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## **Awakening**

by

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*1 John 1:8*

*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*

*1 John 3:9*

*No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.*

*Four Years Ago*

Marcus Palmer was one of the best criminal defense attorneys in Manhattan. He left court late in the afternoon, feeling on top of his game. He had just successfully defended a man who viciously beat a woman in Central Park in front of dozens of witnesses. Marcus' skill in manipulating the system found a procedural error in the arrest, and the man walked.

Another win, he knew. One more for the resume. A handful more like that and soon one of the big Manhattan law firms would notice him.

It happened sooner than expected.

A few days later, a generous offer letter from Simons & Braverman arrived via FedEx at his office. Simons & Braverman was the biggest firm in Manhattan. The rock stars of the legal world held office there and pimply faced law school graduates gushed like groupies at the mere mention of the name.

Marcus couldn't help but swell with pride that he had attracted their attention from his shitty little one-man show in White Plains. It was all part of a long, calculated plan that Marcus had put in motion years ago to bring about this very day.

He skimmed the offer letter quickly, flipping the first page over and scanning the second for a bold headline that read "COMPENSATION." The words beneath it were just a random assortment of letters to his eager eyes, what Marcus was searching for was a dollar sign and a string of numbers – hopefully a long string with lots of zeros after it.

He was not disappointed.

Leaning back in his leather chair, he read the letter through as a matter of procedure. His lawyer's eyes looked for something unacceptable but knowing he wouldn't find it.

Marcus could not have realized it, but as he signed the letter and stuffed it back in the return FedEx pack, he had set into motion a chain of events that would prove unstoppable.

Events that were foretold when the world was newly made and the human animal was just learning to walk erect.

The simple act of putting ink on paper was a beacon that shone through all the barriers between worlds. Like an insistent signal it erupted across the folds of reality, it created a small schism in the usual orderliness that existed among levels of consciousness and sentience.

Those barriers that normally were buffers to keep incompatible dimensions from colliding trembled as the pen made its mark on the paper. They shivered, warped and eventually ruptured. The breach had been made; it could not be closed now. Not yet.

Something that lurked in the shadows between worlds *stirred*. It felt the call after eons in its deep slumber. It was intimately familiar with the feeling associated with the calling. A primal instinct, really, but one the creature welcomed.

After all, since the moment Marcus Palmer slithered howling from his mother's womb, the creature had been stalking him. Finally, the time had come.

With a gleeful little chuckle, it stepped through the rift.

### *Now*

Marcus rose through the ranks at Simons and Braverman with uncanny momentum. His record was nearly perfect. He rarely lost a case. His nickname among the others at the firm was "The Machine" because of his robot-like drive and attention to detail that always seem to be the sole reason his cases were won or lost.

Whatever the firm wanted, he delivered and they paid him handsomely for it. The few times he had lost in court, it was because one of the Senior Partners had told him to throw the case. He never asked questions, never had a moral crisis or a last minute change of heart. He didn't want to know the dark and dirty secrets that the firm hid. They paid him too well to care.

He made few friends and never socialized outside of work with clients or other attorneys unless the firm asked him to. On an average week, Marcus put in eighty to a hundred hours at the office.

As a result, he was on the short list of candidates to be made Partner. All the while, the firm's gratitude fattened his bank account tenfold from his White Plains days.

Tonight, he had to make an appearance at the firm's annual Christmas party, an event he always dreaded. Making small talk with a bunch of elitist, over-ambitious attorneys was not his idea of holiday fun. It kept him from his work. Being away from his caseload never made him happy.

There was one bright spot in all of this.

His wife Lily had come down with a nasty virus that had left her bedridden for nearly a week. He monitored her progress daily, but not out of concern. He silently hoped that she would stay sick for just a few more days.

Their passion for one another had died a slow, miserable death years ago, to be replaced with barely disguised tolerance. They fought more than talked, and had built up so much resentment towards one another, they barely could stand to be in the same room together.

The plain truth was that Lily loved their bank account more than she did him. Period.

When it became clear that she would not be well enough to attend, Lily insisted Marcus go alone. This of course played into what Marcus wanted anyway, so he let her believe he was doing as he was told and did not argue.

Lily had an overbearing personality and felt the need to control every situation. She insisted on explaining to him how important events like this were to his career. The explanation came out as a teacher trying to show an especially dim child how to add or subtract.

