

Born through Death

The suffering outweighed joy, thus, every story began.

Orsus, the town where but a killer, nothing would interest you. There was a hair strand of a river spawned from the west where the capital was, dividing the town into two halves connected by a bridge, and it emigrated to the far east to join the ocean. On days, the fishermen would harvest catfish and dead bodies, and at nights, the killer would plate the river anew. Eric crossed the bridge to the other end, carefully as he avoided the carriages driving by, when bodies of flesh came towards him, stomping on him as if they could not see. He walked in a direction against them, trying to guess what could possibly attract such an audience, moving as though the entire mass were but a single conglomerate entity. As he passed through the shadows of their congestion, he looked towards the open sky to lessen the tightness of being continually jostled—and to check the remaining time till the incoming death. The night was near. He found himself appalled at the hazy gray sky, and he wished for the luminous stars to appear tonight. No matter which town of the Empire he visited, Eric thought, the sky wore the same guise. Though he had never stepped outside of the Dei Cauda kingdom, he believed that the other kingdoms must be the same. But tales murmured of a sky unique to the privileged residing in the imperial capital, Cordei, better known as the City of Blessed, hoarding a clear, azure sky he could only dream of glimpsing.

The autumn cold seeped into every praying lip and clasped hand, and he shivered despite wearing clothing warmer than those in the street as if they could not feel the same degree of coldness as him. It was a cold, sterile season. There were no leaves with a palette of hues,

nor any eye-catching colors of amber and scarlet. It was as though a hanged artist's brush had swept across everything, as every color screamed for salvation. His solitary figure cut a forlorn silhouette against the trees standing as skeletal sentinels, with their meritless branches praying towards a leaden sky. He blended into their darkness with his matching hair and ensemble to avoid being seen by the countless homeless lying in between trees and narrow alleys, cloaked in the shadows of poverty and hunger, as they awaited The Miracle from God to change their lives. Eric felt a surge of revulsion at the sight of those people—The Believers, whispered about only in minds and hushed voices as “Lunatics” by those who preferred to avert their eyes from their squalid existence and perhaps the existence of their holy God—draped in rags with their hollowed cheeks as they knelt upon the cold naked pavement and shouted prayers of desperate plea for Blessing from a god who never answered.

Eric winced. He looked away in disgust from the loud voices of their prayers, turning his focus to the street. He caught sight of many posters plastered upon every public wall, among them one with blood-red words that screamed “WANTED”—portraying a serial killer who had been hiding in Orsus. He looked at the picture, and the man stared back at him within the confines of the black papery frame. The poster was useless, as the man was clad in a red mask with two ebony-colored horns on his forehead. Eric could not know whether the horns were attached to the mask or the head, for he was one of the so-called Cursed Ones—a term everyone knew yet no one could explain its exact meaning, leaving him only guessing based on the rumors and tales; Curse the evil, Bless the believer, or so would the Lunatics chant. The killer appeared as if plucked from the very depth of Eric’s nightmares,

and he believed it was more likely the exaggeration of the painter rather than the killer's actual appearance. "The Angel of Death", written under his picture, was truly a fitting nickname for him. Black hair cascaded over his face, obscuring the eyes but failing to conceal his thirst for blood. His skin was a common pallid shade of white that could be seen anywhere, but Eric had never witnessed one as ghostly as his. His frame was colossal—at least two meters, Eric thought—though only his shoulders and face were seen in the poster. Yet, his khaki-clad shoulders bore the weight of his sinister presence with an arrogance that bordered on the divine. In his presence, Eric felt diminutive, like a morsel of meat caught between the teeth of humans.

The first murder occurred a week ago. Aleksander Martinsen, along with his wife Linnea, their three sons and two daughters, his old handicapped mother Julie, and a young servant girl named Tomine—who many believed was his illegitimate daughter, as the family was hardly rich enough to afford a servant in that day and time—were all murdered in a single night. Eric knew little about them. They came from the north several years ago—the Pedes kingdom, he guessed. He was a doctor, neither too skilled nor too amateur, and throughout the years he earned enough gratitude that he managed to have a close-knit relation with the affluent and the penniless alike. And so on the morning of their deaths, many clamored for justice, for the murderer to be apprehended immediately—though, Eric thought, it was most likely them being afraid of becoming the next victims. The investigation was carried out with scrupulous attention to details, and when the results came out, all the residents were silenced by a single, petrifying word: It was the work of a Cursed One—the monster of tales and legends, with preternatural powers beyond what ordinary humans could stand

against. The police, overwhelmed by the public outcry, quashed the turmoil by announcing that they would send a messenger to the capital to request a Blessed One be consigned to Orsus, as ordinary soldiers were strictly ordered to not face a Cursed One, as angering it would only lead to more destruction. They were simply powerless against such a monster, and every rational man knew better than to ignore those words.

There was a whisper in the town—mostly a universal feeling within everyone—controverting the claims of the police as constant accusations of conspiracies, mendacity, and cover-ups dominated the rumors, suspecting the sureness of their claims on the murderer being a Cursed One. The rumors began to intensify after the second murder, but in that afternoon, all rumors began to fade, as most people witnessed the murderer's appearance, brazenly sauntering in the shopping district, seemingly appearing out of nowhere, unbothered by the terrified eyes as he picked up any item that caught his eyes—mostly food, but Mr. Hartsfield claimed that the murderer took his black oversized coat—only to vanish once again like a ghost. Yet no one had the courage to stop him. Anywhere that he passed, the residents would hide in the craters and the pockets, not even breathing till they felt him leave. There existed an old rumor, known by all in the empire, believed to be a superstition by most, yet faced with a Cursed One in the flesh, it made even the most devoted soldiers shy away from resisting him, let alone the ordinary citizens. For all their lives, they had only heard about these monsters, as though their butcheries were happening in another world, as though they were immune to it. To them, the news was fodder for a casual conversation, a fairy tale, a distant story in which others were the characters and they, the readers, were cocooned in an

illusionary wall of safety. Now, the claws of death on their throats, they took even mere rumors as Divinum truths. As implausible as it seemed, everyone had started to believe: that those who are touched by a Cursed One, will become one.

