was disappointed. Until you.

When did you know?

The first time you ever had a crush on a boy. You were very young, maybe 5 years old. You smiled at him the same way you smiled at Copia, and I knew it was you. I was tempted to tell him where you were, in order to begin your education and preparation, but I knew he would’ve killed you then. I had to wait, and keep you as safe as possible, until you were ready to join them and face him. I couldn’t tell you any of this, you wouldn’t have understood. But now you do.

I do….but this is so much…

I know. And we’re not finished, either.

The light slowly returns, but it is not the same place. The ground is muddy and red, with many small hills. As things come into focus, Miri realizes the hills are piles of bodies. Thousands of them. There are countless screams ringing out from all directions. Then she sees the portal.

A black, twisting doorway right in the middle of a battlefield. Kneeling on the ground in front of it, is Rachel. This is the dream, finally made real.

She hears the command for arrows, and tries to run to Rachel, but she can’t. She has no form here, at least none that can affect anything. She hears Copia scream from behind a pile of bodies, and she knows the moment is close.

She looks back to Rachel, and their eyes meet. They truly see each other for the first and last time. Rachel smiles at her, and she instantly feels the love she had for Him, and for Copia. It’s like it was
shot out of a cannon directly at her. It’s overwhelming and she wants to scream.

Then the arrows come. Rachel looks surprised for a moment, then almost imperceptibly moves her fingers to beckon Miri to her. Now she can move, and she’s at the dying woman’s side in an instant. She whispers something, and Miri can’t understand the language with her ears, but she hears it in English in her mind.

Join…me…

Miri listens to her instincts and throws what passes for arms around Rachel, and suddenly she’s riddled with arrows. She looks down at herself, and begins to fall backwards, when Copia catches her in his arms. The look of utter despair on his face cuts her deeply, his pleas for Rachel to stay beyond heartbreaking. Rachel is truly gone, and she’s alone in a dying body. She struggles to make it breathe or move, like a sick puppet. All she can really control is the mouth, and she knows what she has to do.

I will find you again…Copia.

The heart stops beating, the eyes slowly cloud over, and everything goes dark again.

Now you see.

I….I can’t….

Yes, you can. You already have. You have stopped your own death and travelled through time, do you understand?

His voice suddenly becomes all-encompassing and consuming.

I have given you the power to tear apart this world, to send every soul on Earth screaming into Hell. I have waited centuries for someone strong enough to wield this power, and now you are here, upon the precipice of greatness. The choice, as always, is yours. What say you?

A moment passes. And another. She lets His words ring out in her mind, replaying over and over.

Let’s go home. Unfinished business can’t wait.
Chapter Summary

Here it is, kiddos. Showdown at the Satanic Corral. Hold onto your butts!

Barely a minute had passed. Miri remained suspended in air, as though her body was hanging from an invisible hook. Her head was thrown back, rivulets of blood and saliva slowly running out of her mouth and onto the carpet of the altar. The wound in her chest had stopped bleeding, and her skin was now ghostly-white.

Copia attempted to approach her, but didn’t want to step in the giant pool of blood in front of him. No point in ruining his shoes when he could just make the ghouls do it.

He motioned to Aether to check her wrist. The ghoul flat-out refused to touch her. He turned to the fire ghoul. He stood with his arms crossed, not even acknowledging the request.

The congregation murmured to themselves, unsure of what was happening. Most of them had seen previous rituals, and nothing like this had ever happened before.

Copia had had enough. She was just supposed to pass out and die, no muss no fuss. Instead, Lucifer decided to poke his nose in where it didn’t belong, but it was too late. She was obviously dead, he was only prolonging the inevitable.

Letting out a tiny sigh of annoyance, he tried to step over the puddle and grab her, when Dewdrop moved to block him, and a large number of ghouls in the congregation lept to their feet and began barking. This led to numerous people shrieking and clutching at each other in fear.

As he turned around to calm things down, he noticed the candle holder on the end of the nearest pew was vibrating slightly. In fact, they all were. The pews themselves were also vibrating, just enough that people were looking around to make sure they weren’t imagining it. Then started the sound of tinkling glass, gradually getting louder. The stained-glass windows of the cathedral were starting to shake as well. Small earthquakes were not completely uncommon in the area, but the chances that one would start right now? Highly unlikely.

The entire room seemed to be shaking and vibrating, the light fixtures swinging back and forth in the air. A few of the Siblings charged with assisting Copia gathered near Nihil’s chair, to protect him from anything potentially falling from the ceiling. He was taking huge drags from his oxygen mask, trying not to show how afraid he was.

The noise from the crowd combined with the rumbling made the room feel like it was a boiling kettle, waiting to explode, when suddenly it all came to a crashing halt.

So, we are agreed? He asks

Yes. It’s a deal. Can I get back in my body, or is it too far gone?

It’s not too late, but it will be painful.

I suppose birth is painful, why not rebirth as well?
That’s one way to look at it. They’re going to be terrified, just so you are prepared.

Since they seem to enjoy the theatrics, I’m going to give them a show first. Warm up the crowd, so to speak.

I wouldn’t expect anything less.

Miri’s newest power, the ability to see things from outside her body, has already proven handy. She’s able to see the crowd freaking out, the ghouls getting riled up, her ghouls defending her, and Copia at the end of his rope.

She can’t help but get a perverse sense of pleasure from seeing all his hard work come crashing down around his ears, but that needs to be handled privately. Not in front of the entire church.

She sees her body dangling in the air, bloodless and limp. Her ghouls aren’t straying far from her, in case she needs them, and she is overwhelmed with affection for them. She knows she’s going to scare them half to death, but it can’t be avoided.

She waits until the cacophony of noise stops, then plunges back into her body.

He was right, the pain in unimaginable. The muscles have gone without oxygen, which has made them seize up. Her lungs and stomach are filled with blood. Her brain is still firing a few nerve impulses, so at least it’s not completely dead, but her entire body is sending massive distress signals as the organs shut down. The feeling of lava in her blood that came with His control is there, but it no longer feels like the loss of control. It feels like she has more control than she’s ever had in her life. It feels like power.

Unstoppable.

Only a few seconds of silence have passed when there comes a sound of gurgling from her throat. Getting her body to respond to her is more difficult than she’d anticipated, and her first step is clearing her lungs so she can relieve the pain in her oxygen-starved muscles. Everyone turns to look, and cringes in disgust. They probably believe it’s nothing but a death rattle.

Another gurgle. And another.

Then, almost like some sick lawn decoration, a spurt of black blood pours from her mouth, accompanied by a very distinct cough. She hears Nihil gasping from his chair.

Vivo! Vivo! She lives!

She takes that as her cue to try and breathe. It hurts, and it’s loud, echoing through the completely silent cathedral. She inhales until she simply cannot inflate her lungs any farther, and she violently coughs out more dead blood. It splatters back on her chin and drips down her neck. She takes another deep breath, this one much easier, and the exhale is a piercing scream. It begins as one of rage and pain, but as she continues screaming, it becomes one of triumph.

Everyone in the room is frozen. Nobody’s making a sound. They’re all staring at her, some in wonder, some in fear. Aether and Dew look from her, to each other, then back to her, like they’re trying to determine if they should help her or not. Copia looks as though he’s about to face a firing squad, pale and sweating.

Miri becomes very aware that her neck hurts badly from her head being unsupported, so she attempts to bring it up slowly and miscalculates. Instead, her head is thrown forward and her chin hits her chest, her hair falling over her face. To everybody else, it looks like some kind of possession is
happening. She slowly opens her eyes a little, the sunlight too bright and hurting them. She squints down at herself, at the ruined, unbuttoned dress and discovers the chest wound is gone.

She slowly raises her hands, which are very shaky, and gently rubs the blood away from where the wound was. There’s nothing there, not even a scar. No trace that anything was ever done. She smiles, more blood and saliva dripping from her bottom lip. A small chuckle bubbles up from her chest, and at the sound of it, Aether gasps. His hands fly up to his mouth, and he looks like he’s about to cry. Dewdrop stands up straighter, breathing heavily, seemingly proud of her. Copia still looks like he’s having an out-of-body experience.

Miri slowly raises her head back up, so the congregation can see her face. The smile, the look of vindication. Then she opens her eyes completely. The blue of her irises is gone, consumed by the blackness of her pupils. She looks past Copia, over the entire crowd of people, as a whole new cacophony of noise erupts. People are crying, people are on their knees praying, people are chanting in Latin, thanking the Dark Lord for his gift.

Finally, she looks down at Copia. At first his face is a mix of confusion and fury, but she looks outside herself and at just the right moment, moves slightly so the sun coming through the stained glass windows illuminates her from behind. Her dress is suddenly lit up, as thought with a spotlight. Now she matches the version of herself from 1348. The original vision that led Copia to the church in the first place. Whatever color was left in his face is now gone. His mouth drops open slightly, and his eyes fill with tears. Now the realization has hit him.

While everybody loses their minds, Miri slowly buttons up the front of the dress. She has to maintain some kind of image here, the ritual must be completed, and she doesn’t want a tit popping out unexpectedly. Once she’s finished, she slowly lowers herself down, so her feet land flat on the bench. Her legs are a little wobbly, and her ghouls immediately hold out their hands for support. She gently waves them off with a smile. She stands up straight and clasps her hands together in front.

The ghouls at her side drop to their knees, bow their heads, and hold their hands palm-up in supplication to her. The rest of the congregation notices and quickly does the same. The last to move is Copia, who begrudgingly bows to her.

There’s a rustling noise behind her, and two Sisters appear with the parts of her new headpiece. One drapes a long, black lace veil over her head that goes almost to her knees. The other places the crown on her head over it, a deceivingly heavy circlet made to look like golden roses. Miri wonders if there aren’t actually lights installed in it, because it looks like it’s glowing.

She stands still for a moment, letting everybody take a good look at her, before slowly turning around and stepping off the bench. The Sisters each take a hand to help her, as her legs are still a bit shaky. They help her walk the few steps towards Nihil’s chair.

The old man is beside himself, tears dripping off his cheeks and onto his vestments. His hands tremble as he reaches out and gently grabs the edge of the veil and brings it to his lips. He’s crying so hard Miri can’t understand anything he’s saying, so he takes his hands and squeezes them. He looks up at her, with a huge grin on his face, and just nods.

