

## The Ritual

Amanda was following the turns and curves of a narrow road winding between two rows of ancient oaks. At last, from a tiny rise, she had a distant view of the house: Its long grey façade, flanked by the corner towers, presided over a seemingly boundless expanse of neatly trimmed grass.

She parked her car by the wide stone staircase leading to the pointed arch with two windows of stained glass above it. Sixteen years later, Amanda stood in front of Grandpa Simon's house; her dark brown, almost black eyes were taking in the intricately carved façade, with its two rows of windows and tiny balconies dotting the second floor here and there.

The entrance door slid in silently, and Amanda distinguished an old man, in a butler's uniform, his snow-white hair reaching his shoulders. His watery eyes pierced her from behind the spider web of wrinkles on his face.

"Welcome, Miss Andrew. I'm—"

"I remember you, Perkins." The old man's face brightened, and the spider web rearranged itself in a resemblance of a smile. "How are you doing?"

"I am fine, Miss," he paused for a moment. "My deepest sympathies, Miss."

"Thank you, Perkins."

She remembered the butler and the old house from her childhood, when she visited her Grandpa Simon, spending her summers exploring the ancient house and the grounds that stretched for miles in all directions. The summer she was eight, her Grandpa had a huge pool built behind the rose garden; however, she only had two summers to enjoy it... An argument between Old Simon and her father, who had passed away three years before, and Amanda was forbidden from going to her Grandfather's house.

When she learned about Grandpa Simon's death, Amanda was sad and relieved at the same time, as the tension between Old Simon and her father had ended. She was surprised to find out that she was the heiress to the mansion and an insignificant, as the Last Will ran, sum of

money. This money was more than enough for her to pay back her various debts and buy a new car... And to live in this house for the rest of her life.

She went through the tall doorway and stepped into a huge dark hall with a two-winged curved staircase. The white-and-black checkered marble floor reflected an enormous crystal chandelier suspended by a thick chain from the ceiling two floors above. At the West Doors, the servants had lined up waiting to be introduced to the new owner. She was inattentive while Perkins was going through the ordeal – she wanted to go to the library-room, sit down in one of the old Chippendale chairs and look at the bluish forest beyond the back garden. She also wanted to be left alone so she could get used to the old house, to the dark atmosphere of the huge rooms.

She declined lunch and went to the library. The oak-paneled, with a fireplace and a gallery along three walls, was lined with bookshelves – the leather-bound volumes towering in front of her made her feel little again; the portraits staring from the walls made her feel little and insignificant.

She recalled her Grandfather sitting by the fire, reading a newspaper or some big volume placed on a pulpit. The stem of a pipe in his thin long fingers was tracing along the lines.

“Never ever climb onto the gallery! You have nothing to do over there. You see the books on those shelves?” With the same pipe he would point at the volumes across the fireplace. “A young lady like you should get acquainted herself with those! And never climb onto the gallery, child!”

She shivered. It seemed as if she was in her Grandfather’s presence, and his cold blue eyes were penetrating her.

Nevertheless, she liked the library-room; nevertheless, she did climb onto the gallery. One day, for some reason she clearly remembered that it was a Wednesday, Grandpa Simon left for a business in town. It gave Amanda a couple of hours for herself, and she walked along the passage that seemed to stretch forever. And she approached the library and slowly pushed down the lion’s paw of the door handle and, leaning against the warm wooden surface, she let herself in. Step by step, holding her breath, listening to the silence outside the room, she stealthily climbed the narrow spiral staircase, and *onto the gallery*.

She tiptoed along the banister looking at the back of the books – the names were strange, the titles were unfamiliar: “The Dawn of the Gods”... “Quabala”... “Lucifer’s Last Crusade”...

She recalled looking over the banister: the floor, the chairs, and the table seemed to be far away and looked tiny, like the ones in her dollhouse.

Next morning Amanda was grounded for three days. She was ordered to stay in her room, a dark corner chamber with a huge Gothic bed and a dresser; two windows faced the back garden and the thick line of a forest in the south and the pond in the west. An old maid-servant, who refused to utter a single word, brought in her meals.

Amanda climbed the stairs and looked along the gallery: the same banister, the same polished hardwood floor, the same books lined the shelves. She ran her finger along the backs of the thick volumes. Suddenly, she felt a gust of a chilly wind sweep through the library. Amanda opened one of the volumes:

*"And to cleanse the Castle, They bring a Virgin in Front of the Grand Master. And He looketh at Her Up and Down, and He decideth: She shall be the Sacrifice. And He leth Her drink the Blood of a Dove. And He placeth Her on the Altar, amongst the Candles, and He makes a Sacrifice with a Dagger of Steel of Damascus, the one with a Serpent Hilt, by opening Her throat. And thus the Annual Ritual hath been performed."*

The year 1702 was embossed at the bottom of the frontispiece. She put the book back on the shelf and shivered: despite a warm day, the air in the library felt cold and damp. From behind the books, a light draft came and filled the library with the smell of a cellar.

Amanda looked around. Most of the panes in the French windows were broken, and the wind was entering at will, twisting and sweeping the piles of old, dry leaves along the floor. One of the Chippendale chairs had upturned and was missing a leg; its once meticulously kept upholstery appeared rotten and covered with mould. The walls were splattered with greenish slime that was also slathered on the scratched and rotten hardwood floor. The books were strewn all over the balcony and the floor, their pages ripped out or covered with the same green slime.

Constellations of bats inhabited the wide beams below the ceiling, taking off in pairs or groups and darting all over the room.

Amanda blinked, and the vision disappeared. She descended the spiral staircase and opened one of the French windows: a long slope of grass, the familiar rose garden, however, without her clad in black Grandfather , the pool with a blue water, a distant creek glistening in the sun.