A week had passed, a family slaughtered each night; and still, no words were heard about the Blessed One. Eric laughed hopelessly in his mind, for it was only a three-day journey from the capital to Orsus. Although the killer had never been once witnessed without his mask, the notion that the Cursed One could be one of the many people walking beside him in the streets crossed his mind; yet he was not unnerved. He had long grown accustomed to the fact that the world was filled with nothing but predators and maniacs. The illusion of safety was just a mirage—forever out of reach. Yet despite all this, he found himself disgusted at the surrendered glances cast at the posters. Everyone had given up, placing all their hopes on the unpromised Blessed One, who might arrive months later—by which time everyone would be dead.

He reached home, finally, and reluctantly. He wished he could still work till midnight, arriving only when his family was long asleep, going to work once again in the morning; but nights had become an unmentionable subject for everyone. His hands dug deeper into the pockets of his coat. He felt a coldness from the building more frigid than he would ever feel outside. He took out the bundle of keys from his pocket and started to sort through them. He tried a few times to insert the right key, yet his hands shivered in the gelid claws of the cold metal door. The wind blew harder, and the door made a shrill noise akin to the sound of metal scraping against metal as he slowly opened it. The narrow corridor leading from the entrance to the living room made him

feel suffocated, as if the weight of the whole building had crushed upon him. He tried to keep every sound of his entrance as silent as possible, as if he did not exist. Retrieving his dusty black boots, he very carefully—careful in the most natural way, in a way that no one observing him could realize his utmost endeavor of keeping silent—walked towards the stairs.

“Eric?”

His steps floundered. It was the obnoxious voice of Sam, his older brother. He barely ignored the subliminal urge of frowning as he looked around only to realize that his voice was coming from the upstairs. Yet unlike Sam's usual brazen-facedness and his blaringly loud nature, there was a disquieting undertone to his voice, even a tinge of gentleness, which propelled Eric to call out his name despite his plan of silently going straight to his room.

“Eric, can you come here? I’m in my room.”

Again. Eric could feel goosebumps raise on his flesh, grazing the woven fabric of his sleeves. Sam was a nice person—though indelicate most of the time—yet this voice simply felt too unfamiliar to Eric. Sweetened, it was as though he was luring him into a vexing matter. A repulsive squeak reverberated from the wooden surface of the stairs, grating against Eric's senses. With cautious steps, he advanced into the orderly cobwebs of darkness that shrouded the second floor. With the sun’s nearing death, the entire upper level was cloaked in radiant darkness.

“Are you coming? Please make haste, it’s urgent.”

With each step, Eric willed his foot to move forward. He foresaw that it would be a bothersome conversation, most likely related to a family matter. He resolved himself that if they annoyed him with another marriage candidate, urging him to marry someone before he was out of God's favor, he would give them a mouthful no matter how nice they asked. The insidious wind howled through the wooden staircase and closed windows. Squinting, he fixed his gaze on the upper level, ascending step by step as the sound of short murmurs—seemingly Sam and Mother—grew clearer. He tried to interpret their secluded words to ascertain the matter before facing them, as he felt quite nervous about what could this conversation be about. He could not remember any such small family talks that had a nice outcome. Amidst the pauses, he detected an ominous sensation, accompanied by a faint, unsettling aroma. It was a foul smell, yet mixed with it was a sweet scent. He felt a passionate yearning to seek out the source of this smell, like a beetle drawn to the sweetness of a Venus flytrap.

“Eric! Just come before it's gotten cold!”

With those words, a realization dawned upon him: It was his twenty-second birthday. He had thought it unlikely for a birthday party to happen, so he had quite forgotten about the fact that today was his birthday. With families dying every night, the whole town was submerged in a lifeless state. Even children laughing was frowned upon by others, especially by the elderly and the mourning relatives of the victims. Believing that a birthday party awaited him, his steps became light and short, his heart easing. Giving his eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness, he blinked several times as his fingertips grazed the wall in search of Sam's room. He kept balance as his hand traversed the

coarse texture of the plaster, registering the sensation of dampness below his skin. His family had extinguished every candle and oil lamp in the corridor, in an attempt to deceive the killer into believing that the house was empty—which Eric thought was quite useless, yet nevertheless gave them an illusionary feeling of safety. Glancing at the feeble glow of the light coming underneath the door to Sam's room, he sighed and strode towards it, careful not to jostle any of the furniture. That flickering light intermittently blinked, and the trembling monsters of the shadows gnashed their teeth. Distant pigeons wailed. He cursed under his breath—his mind wandering to tales of ghosts and hauntings that always cropped up at night around one's birthday, and to the unknown monster lurking in between the shadows of alleys and nights. Sinisterness repeated, emanating from multiple dimensions simultaneously, like mice running through walls.

He halted before the threshold of the room and instinctively hunched and drew in his lungs an overdose of courage to push the doorknob. He braced himself for the awkwardly uncomfortable hugs, for he felt quite unnatural by passionate physical activities, such as hugs and kisses, even if it was done by his family. Yet he felt relieved that there would be no more big parties with mandatory singings and soullessly lilted music, his parents dragging him around to introduce him to new distant relatives and family friends—most of whom he deemed as shallow and outright intolerable—and demanding that he talk pleasantries with them. Eric pushed open the door and waited for the flicker of clapping or the chorus of "Happy Birthday". In a mournful groan, the hinges complained the way a dying pigeon would after being shot. Within, the room lay in a void devoid of life.

“You’re late. The cake is cold.”

The sinisterness laughed.