She takes her place in the giant chair next to him, which has a large pillow on the seat. The chair dwarfs her, but the pillow at least makes her look like she’s almost as tall as Nihil. That seems to be the cute for the organist, as they suddenly start in on a hymn, and the congregation rises in song.

Once the pageantry is done, Miri and Nihil are lead out the back of the cathedral to one of the anterooms. Immediately, she collapses into a chair and asks for bottled water and a trash can.
Can someone get these things off my head? I need to throw up.

The Sisters that assisted earlier snatch both objects off just in time for someone to hand her a plastic garbage can. She hugs it to her chest and forcefully vomits a great gout of blood. She moans miserably into the can.

Mater, sì ok? Nihil pats at her shoulder.

Fine, Papa. I swallowed a lot of blood, it doesn’t sit well in the stomach.

Then she throws up again. A Brother stands next to her with a bottle water at the ready. She takes it, rinses her mouth out with a little, and spits it into the can.

I think I’m ok to walk back to my room. I feel like I’ve been hit by a dozen trucks. Definitely nap time.

Nihil nods. Sì, sì. You rest before party tonight.

Once she’s able to stand again, the Sisters and Brother walk slowly with her back to her room. She wonders about her ghouls and Copia for a moment, and suddenly she can see inside the cathedral again. Copia is left standing there, looking bewildered, when Dew grabs his arm.

She knows everything. You’re finished.

They’re interrupted by church members grabbing Copia’s hands and shaking them, congratulating him on a such a successful ritual. Dew melts into the crowd and disappears.

He’s definitely going to want to talk. Or worse she thinks to herself.

He can’t do anything to you now. He says. At worst, he’ll just stomp his feet and cry like the child he is.

Yeah, but you don’t have to stand in front of him while he does it.

Neither do you.

I need to finish this, one way or the other.

Miri manages to make it back to her room with the help of the Siblings, one of whom is carrying the puke bucket behind her. She doesn’t get sick again, but she’s still really shaky. They offer to get her some food and orange juice, to raise her blood sugar.

Once they’ve left, gets the guards’ attention.

When Copia shows up, let him in. Do not open the door, no matter what you hear.

She stands in front of the mirror in her vanity, trying to unbutton the dress, now sticky and stiff from the drying blood. Her skin is still pretty white, and it makes the new blackness of her eyes look really creepy. She knows the eyes are permanent, but hopefully the skin won’t be. Otherwise it’s fake tans for a very long time.

She’s stuck on one particular gummy button when she hears her door open and close quickly. She doesn’t need to use her third eye to know who it is.

For a few moments, the only sound is his heavy breathing and the crinkle of his leather gloves as he twists his fingers together.
How?

She sighs. I don’t know.

Don’t you fucking lie to me. How?!

She gives up on the button for now, the dress mostly hanging open. She turns to look at him, and his face is back to the same color as his cassock: beet red.

Have you ever heard of a causal loop? It’s physics, but I thought maybe you’ve read about it, since you’ve had so much time on your hands. The first event causes the second event, which in turn causes the first event. A causes B, B causes A, and around and around we go, until the end of time. You saw me, you made the deal, which allowed you to live long enough to find me in person. Because I’m here, I was able to go back so you could see me and make the deal. Around and around we go.

He clenches and unclenches his fists a few times. What did you see?

Besides you, sniveling on your knees? People you’ve betrayed, people you’ve killed, Johns being eaten alive by your precious rats. Did you know Rachel died because of me?

He stops fidgeting and his mouth drops open slightly. He appears to be speechless.

I appeared on the battlefield, right in front of her. If she hadn’t been staring at me, she would’ve realized she was about to be shot. It also wasn’t her that spoke to you; it was me. She was already dead. You would’ve believe how hard it is to make dead lips move.

He closes his mouth, and his whole body begins to shake. He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes.

You said checkmate. Why?

Isn’t that what you’re supposed to say in chess? When you’re about to totally crush someone?

You didn’t crush me.

She tilts her head to the side. Oh honey, but I did. I completely crushed you and your Scooby Doo villain plans. No more crazy “take over the church because I didn’t like not being in charge” bullshit. No power trips just because you can. No more pretending to be all nervous and awkward and making everybody underestimate you. She raises a finger and wags it at him. No more.

He looks like he’s gone well past rage and fury, and straight to absolutely murderous. And what’s to stop me from sending a pack of ghouls to your room tonight?

Most of them have sworn allegiance to me, and those that haven’t, Dew will tear apart with his bare hands. You know, like he did with Emeritus the Third? I saw that, too. I can’t imagine what Nihil’s reaction is going to be when he finds out that, instead of poisoning his sons like he instructed, you had ghouls tear them to pieces. If I remember correctly, Emeritus the Second was still alive when they started to eat him…

He’s finally reached the end of his tolerance, grabbing an empty glass off a nearby table, preparing to throw it at her.

DO IT she screams in his face. FUCKING DO IT, AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS!
He hesitates, his eyes wide and unblinking.

She begins yanking open the rest of the button on the dress, now desperate to get it off. *I can’t even fucking look at you...you make me want to scream, but I’ve done enough of that today.* The buttons are caked in so much blood, it’s like glue. Her frustration with the dress combined with her anger and pain, finally causes her to emotions to boil over.

_FUCK_ she screams, His power showing in her voice. *YOU FUCKING PIECE OF SHIT. I LET YOU F- and her voice breaks, as she tries not to think of all the times she’d been so vulnerable in front of him, and he was so tender to her, and it was mostly a lie. She tries her best not to let him see her tear up.*

She points to the door. *Get out. I will deal with you later, when I’m feeling more up to it.*

She wriggles out of the dress, leaving it on the bedroom floor in a heap. She walks towards her bathroom, but a wave of nausea and light-headedness overcomes her, and she falls to her knees in the doorway. She hangs her head down, trying to take deep breaths and waiting for the feeling to pass, when she feels a hand on the back of her head. She knows better than to assume it’s out of concern, and she’s right.

Copia’s hand twists in her hair, pulling it tightly, and he lifts her to her feet by it. She tries to slap at his hands, but her feet are threatening to slip out from under her. He yanks back on her hair, and brings his lips to her ear.

_How dare you. All these years...all the sacrifices I’ve made...everything I’ve ever done to get to this point, and you just come in here and ruin EVERYTHING._ He screams the last word in her ear, but she’s unable to move her head away. He drags her over to the counter and slams her into it, belly-first, knocking the wind out of her.

_Do you know how many times I thought about snapping your fucking neck while you were in my bed? It would’ve been so easy. You were letting me do whatever I wanted to you._ He grinds his crotch against her, and she can feel him starting to get hard as she gasps for breath. _All those times you whimpered and begged. You always came the hardest when I was in control, and suddenly you want to share? No, no, no. Little girls don’t sit at the same table as big boys._

He yanks her head up hard, so she can see her own reflection in the mirror. Tears have cut white lines through the dried blood on her face, and she’s still having a little trouble breathing. He’s about to say something else, when the mirror changes. At least, from his point of view. She changes his reflection to what she saw in the past. A dirty, dying boy, so scared and alone.

It’s like he’s seen a ghost. It’s been so long, he’s forgotten what he looked like. His hand slowly loosens its grip on Miri’s hair until it falls uselessly to his side. His eyes fill with tears and they spill down his cheeks, leaving little black trails of his eye paint behind. A sound comes out of his mouth, a shaky, high-pitched whine. His lips tremble uncontrollably as he struggles to breathe.

Miri stands up straight, and steps to come between Copia and his reflection. *See...I know that boy is still in there...he’s still waiting for someone to save him. And I’m trying. I’m trying, but you need to give me your hand. Can you do that?*

He keeps his eyes on the mirror, over her head, when she leans in and gently kisses his bottom lip. He holds his breath and closes his eyes as she continues to plant tiny kisses on his lip. She reaches up and starts to unbutton his cassock, stopping once she reaches his waist. Then she unbuttons his shirt underneath. He’s quivering now, unable to move. She reaches inside his shirt, and places her hand over his heart, which is pounding out of control.
She slips his cassock off his shoulders and down his arms, when he suddenly grabs her by the wrists. He finally looks her in the eye for a moment, bringing her hands to his face, and he kisses her passionately. She moans into his mouth, wrapping her arms around his neck. He quickly reaches down, grabbing the backs of her thighs, and lifting her up high enough to wrap her legs around his waist. He somehow manages to find his way back out of the bathroom and to her bed, where he lays her down on her back.

She works on getting his pants undone while he steps out of his cassock and shrugs out of his shirt, almost tearing his gloves off his hands. He reaches down to her blood-encrusted underwear, and in two hard yanks, tears them off of her. She grabs his shoulders and pulls him down on top of her, reaching down between them and guiding his cock into her.

He immediately loses all control, thrusting into her as hard as possible, sobbing loudly into the blanket next to her head. She thrusts back, grabbing his ass and grinding against him in just the way he likes. She wants to comfort him, stroke his hair and tell him it’s all ok, but she doesn’t want him to think he’s forgiven.

When he’s finally cried himself out, Copia turns his head to her. I’m sorry. Don’t. Don’t even try. Just fuck me.

He resumes his quick pace, slamming his hips into hers. He nibbles at her ear, whispering I love you over and over. Miri can’t help but whimper. Between his cock and his teeth and his breath on her ear, it’s too much. She slaps at his ass, not enough to hurt, just enough to spur him on. Fuck you for making me feel this good she whines.

He chuckles into her ear. I can always stop…

She grabs his face. Don’t you fucking dare.

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After they’ve finished, and showered together, Miri lets Copia use her makeup on his eyes and lip, while she brushes his hair into place. You should get going she says. You have a soundcheck before dinner.

I have time. He looks at her through the vanity mirror. You’re finally pinking up a bit.

She looks down at herself, and can faintly see a pinkish tinge to her skin. Good, I didn’t want to look like a vampire for the rest of eternity.

He turns around, with a confused look. What do you mean, eternity?

She smirks. I made the same deal you did. I told Him if I was gonna do this for real, I wanted the same deal as you: immortality, until the End of Days. So, now we’re the same. Neither of us can die. We deserve each other, now.

He stands up, pulling her to him. You did that for me?