She stepped onto the terrace. Two stone lions, sitting on their hind legs, guarded the wide staircase. She petted the marble mane of one of the beasts, just like he did when she was a little girl. But then, the lion's eyes reflected Amanda's long brown hair, her dark eyes on a bit narrow face with high cheek-bones, her full lips that always curved in a smile. But now, the blank eyes of the lion remained lifeless.

Amanda followed one of the flagstone paths down the lawn, and into the rose garden; the flowers of a dark red color reminded her of blood. She stopped by a bush. The memories of the day she had cut a flower for herself came back. The day she was forbidden to go to the pool for a week felt as if it was yesterday. Grandpa Simon was protective of his bloody roses.

She followed the path towards the forest and, passing the tall pillars of the pine-trees by, approached a low stone wall. She smoothed her green woolen sweater and leaned against the parapet, feeling the warmth of the stone under her palms. A spectacular view of the blue-blue sea from the thirty-foot drop took her breath away. Amanda gazed at the monstrous rocks that formed a sort of a wave-breaker and protected the seashell-shaped lagoon of shallow water. For a second she thought she saw a woman in a long dress and a tiny figure of a girl in a red bathing suit sitting on a blue towel spread on the sand. *Who is it over there? There is no boat on the waves of the lagoon. And you can't get to the beach just walking along the water.* She realized that her eyes deceived her – the narrow stretch of the sand was empty, save for the rocks dotting it here and there. She started her walk back to the house.

A rose in her hand, Amanda paused by one of the marble benches by the pool. The blue water was sparkling under the sun, reflecting its bright rays. Amanda felt a strong gust of a cold wind, and the smell of rotten soil filled the hot afternoon air. She gazed at the pool: a reddish mist hovered above the dark red liquid. The tiny waves were ebbing towards her feet. She saw the body parts floating on the surface. Amanda felt nauseated. She lowered herself on the bench and closed her eyes. The stench became intolerable. She heard a faint voice calling her name.

And she passed out.

The world was slowly coming back. Amanda found herself sitting on the bench, her heels on the edge, hugging her legs just like she would sit when she had been punished or upset. She slowly opened her eyes. A light breeze brought her a fresh scent of grass and herbs; the blue water of the pool reflected the sunrays.

Her eyes were fixed on the rose laying on the marble tile. Its petals became dry and withered; the green stem turned grey. When she touched the flower, it turned into a heap of ashes.

A light wind came and swept it away, into the grass.

Amanda headed towards the house. *Why have I come here? I should have stayed in Cambridge... At least, I have my apartment there... And I don't care that it's off Mass Ave and some people think it's noisy... I have my snuggly bunny Sue... She still loves me... I miss you, babe... I can't even call her from here... This place doesn't have a phone... I am going nuts...*

She crossed the library, went upstairs and sat down on her bed. Nothing has changed in those sixteen years: the same walls, the same dresser, the same enormous bed. The same room where she had spent hours... forbidden to leave it... On those night, the servants were given a day off, and her Grandpa Simon was having his friends over. And Amanda was left alone in the huge bedroom.

Those nights... She could still remember the scents, the strange scents coming out of the vents. She knew where they originated: Thrilled, excited, and scared, Amanda would sneak into the basement, to find half-burnt candles placed in the heavy silver holders. A huge altar, with rows of candles along the edges, occupied the back wall. The grinning skulls guarded the four corners of the surface, their empty eye sockets seemed to follow her. Silver goblets and black leather-bound volumes were scattered all over the big table in the center of the room. She would look through the books, turning over the heavy pages with unfamiliar texts and strange, scary drawings.

She was deeply in admiring one of the elaborate artworks in the margins when Grandpa Simon caught her in the basement.

"I told you not to come here!" He said in a grave deep voice. "Ever!"

”But what is it about, Grandpa?” Amanda was scared and curious at the same time. “What are those books about?”

“You won't understand it right now, child. But when you're grown up, and you still want to know, I'll tell you.” He gave her a faint smile. “Agreed?”

“Agreed, Grandpa.” She started moving towards the basement stairs. “Am I grounded?”

“Not this time. However, I know that you've been sneaking in here on several occasions. Right?” She nodded and blushed. “Promise, you'll never enter the basement unless I allow you.”

“I promise.”

“No pool for you today.”

“But, Grandpa!”

“I said no pool! And no beach! “

It was a hot day: Amanda never descended the basement stairs again.

Amanda opened the closet door - her clothes neatly hung on the hangers, her shoes were lined up at the back wall. She picked her dinner outfit - formal, very formal. While changing, she realized she wouldn't be able to sleep in this room. The dark brown silk on the walls... Its pattern familiar from her childhood. From the days when she--

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. Her maid Mathilda entered the room to announce supper. Amanda asked her to move her belongings to another bedroom.

"But which one, Miss?" The maid looked a bit puzzled.

"Any room... Except the master bedroom," Amanda retorted. "Any room will do..."

She had supper in the large and dark dining room lighted with the candles and dimmed textures on the walls. Perkins was supervising the servants. Amanda sat silent in her chair, the one she used to occupy when she was visiting her grandfather.

“Was it you who picked the outfit? Your shirt and vest don't match, Amanda. And your skirt is too short for a supper. Next time let your governess choose clothes for you.” His eyes darted at her across the table. “Sit straight!”

And then he would start telling her about his younger days (at that time, Amanda thought he should have been at least a hundred years old), about his father and grandfather, and how strict they were. But now Grandpa Simon was not there to tell her how to behave, what to say; no

more of his stories.