Red. As far as eyes went, a deep, liver-red. The sweet, foul scent punched his senses, stronger than before, as if he was striding in a graveyard with open graves. The blood-soaked walls were a macabre display, akin to a lunatic's twisted artistry. The metallic tang of iron hung thick in the air. Sam was impaled to the wall, skewered by an assortment of forks, knives, and wires. His intestines spilled out of a gravestone-sized hole. Dark, empty cavities stared back at Eric in place of eyes, lips sewn shut in a grotesque parody of silence. "Eric..."! The chilling whispers echoed from the open wound upon his throat, within which was nothing but the emptiness of death. The rumors about the Cursed Ones and the powers they wielded flashed into his mind as he stared blankly at the corpse of his brother calling out his name.

Eric took a step back, trembling. He wanted to run, to escape from this nightmare, yet he could not dredge up any energy from within himself. It was he who seemed strapped to the wall, held captive by wires and knives. The world swam before him—a haze of surreal black and white. He felt the urge to scream and vomit, and stifled it with all his force, for he knew: He was next. The mournful screams of pigeons reverberated amidst his ears. The candles swayed; The narrow corridor laughed. The room behind him, covered in darkness, opened upon him like the silent approach of death. A footfall shook Eric's entire world, waking him up from the feeling of unreality and shock, as he desperately commanded his legs to run. Yet, a roughness of fingers closed around his mouth, sapping from him his new-found strength to struggle and to scream. The hand belted his face back, and the figure stared deep into his eyes, smiling. A crimson mask, tall as suffering, with

horns attached to his head. The Angel of Death, with a voice like gravel, spoke words that chilled Eric's soul down to its core:

“Happy... Happy... Happy Birthday, to you...”

In his presence, Eric forgot everything—how to fight, how to flee, how to think. He beheld death. Coldness bit into his bones, his heart shivering. He held out his hands, outstretched to plead for salvation, for a miracle—whomever it came from: the world, the God, or the clutches of death itself. Yet he realized, there was no salvation. His silent prayers echoed into the void, unanswered.

Under the guise of the mask, death itself smirked with satisfaction. His eyes danced with a jubilant amusement. He stretched out his hand within the folds of his blood-soaked coat. Calmly, smiling, almost angelic, he beckoned, luring his prey closer with honeyed words. "Oh, fear not, my dear," his voice dripped with warmth, "come hither, for I bear gifts." Something glinted in his grasp, a blade that advanced towards Eric's knee. His screams were stifled by a wall of fingers. Like an entrapped animal, Eric turned frantically, yet he found no escape from the relentless grip that held him hard. The once pristine white carpet, now bore witness to the crimson tide of suffering.

Death chuckled. He returned the blade to its pocket with practiced nonchalance. In the void of his blade, a bony whiteness could be seen in Eric's wound as if the outer part of a statue had broken. Drawing him nearer with a forceful pull, Eric felt his breaths stop as his body touched the killer's body. He writhed like a worm, his futile protests laced with agony, and the Angel of Death enjoyed every movement, every moment of it. He allowed only a small gasp to escape from Eric's mouth, as tears welled up within his eyes, and his body—from head to toe—shuddered

in his embrace. The killer's lips twisted into a smirk, his eyes narrowing in enjoyment. In Eric's turbulent gaze, a plea for mercy shouted, and he shouted together with him:

"Oh, God! Do you hear the cries you so relish?"

He moistened his dry lips as he pushed away the unruly hair falling on his face; his horns—two curved horns the size of a finger sprouting out of his flesh—supported his hair from falling in front of his deep black eyes. His grip around Eric's mouth loosened ever so slightly, and the killer's anticipation almost rose to a boil as he awaited the first desperate utterance to break free of Eric's trembling lips. As if it was the very first word spoken by one who had been wandering in a desert without water for days, Eric's voice shattered within his throat as he cried out:

"What do you want?"

The killer's lifeless eyes fluttered with a twisted excitement. At the corners, his lips arched in an even thicker smirk. With a dry mouth that embodied his insatiable thirst, he uttered the name with lurid reverence: "Eric."

As Eric's eyes grew more wretched and his breathing more irregular, he struggled to scream, but the words were stuck in his narrowed throat—by a clinging grasp which held him fast, and it slowly dragged him backward toward the abyss of a room at the far end of the corridor, till Eric's figure shrunk to a mere speck of existence.

"Don't be alarmed by the room. I've adorned it just for you, my dear." Faces daubed with blood embellished the walls. Knives and razors glinted over the shelves with sinister portent, illuminating portrait

paintings of the slaughtered families, staring back at Eric with vacant eyes, their silent screams echoing through the horrors of their papery prison. It was an entire room unfolded like a stage; like a spectacle meant to be witnessed but once in the annals of history.

"Are you troubled, dear one? I even sold my soul to the devil for you, did I not? What ails you? Do you question the reality of it? Are you thinking it merely a dream, a nightmare? Ah, but dear Eric, the real nightmare still comes."

His half-lidded eyes gleamed with soulless delight. To behold Eric was a heavenly pleasure, the kind of pleasure which tantalizes the very being of existence. Each breath swallowed, each gasp drawn, each muscle pulsed, all were a symphony that caused even the heartstrings of an Angel of Death to quiver.

"Ah, Eric! All comes back to my mind like a sweet dream. How I have hungered for this moment! At long last—ah, at long last! I shall have to thrill the devil with thanks when next we meet."

His fingers relaxed to let Eric fall into the ethereal embrace of the ground. Powerless, Eric's body dropped with a hollow cough as his eyes welled over with defiant tears, and he screamed for help as hard as he could.

"Do you hear it? The steps, the murmurs. They are all outside, Eric, and they, too, they hear your screams. Yet, help—that small ray of hope you so so dearly embrace—it will never come, my dear. They let you come into the house, did they not? And ah, believe me, my dear Eric, they knew I was here, before you arrived."