Don’t get too full of yourself. That was part of the reason. Because I want to be with you. But I also don’t trust you any farther than I can throw you. You need to earn that back, and now we have plenty of time.

I swear….I will do my best.
Good. She leads him to the door, and plants one last kiss on his cheek.

By the way…something to consider. You don’t need limbs to live.
Chapter 32

In the hours before the banquet, Miri gets a visit from Doc, who comes bearing orange juice and cookies. His test shows her blood sugar is dangerously low, and she needs to eat or else she’ll go into a coma before dinner. She ends up drinking almost a gallon of juice, and close to a dozen cookies before she needs to stop. Her blood pressure is also very low, but he assures her it will come up in a few days, once her bone marrow has had a chance to create more red blood cells. He give her the ok to attend the party, because what kind of party would it be without the guest of honor?

Once she had a chance to nap for a few hours, Miri finally started feeling like herself again. At least, what she thinks is herself. Memories still there, personality seems the same. The only difference is this constant, electric humming she feels. Her new powers, she assumes. The remote viewing comes in quite handy. She’s able to look outside her door and tell who’s there before they ever knock. This time, it’s the Sisters that got her dressed that morning. They need to get her ready for the banquet.

They’ve brought a black dress with dark blue accents. A long skirt, with long sleeves that end in lace. A choker-like collar with the decolletage covered in the same lace. She thinks she couldn’t look more goth than if she’d dressed up as Morticia Addams, but considering the occasion…

They paint her lips black, apply minimal eye makeup, and call it good. She guesses the partially undead look doesn’t require much improvement. She ends up shooing them out of the room because they insist on curling her hair.

Miri doesn’t bother waiting for someone to come get her, she just leaves her rooms, and her guards have to jog to catch up. *I’m tired of waiting* she yells over her shoulder at them.

The pathway to the grand hall is light with small torches, and in the waning sunlight, everything appears to be glowing. Miri can faintly hear Mozart’s Requiem Overture coming from the building. His work seems to be a big hit amongst devil worshipers, because she’s heard it playing all over the church for the past 6 months.

When she reaches the doors, a pair of Brothers bow and open the doors for her. She’s suddenly faced with what appears to be hundreds of people packed into the giant hall. She’s never actually been in here, but she’s seen photos. They don’t do it justice. It’s a newer building, with a high pointed ceiling, and parquet flooring with the crucifix symbol. The hall itself has been decorated with bouquets of red and white flowers, black candles in elaborate candelabras, and heavy red and black drapes covering all the windows.

Miri begins to panic slightly, as she doesn’t recognize anyone in the huge crowd in front of her. She doesn’t even know where she’s supposed to go. Then she just decides *Fuck it. I’ll just walk through them until I see a dinner table.*

She walks forward and, like she expected, everybody bows and steps out of her way. The crowd quickly parts for her, and then she hears Papa over the noise, ranting excitedly in Italian. He staggers over to her, oxygen tank in tow.

*Mia signora! Come, come! Ora di mangiare!*

He takes her arm and leads her towards a table that stretches almost the entire width of the hall. There are two chairs in the middle, very ornate and regal in appearance. Those must be for them.
As they round the end of the table, she sees a group of men, all in Cardinal vestments. In the middle is Copia, the center of attention, having praise heaped on him by his former equals. He’s blushing quite a bit, trying to be as humble as possible but still enjoying the attention. She catches his eye just as he’s about to sit down, he smiles and bows to her, winking as he stands back up. She can’t help but look down and blush. It’s embarrassing that he still has that effect on her, and she hopes nobody else noticed.

A few of the Cardinals sit down at the table across from her, chattering amongst themselves in Italian. In broken English, they try to convey how honored they are to be eating with her, and suddenly her stomach rumbles so loud, everybody at the table turns to look at her. All she can do is shrug. *Resurrection makes you hungry, I guess.*

Almost as if on cue, porters begin bringing out plates of food, beginning with their table. Of course, it’s Papa’s favorite: spaghetti carbonara. Miri almost doesn’t come up for breath until her plate is clean. The Cardinal across from her seems to be both surprised and amused at the same time.

*Appetite is good, yes?*

She nods as she blots her mouth with her napkin. *I guess my body needs more food to get my strength back.*

*Is important for baby, yes?*

She pauses for a moment, hoping that she heard him incorrectly. She can almost feel Copia cringing on Papa’s other side. *I’m sorry, what did you say?*

He gestures to her stomach. *You make baby soon? Anticristo? For that, must be più grande…uhm…bigger? Big mama means strong son!*

She stops chewing. *Is this guy telling me I need to gain weight in order to have a healthy baby?* she thinks to herself.

*I’m not concerned with that right now, I have plenty of time to worry about being healthy enough to have a baby.*

*Sì, sì…but…* He taps his finger on his watch.

Miri is really hoping this is one of those cultural misunderstandings. She’s about to say something when one of the other Cardinals pipes up.

*Just so you know…we have a bet going….which of the clergy you will choose to….obtain the seed…yes?*

She starts to open her mouth when, mercifully, Copia asks the men a question in Italian, and it sparks a whole new conversation between them. She looks back at her plate, and feels Papa leaning close to her ear.

*What a bunch of assholes, huh?*

She can’t help but burst out laughing. She covers her mouth with her napkin, turning to smile at Nihil. He acts like he didn’t say a word.

Once dinner and dessert are done, the other dinner tables are moved to create a large dance floor area. Classical music starts piping out of a massive sound system, and the assorted guests and
Siblings get up to dance. Papa struggles to his feet and, in an attempt to be chivalrous, extends a hand to Miri. She takes his arm, expecting to help him somewhere, but instead he leads her to the dance floor. She’s never danced in public before, and he’s left behind his oxygen tank, so she expects to be horribly embarrassed either way.

Amazingly, he’s very light on his feet, and Miri starts to wonder if his doddering old man routine is like Copia’s sniveling rat act; just that, an act. She sees Copia at the edge of the dance floor, and the look in his eye reminds her what Nihil is capable of. He had his own sons murdered, after all. Who knows what else is hiding inside that corpulent old fucker.

The song ends, and he graciously bows to her and kisses the back of her hand. She moves to take his arm and leave the floor, when Copia calls out to her.

_Mother Memoriam!

Everybody goes silent. She turns around and meets his gaze. He holds a hand out to her.

_A dance?_

The sudden whispering and murmuring in the crowd is almost like a song itself. The fact that they’d been seeing each other for months wasn’t a surprise amongst the Siblings, but for the visiting guests, they obviously had no idea. The Cardinals that Copia was speaking to earlier are standing agog, mouths open in disbelief as they meet in the center of the floor. He takes her hand, and when she places her other on his shoulder, he pulls her tight up against him, so there is no mistaking the nature of their relationship.

As they start to dance, he brings his lips to her ear.

If I understood you correctly...if I misbehave, you’ll have my limbs cut off?

_Basically, yes. I can’t kill you, obviously. I don’t even want to. But I can’t have you running around, doing whatever the hell you want with the church. So many people depend on it, they’ve dedicated their lives to it. We owe it to them to, at the very least, not run it into the ground or completely destroy it._

_You know that Nihil and Imperator deserve whatever comes to them, yes?_

_Absolutely. But not now._

_Then when?_

_Once I’m…pregnant, I guess. They won’t risk touching me and hurting their unborn savior. I was planning on waiting a few years for that, but I guess we should move up the timetable a bit. The sooner they’re gone, the better._

_My thinking, exactly._

She rests her head on his shoulder, and closes her eyes.

_I’ve never lied to you...about how I felt, just in case you were wondering he says. I do love you...more than anything...but I could never stop thinking about something I was told a long time ago. ‘Never love something so much you cannot bear to see it die.’_

_But now I can’t die either, so you don’t have to worry about that. And since you’ve realized how utterly ridiculous you were being, we don’t have to worry about that being an issue anymore, either._
It’s ridiculous of me to not want to spend eternity under someone’s thumb? I serve Lucifer, not whatever moron that managed to become head of the church simply by being born. I worked hard to get here, and what did he do? Fell out of his mother, the senile old-

She silences him with a kiss, much to the crowd’s audible delight and surprise. As she pulls away, his eyes remain closed for a few seconds. When he opens them again, he says something she never expected to hear.

*I know you can’t…but I want you to marry me.*

It shocks her so much, her legs almost give way underneath her. He feels her body starting to sag, and squeezes her even tighter against him. She starts to giggle hysterically.

*Are you insane?*

*I’m so old…I’ve been lonely for you, for so long, and now I finally have you…*

*I don’t need to be your wife to be with you. If you want something official…how do you feel about being called a consort?*

He gives her a weird look. *Doesn’t that mean ‘whore’?*

*You might be thinking of ‘concubine’. A consort is usually what they call the spouse of a king or queen. They don’t have any actual power, but it recognizes their relationship.*

He smiles. *So you won’t marry me, and you want me to use a title that says I have no power?*

She smirks at him. *Don’t be an asshole. Once you’re Papa, you’ll have your own title to play with all you want. In the meantime…it tells everybody that you’re mine. If anybody tries to hurt you, they’ll have to deal with me.*

*Very generous of you.*

*Considering the fact that, less than 12 hours ago, you brutally murdered me…you’re lucky I don’t have your balls in a display case already.*

He chuckles darkly. *Why does the sound of that excite me?*

*Because you’re an old pervert. But you’re mine. She plants a few kisses on his cheek. You’re all mine and nobody is going to stop us.*

After the dancing portion of the evening is done, Copia slips out to get ready for Ghost’s performance. Miri is beside herself with excitement, having only watched rehearsals. She would love to be up at the front, with all the others, dancing and singing, but she has to maintain some kind of decorum. She stands at the back of the crowd, on a chair, so she can see over their heads.

Once the band emerges on stage, the screaming is deafening. Copia comes out swinging a litthurible, spewing incense and smoke, and she can’t help but laugh at how completely extra he is. She’s seen most of these songs performed in private, but she still screams and dances and sings along like everybody else.

After an instrumental song, Copia comes back out on stage in a pure white suit, and she thinks she might pass out. Literally every curve and bulge of his body is shown off, and she has to resist the urge to run to the front and try to touch him. He’s got a cane and a hat, and he’s acting like he’s Fred
Astaire or something. It’s funny and silly and charming, and now she sees why sometimes Sisters, and even some Brothers, blush when he walks by. He has them eating out of the palm of his hand, and she knows he’s loving every second of it.