The truth of it was, Lily had high ambitions for him and his annual compensation package that weren't about to be derailed by her contraction of a simple illness.

Lily did love her extravagances and moving with the social elite of Manhattan wasn't cheap. He didn't care, as long as she left him alone. If that came at the cost of 80% of his annual income, then at the end of the day he considered it a fair trade.

He could always make more; the remaining 20% was considerable.

Marcus had just put his overcoat on when he heard her vomit into a large saucepan she kept next to the bed. A slow, satisfied smile spread across his face. It faded fast as she barked at him to come clean it up. Just like everything with Lily, it was more a command than a request. He sighed, removing his coat and gloves to go empty the bucket of puke.

He was twenty minutes late to the party and in a foul mood. He went straight to the bar. They had setup two bars and a hot buffet in the firm's expansive law library. It was stuffy, pretentious and overbearing - exactly what he expected.

The normally soundless room buzzed softly with muted, private conversations. The steady rhythm of soft jazz piano drifted from some corner of the library that Marcus could not pinpoint. It smelled of expensive cigars and Polo cologne. The strange, masculine mixture was at odds with a swarm of women's fragrances drifting throughout the room.

The conservative stink of Manhattan's financial royalty still made him uneasy. Despite all his success at Simons & Braverman, he didn't really belong here. He had earned his way here; worked his ass off and made it to the big leagues through perspiration and being exceptionally clever in the courtroom. He hadn't been born into it, and his blue-collar background fueled a contemptuous fire in his belly.

People who were born rich never knew anything but privilege and plenty. They never needed to look in the mirror because so many people were telling them how wonderful they were. Need never touched them, and want was a temporary inconvenience.

Let the whole world go to shit, Marcus thought, and most of these people would crumble right along with it. But not him...he would rebound, that was his strength. He had gotten where he was because of his brains and cunning, and he could do it all over again.

I'm like a cockroach, Marcus thought to himself, smiling.

Marcus accepted his whiskey sour from the bartender and gave him a five, even though the drink was four-fifty. The man's tip jar was filled with tens and twenties, but Marcus would be damned if he'd tip the guy that much for an overpriced, watered down drink.

He turned from the bar took a long pull of the whiskey -- and saw her. Sheila Stevens. She was the absolute hottest piece of Manhattan-Bred-Ass ever to grace the firm. Watching Sheila move was like watching a Porsche corner -- just fucking perfect.

Sheila was a hunter, though. She was an ambitious, female attorney attempting to succeed in a web of ego and testosterone that wanted nothing more than for her to fail. Marcus almost could have respected her having the stones to play the game with the wrinkled aristocracy of Simons & Braverman.

*Almost.*

It really pissed him off that Sheila had no qualms about using her best asset -- her body -- to advance her career and that he couldn't respect. There was no moral high ground here for Marcus - it was simply an unfair advantage that men just didn't have.

Everyone at the firm knew it -- expected it, even. Even now, there were half a dozen men standing around her, their wives abandoned, or like his, safely at home. The Queen was holding court.

Sheila laughed suddenly at something one of the men said, playfully laying a hand on his shoulder. Her laugh was a musical, sensual sound that was inviting and warm, even from across the room.

Marcus knew it didn't really matter how good she was at her job, for the men she bartered her favors with, it was always about the sex. If any of them brought her name up in the boardroom afterwards, it was discreetly done. Nothing agreed upon up front, nothing out in the open. Plausible deniability.

*Could she be that good in bed?*

He'd never know. There were dozens of other young hot-shots in the firm that could offer her more on the way up than Marcus Palmer. It would probably be another year before she rose high enough in the firm to be threatened by his position, but he gave her credit for recognizing him as competition this early.

None of that stopped him from watching her now though. She had an athletic body whose lines were somehow still soft, graceful and curvaceous. The cut of her business suit accented her figure in a way that was both professional and sensual. Marcus knew it was deliberate; everything was with Sheila. That was part of her allure.

Eventually, she felt the weight of his stare and flicked her eyes towards him. Barely a turn of her blonde head, not enough to be a glance, but he caught it. Her expression was a smoldering warning.