A light chilly wind blew across the room making the candles flicker.

"Dessert, Miss?" Perkin's voice came as if from a distance. Amanda shivered.

"No, thank you," she hesitated. "Perhaps, I'll have it later."

She left the dining room and walked down the passages, opening the doors and flipping the switches. *The house should be renovated*, she thought walking through the drawing rooms, the billiard-room. *It 's too gloomy and dark. Like a dungeon.* She flooded the Grand ballroom with light; the hardwood floor of an elaborate pattern glittered under the crystal chandeliers. Amanda caught a reflection of herself in one of the huge mirrors and recalled the dance classes her Grandpa Simon made her take from... *What was her name?*

She ascended to the second floor. There were more sitting rooms, guest bedrooms. She opened the door to Grandpa Simon's bedroom, with a huge Gothic bed covered with a dark red spread with his coat of arms. She paused by the fireplace, now dark and lifeless.

Amanda arranged herself in one of the chairs by the fireplace, as she would do a long time ago.

*"You're a beautiful girl, Amanda,* she could hear her Grandpa's voice. *You've inherited all the family features. The color of your eyes is different, though. It should have been blue.*

*Like yours, Grandpa?*

*Yes, like my eyes.* He sighed. *Perhaps, you got the color from your mother's side. You have seen the portraits in the library? You look like MY side of the family. And you did inherit a sharp mind! Remember, you belong here, and you belong to the Knowledge and Science. Promise, you'll go to College you and get a degree... As many degrees as possible.*

*I promise.*

*Remember, always aim as high as you can.*

Amanda shivered recalling the long evening talks with her Grandpa. He would talk, she would listen, sometimes not comprehending the meaning of what was said, sometimes asking him for a clarification. But now she realized that through their seemingly slow conversations the reserved old man had made her what she was: an over-achiever, with two Doctorate degrees, a single female, twenty-five. Beautiful...

“I hate you, Grandpa,” she whispered.

Room after room, Amanda was turning the lights off and closing the doors. Memory after memory, the four summers in this old house (or this old mansion if you will) were coming back. She recalled the sunny days spent by the pool and in the meticulously planned garden. The air was filled with a heavy sweet mellow scent of freshly cut grass and the buzzing singing of the bugs. She recalled the salty taste on her lips after a swim in the lagoon; and after her swim, in her red bathing suit, she played in the sand or sat on her blue towel reading a book. She recalled the rainy days spent in the music-room playing a grand Blüthner or sitting in the library with a book from the shelves opposite the fireplace. A chess or checkers game with her Grandpa Simon. No other playmates were allowed. Ever.

Amanda stepped outside, onto the terrace. The air was muggy, and the heavy clouds hovering above the forest promised a thunderstorm. She rang for Perkins and asked for the missed desert. To her utmost surprise, it was a homemade ice cream frozen in a whimsical way, just as she had had it more the fifteen years before. *Strange...* she thought. *Who would remember that I liked it exactly the way it looks and tastes so many years later?*

Amanda took a long bath: the hot water was relaxing her, freeing her of the burden of most of her memories. She closed her eyes. The temperature suddenly dropped, and the water turned into a viscose liquid that filled each pore of her skin. The air stank of a decay and decomposition; Amanda gagged. She tried to move, but the liquid didn't let her. She felt fingers on her neck, squeezing her throat and denying her even that stale air.

*Amanda*, she heard her Grandfather's voice. *You're a disappointment and a disgrace to your family! You only have two Doctorates!*

*How is it a disgrace?* The thought flashed through her mind. It didn't make sense to her. *How...*

There was no answer, and the thought abruptly disappeared into a dark void as the fingers squeezed her throat tighter. She resisted and opened her eyes.

She was alone. The greenish water was partially covered with a bath foam; the air was full of a pleasant scent of lavender. She took a deep breath.



The lights flickered. The door opened, and a girl entered the bathroom - it was Amanda herself, at nine or ten - the front of her torn long nightshirt was soaked in blood dripping onto the floor. Her small feet were leaving bloody prints on the blue tiles. Her nose bleeding, the girl held her left hand pressed tightly against her neck, the blood streaming down her arm.

Little Amanda stepped into the bath and took her hand off her throat - the blood rushed out of the dark slit of an open wound; immediately, the water turned red. She knelt in front of Amanda, put her cold little hands on her knees and smiled broadly, showing her blackened teeth, *Grandpa has just sacrificed me!* Then, leaning closer, her dull, empty eyes fixed on Amanda's eyes, she whispered, *Grandpa is right... You're a disgrace!* Little Amanda's breath reeked of the choking stench of a grave.

Amanda screamed and shook her head. There was no little Amanda. The water was bluish and clear (she hated bath foams!), and the air smelled fresh and clean.

She heard a roll of thunder. Trembling, Amanda dried herself, got into her nightshirt and slipped under the covers, and closed her eyes. Another roll of thunder. A lightning and a roll of thunder. *I'm going nuts*, she thought. *I'm going nuts. It's impossible. First, I thought I saw a woman and a girl (myself?) on the beach. I swear it was ME! And now... NOW I entered this room... And not even... I'm nuts...*

She was on the beach. In her red bathing suit, she sat on her blue towels reading a book. She took her eyes off the page and looked up the drop: a woman in a green sweater was leaning against the low stone wall. Grandpa Simon stood behind her. *Who is she?* Amanda thought. *Is she staying for dinner?* She turned towards her governess, *Joanne, who is...?* Amanda looked back to the top - the woman and Grandpa Simon were gone. *Never mind...* She flipped over a page.