They perform a few songs while he’s wearing that outfit, but then suddenly the stage goes dark and a bell starts chiming. She overhears a few Siblings saying that they’re going to perform a new song, one they’ve never played in public before. She gets down from the chair and joins the crowd.

The bell continues to toll a few more times, and suddenly the spotlight hits the microphone and Copia begins to sing.

*Can you hear me say your name forever*

*Can you see me longing for you forever*

*Would you let me touch your soul forever*

*Can you feel me longing for you forever*

The words hit her like a sucker punch to the stomach, and she can’t breathe. His voice is so plaintive, she has to wonder just how long ago did he write this song? How long has he been waiting to perform this? Was he waiting for her?

*This is the moment of just letting go*

*She said if you had life eternal*

Without warning, Miri bursts into tears. She’s not the only one. Several Siblings are crying uncontrollably as well. The ones nearest to her reach out and stroke her hair, they huddle around her and embrace her as they all cry. They hold each other and sway back and forth as Copia sings his heart out to her from the stage.

The song ends, and the stage goes dark again. Another instrumental piece, presumably while he changes outfits yet again. He comes back out in one of his black suits, with the crucifix symbol on the left breast. The songs from that point on are loud, fast, and not a single person is left not dancing. Even Miri, in her long, lacy gothic gown, is jumping up and down, waving her arms in the air. One of the last songs, which is filled with lots of growling and pelvic thrusting, ends with giant confetti cannons going off and covering everybody with sticky confetti. She knows she’s going to be digging that out of her dress later, but she doesn’t care.

By the time the show is over, everybody is dripping sweat and covered in confetti, but they all look so happy. Miri lets the crowd carry her out of the hall, and they all blissfully wander back to the compound together in the dark. She makes her way back to her room, and just flops onto her bed. She’ll deal with the dress and confetti in the morning.

Some point later, she feels someone moving her to unzip her dress and slide it off. They move her up so her head rests on a pillow, and they cover her with her sheet and blankets. She wants to say something, but she’s just so exhausted, she can’t even move. Then she feels warm skin sliding into bed next to her, arms wrapping around her, lips near her ear.

*I’m staying here tonight, my queen* Copia whispers.
Chapter 33

Now that the ascension ritual is no longer hanging over her head, Miri finally feels comfortable enough to treat the church like her home. Much to the chagrin of the high clergy, she has adopted her own dress code. It usually consists of black t-shirts, shorts, and flip-flops. Sometimes, she even goes down to the kitchen for breakfast in her pajamas.

She takes books from the library, stretches out on a bench in the courtyard, and reads for hours. Siblings often find her asleep with a book on her face, trying to absorb some sunlight into her skin. Once, during a surprise downpour, a group of visitors were treated to the sight of Miri, soaking wet and shrieking as she ran from the courtyard back to her room.

The only downside she’s found so far is weekly Mass. She has to wear a long, black dress, as well as the veil and crown. When the late afternoon sun comes blasting through the stained glass windows, she feels like she’s boiling in the dark clothes. When Nihil begins rambling in Latin, she really has to fight to stay awake. The only thing that holds her attention is Copia’s recitation of prayers or leading the congregation in song.

Since he has now officially been named her consort, he’s spending almost every night in her room. He talks about having his room in the library turned into storage space, and she tells him no. *I might decide I’d like to spend a night by myself, you know.*

He gives her the sad puppy eyes with a big, exaggerated frown. *A night away from me? You’d make me sleep in that little room all by myself? With nobody to hold me?*

She sighs in annoyance and he laughs.

Something Miri hasn’t prepared herself for is how much the Siblings and ghouls would be looking to her for support and guidance. Instead of whispers and weird looks, now she has people asking to meet with her in private, asking for help or advice. She knows it’s not really her they want to speak to, it’s Him, but having to hear their problems and concerns gets pretty heavy some days. Now she understands why Copia dreads confessional.

In some cases, it’s nothing short of amazing. A female ghoul, pregnant with her first kit, asks Miri to be present at the birth. They have their own birthing room in their dorm, and she has no idea what to expect. A male ghoul, surrounded by a large group, is frantically pacing and lunging at the others, like a territorial animal. The father, she assumes.

The mother-to-be is crawling on all fours, snarling and growling, in the birthing room. She wonders why she was asked to be here, when the ghoul suddenly leaps up from the floor towards one of the nurses. Miri catches and holds the ghoul in midair, the tail whipping back and forth. *I’m going to set you down now, and you need to behave. If you don’t, it will be even more difficult.*

The ghoul nods, and Miri helps her back to the bed. She tries all the things she’s seen in movies and tv, rubbing her back, wiping her face with a cool cloth, while at the same time restraining her every time a contraction makes her lash out with her claws.

Finally it is time to push, and she helps hold back one of the ghoul’s legs. She doesn’t look, mostly to preserve some privacy, and she helps count down the seconds. With one final push, and a bloodcurdling scream, the kit is out, and Miri’s stomach drops. It looks….sort-of human. It’s smaller than she was expecting, with tiny flimsy limbs, and a tail. It’s completely black.
One of the nurses sees the look on her face and laughs. *It’s ok, they’re supposed to look like this. Ones that are born on this plane are black at birth, and their skin lightens to grey once they’re older. The horns don’t come for a little while, either.*

The nurse cuts the cord and places the tiny, squealing baby on his mother’s chest, and the ghoul immediately begins to lick the blood and fluids off her son. Miri feels a bit nauseated at first, but after seeing how the new mother looks at her baby…

Later that night, she buries her face in Copia’s neck, her fingers twirling in his chest hair. *I want a baby* she whispers in his ear.

He sighs into her hair. *I can’t give you that.*

*I know. But you can be there for me. You can help me raise it.*

He doesn’t say anything, and she looks up at him. He looks a bit panicked.

*You…want me to help you?*

*Well, why wouldn’t I? You’re my man, aren’t you?*

He blushes and tries to hide his face in the pillow. Miri digs a finger into his side to tickle him, and he begins shrieking like a little girl.

*STOP! PLEASE! I BEG YOU!*

He manages to get his hand around her wrist and pry it away from his belly, forcing her onto her back. She can’t help but laugh at him, all flustered with his hair going every direction.

*You really want me to help you…we can talk to Doc in the morning, start planning things. Then you need to choose a vessel for Him.*

*Already done.*

He tips his head to the side. *Who?*

*Do you need to know?*

He thinks for a moment. *Maybe it’s better if I don’t.*

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After having a full physical, Doc gives Miri an electronic fertility tracker. It’s supposed to help identify your 4 most fertile days every month, so you know when to do the deed. The only drawback is, she has to pee on a stick every single day and put it in the machine. On the first day, she almost drops the whole thing in the toilet. After that, she just pees in a cup and sets that on the counter. The first time Copia sees a glass of urine sitting on the counter he screams in disgust. *Hey, you popped a plague boil and rubbed pus all over stuff, you’re not one to talk!*

A few days pass, and then one morning it indicates a rise in hormone levels. The 4th day after that is when the levels should be at their highest, so that means they have time to arrange the fertility ritual. All it entails is lighting a bunch of black candles, and using a special pillow that is designed to increase the chances of conception. The vessel needs to recite some prayers, to open themselves up to His presence and allow Him to use their body as needed. Miri’s only request is that it be private. Apparently, fertility rituals usually gather a large crowd. Not this time.
On the 4th night, she doesn’t bother with any special ceremonial robes. She just puts on a nice black silk robe, and walks to the “chamber” by herself. It’s just an empty room with a generously padded floor. It feels like walking on a bed, just not as squishy. The candles are already lit, now she just has to wait for the vessel.

She doesn’t have to wait very long. The door opens, and in steps Dewdrop, barefoot but otherwise in his usual black clothing and mask. He takes only a few steps towards her before they lunge at each other, kissing and groping and clawing at each other’s clothing. She reaches up to pull off his mask, and receives a shock. His long hair is gone, cut short just below his ears. The mustache is gone, as well. She thinks he’s much more handsome without it, but she can’t believe he cut his hair.

She reaches up and runs her hand through the back of his hair. *I thought you loved your hair, why’d you do this?*

He smiles and shrugs. *It was windy outside last night, it blew into my lighter and went up like a bonfire. I’m lucky I put it out in time.*

She laughs and can’t believe what a dumbass he is. A fire ghoul that manages to light himself on fire. He reaches down to untie and remove her robe. When he sees the tattoo under her breasts, he immediately drops to his knees and begins kissing it. The sudden contact makes her gasp loudly. *Please* she whimpers. *I need to lay down.*

*By your command, my queen.* He scoops her up into his arms, and walks to the center of the room, laying her down on the cushioned floor. She helps him pull off his clothes, and he’s already rock hard.

He starts kissing a line from her neck down her body, but she stops him. *You don’t need to do all that* she pants. *I’m definitely ready.*

He slides an exploratory finger inside her while stroking her hair with his other hand. The sound of her wetness is very apparent. He shudders and bites his lower lip. *I’ve wanted this since the moment I laid eyes on you* he says quietly.

*I think I have, too* she whispers.

He removes his finger, sucking every drop of liquid off of it, and gets up to retrieve the special pillow. Miri obediently lifts her bottom off the floor so he can slide it under her. It’s shaped kind of like an ass, and she tries not to giggle.

As Dew kneels between her spread legs, he starts speaking Ghoulish, which she still can’t really understand. He bows his head and raises his hands, palm up, in prayer. His breathing becomes more and more heavy the more he speaks, his cock throbbing with every beat of his heart and steadily dripping from the tip. When he completes the prayer, he quickly leans down, grabbing her behind her head with one hand, while the other guides his tip to her entrance, and he glides completely inside her in one stroke.

Miri yelps in surprise, digging her fingers into his shoulders. It’s immediately so intense, she thinks she might cum just from that. He seems to be feeling the same way, as he has not moved at all. His entire body is shaking, but his breathing is steady in her ear. He suddenly makes a strange choking noise, and when she turns to look at him, his eyes are no longer the vibrant greenish-gold that she knows. They’re black. He and Dew are now one.