He went toward the shelves, and with meticulous care, he selected a syringe from the array of sinister implements upon the shelf. Within its depths lay a liquid as dark as the night, infused with the vilest of sins. He plunged the fouled needle deep into the same bleeding gash on his knee. Eric's scream echoed across the room more profound than any sound he had ever heard. The killer felt a strong urge to laugh, to dance, and above all, to observe—observe with a passion to burn into memory the passage of every moment, the sight of Eric's fingers clawing helplessly at the ground, broken nails and dried blood staining his toes. He felt a pleasure he knew, he knew for sure that he could never taste in heaven nor hell.

"It was heroin, you see," he said, "supposed to numb the body's pains, they say. But I've sampled it myself; it offers no respite from the ache of existence. No matter how deeply one sinks into the abyss of drugs and substances, death still beckons—relentless in its pursuit." He gouged an index finger into his ear and pressed hard as his face scrunched up. "Every accursed second!" he shouted, "it whispers incessantly in my ear, 'What is the meaning of life', Eric?"

Abruptly, he clapped his hands a span or two from Eric's nose, with a sharp crack. A light, playful burble of laughter emerged from under the mask as he said:

"Today, I've come seeking answers from you, yes? Today! Today is unlike any other, Eric. Today, I demand your response. Today, I am the deity of this house! I am the..."

His lips then fell silent, and the room quiet. He tilted his head slightly, closer to Eric, blowing warm air from his mouth onto his eyes gently as he spoke, as if in some surprise.

"Hmm... why do tears stain your cheeks? Please, do not weep. Look into my eyes. Peer deeply, and discern if I speak falsehoods. I never intended to cause you harm. Never. Oh, my dear child! Mother's precious son! Please, dry your tears."

Perplexed, he looked all around the room, his eyes darting as if they were searching for something imperceptible. Not finding it, he began to fidget nervously and started very slowly to uncover his mask under which a round face appeared, like the opening of a snake's jaws. He had a short, unkempt beard, his lips covered in small scars. A gaping hole in his nose marred its completeness, appearing more like a searing wound than a natural feature. He bit his nails nervously when all of a sudden, he lashed out at Eric with a forceful blow to the face as his voice erupted into an abhorrent tirade.

"I told you not to weep! Cease your wretched tears, you filth! Your voice is an affront to my ears!"

His eyes fell on a cherished painting frame, in which the five-year-old Eric looked into his eyes with a faint, guileless smile. One small hand lay in his mother's hand, while the other was cupped by his brother—and his hand locked with their father's, all frozen in a bygone moment. Turning away from the now-useless frame, the killer's trembling fingers fetched a cigarette, holding the lighter to his cigarette and trying to light it, he locked eyes with Eric.

"Have you ever harbored a desire to slay God, Eric?" he questioned, his voice laced with scorn. "Yes, yes, fret not. God is not the formidable entity you perceive. God is merely... a woman. Just a woman!"

The soulless lighter, despite many attempts, refused to yield a spark. With a frustrated curse, the killer dropped the unlit cigarette, his hand

moving to shield his face. His eyes averted from Eric, unable to stand his crying gaze. He tapped the toe end of his shoe against the innocent cigarette, his every movement heavy and laden with chilling weight. He inhaled deeply, coldly, in silence, and counted the intakes up to three and then, abruptly, he stopped breathing at all.

The killer removed his hand from his face, and he ceased to embody death in that fleeting moment; he revealed the visage of a deeply depressed individual cloaked in a shroud of anxiety. Large, suffocating tears streamed down his cadaverous cheeks, his trembling lips struggling to articulate the reflection of a singular name:

"Eric..."

He sank to the ground, hugging his knees tightly to his chest like an abused child who finds solace nowhere else except perhaps within himself. He cast upward eyes toward heaven and cried out through stifled sobs, "In a world where even death has lost its worth, tell me, why should one endure?" He buried his head deeper into his knees and folded into himself until nothing of him was seen except the dark, somber tresses of his hair.

"Everyone forgets, they forget how fleeting their lives are," he murmured softly, slowly, as he lifted his head, the corners of his eyes stained with red. For the first time, his lips curved into an innocent smile, albeit faint and faded, as if he was unfamiliar with the notion of smiling.

"I... I just want to savor life! Like everyone else! What have I done wrong? Besides yearning for a simple existence... nothing!" he exclaimed. "Eric! Eric! Can you... can you take death from me? Can you?"

He bit into his lower lip, sensing the effects of heroin in Eric's eyes. They appeared unfocused and vacant, as if he was staring into another world, but in that distant stare, he could feel a deep betrayal. He felt fear from those eyes—An underlying fear of himself. His precious Eric was looking at him, with fear, with a face that was planning to run from their house the moment he was unabused. He felt a surge of anger rise within himself, yet calmed himself down and tried to persuade him through gentle words, to explain to him everything.

"Don't fear me, Eric. Don't flee from me. Your fear stems from the world's nature. If things were different, would you still fear me? No! I'm not frightening. You don't even grasp the true nature of the world! Let me tell you; you want to know what real fear is?"

He knelt on the ground and approached Eric. He put his hands on Eric's bare shoulders and said, "Daunting is our freedom. There's nothing scarier than freedom, right? The weight of responsibility that comes with every choice... Daunting is..."

His hands slipped from Eric's shoulders. He looked at the dried, suffocated blood on his fingernails. His eyes shone with a strange feeling, a feeling no one will ever understand, or perhaps, is what everyone rejects from the depths of their soul.

"I didn't want to kill. I didn't want to take the burden of killing someone. But..."

He closed his eyes, then whispered, "But without death, how can one know what life is?" His eyelashes fluttered apart, revealing eyes that seemed strangely vacant, the emotions on his face fainter than usual, veiled as if by an impenetrable shroud of numbness. As the weight of his confession hung heavy in the air, he stood up ever so

slightly. He undressed, his movements mechanical, with each piece of clothing falling away to reveal some horror beneath. Even the dreamy embrace of heroin could not insulate Eric from the sinister events unfolding before his eyes.