A roll of thunder shook the house. She recalled a similar night more than fifteen years ago. She got scared and ran barefoot to her grandpa's bedroom in the other wing. When she had reached the landing, she looked at the entrance doors and stopped dead: In the eerie flashes of the lightning, in the dim light of the huge chandelier, she saw her Grandpa meeting his friends, all

clad in black. She ducked and hid behind the banister, wishing her nightshirt were not so bright. She remained unnoticed as the men walked through the East Doors. Bursting with curiosity, Amanda tiptoed after them to find out that they had already descended the tower stairs, to the basement. She reached for the handle, but the door didn't give.

Back in her room, tightly wrapped in her blanket, she sat on the bed, listening to the distant muted chants and smelling the strange scents. Thrilled with the thunderstorm, she walked up to the window, her blanket on her shoulders, and climbed up on the wide windowsill. Her forehead pressed against the cold glass, the lower hem of her nightshirt clenched between her teeth, she trembled and watched the wall of rain turning the garden into the glistening silhouettes of the trees and bushes. The lighting bolts were wildly crisscrossing the sky. In their light, she could see her bluish face reflected in the window pane; the rolls of thunder were deafening her. Soon, the thunderstorm degenerated into a monotonous rain.

All thrill gone, she climbed onto the bed and laid onto her back. *I'll be grounded if don't get under my blankey*, she thought listening to the sound of the rain. *Either the maid or Joanna will tell on me. How is THAT possible?* She murmured when, suddenly, she noticed a slant beam of moonlight coming in through the gap in the drapes of the other window fell on her bent bare knees. It's raining over here and there is the moon round the corner? Feeling too tired to investigate, she got under her blanket and, after turning and tossing for hours, she finally managed to fall asleep. When the gap between the drapes turned grey.

Another roll of thunder seemed to shake the house. Amanda recalled the feeling of being in her old bedroom, with the covers drawn over her head, and thunder rolling all over the place.

*Strange, I couldn't recall that night until... What's this scent coming out of the vents?*

In the flash of a lightning, she thought she saw a shadow of her Grandfather and heard his whisper.

"Are you scared?" He chuckled. "It's just thunderstorm. No need to be scared," He extended his hand and she felt his dry fingers gently wrapping around her hand. "Let's go, Amanda."

"Where are you taking me to, Grandpa?" She whispered.

"You wanted to know what the basement was about..." Half question, half statement... She nodded in the darkness. "If you do, then, follow me..."

They reached the landing. In the entrance hall, a group of men, all clad in black, were waiting for them. Grandpa Simon introduced each of the twelve individuals to his granddaughter. There was a lawyer, and a doctor, and a Medical Examiner. and a Police Chief, and a Judge... She failed to memorize, who or what the rest of them were.

They descended the basement stairs. The torches on the walls illuminated the familiar room; the candles on the table and the altar were sending an eerie flickering light onto the men's faces. They took their seats around the table, with Amanda next to her Grandfather.

“We have gathered tonight to celebrate Him, who is the Greatest superior, the Ruler of the Universe,” Old Simon's voice reverberated under the vaulted ceiling of the room. “This is the night when we honor Him, when we offer Him the blood. And with this blood we also cleanse the castle.”

The men opened the books and, one after another, they started to read out loud in a strange language. Old Simon was the last one to recite - when he stopped, the flames of the torches died out by themselves. In the dim candlelight, the men rose to their feet and approached the altar. Amanda followed them with her eyes and then she noticed that one of them had a white dove in his hands. With the chants as a background, Old Simon placed the dove in the altar's center and, with a bluish dagger, he sliced through the dove's neck, detaching its head. The blood reddened the feathers and a dark puddle started to spread from the talons towards the candles set along the edges of the altar. Old Simon's voice was getting louder and louder; a strong wind blew across the room, putting the candle flames out. Dead silence and a total darkness wrapped Amanda. She felt as if she was deep underground, buried in a crypt forever.

Then, one after another, the candles lit all by themselves. She looked at the altar: the dove had disappeared, leaving only a puddle of blood on the uneven surface.

The men stood in a semi-circle in front of the altar, pronouncing something Amanda couldn't understand. Two of them walked towards a wall and touched one of the stones - a hidden door slid in and revealed a chamber beyond. In the light of two candles, she saw a girl of about eighteen-nineteen, blindfolded, wrapped in a cloak, sitting on a chair. Amanda could distinguish that her hands and hands were tied with pieces of rope. The girl was told to rise on her feet, and the two men led her towards the altar. Her cloak was pulled down and it heaped by her feet on the stone floor; the blindfold followed the cloak.

The girl looked around, her been eyes filled with honor. “Who are you? What do you

want from me? Why you kept me in that stinky room?”

Without answering her, Old Simon looked her up and down. “She will be the sacrifice!” He pronounced in a deep voice.

The girl screamed.

Old Simon approached her and looked her straight in the eyes, and then he cut the ropes on her wrists. He handed the girl a silver goblet. “The blood of a white dove! Drink it!” Obediently and silently, like a somnambulist, the girl took the goblet and brought it up to her lips. “Drink it!”

Gulp after gulp, she emptied the vessel - two red threads ran from the corners of her mouth down to her chin, and down her naked body. She dropped the goblet.

She was lifted and placed onto the altar. The girl's long blond hair spilled over the surface and got mixed with the dove's blood, turning pink. *She's so beautiful*, Amanda thought. *They are not going to...* Old Simon cut the rope on her ankles. In a clear voice he started to read from the book in his hands. then the others joined in. The voices were getting louder and louder. A sudden stop. A dead silence.

“In the name of the Greatest Superior, to honor Him and to cleanse the Castle!” Old Simon raised his hand, and Amanda observed that he was holding a long bluish dagger. And he plunged the blade into the girl's throat. Her back arched; gurgling sounds emanated from her throat. Amanda noticed that the serpent-shaped ebony hilt contrasted with the girl's milky white skin.