He smiles widely, the inky pools of His eyes shining in the candlelight. *My love*…He whispers. His voice is a strange mixture of the one inside her head and Dew’s. *At last…I can finally feel you.* He
gently strokes her hair, the side of her face. He laughs in disbelief. So soft…

She gently thrusts her hips up at Him, and He moans loudly. He gently thrusts back, unsure of how hard or deep to go. Forgive me…it's been a very long time since I've done this.

It's ok. She pulls Him closer and wraps her legs around Him, crossing her ankles. His thrusts go deeper, and He moans even louder.

Ohhh….my queen….my goddess…you are so perfect. Every time you’ve ever touched yourself, or another has touched you, I’ve wanted to be enveloped in you, sharing that pleasure with you…

His voice is so intoxicating, Miri almost can’t stand it. She runs her hands up and down His back, lightly scratching with her nails. You mean you’ve wanted to fuck me all this time?

His face contorts as He tries to explain. Not…I’ve wanted to give you pleasure, and be able to feel it with you…

His pace begins to quicken, but almost as though He’s not in complete control. Ohhh…ohh f-fuck….this feels so fucking GOOD. OH!

He wraps His arms around her, planting kisses all over her cheek and ear, as He viciously slams into her. You’ve wanted this too, haven’t you? Admit it. You’ve imagined me deep inside you, thrusting into your perfect sex…haven’t you?

Tears pool at the corners of her eyes and run down her face. It was something she never wanted to admit to herself, and especially not to Him, but once she knew what purpose He had in mind for her, she had thought about Him on occasion while getting herself off. What He would feel like, how He would sound as He begged her to cum for Him.

YES! YES, PLEASE! She can’t stand the desperation in her voice, but she needs Him to know how badly she wants this now. Please…please…she begs, almost sobbing. I want to cum for you…

He growls, burying His face into her neck while He lifts her hips with one hand. The change in angle is exactly what she needed, and as she feels herself falling over the edge, it all falls into place. As much as she loves Copia, and her ghouls, none of them will ever feel as close to a soulmate as He does. She feels no guilt over this realization, she knows they will understand.

She throws her head back and screams as she rides out her orgasm, digging her nails into His back. He screams along with her.

YES! Yes, my queen, my bride, there you are! Ohhhhh yes!

His thrusts start getting sloppier, and she can feel the familiar sensation of swelling at the base of His cock. Either He’s not aware of how ghouls cum, or He doesn’t care, because He starts trying to force the swollen part into her as well. The stretching is almost too much for her oversensitive flesh, but she breathes through it. He begins to whimper, so she knows He’s close.

Ohhhh…ah-ah……fuck….ohh! Miri….oh, Miri….I’m going to fill you up. I can’t hold back.

Please….plea-OHHH! The sudden flood of warmth inside her combined with the intense throbbing of His cock is enough to make her cum again, not as intensely as before, but enough that He can feel it. FUCK! I love you…I love you so much….
I love you too….

They stay locked together for some time, stroking and caressing each other, until the knot finally subsides and He can withdraw from her. The pillow helps keep her hips tipped up, so nothing runs out. His body starts to shudder uncontrollably, signaling the end of His time there. This…was amazing. I almost hope it doesn’t work this time…then we can do it again.

She giggles softly. We’ll see.

He shudders one last time and takes a deep breath. When he exhales, the blackness fades from his eyes, and it’s just Dewdrop again. He collapses next to Miri, panting heavily and shaking. Jesus fucking Christ…that was insane.

Did you feel any of it? Or were you like…floating?

Felt everything. Holy shit. He drapes an arm and a leg over her, resting his head on her chest. Let’s just...stay like this for a while...ok?

She mumbles something into the top of his head, and they both doze off.

Later on, she feels her body being rolled onto its side and her leg moved up, with Dew’s body flush against hers. She feels him slide into her again, but he’s much more gentle, moving slowly. She lets out a quiet moan, and he hushes her, kissing the back of her neck. It’s ok…I won’t cum in you this time...just relax and enjoy it...

She keeps her body completely relaxed, as he continues to fuck her softly. It doesn’t take long, and her muscles clench around him as she lets out a long, throaty moan. He thrusts a few more times before pulling out completely and finishing into a clean hand towel. After cleaning himself up, Dew lays back down next to her, and they fall asleep again.

A loud knock at the door wakes them up, and they slowly stagger to their feet and get dressed. They both look like they’ve been through Hell but enjoyed every second of it. Once they’re somewhat put back together again, they open the door. Two Brothers are waiting to clean the room, and they weren’t expecting them to still be there. Miri blushes a little, and Dew snaps his suspenders.

He walks her back to her room, trying to be gentlemanly. Before she can open the door, he pulls her back to him and kisses her deeply, holding her face in his hands. Until next time he whispers, and walks away.

Miri goes straight to her bathroom and runs the hottest bath she can stand. She takes off the robe, and there are small bruises all over her hips and thighs. He must have been holding on to her a lot harder than she thought. She puts her hair up in a messy bun and slides into the bath. She just gets settled when she sees Copia coming down the hall in her mind. She opens the door so he knows it’s ok to come in.

He tentatively approaches the bathroom door and sticks his head in. His eyes go wide at the apparent exhaustion on her face. Are you alright? He didn’t...his eyes turn hard for a moment. He didn’t hurt you, did he?

She shakes her head no. I haven’t felt this tired or sore since our first time together. Would you stay with me? Just for a little while, so I don’t fall asleep and drown in here?

He nods and smiles. Of course.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

I apologize for this chapter being a bit short, the next one will be very busy to make up for it.

Like the Tom Petty song says, the waiting is the hardest part. Miri knows it’ll be at least 6 weeks before she knows if the ritual worked or not, so she tries to keep herself busy and not think about it. Unfortunately, it seems to be the only thing anybody wants to talk about with her. She’s constantly being bombarded with questions about how she feels, if she’s hungry, if she’s nauseous, if her tits are sore. The last question earned an air ghoul a punch in the crotch.

The worst part is none of her men will have sex with her. All three are worried that it’ll mess something up, if she’s already pregnant. She even shows them print-outs from Doc that show significant proof that having sex, unless it’s incredibly rough, cannot possibly affect a potential pregnancy, but they all pull the “just in case” card.

It eventually gets to the point where she just walks into Copia’s office, pushes a large stack of books and papers off his desk, sits down and begins furiously masturbating in front of him. He gets the hint.

On the plus side, everybody wants to take care of her. She never has to carry anything, there’s always someone nearby wanting to open a door for her, some Brothers and ghouls are even offering to carry her up or down stairs. She starts wondering how ridiculous it’s going to be once she’s actually pregnant. They’ll probably insist on pushing her around in a wheelchair.

She doesn’t realize how far they’ll go for her until her parents come back.

Shortly before weekly Mass, something sets off what Miri refuses to call “spidey sense” but it works in a similar way. It sends a shiver up her spine, and she uses the remote viewing to look for anything out of the ordinary, when she sees a car pulling up the long, winding drive to the compound. It’s a sheriff’s department vehicle, with what looks like the sheriff himself behind the wheel. In the front seat is a man in a suit, holding a briefcase. Probably a lawyer. In the back are her parents, looking just as insufferable as the last time they were here.

If they have a lawyer and the sheriff, chances are good they’ve gone ahead and obtained that non compos mentis order, and are here to take her away. Or maybe they’re offering her hush money. That would be nice, except she has no use for it. They’re probably doing it on a Saturday night because it would be difficult to wrangle the church’s lawyers in a hurry, and she’d be locked up for at least 2 to 3 days before they’d have a chance to go before a judge and request a psychological examination.

She calls down to the front office and lets them know who’s coming. Since Mass is about to start, she asks them to have them seated in the cathedral with the rest of the congregation. If they want to serve papers, it can wait until after the service. They wouldn’t interrupt a Christian service to do the same, would they? Of course not, so this is no different. She also calls Copia’s office, explains the situation, and asks if he happens to have a sermon prepared that would fit the occasion.
Are you kidding? I have one for every possible subject. Saves me the time of writing a new one every week. Nobody seems to notice when they repeat.

With all of that settled, Miri dons one of her best black gowns and heads to the back entrance of the cathedral, where the crown and veil are waiting. If her parents want a spectacle, that’s what they’ll get.

She quickly explains to Nihil about the “special guests” and he instantly wants them thrown out. Miri manages to convince him to let them stay for the service, maybe one of them will come to their senses and get the others to leave. He isn’t 100% sold on the idea, but he trusts her judgment. They walk out of the back room to take their seats on the dais, and she can just barely make out her parents sitting in the back row. She manages to catch herself before her jaw drops.

They are surrounded by ghouls. Cumulus, one of the female ghouls from the band, is sitting on the end of the pew next to the lawyer, playing cute and flirtatious to make him uncomfortable. Dewdrop is sitting on the other end, next to her father. Just as the opening liturgy ends, and the crowd begins to fall silent, Dew leans towards her father and opens his mouth to speak. She uses the remote viewing to hear him.

_I inseminated your daughter recently. She’s a good girl, held on to every last drop, and she loved it. She begged me to make her cum, and I could not disobey my queen. I once came in her mouth while my brother ghoul fucked her senseless. She’s so eager to please._

Her father’s face is a deep crimson, and he looks like he’s ready to murder the ghoul. He turns to look at Dew, who gives his most innocent smile below his mask.

_We love her. We have venerated her and placed her at the head of our church. She will give birth to our savior. You will not take her away, no matter what piece of paper that asshole is carrying, or what kind of weapon the cop is holding, or whatever twisted threats you and your whore can come up with. She’s not leaving._

Copia has stepped up to the podium, and her attention falters. She loses the connection, but Dew has turned his attention to the front and left her father fuming in his seat. Copia seems to have chosen a fitting topic for tonight’s sermon: family. How it is often that the family we are born into is not the true one, but the family we choose, or that chooses us, is where we rightly belong. People that support us when we need it, but also call us out on our bullshit when we need it.

_Because we’re not bound by ancient expectations of loyalty by blood; we’re bound by what we see and feel in each other’s hearts. We are Brothers and Sisters in Satan, who was cast down from Heaven for the simple crime of wanting us to find our own happiness away from God. He wanted us to have the choice._

The congregation nods in agreement. A few stray exclamations of _Hail Satan_ pierce the murmuring of the crowd. Everyone stands to sing _You Can’t Always Get What You Want_, always a favorite at Mass. Miri smirks to herself when she sees the sheriff mouthing along with the words. It looks like he’ll be the one to suggest they leave things alone.