Eric's senses reeled in horror, his mind in turbulence to decide if what he was seeing was real or a result of the heroin in his body. There was a hideous thing, a living thing, some kind of deformed creature—with all its flesh mashed up to form an ovoid shape—that bulged out from the killer's chest. The creature, in agonizing torment, sought to free its imprisoned self; its claws moving in what appeared to be a desperate reach for freedom, only that it was half-born, bound down by bandages and wires that seemed to cut into its flesh, allowing no movement beyond its grotesque emergence. The odor of decay and the metallic tang of blood wafted in the air—the same sweet yet foul smell attacking his nascent senses as Eric sought to wrap his mind around this abomination standing before him. Beastly terror opened wide its eyes, gazing deeply into Eric's eyes. He was unable to wrench his gaze away from the horror unfolding. The killer's sunken eyes spoke in an as lifeless tone as the weight of his dreaded words in silence:

"This, is my mother," he declared, his voice a mere whisper in the suffocating silence. "She perished long ago, but through The Miracle wrought by God, or that devil, she is being reborn. Each life I take, each scream yelped, hastens her growth; a testament to the price of my sins."

Eric felt the contents of his stomach rise in his closed mouth, a sickening sensation that threatened to overcome him. He gasped for breath but was choking on bile and tears as his body heaved in a vain

attempt at expelling the nauseating taste. He doubled over, violently retching as the tears merged with the mucus running from his nose. His whole body quivered with a feeling of doom, feeble in his muscles, as though all vitality had been drained from them. Through the blur of his senses, a deep fear was starting to root itself into his mind like twisted roots on a tree hundreds of years old, for in his mind, he knew: death was inescapable.

"At last, you'll put an end to my torment, won't you? I know you're capable. You're unlike the rest. I've heard you scream—louder, louder, louder, louder, louder! I've heard it echo through the void. I can hear it now, resonating like the haunting lullaby my mother sang every night."

He let out a throaty laugh that bordered on hysteria. Trembling, hardly able to keep his feet, he fumbled inside his coat with shaking hands to retrieve a knife. "It is soon! Soon! Just one might be enough, Eric! Just one!" The killer's voice trembled, "I can feel it, Eric! I can feel it clawing its way out of my chest any moment now!"

The killer blinked slowly; his expression momentarily softened as the wrinkles eased on his weathered face. Then, with the familiar smile—that innate smirk of the killer—his fingers toyed idly with the knife in his grasp as he uttered a twisted chuckle and said:

"Fear not, for you too shall soon join your family in the embrace of eternity! Just as I shall reunite with my beloved mother, Eric. Oh, envision the grandeur of that fateful moment! The heavens shall weep tears of joy!"

Gracefully bowing towards Eric, as if delivering the peroration of a grand show, he whispered softly:

"Do you comprehend the depths of my longing to behold my mother once more, Eric? It is because... I yearn to slay God once more. Just once more! And perhaps then, I would escape from this perpetual death."

Gazing slowly and deeply into Eric's bloodshot eyes, the killer beheld their purity: eyes that looked capable of reflecting the unadulterated agony from the depths of one's soul. Eric, in turn, felt sharp voices piercing his mind, as though some insects had taken residence within the recesses of his ears, while he was overwhelmed with a sense of brokenness that seemed to suffocate his very being. An incapacitating headache seized him, along with a storm of emotions: lethargy, confusion, fear, shame, anger. Sensations blurred into a disorienting haze, the boundary between inner and outer worlds dissolving. The world around him dissolved like a drop of color in a vast pool of water. The echoes of the killer's voice faded into oblivion, memories morphing into unfamiliar fragments.

"Well, there is no rush, my dear. Mother comes soon, yet some nights, are best savored with music, wine, and torture."

Eric did not know when and through which torture that thought crossed his mind—when the knives dug into his body as laughs erupted from the throat of the killer, or as he burned each wound shut, caressing Eric's hair, assuring him that he would not die from blood loss, or did it start from the moment he opened the door to this hell? He did not know, yet he understood for sure, that once the thought took hold, it never left him. It became a leach, drinking straight out of his heart, not stopping even as he passed out from pain, only to be brought back to consciousness by the killer's hands. Before all these, he was satisfied

with his life. There was nothing too joyful or beautiful, but nor were there any knives, razors, or Cursed Ones. It was an ordinary life. He made decent money. He made some good friends. He had a loving family, even if they had arguments once in a while. Yet now, he hated everything. He hated even the most beautiful things. He guessed that they all appeared too otiose, too empty, too devoid of meaning. He guessed that he could no longer see beauty in the stars, as every time a part of his skin was sliced, he endlessly asked himself: "So what?" So, what if the stars glittered? What if the books smelled nice? What if he had once enjoyed wearing fancy clothes? Now all was battered. His entire world had contracted into one empty question: Why?

The floor felt as if it was made out of sharp stones, cold metals pressing in from all sides, the only softness being a small piece of fabric in his hand. As he felt the knives draw something on his back, he looked at the fabric—that was once part of his sleeves—and his nail-less fingers caressed the rough softness, his blood seeping into the lines of yarn. It was as though he was merging with it, as if he knew every single detail of it. The more he caressed it, the more he found himself unable of not touching it again and again. Again, with each pain. Again, with each scream. Again, with each wound. Again, and again, and again. It felt like a childhood memory that he could not remember, but with each stroke of his finger, it became clearer, closer. At that moment, he felt like smiling, yet moving his lips felt too painful.

He felt smartly empty. All he could perceive was the darkness of the floor pressing his forehead as he heard wet sounds: from left to right, from right to left. This killer was still cutting into his back, again and again, as if he wanted to carve a grave for Eric inside his own flesh. The

feeling of pain had numbed; only the sound of every slash reminded him that a killer existed in that room.