Old Simon pulled the dagger out. Amanda had never seen so much blood pouring out of one's body - it was steaming down the girl's neck, pooling around her head, around her body. *They did it... They killed the poor girl. Do they even know who she is? Was?*

Amanda heard a choking sound from somewhere behind her. She turned her head to find out the little Amanda by the foot of the stairs, barefoot, in her nightshirt, her eyes opened wide. *It's impossible! I can't be here and there at the same time! I'm going nuts!*

The room was swirling and twisting. Amanda heard a low voice (sounded like the man who introduced himself as a physician), saying, “Grand Master Simon, the girl is not a virgin. Now I've recognized her. She was in my office a couple of days ago. She wanted something that would cause a miscarriage. And I...”

The voices became muffled, the scents got stronger, and Amanda plunged into the

darkness...

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In the morning, Amanda was found with a dagger of steel of Damascus in her throat. The serpent-shaped ebony hilt contrasted with her milky white skin. Despite the traces of candle wax on her body and arms, the Medical Examiner concluded that it was “suicide through negligence”.

The case was closed.

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The Annual Ritual had been performed.

## THE PRICE OF KNOWLEDGE

“Give us your wallet!” Two youngsters pushed a well-dressed man against the wall of the coffee-shop he had just left. “And your watch!”

“You don't want to do that,” the man retorted.

“Why not, Grandpa?” Click-click and two blades glistened in the light of a street-lamp. “If we want to, we'll do that, you dip-shit!”

Keeping silent and composed, the man took in the tattoos that covered the necks and arms of the young men, at their dark clothes. *Street punks with some gang*, he thought... *Although...*

“You don't want to do that,” he repeated quietly.

“Your wallet!” They stepped closer. “Now!”

With a wide grin, the man stretched his hand towards the chest of the dark-haired young man, mumbled something, and, suddenly, they saw a human heart in his palm. The heart was still pulsating, still pushing the blood through the vessels. The young man choked, dropped his knife, and fell on the ground. The man took the knife out of the other youngster's hand and tossed it onto the sidewalk, as if what had just happened was nothing but a mere nuisance.

Silently, he took the shocked youngster's hand in his hand and squeezed it tight, forcing him to kneel. The young man looked up at the man: He seemed taller, his face had become narrower; his skin had turned pale white. Instead of the expensive grey suit, the man was clad in a black cape with a flaming red lining; a short dagger was tucked behind his belt. Red flames danced in the man's eyes.

“We meet again, Billy...”

“Grand Master,” the young man whispered in awe. “I didn't recognize you, master.” A tighter squeeze nearly squashed his fingers and hand, sending jolts of sharp pain through the entire body. “Forgive me, Grand Master! I've been—“

“You've been a failure, Billy! You've been worshipping me since you were nine! And even now you know nothing! And see nothing!”

“I know what they say about you! They say you tempt—“

“Fools!!! I don't tempt! I give them a choice!” He looked straight into his follower's eyes, and whispered. “Just like I've been doing onto you. Remember? You had a choice... To go to school or to be a lazy slob. What did you chose?”

“To be a slob,” the pain was almost unbearable.

“I let you choose... To work or to be a nobody, to be a lousy mugger! And what are you now?”

“Man, it hurts!!!” Billy shrieked.

The pain became excruciating and then it disappeared. He saw the man's long white fingers in front of his eyes, then something slipped into their corners, and the Billy's eyeballs left the sockets. And a greater pain and darkness wrapped Billy. He felt a hand on top of his head, and the world exploded into nothingness.

The man in the expensive gray suit approached a car parked in front of the coffee-shop, fished the keys out of the pocket, and got behind the wheel.

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Ignatius Green always hated the ridiculous combination of his names: his pious Mother, in a fit of religious ecstasy, decided that Ignatius would be a perfect name for a child. It could have been... However, his father's last name made everything even worse – the kids at school called him a ‘green gnat’ and exercised their, what he called it ‘retarded stupidity’, inventing various stories about his ‘gnat’ family.

On quite a few occasions he would come home either with a black eye, or with a note from the Principal *about* a black eye he had given another boy. The things got worse when his younger sisters Anastasia and Eustachia went to the same school and, in their turn, had been bullied for their names. The bullying got worse in high school as then his class-mates had also become ‘curious’ about the girls. His Mother knew how to ruin their lives.

Then, somebody had dropped a hint, a very light hint. And Ignatius joined a group. They called it ‘the Society’. AS the time went by, he got to like the rituals, the books, and the support that made him feel stronger. He even got a secret name: Hokhmah. Every Wednesday and Friday, he would attend the services at the Society Temple and bring home books that he dared not show his parents or his sisters. He read them at night, before falling asleep.

One day he made Arthur, the worst of his bullies, vanish. For years and years now, Ignatius was haunted by the visions of Arthur catching up with him by the river and plunging into their usual heated exchange of words. At first. After that, a usual number of punches would follow that left Ignatius feeling seek and dizzy. But this time, Ignatius recalled a line from one of the books and muttered it.

“What are you mumbling over there, you frikking gnat?” Arthur pushed Ignatius on his chest, making him drop his backpack. “Want to share your excitement? Or you're apologizing for your punk-ass behavior?”

“I'm not apologizing—“

“Whaaat!? I am gonna kick your—“

Arthur suddenly fell onto the ground, and, in convulsions, rolled off the steep bank and disappeared under the water. Ignatius, shivering and speechless, came home; he refused lunch and yelled at Eustachia for bugging him. They never found Arthur 's body, so it was believed that he had run away.