Once the service is done, everybody stands, but the recessional does not play. It is completely silent. Everyone turns and looks at the back row, at the 4 strangers in their midst. Nobody moves. Nobody speaks. The sheriff tries to signal that they should just leave, but the other 3 won’t budge.

Eventually, Copia steps down from the altar, and walks down the aisle to the back. He puts on his best customer service face and asks if they have something to deliver. The lawyer opens his mouth to speak, but the sheriff cuts him off.
Mr. Preston and Ms. Hughes simply wanted to…reiterate to their daughter, in the presence of their attorney, how badly they would like her to come home. That’s all. So sorry to have disturbed your… church service. We won’t bother you again.

The others look pissed beyond belief, but when the sheriff walks to the door of the cathedral, and ghouls begin closing in, they scramble to follow him out. Miri’s mother turns to look back at the dais, and Miri stands to give her one last look. She almost looks like a grieving widow, dressed in black with a black veil. She doesn’t wave or smile or really acknowledge her mother in any way. She just looks at her.

The rest of the congregation begins to leave the pews and move towards the door, forcing the outsiders out the door, like a giant wall of bodies. They follow them out of the cathedral, through the halls, and out the front door of the building. They continue to follow them, silently, until they climb into the sheriff’s car. The car peels out, spraying gravel and dirt everywhere. Once the car is out of sight, the Siblings begin cheering and howling, and the ghouls begin screeching and chittering.

Back in the cathedral, Miri collapses in relief into her chair. She and Copia are alone in the giant room, no sound except the swishing of his cassock as he walks back to the dais. He kneels in front of her, placing his head into her lap. She runs her fingers through his hair, careful not to disturb his biretta.

*I was terrified* he whispers. *I don’t know how I managed not to faint in front of them.*

And what would you have done if they came for me?

He sighs heavily. *Honestly? Find a way to slice open my hand, and fling my blood into their eyes.*

She scoffs, partially in disgust. *What good would that do?*

He looks up at her, his eyes filled with what looks like shame. *It would give them the plague. They’d be dead before dawn.*

She can feel the blood draining from her face in horror, but her heart swells with affection for him. *You’d do that for me?*

He smiles humorlessly. *I’ve given up 600 years of ruthless planning for you. What else could you possibly want from me?*

She shrugs. *Don’t kill anybody else until I tell you to.*
The morning Miri decides to ask Doc for an early detection kit, she throws up on herself in the shower. There’s no nausea or anything, just suddenly there’s vomit. She rinses out her mouth and rubs her hands over her belly. *Is something in there?* she asks Him. *Can you see?*

*I can only see so much. Find a ghoul. They will know by smell.*

The thought of several dozen ghouls swarming all over her once they pick up the scent does not sound appealing in the least. Besides, she wanted Copia to be the first person she told.

After digging through the bathroom cupboards, she finds the fertility tester and discovers that Doc had snuck some stick tests in there as well. She doesn’t pee in a glass this time, leaving the test to sit on the counter. Instead of doing something else to pass the time, she stands and watches it. Slowly, a little plus sign appears in the little window.

Positive.

In her excitement, she slaps it off the counter and giggles hysterically. She clasps her belly with both hands, and feels a surge of power up her spine.

*Can you see him? Or feel him?*

*Not yet* he says. *Once I do, you will know. Now, go see Copia. If he’s going to raise my son, he needs to start now.*

Miri quickly slips through the halls, trying desperately to reach the library without encountering any ghouls. They’ll start shrieking and chirping and that will be it.

The library is empty, as it usually is before breakfast. She sneaks through to the back, to see if Copia is awake yet. He is, sitting at his desk, scribbling away on something. She opens the door all the way, and he looks up and smiles at her.

*Good morning. Why are you here and not in the dining hall?*

*I needed to see you, right away.*

He leans back in his chair. *Well..it seems a little early in the day, but if you’re in the mood-*

She walks around the side of his desk and stands before him, grabbing his head and pushing it into her stomach.

*Uhm…is there a reason for this?*

*Feel anything?*
No….?

You should.

He gasps and looks up at her. The smile on her face gives it away immediately. His eyes are suddenly brimming with tears, and his lower lip quivers.

Really? It’s really happening?

She nods emphatically, her own tears rolling down her cheeks.

He tries to get to his feet, but has to brace himself with one hand on his desk. Once he has a moment to recover, he turns and cups her face in his hands.

Cara mia…I…I don’t have words.

He begins to laugh and cry simultaneously.

How about ‘I love you’?

Yes! I do love you! I’m just…overwhelmed! He excitedly plants little kisses all over her face. She can’t help but laugh at how silly he’s behaving.

I wanted to make sure you were the first to find out. I want to see Doc as soon as possible, but first, can we get something to eat? I’m tempted to see if there’s any chance of getting BBQ this morning.

He makes a disgusted face. Why on Earth would you eat that for breakfast?

I don’t know, I just really want some right now.

Are you going to start eating pickles and ice cream?

She thinks for a second. Maybe not in the same dish, but they both sound good, too.

He makes a face and pretends to gag. Please, enough. I want to be able to eat today.

They walk to the dining hall together, the corridors blessedly empty of people. Once they enter the hall, it’s all over. Almost every ghoul immediately smells something off, and they all stare at Miri as she walks by. She tries to ignore them, but as she and Copia get closer to their table, it goes almost silent in the room. Every conversation has stopped. Nobody is eating. They all just look at her.

When she tries to sit down, she looks up and, seeing the expectant faces, can’t help but laugh. They are literally on the edges of their seats, waiting for some kind of confirmation from her. She sighs and smiles, nodding her head.

The entire room erupts into screams and cheers. She claps her hands over her ears, it’s so loud. At their usual table, Aether has stood up and hoisted Dewdrop up in the air under his arms, like he was a small child. He yells something in Ghoulish, and the other ghouls respond accordingly, probably some kind of cheer for Dew. They’re all patting him on the back and shaking his hands, and he looks bewildered but proud.

When they finally start settling down, he looks at Miri with the biggest smile she’s ever seen on his face. It occurs to her that this is probably the first time he’s looked happy since she met him. The realization sends a twinge through her heart and she feels guilty for how badly she treated him in the past. He seems to have forgotten it, or at least gotten over it, but she swears to herself that she’ll be more gentle with him from now on.

Copia calls an emergency meeting of the high clergy, and Miri’s news is received almost exactly like
she expected.

Almost.

The majority of them are almost beside themselves with excitement, but the reactions from Nihil and Imperator seem...off. They are happy, of course, but they also seem somewhat apprehensive. As though they are expecting a great undertaking of work. Miri isn’t sure what to think, but considering their insidiousness when it came to Nihil’s sons, she knows better than to trust them at face value. She gets word to her loyal ghouls to be on the lookout for anything suspicious from either of them. Something inside tells her that their plans are far from over.

The first trimester flies by; lots of early morning barfing, emotional outbursts, and a ridiculous craving for dairy products. Doc examines her at what should be 12 weeks, and for the first time hears the heartbeat, strong and fast. Part of her is disturbed by this whole process, something living and growing inside her, but part of her can’t help but love this weird thing the size of a lime. *It already has a face* Copia tells her, reading from a pregnancy website on her laptop.

*It’s so weird!* She wriggles under the covers, making a disgusted face.

He gasps, with an incredibly fake offended look. *How dare you say such horrible things about our child! He can hear you, you know! Do you want him to develop a complex?*

Miri shrieks with laughter as he continues his ridiculous fake indignation, unable to push him away when he presses his mouth to her belly and attempts to talk directly to the baby.

*Don’t worry, little one. Your mommy doesn’t mean these things. She’s just full of crazy hormones and Neapolitan ice cream. Once you’re here, I’m sure she’ll love you just as much as I do.*

Sometimes she doesn’t know whether to slap or kiss him.

The nagging sensation that something isn’t right continues to bother Miri for a few weeks. Everything still seems pretty much the same around the church. She constantly uses remote viewing to look at what’s going on, and nothing seems out of the ordinary. The feeling just won’t go away. Like there’s something near her that she should be afraid of, but she just can’t see it. She decides to try and assuage her fears by sitting down with Imperator. Miri knows she can’t trust the old woman farther than she could throw her, but a few innocent questions shouldn’t spark any suspicion.

She ambles down to Imperator’s office, but she’s nowhere to be seen. Remote vision shows the Sister is at the front office, going over something with one of the secretaries. *Good* she thinks. *I’ve got some time for a little snooping.*

The desk is an utter disaster, papers everywhere. Copia and Imperator must have attended the same class in disorganization. She gently runs her hand across the pages, careful not to disturb them, when she feels the horrible tingling in her hand again. She moves it back and forth until she finds the offending page.

It’s a press release, dated for the next day. *That’s weird. Why would they have a release for something that hasn’t happened yet?*

She skims over the page, and two sentences knock the wind out of her.
“…the tragic and untimely death of Cardinal Copia…”

“…the Unholy Mother has been taken to a secure location for the remainder of her pregnancy…”

nononononononogodohgodohgod

MIRIAM! Breathe! You need to breathe! Sit down, now!

She barely manages to sit in Imperator’s chair before her legs give out. She grasps the edge of the desk, trying not to throw up.

I can’t-I can’t-can’t think…

Yes, you can. You just need to focus. Make a plan. Get help. You’ve been through this before and survived, you can do it again. You have to.

She takes a few deep breathes, and when she’s certain she won’t fall, she gets up and leaves the office as fast as she can. She manages to make it to the library without attracting too much attention, but once she gets close to Copia’s office, the tears start. She darts into his office, scaring him half to death, and slams the door behind her.

She’s sobbing by the time she reaches him, dropping to her knees and placing her head in his lap. What is it this time, my love? That television commercial with the sad puppies?

The look she gives him says this is much more serious than that.

Is it the baby? Is something-

They’re coming for you. Tonight. I saw a press release on Imperator’s desk dated tomorrow, and it mentions your “untimely death”. They’re also planning on taking me away somewhere. I know they won’t do anything to me while I’m pregnant, but afterwards…she shrugs.