"Did you know, my dearest? As a child, I always saved the most delicious part for last. My mother would get mad, telling me that I need not waste time, reminding me to finish the job before it failed. Yet, now that I am free of her, I know the taste of heaven."

The sound of the knife suddenly stopped. Eric's vision blurred, fading in and out, as a strong hand forced him to turn upward. He could see no more than the blade hovering above his face, tracing each feature without cutting, as the killer started humming the names in a childish way, "Nose! Eyes! Lips!" contemplating on each as if he was deciding which piece of Eric's face would make the best meal.

"The eyes! Ah, your eyes are so tempting, Eric. I know that I should save them for last, but... Just a taste. Please, allow me just a taste!"

The killer stood up and walked toward the shelves, where he took down every metallic item, staring at each for a few seconds. Eric felt that he could move once again, as if every fiber inside him was under his command, and he instinctively knew that his body could move, perhaps even better than in the prime of his life. Yet he remained still. His hand, wrapped in the woven fabric, moved so slowly, so carefully, that it felt like an eternity before it closed on a blade the size of his palm. At that moment, it all felt too natural, too easy to him. He felt no anxiety, no fear. He simply took the blade, and covered it with the fabric, slowly retracting his hand back to its original position, holding it as if it concealed nothing but a piece of cloth.

As the killer returned, Eric noticed a whiteness in the darkness—a pair of ancient, pupil-less eyes in the killer's chest, gleaming like a ghost

risen from hell. Eric was certain that those haunting eyes were staring directly at him, and he felt their murderous intent. The killer loomed above him, hunched over, and the room suddenly felt too small. They were looking down at him. Those eyes—black and white, mirroring with a twisted joy, delighted in his suffering, a sick pleasure in a pain they were not feeling. Anger boiled inside Eric. He wanted to gouge out those eyes, to snuff out the joy, to kill them over and over. His fingers caressed the fabric, the sharpness of the blade underneath giving him courage.

"Tonight, we will make history, my dear! Tonight, history itself will be rewritten. I can feel it, Eric—can you? Do you want to touch it? To feel the pulsating life within my mother? Do you wish to witness her struggle to return from the void? It's so close, Eric. So very close... it shall be soon! Soon she will..."

A sharpness snapped in the air, the sound of the metal wire breaking, drawing the killer's gaze downward, towards his chest, as one by one, the wires began to snap, each louder than the last. The compressed flesh started to expand, bulging out like blood splattering, as a dark red hue spread through the air, its claws and hands bursting forth. And in that precise moment, Eric acted. He drove the blade into the killer's neck, pushing it with all force, his eyes locked onto the silvery blade, as it sank into flesh, deeper and deeper, till the hilt was pressed against his skin, not a glint of metal visible. A smile crept across his face as he pulled out the knife, and with that motion, he felt as though every pain had left his body. The killer's scream ripped from his throat, and he stumbled backward, the weight of the creature within him too unbearable. He collapsed to the ground, blood gushing out of

his neck, unable to withstand the force of the monster ripping its way out, clawing as if it was being birthed through a too-tight passage.

“Mother! Forgive me, Mother, I... I have sinned. Maman! It hurts, Maman, please!”

He wailed, and the creature continued to emerge, fiber by fiber, its grotesque form stretching and twisting as it forced itself free, till it halted halfway, only its upper body visible, as if it was connected to the killer by waist. It shook violently, and as if it could not breath, as if it could not live, it raked the floor with its claws, hopelessly, desperately, as if it wanted to grab onto something. Its face, an amorphous mass of clay-like flesh, twisted and opened, and it wailed with a voice that sounded like the grinding of metal on metal along with her son:

“Help me, Maman!”

Slowly, Eric stood up, hovering above the Angel of Death, and burned into his memory, the passage of every moment, the sight of the monster’s fingers clawing helplessly at the ground, the killer’s bloodshot eyes, as he screamed, louder, louder, louder than before, as his blood mixed into Eric’s, the hole in his nose moving rapidly, and witnessed by his heart, its ascend, and descent, till they stopped breathing, both at the same time, their lifeless bodies bringing joy into his heart. And he collapsed, no longer able to stand. His vision blurred, colors draining away, till everything around him dissolved into a radiant darkness. In his final moments, Eric’s dwindling gaze caught the narrow gap between the curtains. Beyond, the sky hazed his eyes—dark, starless, and unchanging.

Diary

1

We walked endlessly, but all was a dream.

Today, I hardly remember that dream, for I have dreamed all my life, for dreams are my only haven from this absurd world, and they keep me going; yet I will write what I can for I strongly believe, that this dream, was my beginning.

It was as though time had frozen at three in the afternoon, in the zenith of summer's scorching intensity. We dared not look at each other. Our steps faltered in irregular patterns, yet never did we stride close to one another. To avoid even the slightest exchange of glances, we focused on the distant apparent horizon—a line where black and yellow struggled to win over the world. Beneath a sky darker than midnight and shadow, a void where not even the faintest star dared venture, we traversed; Yet all was bright, painfully bright. Though the Imperceptible sun veiled itself behind curtains of night, its light pierced us like searing blades. It was hot and withering, exhausting, dusty, and tight, oppressive, maddening. The sands at our feet, like living things, arose like molten clay, molding themselves into the shape of humans to give birth to the unfortunate souls—sentenced to the same fate as me—to stride endlessly in this hellish place.

We endured in hope of change, yet strayed as if our very existence was bound to this unabated motion, devoid of purpose beyond it. Crows cawed, trailing behind us, a shadowy, shapeless flock, whose extent was blurred by the void above and yet unmistakably

countless—millions or hundreds of millions, I did not know. My eyes swam in the possibility that this blackness of the sky was not of darkness, but that of the crows. Cries of "water!" were heard across the dunes when someone, perhaps a new-comer, charged forward towards the illusionary mirage, knocking people left and right off their feet and onto their backs into the sand, only to reach nothing. Mirages teased, then eluded us; Like fleeting happiness that does not last nor does it satisfy.