While still at high school, Ignatius put to use a lot of what he had read in the books. This or that classmate of his, especially the ones who were mean to him, would get some nasty condition, usually in the most virulent form. If assaulted, he would just have to recite a line or a verse from one of the books, and the problem would have been solved. With no damage to Ignatius; with a lot of damage to the assaulting person.

The only thing that brought any happiness and satisfaction to Ignatius' life was his attending the functions at the Temple. He had managed to rise gradually in the ranks, from an Initiate to one of the Chosen. Even though he never made to the Master of the Society, he was respected and considered an authority.

That night, Master Pontius introduced a very special guest, Grand Master Luke Ciferus, or something along those lines as Ignatius failed to catch the name. Ignatius was impressed by the man's appearance, by what he said and how he said it. At home, when his wife and daughters had gone to bed, he remained in the living-room, to meditate about the evening. *What was it that the Grand Master said about the Initiates being loyal? And all of the members of the Temple follow the Ordinance?*



The bell at the front door rang. Wondering, who it might be, and at that hour, Ignatius opened the door. With an utmost surprise and astonishment, he found himself face to face with Master Pontius. AND Grand Master Luke himself!

“Hokhmah, may we come in?” Master Pontius inquired after their usual exchange of the secret signs.

“Yes, yes...” Ignatius whispered. “Yes, of course. It's such an unexpected visit!”

“I do understand it is very late. And for that - my apologies.” He paused. “But I have to ask you for a really big favor...”

They arranged themselves in the stuffed armchairs in the living-room. The host offered coffee or drinks, but his guests declined.

“Hokhmah, you've been a devoted member of the Society, and we've always appreciated your services in the name of the Greatest Superior.” He hesitated, as they heard somebody descending the stairs.

“Honey, who was at the door? And at this—“ Beth paused when she noticed that her husband was not alone. “Ah, Master Pontius! How are you doing?”

“I'm fine, Beth. Thank you. How are you? And the girls?”

“We're all fine, thank you.”

“Allow me to introduce Grand Master Luke Ciferus.” Master Pontius said, waving at the Grand Master. “He is visiting our Chapter of the Society. It's such an honor...”

Beth looked at the man. He was neatly dressed, of an average height, with darkish hair that was emphasized with two white spikes on the left side of his head, some gray hair on his temples. His hazel eyes - for some reason, she was not sure of their color - were warm at one moment and penetrating at the next. A warm smile curved his a bit narrow lips. She looked into his eyes again: Was his glance suppressive, or was she just imagining things...? She had never seen so much intelligence in one's eyes... And suppressed pain?

She started losing the sense of reality. It seemed to her that she was in a kind of a basement, its stone walls illuminated by the torches on the walls. The floor was inlaid with stone signs she didn't recognized. This man, Grand Master Luke, was facing a tall slab of white stone. For some strange reason she knew it was not marble. The man held a long knife in his hand. And on the top of the stone, hands and legs tied to the rings - was HERSELF! Grand Master Luke raised his hand, the blade glistened in the torch light, almost blinding her, and he plunged the

dagger into her chest.

She gasped, and the vision disappeared. She was in her living-room, next to her husband. Ignatius looked at her, worried.

“What's the matter, honey?”

“Nothing,” she responded slowly. “I am just tired... I think...”

“Why wouldn't you call it the day and turn in? I have something to discuss with the gentlemen.” Ignatius gave his wife a closer look.

She squeezed her husband's hand. Master Pontius glanced at Beth and Ignatius.

“I believe it would be better if you stay, Beth.” He gave them a broad smile. “As I've already told Ignatius, we've come to your house to ask you for a big favor...”

“And it'll be a great honor, Master Pontius,” Ignatius intervened.

“As you know,” Pontius continued, “Grand Master Luke is visiting us for a couple of days. We ask you to let him stay in your house.” Pontius paused, a question in his eyes.

“Of course he can stay,” Beth exclaimed. “We will be honored that you have chosen our humble dwelling, Sir.”

“Only for a couple of days, Madam,” Grand Master's deep voice reverberated in the room. “I appreciate your hospitality. My compliments - you have a very beautiful house.”

“Thank you, Sir. You are too kind. I'll go and take care of your room, then.” She rose to her feet. “We have a suite on the first floor. It is very quiet. I'll tell the girls not to make noise in the morning, so you could—“

“Please don't interrupt your daily life because of me,” Grand Master stopped her.

“No changes then, sir. Breakfast at nine.” She forced her lips to resemble a smile and left the room.

“I must be going,” Master Pontius uttered, rising. “Hokhmah, thanks again.”

Ignatius saw his guest to the door and returned to the living-room. Grand Master sat motionless in the chair, apparently deep in thought.

In the morning the Grand Master joined the family for breakfast, and the girls, Melanie and Karen, were introduced to him. Ignatius had a newspaper with him and read aloud an article about the previous night's alleged murder.

“I wonder, how is it possible to extract one's heart without opening his ribcage?” Beth

exclaimed.

“Ewwwww, Mother! You're making me puke!” Melanie shouted in disgust. “You always find something nasty to discuss at the table!”

“And the other guy's head... they say... looks as if it had exploded inside...” Beth continued, ignoring Melanie's exclamation. “And who knows what really happened! The newspapers are never able to put all the facts right and straight!!!”

“They have no clue,” Ignatius murmured.

“It was a mugging attempt, “the Grand Master said. They looked at him with deep disbelief. “I happened to be in the area...”

“How close?” Melanie inquired, bursting with curiosity, her eyes fixed on the Grand Master. “Tell me please. Please? Pretty please?”