He strokes her hair, staring straight ahead, deep in thought.

What are we gonna do? she asks.

You’re going to go back to your room and do nothing. I will contact Aether and Dewdrop, and have them assemble their compatriots. They will ensure no one takes you anywhere.

What about you?

I can take care of myself. Hopefully it will just be Siblings. If it is ghouls…I’ll have to improvise.

Do you think Nihil has something to do with this? Or has Imperator just completely gone off the reservation?

I do not know. Without me, there is no one to succeed Papa, but maybe she’s hoping for that. Maybe she thinks the church won’t be needed once the Antichrist is born. I’m inclined to disagree.

Me, too. This is the only home for us.

Not true. We have each other.

Miri requests her dinner in her room. She can’t eat anyway, but she wants to keep up appearances. She changes into more active clothes: shorts, a hoodie, black trainers. She tries to think of all the
different ways she can get outside from her room. She makes it to 4 when she hears a far-off scream that ends abruptly.

It’s started.

She sits in her bathroom doorway, focusing her attention on her bedroom door. She hears another scream. Then another. Soon there is a cacophony of noise outside. She decides she’s had enough, scrambling to her feet and throwing open the doors.

There are no guards outside her room. In fact, she can’t see or hear anybody. She desperately hopes it’s because they’re hiding in their rooms.

She scampers through the halls as quietly as she can, heading towards the source of the noise. When she finally reaches the courtyard, she almost faints.

Dozens of ghouls tearing each other apart. Ripping and shredding with their teeth and claws. Aether throws them like they were rag dolls, their bones shattering on impact. Dew is taking on 3 at once, his lower jaw and hands covered in blood and little bits of tissue.

Miri’s already-touchy gag reflex can not withstand the sight, and she throws up onto the floor in front of her. It’s not clear if it’s from the sound or the smell, but every ghoul freezes in place, then turns to look at her. A good number of them suddenly snarl and run towards her. She turns her head and puts her hands out in front of her, expecting the worst, but it never comes. She turns back and her jaw drops.

The attacking ghouls are suspended in midair, their bodies twisted and broken. Aether tentatively pokes one with a finger, and the ghoul shrieks in agony. Miri knows she can’t let them go, so she brings her hands up in front of her and claps them together. There is a loud cracking sound as hundreds of bones snap at once, and the ghouls drop to the floor, obviously very dead.

The others rush over, surrounding her in a protective circle. Aether lifts her clear off the ground and wraps his arms around her in a giant bear hug. Dew can’t seem to look her in the eye, the expression on his face one of shame.

Copia? she asks, looking around. They all shrug.

*He told us he could take care of himself* Dew smirks. *Not sure if that makes him crazy or stupid.*

She takes a chance, and looks into the library. There are bodies everywhere. In the aisles, flung across tables. She looks closer and sees that they’re covered in huge black boils, clustered around their throats. Some have been scratched open, leaking pus everywhere.

He’s given them the Black Plague.

She wriggles out of Aether’s grasp and turns towards the library.

*I need you to find Imperator and Nihil. We can’t allow them to leave.*

*Take someone with you.* A smaller ghoul steps forward to accompany her.

*No. You need to stay out of the library. It’s not safe for you. Go, I’ll be fine.*

And they are gone, tails swishing violently behind them.

Miri makes to the library without being noticed. The door is partially blocked by bodies, and she has
to use a power to push them away enough to get in. She gently steps over and between them, trying not to touch any of them. She knows she can’t get sick from them, but she doesn’t want to take any chances.

The farther in she walks, the more bodies she finds. Putrid-smelling fluids have soaked into the carpets, the corpses already rotting. She does her best to hold her gorge, not wanting to add to the already-horrific mess.

She picks her way amongst the bodies until she reaches the back hall. Another body is in the doorway of Copia’s office, black-faced and bloated. She carefully pushes the door open the rest of the way until she can see Copia.

He’s sitting at his desk, minus the cassock and biretta. Sitting back in his chair, with his head tipped back, he doesn’t notice her at first. Her shoe barely squeaks in the floor, and he whips his head towards her.

DON’T! He screams. DON’T COME NEAR ME! He holds his hands out to stop her, and she notices there are small black spots all over them.

The boils will recede, but it takes time, and I don’t want you to touch me when I’m like this.

She ignores him, walking around the edge of his desk, until she is directly in front of him. She smiles softly at him, and he bursts into tears. His head drops forward and he rests his forehead against her belly.

I’m so disgusting….how can you possibly love me?

She runs her fingers through his hair, smoothing it down. You chose this for me. You didn’t know it at the time, but….here we are. Could any other woman claim their man willingly chose to be a Horseman of the Apocalypse for her?

He looks up at her, eyes watery, his makeup smeared.

Stop feeling sorry for yourself. We still have work to do.

Once his tears are dried, and he’s put on a pair of leather gloves, Miri and Copia venture outside the library. It’s completely silent again. They creep through the halls as quietly as possible, until she feels a strange tingling in the back of her head. At the same time, a few members of the high clergy peek around the next corner, looking terrified and confused.

Copia, what in the hell-

Miri holds up a hand to silence the bishop while she tries to figure out what is happening. She quickly scans the outside of the building, and sees Imperator and Nihil practically tiptoeing to a car parked near one of the rear doors.

SOUTHWEST EXIT, NOW! she screams as she takes off running towards the door. The others, not wanting to be left behind, run after her.

Once she reaches the door, she slams herself into it and almost eats shit in the dirt outside. She wasn’t aware it had been raining for hours, and the ground is waterlogged and muddy. It’s almost impossible to see, but she can just barely make out the tail lights of the getaway car as it slowly starts to pull away.
She runs after it, her shoes making a disgusting smacking sound as they almost get stuck in the mud. She’s nowhere near fast enough to catch the car, but that’s not a problem. The headlights barely illuminate the large ghoul blocking the car’s path, and the driver obviously doesn’t see it either. The car slams into the ghoul, as though it were slamming into a steel post. He is unmoved, while the front of the car is totaled, engine smoking and sputtering.

A number of ghouls come running up from behind him, clawing open the car doors and dragging out the occupants. The driver is terrified and pissing himself. The bodyguard in the front seat tries to fight, until a ghoul rips off one of his arms and clubs him to death with it. The driver begins to scream, until another ghoul walks up and punches him in the face so hard, it basically collapses in on itself. The screaming stops.

Imperator and Nihil are treated with more respect and consideration, being gently helped from the backseat. They look so small, sodden and wrinkled, and Miri almost feels sorry for them. Almost.

Imperator begins to laugh and claps her hands in a very slow, sarcastic manner.

Bravo, my dear! I must say, you are far smarter and more powerful than we’d ever anticipated. And that’s saying something!

You never intended to let me raise my own child, did you?

The Sister lets out a sharp exclamation. Of course not! Why would we trust the care of our savior to someone that came here infested with lice? That ate garbage and slept in the gutter? No better than a rat! Ohh, yes, you and Copia are fit for each other, this much is certain. Did he tell you that this idea was his?

Miri fights to keep herself from reacting. She blinks the rain out of her eyes, then slowly turns to face Copia.

Oh, he didn’t, did he? Imperator throws her head back, continuing to laugh.

Copia, always the cleverest of rats, immediately prostrates himself in the mud. His nose is almost buried in it, he’s bent over so far.

Please…it’s not what you think…

Miri can barely hear him over the rain. She slowly steps over to him, and moves her hand towards his head.

Then what is it….Vincenzo?

She roughly grabs the back of his head, digging her fingers into his scalp. She can feel his panic, black and slippery, roiling around in his head. Countless images fly through her mind, too many to focus on, until he finally stops panicking. His thoughts settle on two images:

Her, standing in a sunny, rustic kitchen, holding a chubby infant. Kissing its cheeks and gently bouncing up and down, making the baby giggle and coo.

Both of them, laying in a fluffy featherbed with the baby between them. The baby plays with its toes as they sigh contentedly.

She stops digging through his mind, and he looks up at her, his rain-soaked hair hanging in his eyes.

That was all I wanted he thinks. A place just for us…for a family. Away from these wolves and their
schemes. Doesn’t our son deserve that?

Miri closes her eyes and sighs deeply. It’s what she wants, as well, and the church could be that place. As long as there was no one above them…

She turns back to Imperator. And why did Copia need to die?

Suddenly the old woman falters. Her smile fades, and she attempts to stutter out an answer. Nihil, who seemed to be following her lead, turns to look at her.

I did not know of this. I did not sanction this.

Imperator laughs nervously, trying desperately to come up with an answer that would satisfy him. The more she flounders, the angrier he gets. He finally grabs her by the shoulders, shaking her roughly.

Enough, woman! Enough manipulating! You know nothing about who he is, about what he is. He must lead this church. My sons were never as worthy as he, and I let you believe it was all your idea, but it had been mine from the start.

Miri signals to Copia behind her back to stand up. He pulls himself up out of the mud, and stands next to her.

All these years, everything you have ever done has been to put you into His good graces. Let me know how that worked out for you.

Before anybody can react, he grabs Imperator’s head between his hands and twists. Her limp body hits the ground with a wet, sickening thud.

Everyone is frozen in shock. There is no sound but the rain. After a moment, Nihil turns to Copia.

Now…it is time. Come, then. Take your destiny.

The old man undoes the first few buttons of his chasuble, exposing his throat.

This is what you have been waiting for, Copia. Take it!

Copia haltingly begins to walk towards him, slowly pulling off his leather gloves. Miri knows that if he does this, he’ll truly become a monster. She knows he doesn’t really want that anymore either, but what choice does he have?

An idea occurs to her. An alternate plan. But Copia has to refuse.

She carefully gets down on her knees and concentrates. The only time she’s ever seen this happen was a moment fueled by rage and grief. She’s angry, sure, but not enough to pull this off. She decides instead to focus on positive emotions. The love she has for her child, for Copia. She thinks of his dream, of them happy and safe together.

It works. Slowly, in the air behind Nihil, a shimmery spot appears. Like oil on the surface of a puddle. She envisions it stretching, growing, and it does. Within seconds, it’s the size of a softball.

Copia sees it over Nihil’s shoulder, and recognizes it. His face goes even paler, and he stops in his tracks. He grips his gloves tightly in his hands, and turns around, his back to the other man.