The scent of warm dampness rose, as if the wind had discovered a new plaything. Slithering balefully, implacably across the sand, like a natural disaster, it crawled along the rim of the hills, turning into a sandstorm, and assailing us with a relentless barrage of grains, accompanied by the cacophony of black birds' cries and the insatiable chatter of their beaks. Their wings amplified the wind's fury; the odor of fear thickening, enveloping all in ever-deepening fear.

"So, this is the afterlife." I thought, and I wonder, was it in the nature of my dream to say those words, or was it, perhaps, because it all felt too real?

I marched, though deep down, I knew: in the end, there is no end, for our essence is an exercise in futile endeavor toward meaningless death. Death, yes, I strongly believed that I would die in that dream. To me, it was certain, definite. Like a fact, it had etched itself into my very being. No word had been spoken to me, no news or chattering had come to my ears, no heavenly messenger had visited me to declare, yet this idea, this gleam of hope, was as if rooted in every part of my being, soul and flesh, needing no logic or reason—like every mortal, I instinctively knew: I will die.

It is laughable how I trod toward my own demise, even in a dream, but even more absurd are the people, corpses walking in a vast desert, writhing in agony and pain, yet crying out with fear of the death they refuse to embrace, how they do not want to die, how they fear the definite destruction, and scream their wishes of immortality. I have seen immortality. It is pitiful, really. Yet, they wished to last forever in a world like that, with everything of it bathed in agony—the relentless sun that sucked and dried and wrinkled; the wind that crushed down like the anger of nature; the clay that birthed; the endless walks, the mirages, the crows...

Suddenly, in the silence of expectations, the sound of another fall crumpled the entire desert. Not too far from me, where the corpses had yet to blur into distant specks, a fractured figure collapsed onto the ground. Out of tiredness or because of the constant in-fighting of humans, I did not know. I thought I had already become accustomed to both the foolishness of humans fighting with each other in this hell that was filled with suffering, and the torturer crows. Yet, once more, that person's soul-rending wail tore through me with almight. I can feel that sheer horror even today, and I find it deeply unnerving even after everything that I have been through in the real life. I felt that cry steeped in anguish, as if each syllable rent my very bones from their moorings. He suffered, and I grasped only a fraction of his pain, yet every single hair on my body stood on end—and it has, right now, as I am writing. How painful was it? Was it worse than what I am experiencing? I have screamed a lot in my life, yet, I cannot remember one as painful as that.

Unwittingly, a scene replayed in front of me. I do not know if I have forgotten fragments of my dream, but that familiar woman—with

whom I felt a deep closeness, as if I had known her for all my life—was in front of me again, lying like a corpse on the ground, with crows surrounding her in hundreds. I do not know whether I am hallucinating right now, but it feels as though that is all happening once again—how in those moments of initial doubt, when I wondered the purpose of it, that widespread ceaseless march, it happened before me. Not so distant as to remain just an image and an echo, but before me. Close. So close that the warmth of blood could be felt, where pleading eyes locked onto mine, beseeching help. Crimson rivulets pooled beneath my inert feet, as I stood transfixed, witnessing, second by agonizing second, the grim image of a woman, morsel by morsel, beak by beak, being consumed by the crows. Yet she could not, would not die, for she was dead, living in a dead world. For every fiber and flesh regrew in time, as the crows were only eating away at our souls, our bodies dead and rotting in the living world. For it was a torment that ceased when she gathered the strength to rise again, her weary limbs pushing her on yet one more time in a meaningless walk of no purpose. It was the bare face of the will of the world that awaited us all, delayed only by our endless footsteps. As though molten lead coursed through my veins, I felt heavy and breathless. My soul was sick with fear, but a greater fear, the fear of the winged shadows of the high sky, became the strength of my broken steps.

A colossal corpse loomed solitary above in the sky—and I am unable to recall if it had always been there or if it appeared suddenly, like every chaotic dream—and it hovered as though sitting on the ground, slumped against the skies, its arms outstretched and shackled—by the amalgamation of the crows resembling chains—to a bloodied stone tablet twice its size. The crows teared into its rotten, deformed flesh,

flesh that shifted from woman to man with each blink, its appearance morphing before my eyes perpetually. Yet, its face always remained obscured, veiled behind a blood-red fabric tightly pressed against its face as if by unseen hands. The uncountable flock of crows all focused only on its chest, eating away at its heart with insatiable thirst; Yet, its body was so enormous that no matter how many morsels were torn off of it, the eaten parts regrew faster than the speed of crows devouring it. I wondered what it was; A Cursed One, or a dreadful portrayal of our fates, meant to keep our legs moving? I looked upon its face one last time, and deep black eyes stared back at me:

“Wake. Up. Scream. God.”

“Move! Walk! Walk till you die!”

I jolted in shock as the corpse behind me shouted at me to walk. I continued my stride among them, as if I had never seen that giant corpse, like forgetting time immediately after checking the watch, and like dreams, slipping away upon waking.

“God! Have mercy!”

A man and woman—married, I assumed, as they had hugged each other so tightly that it was difficult to distinguish them from one another—screamed shouts of penitence, asking for forgiveness from the God that tortured us. I do not remember what happened to them, but this, I clearly remember: in the lows of my mind, the once indifferent architect of the universe twisted into something cruel. Yes, cruel and sadistic, the same creator of the Angel of Death, torturing us and enjoying our cries. No indifferent being would ever orchestrate such calculated suffering—a world where each step was a trial, refusing to walk a greater torture; where we lived in a constant state of

unknowing, uncertain of the hour of our demise, unsure if that would be release from the everlasting torment or merely the moving of our consciousness to another world to suffer once more the same old anguish. Will it let go of us? Will it be so kind as to tear us body and soul, and let us rest in non-existence? I doubt, doubt itself evidence of the never-ending pain. This is the world in which we live—the very world those lunatics praise as the crowning of creation, a world carefully handcrafted by their all-good and almighty God, who doomed us to eternal struggle, only to experience fleeting joy upon satisfying our goals, only to head once again into the deep well of need for that mirage of happiness. Suffering is always, pain forever. I, have felt pain for years and years and years, yet why does happiness last not mere hours? Was happiness not all we wanted from this world? Would my non-being... would it not be preferable to my being?