“Pretty close,” the Grand Master looked straight into her face; Melanie felt a hot wave passing through her body.

“But they don't mention any witnesses.”

“There weren't any...”

Beth felt as if she had plunged into a cold water – *Is he the one who...?*

She shivered and looked at her husband: Ignatius was sipping his coffee, seemingly content with his breakfast. Then she realized that she knew nothing about the Society and what role her husband played there... *What services had he rendered to them?* she blushed, as she noticed the Grand Master observing her from the corner of his eye. *I should find out what the Society is about... And keep the girls away from—* Something interrupted her thoughts. *Why wouldn't we go shopping today?*

“I think we could go shopping!” Beth exclaimed, suddenly enthused with the idea. “We could go to the Nine Oaks Mall and then have some Chinese food. Grand Master Luke, would you like to join us?”

“It will be my pleasure, Ma'am.”

After breakfast Ignatius spent some time contemplating the reasons for such an unexpected shopping trip. *Has Beth forgotten that just last weekend we— What a great ideal We haven't gone shopping for at least a month. Some new clothes won't hurt...*

The mall was crowded, with shoppers streaming in and out of the stores. They bought about everything they wanted... Or, didn't want... They didn't notice that it was Grand Master

Luke who was paying for everything... The same happened in the Half-Moon Buffet as well... Karen mentioned that; however, they immediately forgot what she had said.

There was a reception in the Grand Master's honor the same night. As it had been agreed, Ignatius drove him to the society Temple. There were only the Chosen present, and Master Pontius led the ceremony. They honored the Greatest Superior: In the light of the torches, Grand Master beheaded a dove, collected its blood into an upturned skull, and, reading from one of the books, let the blood run through the skull's eye sockets, and onto the sacred stone. Ignatius was astonished: the moment the just blood drop fell onto the stone, it seemed to emanate a blue light.

He felt so close to the Greatest Superior as he had never felt before! His lips were repeating the words from the Books, his mind... His mind, for some reason, was going over his life... Arthur... His sisters who had become nuns (a total waste of life, as he saw it)... His services to the Society - delivering a packet, calling a certain number, meeting somebody at the airport... He recalled the smell of the swamps where he would bring the bodies of those he had met at the airport ... Bodies only... No heads...

After the reception, in the car, the Grand Master talked to Ignatius about how omnipotent the Greatest Superior was, how devoted His followers should be... And obedient... And strong...

"Master Pontius seems to highly value you, Ignatius," said the Grand Master. "I know you've done a lot for the Society and the Greatest Superior. Do you think the Greatest Superior is really the greatest?"

"Yes," Ignatius. "He is the greatest."

"How do you know that?"

"He made me strong when I was weak. He helped me survive with all those morons around... I feel I can do anything!"

"And nobody would know..." The Grand Master dropped casually... "Very casually..."

Ignatius shivered. "What do you mean?"

"You're a remarkable man, Ignatius. Your wife and daughters know nothing. Or almost nothing... But she suspects something..."

"She doesn't know," retorted the worried Ignatius. "And she won't know! I never told her about—"

"No, you didn't," the Grand Master interrupted him. "She doesn't know what you were

thinking about during the Service. It was about Arthur, right?”

Ignatius almost hit a parked car; he pulled over and killed the engine. His face turned ashy gray. His hands were trembling.

“What... What did you say?”

“I said that Beth didn't know about Arthur, did she?”

“H... H... How do YOU know about Arthur?” Ignatius leaned back in the seat; his trembling hands on the wheel. “I thought...”

“You thought correctly, the Grand Master whispered.

“B... B... But how...”

“Did you say anything before he fell on the ground in convulsions?” The Grand Master's lips curved lightly.

“Yes, I did...” Ignatius whispered.

“And do you recall those occasions when you made your classmates sick?”

“Yes, I do...” Ignatius whispered, his her throbbing in his chest. “Yes, I did... I did say...”

“And do you recall those occasions when you made your sisters do all those things to you?”

Ignatius blanched. He looked at the Grand Master, “But... But I was using what I had read in the Books...”

“You used the Great Magic of the Books to have what you called fun with your sisters!” The Grand Master sounded angry. Ignatius remained silent. “Now, take me to the Society temple.”

Ignatius, acting like an automaton, started the car and followed the familiar route; he parked in the driveway. They entered the quiet Temple and descended the basement stairs. Master Pontius and the eleven Chosen, all clad, in black, all looking grave, sat around the table. They rose; the Grand Master approached the chair at the head of the table. As the all the seats had been taken, Ignatius remained standing by the table, facing the Chosen. Master Pontius unrolled a scroll.

Keeping his eyes on the parchment, he announced, “As it is recorded in the Ordinance of this Society if anyone who uses the name of the Greatest Superior, the Books, the Skills and Knowledge, for the purposes different from the ones stated in the Ordinance, shall be punished, as well as his family.”

Ignatius turned pale, shivering and trembling, he whispered, "But I've always followed the Ordinance..."

"Silence!" the voice of the Grand Master thundered. "You have violated the Ordinance several times!" He looked at Ignatius. "We'll forgive you the Arthur's incident and what you did to your classmates."

"Thank you, Grand Master," Ignatius relaxed.

"I haven't finished! Bring them in!"

Some of the Chosen left and returned, dragging Beth, Melanie, and Karen along. All three were blindfolded, dressed in their nightgowns, and their hands were tied. They were made to kneel by the sacred stone.

"Your wife and daughters shall know how you have debased the sacred Books and Skills and the Knowledge! Take the blindfolds off!" He turned towards Ignatius. "Now... Tell them, Ignatius! Or, should I say, Hokhmah?"