He stared back, equally revolted by her and letting it show in his eyes – but not on his face. That was a smooth, expressionless mask. It was a facade he had crafted through years spent in front of juries and judges, defending the worst of humanity in order to make a buck.

Well, several *hundred thousand* bucks, actually.

He sipped his whiskey sour and continued to violate her in his mind's eye – and she knew it. More importantly, he *wanted* her to know it. Fucking with her head was passing the time and he could see it was driving her absolutely bugshit.

“Nasty little viper, isn’t she?” The voice came as a soft whisper over his shoulder, and Marcus turned to see who the speaker was.

An impossibly tall man stood behind him. Impeccably dressed in a black business suit, he looked like a funeral director. It wasn’t just the clothes though – he had the look of a man who spent more time with the dead than the living.

Marcus had no idea who the man was. He didn’t want to agree with his obviously scandalous statement without first knowing who the man was. For all he knew he was looking at one of her clients.

“Pardon?” Marcus said.

The man smiled, showing altogether too many teeth as his face stretched to accommodate a wicked grin. He leaned in closer to Marcus and gestured towards Sheila. His voice dropped even lower. “I said she’s a slippery piece of commerce, that one. Whored her way here, I imagine. With a body like that, I would hope it was getting some use, wouldn’t you say?”

Marcus turned back to the man and extended his free hand, “Marcus Palmer. You are?”

“Mr. Screech,” the man said with a slight nod of his head and another smile that did not touch his unhappy eyes.

Marcus did not recognize the name. “I’m sorry, Mr. Screech, I don’t think we’ve met. Are you with the firm or are you a client?”

“Neither. I noticed you admiring the young lady and thought I’d stop to chat.”

Marcus flushed. He hoped he hadn't been that obvious – he was aiming for a subtlety that only Sheila would notice, not the whole damn room.

“Well,” Marcus said, lowering his voice, “I wouldn't say admiring.” He took a sip of his drink. “I was looking, that's true – but Hell, who wouldn't, right?”

“Yes,” Mr. Screech said in a low hiss, “Even I can see the temptation of the flesh with that one. After all, we are but men, are we not?”

The smile that Mr. Screech displayed was horrible, like a grinning skull. Marcus only laughed, enjoying the diversion of the peculiar man's company.

Mr. Screech lowered his voice further. “I bet she's the worst kind of *bitch* too. Almost certainly she's a tease – unless you've something to offer in trade. In all probability, she has never had a genuine orgasm of her own all her life. You can see it in those poor, soulless little eyes -- no one ever cared about her enough to try *that* hard.”

“Probably,” Marcus agreed. He realized that he had been thinking exactly the same thing.

“I would suppose a girl like that needs someone to *show* her what truly *using* another person is all about, doesn't she? A real man – a man like you, I dare say - could probably give her the best sex of her life. Not for power or political favor, but just for the sake of pure, animal lust.”

“That would really piss her off, wouldn't it?” Marcus said more to himself than to Mr. Screech. He felt warmth spreading in his belly, the flush of desire.

“It would,” Mr. Screech agreed. “She is used to always being in control of the exchange. Probably only really knows how to be on top. Women like that *need* to be conquered. They need to be taught. Shaped. *Taken.*”

Marcus drained his whiskey sour. "I do believe you're right, Mr. Screech."

Mr. Screech leaned in closer to Marcus, so close his mouth was almost touching Marcus' ear. The man's breath stank of an open grave, a horrible rotting smell that Marcus somehow instantly identified. "Why don't you go talk to her?"

*Why didn't he go talk to her? So he was married? So were half the men in this room and nearly all of those would probably end up bedding someone else other than their wife tonight. Why not him?*

His thoughts instantly rewound back to earlier that evening, when he went to empty the saucepan Lily had spattered with vomit. She had laughed at him, mocked him as he emptied the pot into the toilet and cleaned it out for her. She thought it was funny that he was "some big shot lawyer" and she could still make him clean up her puke.

*Fucking hilarious, Marcus thought. Why not me?*

At that moment, Sheila turned again. Her eyes locked with his for an instant but by now his mask was gone. Marcus was fuming.

Finally she excused herself from the small clutch of men she was speaking with, and marched towards him. She walked with confidence and grace, completely sure of herself and in control.