What...what are you doing? Come here! Your Papa commands you!
The ghouls have never seen the doorway themselves, but the creatures inhabiting their bodies know what comes next. They begin to back away in fear, snarling and mewling.

Nihil is completely oblivious when the portal opens completely. He barely has time to scream before black, oily tendrils reach out and wrap around him. Around his throat, over his mouth, at his wrists and ankles. They snap backwards, and his body breaks in half vertically before being swallowed whole by the blackness.

Miri squeezes her eyes shut, visualizing the closing of the portal in her mind. When she opens them again, it’s gone. She looks up at Copia. His face is tipped up to the rain, probably so the others can’t tell that he’s sobbing with relief. She slowly gets to her feet, and looks around at the others.

The remaining members of the high clergy are wide eyed and in shock. The ghouls are exhausted, filthy and covered in blood.

*Is this how you welcome your new Papa? Kneel.*
Copia’s coronation, such as it is, is just as ridiculous as Miri imagined it. Incredibly extravagant and overdramatic. Even the papal name he chose, since he obviously could not use Emeritus. *Equitum? Seriously?* She thinks back to those godawful Latin lessons. *You’re literally calling yourself Horseman? Papa Horseman the First?* She tries her best not to laugh, as it recently has been the cause of her almost peeing her pants.

He just ignores her, fiddling with his new chasuble until it looks just right. No Papa in the church’s history has ever chosen cardinal red and black for their official colors, but there’s a first time for everything.

Her part in the ceremony is to place the mitre on his head, and when she does, she realizes he actually looks like the bird. She manages to stifle a giggle, and he looks like he would shoot daggers from his eyes at her, if he could. She bites her lower lip hard, and tries to play it off like she’s overcome with emotion.

The celebration in the great hall is even more lavish than the one they had for her ascension. This time, she asks Copia to dance. She even lets him wear the stupid mitre.

As she becomes more and more gravid, Miri’s discomfort increases exponentially. No sleeping position is comfortable, no matter how many giant pregnancy pillows she tries. Rolling over is agony on her hips and lower back.

The heartburn and indigestion are even worse. She can barely eat anything; it either makes her feel like she could breathe fire, or she gets too full too quickly from her stomach being compressed. She pees herself multiple times before demanding adult diapers, just in case she sneezes.

No matter how miserable she feels, it’s all worth it to see and feel this little creature poking and rolling around inside her. The ultrasound has already confirmed it is a boy, and practically every church member from around the world has inundated her with name suggestions. She’s already chosen a name, she’s just not going to share it with anyone until the birth.

Her water breaks a week early, right in the middle of dinner. One second, she’s taking a sip of her milkshake (she’s basically given up on solid food at this point), and the next she’s sitting in a giant puddle. She calmly sets her glass down on the table, pushes her chair back, and proceeds to waddle towards the door, fluid dripping down her legs and all over the floor.

*Where are you going?* Copia asks.

She turns, nervous and exasperated. *I thought I’d go have a baby since my water just broke. You coming, or do you really need to finish your pot pie?*

Nobody else has heard the exchange, so they’re able to slip out the door relatively unnoticed. They make it to the infirmary just as Doc is about to leave for the day.

*Sorry, Doc. No false labor this time. I’ve left a trail all the way from the dining hall.*
The old man’s face lights up with excitement and he rubs his hands together. Well, let’s get this show on the road, then!

Miri demands an epidural immediately. There’s no debate. Copia just puts his hands up. Do whatever she asks.

The drugs work so fast, she almost falls off the bed. The horrible, nagging pain that had plagued her for the entire last trimester is now gone, and she takes the opportunity to get some decent sleep.

She manages to get a few hours, until an unfamiliar sensation deep in her belly wakes her up. It feels like a tiny, white-hot flower bud slowly opening inside her, and as it does, the pain only gets worse and worse. It reaches an intensity that she almost cannot withstand, but she is incapable of calling for help. A nurse comes into the room just as the contraction subsides. Gasping for breath, she demands more painkillers. The nurse insists on checking her progress before administering anything new.

Oh, sweet Satan. You’re not going to believe this. The baby has moved down on his own. You’re going to be pushing in just a few minutes. I’ll give you more medicine, so you can save your strength.

Miri quickly decides that giving birth is highly overrated and should be abolished. Goodbye, human race. No more of this impossibly strenuous and painful practice.

After almost an hour of pushing, she’s sweaty and exhausted, unable to hold herself up any longer. Copia’s been doing his best to prop her up with every push, wiping sweat from her forehead, but even he is getting winded. The head nurse whispers something to one of the others, who then leaves the room. She returns a few seconds later with Dew in tow. She snaps her fingers and points to Miri.

Help him hold her up, they’re both getting too tired.

He doesn’t hesitate, sliding an arm behind her back and gently grasping her shoulder. He’s strangely calm, considering the importance of the moment.

Just keep breathing. You’re doing great.

A nurse stands on either side of her, holding her legs up and back so pushing is easier. There’s no more pain, only pressure. A slight burning sensation, and Doc calls out He’s crowning!

The near-deafening commotion outside the door tells her that they have a very excited audience. Dew whips his head around and yells SHUT UP!

Silence.

A few more gentle pushes, and Miri feels the strangest…popping sensation.

The head’s out. Let’s just suction out his nose and mouth a little…one more little push, and you’ll have your baby.

One last tiny push, and she can feel Doc pulling the rest of the baby out. The nurses gather around him, handing him tools and sponges. There’s a weird crunching sound, lots of movement, and suddenly he plops a small, wrinkly-faced thing on her chest.

The first thing that comes to her mind is He looks pissed. He tries so hard to take his first breath, all red-faced and angry. She doesn’t hear the inhale, but his squawking exhale is music to her ears. She instantly grabs him and pulls him closer to her face, so they can feel each other’s skin. She doesn’t
even notice that every one in the room is bowing to him. To her, he’s just her baby, and that’s all she
cares about.

As his cries grow louder, the crowd outside the infirmary begins shouting and praying, which Miri
finds amusing, since they don’t even know his name yet.

She plants tiny kisses on his head, even though he’s covered in blood and fluids, and whispering to
him. One of the nurses reaches for him, and she doesn’t want to give him up, even for a second.

*We need to weigh him and finish cleaning him up. Then you can have him right back.*

When the nurse walks away, that’s when she gets her first real look at him. Lots of dark hair, long
legs, a button nose. Ears that just slightly come to points at the top and, unsurprisingly, what looks
like a vestigial tail. They measure him, wipe all the goop off, put special drops in his eyes, and
suction more gross stuff out of his mouth.

The nurse brings him back, all wrapped up like a burrito. He doesn’t look quite so angry anymore,
mostly just tired. They hand him to her, and she holds him so that Copia and Dew can get a good
look at him. Dew places the gentlest of kisses to the top of his head, then kisses Miri’s cheek before
turning and leaving the room. More cheers and shouts from outside as he tries to get the crowd away
from the door.

Copia just stares at him. He raises a hand to touch him, but it’s shaking. Miri lets out a little laugh.

*He’s not porcelain, you know. He won’t shatter if you touch him.*

*I don’t even know his name. What did you choose?*

*Joshua.*

As a former Catholic, Copia can’t help smirking. *Very fitting.*

The celebration for Joshua’s birth dwarfs every party Miri has seen so far. Thousands and thousand
of the faithful show up, so many that they have to turn people away, there just simply isn’t room for
all of them.

She only attends the party for a little while, just long enough to be seen and to present the baby to the
crowd. Lots of bowing and “Hail Satan”. He doesn’t like all the noise, so it’s the perfect excuse to
not stay long.

From their new rooms in the church, they can hear Ghost playing in the grand hall. It seems to calm
him.

*Is that your papa? You like to hear him sing? Me too.*

A few months later, right in the middle of bath time, a Sister comes pounding at their door. They just
received a phone call from the sheriff. Apparently, Miri’s father’s business had gone belly-up and, in
a fit of madness, he killed his new family and then himself. She’s not really sure how to feel about it.
Relief, maybe.

Later that week, they receive another call. Her mother’s body was found in a cheap motel on the
outskirts of the city. Overdose. She’s not terribly surprised.
Joshua turns out to be a near-perfect baby. Rarely cries, always happy and curious. When he’s old enough, they take him outside and the ghouls crawl on their bellies, trying to get him to copy them. It turns out his tail was not vestigial, it’s fully functional. He quickly learns how to pick up toys with it, he even tries sticking the spade in his mouth.

His hair gets more and more blonde, his eyes a brilliant blueish-green. Even with his chubby cheeks, he looks remarkably like Dew. She asks Copia if that bothers him at all.

*Of course not. I feed him, bathe him, sing to him when he’s sad. He is my son. What does it matter that he didn’t come from my seed?*

*I dunno…I just don’t want you to feel like you have to do this, like you have no choice.*

He places his hands on her shoulders and looks her in eye. *In the eyes of the church, you are my wife and this is my child. That’s all that matters.*

For Joshua’s first birthday, they decide to have one of those huge portraits commissioned. The kind that they usually do for presidents and kings and queens. Obviously they don’t expect an infant to sit still long enough to paint them, so they take a reference photograph first. Miri dresses him in an adorable little dress shirt and pants set. He’s wearing shoes, even though he’s not quite walking yet. He just stands next to things and holds on, but hasn’t worked up the nerve to try taking a step.

Copia wears one of his finest sets of robes, but Miri flat-out refuses to let him wear the stupid mitre. *You’re not wearing that ridiculous thing in a family photo, i don’t care if you think the outfit is missing something.*

Of course, she wears her veil and crown, so she’s not really one to talk.

The photographer frames them in a typical pose: Miri sitting down, Joshua on her lap, Copia standing just behind and to the side of the chair. He has a burst mode on the camera so he can take several photos quickly, which comes in handy when Joshua starts chewing on his tail and refuses to let go.

The photographer quickly goes through the shots on the viewfinder, finds the best one, and holds it out for them to see. Miri pretends to adjust her veil so they don’t see the tears in her eyes.

*A perfect family.*

*Finally.*

Chapter End Notes

*That's it, kids! We're done! And it's my birthday!\n*Thanks for sticking around to the end, it's been a ride.*
You can find me just about anywhere online, undeclaredmilk/undeclared_milk

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