"No... They don't have to know..." Ignatius whispered. His throat felt dry, his tongue scratched like sandpaper against the palate.

"Tell them!" The Grand Master's voice thundered as he extended his arms towards Ignatius. Suddenly, the look in Ignatius' eyes became blank.

"I used the Skills to make my classmates sick and kill... To sleep with my sisters..." His voice sounded monotonous and dull. "I have also killed and disposed of at least fifty people in the last twenty-five years..."

"No, you didn't!" Beth screamed. "No, you didn't! You kept me in the darkness about it! If I only knew! If you only had told me!!!" She burst into tears. "I'd have never have married you! You and your Society! You never told me anything about it! What have you been doing for them? I despise you!" Ignatius kept silent, blankly staring at her. "Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you..." He pronounced gravely. "But it won't change a thing."

"Ignatius, you are to be punished," the Grand Master said.

"What should I do to be forgiven and remain in the society?" Ignatius's voice had some metal in his voice.

"As it is written in the Ordinance, you'll be forgiven through blood!" And the Grand Master handed Ignatius a bluish dagger with a serpent-shaped hilt.

Ignatius clutched the dagger in his hand. He approached Melanie, put his hand on her

forehead and pushed it lightly. The girl screamed, but her father didn't seem to hear anything. He placed the blade on her throat and, with one swift motion, sliced it open. Gurgling, the blood poured onto her front; a dark stain was spreading over her nightshirt.

“I always hated your boy-friend, Melanie. He lied when he said he would marry you after both of you graduate from college. It's because of him you had to have that abortion. If you can still hear me, I'll tell you something. It was ME who killed the bastard, not some stranger. They couldn't find the murderer... It was a clean job.” He laughed and let her body fall on the stone floor by his feet.

Ignatius stepped towards Karen. She was shivering; the tears were running down her cheeks. He squeezed her chin between his thumb and forefinger, and tilted her head up, and looked into frightened bright blue eyes. “Daddy... please... don't...” The girl's pleading whisper reached his ears. He moved his hand on her neck and squeezed it lightly. He whispered, “You lied to me... You've been telling lies all your life...” He squeezed his daughter's throat tighter. “When you were sneaking out of the house telling us you were going to the library, or to some girl's house... Instead, you were spooning with those guys... You lied about college... A sneaky slut of a drop-out...” He slid the blade into her chest and eased the grip on her neck. The body slid off the dagger and, with a thump, hit the floor, splashing blood all over.

“I'm not forgiven yet...” Ignatius mumbled.

He lifted unconscious Beth in his arms and carried her to the sacred stone. He tied her ankles to the rings screwed on the stone's bottom; then, he cut the rope on her wrists and tied her hands to the rings on the top sides. He tore her night-shirt off her body. For some time, in a total silence, he gazed at his wife's naked body, recalling the hours of their passionate love-making when they just met. The visions disappeared. He was looking at lightly fat, aged forms of his—

Beth opened her eyes and screamed, and screamed again: she saw the basement illuminated by the torches; the man, Grand Master Luke, stood behind her husband. No, it wasn't exactly the Grand Master Luke - this man's face was narrower, his skin more pale... He was the man from the vision she had in her living-room... Her husband, a dagger in his hand, was staring at her with his dead, empty eyes.

“I know that Karen is not mine,” he whispered, anger and hatred in his eyes.

“She's yours, Ignatius! Beth screamed. She's YOURS! Ignatius, you're mad!”

“It happened twenty years ago... I know that...” He mumbled, ignoring her deafening

screams. “Perhaps, I shouldn't be mad at my wife... It's hard to realize that she's nothing but a filthy whore of a slut... And I thought that Karen was my first-born... And Melanie... My pet... How could you have cheated on me with your co-workers?” He paused. “It doesn't matter now, though... I forgive you...”

He raised his hand - a bluish dagger glistened in the light of the torches - Beth screamed, and he plunged the blade into her throat. The blood rushed out of the gap between her skin and the cold blade, down her neck, and onto the stone. The flow grew thicker, the stone started to emanate a blue light.

“You are forgiven, Ignatius!” The Grand Master pronounced, taking the dagger out of Ignatius' hand. Ignatius smiled and looked into the Grand Master's eyes.

“Thank you, the Greatest Superior!” He paused. “You ARE him??”

The man nodded. With a single motion of the dagger, he cut Ignatius's head off. The blood spurted in jets and rushed onto his shoulders; with a sickening splash, his body fell on the bloodied stone floor. The head rolled towards Grand Master's feet – Ignatius' empty eyes were staring blankly at the dead bodies of his wife and the two women whom he mistakenly called his daughters all their lives.

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“Ignatius, what's the matter?” Beth shook her husband's shoulder. He mumbled something in his sleep and then opened his eyes. “You've been screaming for the last five minutes!”

“Some weird dream...”

At breakfast, Ignatius had a newspaper with him and read aloud an article about the alleged murder of two young men.

“I wonder, how is it possible to extract one's heart without opening his ribcage?” Beth exclaimed.

“Ewe, Mother! You're making me puke! Melanie shouted in disgust. “You always find something nasty to discuss at the table!”



“And the other guy's head... they say... looks as if it had exploded inside...” Beth continued, ignoring Melanie's exclamation. “And who knows what really happened! The newspapers are never able to put all the facts right and straight!!!”

“It was a mugging attempt,” Ignatius murmured.

“Honey, you'll be late for work,” she failed to notice, or pretended to ignore, his comment. “Ah, by the way, they've brought your gray suit from that Chinese all-night cleaner in downtown. Why you had to leave it with Mr. Cheng last night and pay for an over-night cleaning, is beyond my understanding!”