Perhaps she would slap him, make a scene here in front of the Senior Partners. Perhaps she would quietly tell him to fuck off, as she had done on several occasions before he truly knew her and had tried to make conversation.

As she advanced upon him, time seemed to slow – Sheila's steps became sluggish to his eyes. Like a film running at half speed, she plodded towards him. The sounds of conversations in the room became muffled. Marcus felt as if his head had been stuffed with cotton.

Sheila became a smudge of white and powder blue, her features indistinct. He felt the flush of desire and heat race from his lower abdomen straight up through his chest. It burned past his throat and settled right in the center of his brain.

It seethed there like a boiling ocean of energy, his entire skull tingling with pins and needles. Marcus wondered if it were possible for your head to fall asleep, like a foot or an arm after sleeping on it wrong.

Then all of his senses came alive at once. Somehow until that moment, they had been imprisoned inside the fleshy cage of his body, dulled and numbed. The fire in his skull grew white-hot. Strange impressions came fast and furious, nearly overwhelming him.

He could *smell* her approach – could pick out her perfume from the sea of fragrances in the room. He could even identify her sweat. He knew what she had to eat for supper before coming to the party – could smell the fruity tang of light raspberry vinaigrette on her breath. He smelled a sugary mint fragrance, and knew she had used a breath mint before entering the party to try and cover the dressing.

He knew what the taste of her skin would be like if he ran his tongue from her earlobe to the nape of her neck, salty and hot. He could smell her sex, delicately perfumed beneath a layer of nylon. He could feel its heat, even from here.

The room snapped back into focus with a lurch and time resumed its normal march forward. He felt a sense of vertigo, almost as if stepping down from a carousel while it was still moving. Impossibly only seconds had passed, he could see that now.

Marcus felt as if he were going to pass out.

Sheila took the last steps towards him, that same stupid, counterfeit smile that did not reach her eyes threatening to turn into a snarl. Her voice dropped to a deadly whisper. "Palmer, just what the fuck do you think you're staring at?"

Marcus only managed to stammer, "Nothing, I was just..." but the words caught in his throat as he felt all the energy boiling around inside his skull erupt outward and slam into Sheila like a fire hose.

Something strange came over *her*.

Her face went instantly blank, the phony lawyer-smile gone. She was staring into his eyes as if drugged; the look of derision replaced by one of genuine interest and undisguised lust. Her face lit up as she smiled candidly. Her blue eyes sparkled, as if she had just noticed he was there and was happy to see him. "Yes, Marcus? You were just..."

She took another step towards him. She was inches from him now. There was no mistaking her intent. It was an obvious enticement for him to step closer to her.

On pure instinct, he moved back the same way a horse trots with quick, urgent steps when it comes upon a snake in the forest. He half turned so as not to run into Mr. Screech - but the man was no longer there.

He could see in Sheila's face that she wanted him to talk to her, *needed* it even. He could hear her heart beat, could feel the blood quicken through her veins. What the fuck was going on? The slightest hint of her pungent, sticky sweet sex wafted to his nostrils. She was getting *excited*.

She took a deep breath as if trying to stop herself from talking, but failing in the attempt. "I've been waiting for you to talk to me tonight, Marcus," she breathed.

She was? Really? When did she learn his first name?

Suddenly the fire in his head returned, the pins and needles causing brilliant white stars to explode across his vision. The words were spilling out of his mouth, and he couldn't stop one from following another. "Sheila, would you like to get a hotel room with me?"

Her smile was modest, almost shy as she let out a low, throaty laugh. Her lips twisted into a lustful grin. "Yes, I would like *that* very much Marcus."

Marcus sat in one of the room's two chairs, his pants around his ankles. Sheila knelt naked in front of him, her head in his lap doing a rhythmic motion up and down, up and down. Her hands were tied behind her back with his necktie – something she *begged* him to do. She moaned softly as she worked on him, the only evidence she was even still breathing other than the motion of her head.

For hours, Marcus told Sheila what to do and she did it. She complied without question, without hesitation. Eagerly, even.

The fire in his head blazed even hotter, causing his thoughts to fragment and slip away from him. He felt like he was watching someone else, like he was wearing someone else's skin but had no control. Words poured out of him continuously. He could not stop; it seemed to be integrated somehow in this whole bizarre experience.

He could read her inner desires, her secret thoughts, fears and impulses. Marcus manipulated her complex emotional state like a master pianist tickling the keys. Each thought, each fragment of feeling that Sheila kept buried in her head and heart, he unearthed. The more he did it, the more she fell under his control.

She became more compliant as the hours went by. The more aggressive he became, the more she seemed to like it. She offered to do things he wanted her to do without his being aware that he even wanted it. The lines between her desire and his blurred and fused into one strange, pulsing mess of flesh.

Finally, when he knew he didn't have another drop of fluid in his body, he quietly suggested that Sheila get some rest. Without a word she stood up, walked over to the bed, lay down upon it, hands still tied behind her back. She was almost instantly asleep.

Marcus' mind began to clear. He watched Sheila sleep for a few minutes, and then his eyes drifted towards the darkened bathroom, its door opened halfway.

Something in the darkness chuckled. "Well, well. Looks like old Mr. Screech still knows a thing or two about the ladies, doesn't he?"

Marcus was not startled. He had identified the smell of decay hours ago. His mind connected it at once to Mr. Screech, but somehow he knew the old man was not a threat. Not to him, anyway. How he had gotten into the room, Marcus could not say.

The creature – and Marcus suspected somehow that was exactly what Mr. Screech was – waited in the darkness with all the patience of the grave. Somehow Mr. Screech was part of tonight's strange events, and Marcus was at a loss to explain any of it.

Only the soft sounds Sheila made while sleeping broke the eerie stillness in the air. It was a silence that Marcus knew was his to break.

Say nothing, ignore the darkness and what lurked within it, and tomorrow life would go back to normal. Sheila would go home, shower and wonder just how many drinks she had consumed the night before in order to sleep with Marcus Palmer.

But choose to speak – *talk to it* – converse with the darkness, and it would be like setting a foot firmly on the road to Hell.

Mr. Screech waited. The silence stretched out between them - like evil waiting to be done.

When Marcus arrived at his house sometime after 4:00 a.m., he made no attempt to be quiet. Deliberately, he let the door slam behind him, and tossed his key ring carelessly on the dining room table.

The keys crashed into the glass tabletop, making a terrible racket as they skidded across the surface. He heard his wife stir from within their bedroom down the hall.

Marcus smiled, a thin, sinister smile - not unlike that of Mr. Screech.

Lily's voice came simmering out of the stillness of slumber and quickly rolled to a furious boil. "Marcus? Jesus Christ, what time is it? Where the hell have you been!?!?" Silence for a few brief moments, and then a groan. She was sitting up. "I threw up again a couple hours ago, so get your ass in here and clean it up! Four o'clock in the goddamn morning..."

A piece of the night stepped out from the shadows in the kitchen. "We really *must* do something about that woman," Mr. Screech said. The darkness flowed off of him as he walked to stand beside Marcus. His shadow grew taller and more menacing with each step.

"Yes," Marcus said. His brain was smoldering again with that same white-hot fire, causing him to stagger briefly. The vertigo was briefer this time. He took off his coat and tossed it over the back of one of the high backed chairs in the dining room. "I'll go *talk* to her."

“Wonderful,” Mr. Screech said. “I’ll make us both some tea. Do hurry, Marcus. We mustn’t tarry.”

The gossip around the law firm had been that Sheila Stevens and Marcus Palmer had been lovers for years. Most attributed the public loathing of one another to cleverly crafted deception.

When they found Lily Palmer’s vomit-stained body dangling from the brass gilded ceiling fan in the Palmer’s bedroom, the entire firm was taken aback. The gossip mill quickly ground out the story: Palmer’s wife hung herself, leaving a suicide note behind outlining her husband’s tawdry affair with Sheila.

The police had investigated, of course. A marriage gone sour, an affair, a “suicide” that was really a homicide. Sadly, it was the stuff of both TV Movies and reality.

But Sheila had substantiated Marcus’ story, and so did the clerk at the Hotel Pennsylvania. She told the police that they were in love and that yes, it was true that for the last four years, they were having an affair.

The Hotel produced records outlining when Marcus and Sheila arrived and left the night of Lily Palmer’s death. One of the third shift desk clerks even went so far as to remark that he had spoken with Marcus Palmer on the phone. He had called to ask for more towels, the man said.

The hotel's records showed the time of the call was right about when the coroner said Lily Palmer was busy hanging herself in the bedroom. The police – somewhat reluctantly - concluded that Marcus had not murdered his wife. They officially labeled her death a legitimate suicide.

Why shouldn't they? Marcus had only *talked* to her.

Marcus resigned from the law firm the following week, citing emotional distress. Sheila quit the following week “to be with Marcus”. No one at the firm even noticed in the scramble to secure advancement in the power vacuums that the two of them left behind.

They both simply walked away from their former lives. They left behind extended family, homes, and possessions to begin the long drive to Boston. Marcus told her he had a job offer waiting there.

Sheila asked no questions.

Halfway into the drive, they pulled off Route 84 in Hartford, Connecticut and stopped at the train station. Marcus told Sheila to remove all her jewelry and leave her purse in the car. She complied without complaint or question.

They went into the station, checked the arrivals board, and went up to Track 1. The train serving the Northeast Corridor from Washington would arrive in fifteen minutes. There were a handful of people waiting on the landing. Some were here to pickup passengers coming in, others with briefcases or suitcases waiting to go.

Marcus and Sheila sat on one of the benches and waited for the train to arrive. Sheila's head was on his shoulder, and he had his arm around her. He was whispering to her in a soft, quiet voice. She nodded slowly, smiling with that same stupid doe-eyed expression on her face.

Finally, someone nearby commented that the train was coming, and a bright headlight shone like an arrow through the morning haze of the city. People stood from the benches or pushed themselves away from the walls where they had been leaning to get a better look.

Marcus left Sheila sitting alone on the bench and stepped over to one of the rusted pillars supporting the steel canopy over the platform. Mr. Screech stepped out from behind it. He looked even more frightening in the early grey of the morning.

He smiled his death-head smile at Marcus. Marcus smiled back.

"Excuse me, everyone, could I have your attention please?" Marcus shouted, waving his hands so the others on the platform would turn to see him. "Please, could you all listen to me for just a moment?"

Engineer First Class Paul Middleton began the process to slow Amtrak Train 142 down as it approached the Hartford station. He squinted as he massaged the brakes. What was the crowd doing so close to the edge of the platform? It looked like they were over the yellow safety line.

He blew the train's horn, a quick blast to both announce the arrival and to warn them back behind the line. Where was the cop? There was supposed to be a cop on duty here to keep the damn crowd back.

Paul squinted as he saw a dark blue uniform and felt relief as the cop walked towards the crowd. His relief turned to bewilderment as the officer walked to stand with the others. They appeared to be massing at the edge of the platform, leaning in as the train approached.

Paul felt a slight panic rise in his gut, though he wasn't sure why. He applied more pressure to the braking system, to cut its momentum faster and bring the steel behemoth to a safe stop before something *very bad* happened.

He reached for the hand mic on the radio and clicked the button frantically. "Station, Station...this is Amtrak 142 – there's a bunch of passengers up on arrival platform 1. They're way too close; they've crossed the yellow line, all of them! Looks like the cop is –"

Paul's eyes grew suddenly wide with terror. He dropped the mic from his hand and scrambled to work the brakes to bring the train to an emergency stop. His curses were drowned out by screaming metal and blaring horn as the train tried to comply, but was unable to stop fast enough.

All fifteen people – including the policeman – leapt in front of his train.

Mr. Screech buckled himself into the passenger seat of Marcus's BMW and began to look through Sheila's purse. He pulled something out of it.

"Gum?" Mr. Screech offered, holding the green pack up for Marcus to take a stick.

"No thanks," Marcus said.

Mr. Screech waved the pack of gum in front of him in a tempting fashion. "It's *minty* fresh," he said. His grin was straight out of a nightmare.

“Why don’t *you* have some,” Marcus suggested. “Your breath smells like shit.”

The rush of what he had just done had not left him, and his mind was still on fire. He harbored no regrets; something about the last few weeks had burned the last vestiges of morality out of him.

What he did have was questions -- questions that desperately needed answers.

“You’ve begun to remember, haven’t you?” Mr. Screech hissed.

Marcus drove on in silence for a few minutes, bringing the car back onto Route 84. That was an understatement. Last night the dreams came again. It was the fourth night in a row he dreamt of flying, something he had never done before. As a boy, he remembered many people claimed that was a common dream.

But not like his dreams.

Wings sprouted up out of his back. They were covered with soft, bone-white feathers. Unstained. Clean. Pure. Their lines were graceful and the span sizeable. The person he saw in his dreams looked nothing like him but he knew without doubt that the image in his mind’s eye *was* him.

He flew at speeds which defied even his dreaming mind to comprehend. He fought in mid-air, chopping and slashing with a silver sword against the backdrop of a magnificent, silver city.

Was it called THE Silver City? He could barely remember, but the question tugged at him, impatient for answers.

The sword’s gleaming blade shone wet with the blood of other winged creatures like his dream-self. Creatures he knew to be his kin, yet he fought with a ferocity and hatred that was inhuman and completely merciless.

“I’ve had some pretty fucked up dreams,” Marcus finally said, bringing himself back to the present.

“They are not dreams,” Mr. Screech said. “They are memories.”

Marcus knew the *thing* in the passenger seat was altogether not human. He knew too that it was a creature of evil, a thing out of nightmares that only wore the flesh of a human being. Marcus also knew that it spoke the truth.

Over the past few days he had recognized Mr. Screech. Or rather, he recognized the feeling he associated with the creature that *called itself* Mr. Screech. He could feel it approach before it showed itself to him. He knew it was there. That was an altogether too familiar shiver. It whispered to him, “I’m here, just look over your right shoulder...”

That friendly tremble reminded him of his childhood. Of sleepless nights wondering just what it was that hid itself under his bed. The gripping fear he felt when he knew that something was sitting in the tranquil darkness of his bedroom closet, watching him.

“What am I then?” he finally asked.

Mr. Screech folded his long, spidery fingers in front of his gaunt face, as if considering his words carefully. “You are *Firstborn*.”

His skin prickling, Marcus glanced at the thing in the passenger seat. “What?”

“Firstborn,” Mr. Screech repeated. “Of The Host...?” Mr. Screech tilted his head expectantly, as if this explained everything.

Marcus put his eyes back on the road. “I have no fucking idea what you’re talking about.”

Mr. Screech shrugged. "The Awakening comes differently to all. You will remember everything in time, but unfortunately that is not a commodity that we possess in limitless supply."

"Then cut the shit and just tell me what you know," Marcus barked.

"You are familiar with the story of Heaven and Hell, yes?"

Marcus shivered as another brief memory came to him. He saw his dream-self standing on one of the endless walls of the Silver City, holding a struggling creature out over the ledge by its throat. It bled from a thousand wounds but still fought in a futile attempt to break free from his crushing grasp. The pitiful thing had shattered, broken wings. The velvety white feathers were spattered with blood.

"Yes," Marcus said. "Lucifer led a group of angels against God. They lost the War in Heaven and were cast out."

Mr. Screech frowned. "Not *entirely* accurate, I'm afraid. When God created Man, he ordered all the hosts of Heaven to worship Man as his greatest creation. Nearly all the Angels and Seraphs in Heaven obeyed God as commanded, but there were those who questioned the theological correctness of that point of view. There were those of us that refused."

"Us?" Marcus whispered.

Mr. Screech nodded. "We were God's First; creations made more closely in His image than Man will ever be. No matter how many times mortals are reborn and this world recast, we were *Firstborn*. We believed that the command to worship such imperfect, flawed creatures as Man was a direct conflict with how we were created. We were *made* to worship God, not Man. Those of us who rebelled did so because we believed to worship Man would be the highest form of Blasphemy conceivable."

Marcus felt his pulse quicken as a passage from Revelations leapt into his mind. It came out almost without him being conscious that he was speaking the words. "...and there was a War in Heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven." Marcus swallowed. "He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him."

Mr. Screech sneered, baring his teeth. "Don't quote that mortal idiocy to me. Let us simply say the War never ended. Mortal histories record it differently, of course, but those of us at the Battle of Harmony's End know the truth – as you yourself can attest to. We *were* cast out of Heaven. Excommunicated from Him. 'Hurled to the earth' as you say."

Suddenly Marcus had another flash of insight. "This was to be our Hell," he breathed. "Doomed to live as mortals...to live among them. To live, die and be reborn again over and over and over. Until..."

Mr. Screech snickered with wicked delight. "Good. You remember some of it. Apparently the theory was that by condemning us to mortal flesh, we would eventually learn what it is – *He* -- sees in these miserable shits."

"I am Firstborn," Marcus echoed flatly. More memories were coming then, slow and sluggish but very clear once they arrived.

"Yes," Mr. Screech murmured. "The absolute paramount of mortal evolution. You are a Godless American who earns a healthy living helping the worst of mortal-kind get away with crimes against their own species. You have no children, but instead have accumulated many things that others of your kind covet and lust after. Cars. A boat. Expensive jewelry and artwork. A winter home in Florida. You hated your wife, and broke your vows to copulate with another woman – repeatedly, I might add."

Marcus shot him an angry glance.

“You have become all that God intended. You are completely and unashamedly mortal. Suitable punishment, don’t you think?”

Marcus drove on in silence as more memories assaulted his brain. “I slew Hivictus on the walls of the Silver City. That...that was in my dream. I threw him off the walls after I cut off his wings...”

“That you did,” Mr. Screech smiled, remembering fondly. “You are called Astaroth, Ninth of the Circle of Twenty. We were content to let you live out your life and see if the next cycle brought you back to us as expected, but the War goes badly for us. There are...rumors...that The End is coming, and not in our favor, I am afraid. This necessitated my being sent to help you along with the Awakening.”

Marcus knew everything the creature next to him said was true. He looked at Mr. Screech and no longer saw the cadaverous old man sitting next to him. He recognized it now for the demon it was.

He could see now past the illusion of flesh, revealing a servant of the Nephilim that hid beneath. It had large, bulbous eyes that looked like sacs filled with blood, its pupils a tiny yellow dot within the crimson orb. Its cruel scar of a mouth was overflowing with needle sharp teeth. Large yellow and purplish boils that oozed viscous fluid covered its spiny head.

This particular demon he knew very well. He remembered that it had been a lesser angel once, bound in service to The Host. It was of the lesser caste, and so had been perverted and twisted into demon form as part of its punishment.

“Where do we go now, *Zarafat*,” Astaroth said.

“You remembered my true-name,” it said. “I cannot help but be touched. Our Master waits for us in Boston where we will discuss how to find The Child.”

Marcus cast a quizzical glance at the demon.

“Yes,” it nodded. “*That* child. The time is upon us, wheels upon wheels are already in motion.”

“Are we too late, then?” Astaroth asked.

The Demon Zarafat chuckled. It was a disturbing sound, gurgling forth from a mouth never intended to make that sound. “For this cycle of Man, perhaps we are. But this is not the first time the wheel has come full circle, for that is the nature of the struggle, is it not? Sometimes we are victorious, often we are not. Either way, it all ends and the whole ball of shit starts rolling all over again.”

Astaroth nodded, lost in his own thoughts. “I remember so many lives...”

Zarafat snorted. “Please save the nostalgia for your own time. Our Master bade me remind you that once you are again in possession of your faculties, there would be nothing stopping you from resuming your former responsibilities in service to our Cause. I have attempted to remind you of that in what I hoped would be a subtle manner, but you seemed to have missed my delicate suggestions.”

Astaroth smiled a thin, wicked smile. “Talking fifteen people into throwing themselves in front of a train wasn’t what I would call subtle, Zarafat.”

The creature grinned back at him. “We don’t have time to be clever. That was a message and was not intended to be subtle. It will be clear to those who oppose us that you have returned.”

Zarafat nodded. “What about my wife?”

“What about her?”

“Another message?”

Zarafat raised his clawed hands in a defensive posture. “I had nothing to do with that, Astaroth. Talking that woman into hanging herself was your idea – and you enjoyed it entirely too much if you are asking...”

“I’m not,” Astaroth cut him off.

He slowed the car and flipped the BMW’s right directional on. He began the slow glide over to the far lane, and turned into the rest area off-ramp. There were at least two dozen cars parked there. A steady stream of mortals made their way in or out of the rest area to relieve themselves, refill their coffee cups or grab a bite to eat.

“Let’s grab a cup of coffee. Between the guests and the workers tending this rest stop, there must be fifty or sixty people here. Maybe I can *chat* with a few of them before we get back on the road.”

“Splendid,” the creature grinned.

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