2

The crows' screams echoed in the sky as dark forms churned in a huge wave. I thought: "There it is, all over again—the humans! What is it this time? Locked in another struggle with the ownership of the mirages? Or did the rich and powerful want to get a tighter grip upon the masses, not learning a lesson from last time? Is it another succumbing to the allurements of lawlessness, happy that they can assault and rape anyone they want? Or an infighting among factions of those Lunatics, each zealously proclaiming themselves right about God and the afterlife and others as liars? I'd say it is something new this time, for they are endlessly foolish, with potential to outfool any idea one can have."

"Throw them on the ground! Throw every single one of them! If we feed enough to the crows, then they will stop assaulting us and we'll finally rest! Then, with your help, I'll build houses under the sand, so we can finally be free from the crows! Throw them, don't show mercy! You are not in a position to take care of others. Do not let your conscience stop you!"

I do not remember this part of the dream clearly, therefore, I will only state what I can, and move on to the more important part: what happened to me after awakening. The dialogue was said by a middle-aged man leading a group, with mostly men than women; An odd mix of old fools and young fools. Non-stoppable, they continued, throwing aside any who crossed their path onto the ground. As if there was no commodity more worthless than humans, the lands were filled with them, the redness of sands veiled behind the whiteness of their corpses, the blackness covering all under its rule. Like a flock of pigeons in search of a new nest, they moved towards us as if we were small branches of a dead tree. The sounds of falls intensified, the eyes closed, the teeth clenched, the cracked soles dragged on the hot sand, all mouths murmuring: "We mustn't fall. We mustn't fall."

As I turned my head around, surrounded by crows and corpses, I saw that man again, snickering with that innate grin—the right corner of his lips moving upward exactly to the step between the nose and the lips, three of the teeth showing, a burst of gutsy puff exploding out of his nose. Never... never can I forget that smile.

"Well, hello, dear one."

He stretched the word 'hello', enough for me to turn my body toward him; and there he was, towering, arrogant, as if he owned the world.

"You died, huh?"

I said, but the rest, I cannot recall at all: of what we said, and what we did. There is only a vivid feeling inside me, as if a part of me is trying to stop me from reaching that memory, and each time I think too hard about it—like right now—a scarce, barely detectable pressure twists my heart. What I remember is moments before waking up, how as if my voice, or my scream, echoed across the world, and every eye turned towards me, all with smiling mouths, even the crows, even the sun, even the sands. The world shattered into thousands, turned each into a crow, and assailed me with ever-growing darkness.

I tend to think, that in that moment, had I gone mad? No, I would say. No mad being could remain silent, while their flesh was being eaten by crows, yet, I could also calmly think, for perhaps, I knew it was a dream, and even observe them, up close, that is, until they started eating my eyes. But I did not care, yes, care, I do not know any better words to describe it. It was natural to scream, was it not? Yet I did not. Not because I was enduring it, it was simply a matter of realization. When I realized that pain is always in my head, always no matter what, I realized, that any resistance, any reaction, any thought was futile, a foolery, therefore, I gave up. Right? I was not in despair, or sad, or mad, yet I could see again, as my eyes healed, for I was a dead, and all a dream, that the crows were pitying me, with their pitch-black, demonic eyes, devoid of any emotions, yet I could see pity in them. Was I not pitiful? Yes! They looked at me and I looked at them and with my eyes, I

told them that I need not their pity, yet, they continued to eat me in a sorrowful way. Would I be mad for saying I could understand them? For I could remember his eyes, as if it was in front of me, looking at me with no emotions, with guilt, and sorrow, as he dug a knife at me, strangled me, and I looked at him, and he punched me, and I screamed, and he teared, and he patted me, with pity, with pity he burned me, crushed me, cut me, stabbed me, chopped me, killed me.

I laid there as they devoured me, and felt nothing, nothing at all. Perhaps they had stripped me to bones, and I could not hear anything, or smell, or anything, but I could feel it coming, death, louder than anything, coming, while I awaited it in utter black. Everything black, drowningly dark, and I could not know if I had no eyes, or if it was black—the color, their color. So, I awaited, minutes or years, I didn't know. Memories became alien, droplets of rain on fire. But the clock was beating, and I felt it inside me, once every second, right in the middle of my chest, as the sound grew louder and louder, and I counted with it, losing track of numbers, and counting again, and recounting again, losing count of the times I forgot. Counting countless numbers, the sound became my every focus. It was an unpleasant sound, a cry, an impertinent proclivity to live, as if the world's incarnate enkindled resilience in me. Futile, was it not? It was the world, and I was the nothingness, and it asked me to live, and I asked for death.

As time waned, an emptiness, a deep abyss, began to open on all sides of me. At times, I lost myself; even pain itself slunk away so far from me that nothing could be discerned by vision but dim, dark vacancies. I was only dimly conscious of myself, and the further I went, the darker it became, enclosed within itself something enormous and incomprehensible, raising in me a strange emotion. With each thought

vanishing, it wrapped me closer and closer till I could feel the demon embracing my being, body and soul. And I gave myself up to it, for it was a pleasant feeling. I lost the sense of my hands and feet, as though they had become external to me, or rather, as though they had never been mine. Nor was it painful; it was soothing and tranquil, like plunging into warm water at the most perfect temperature so that it bathes all fibers of one's body straining till one cannot feel it at all. Thoughts dissolved; and I along with them. There were no more any sensations, no sight, no smell, no touch, no nothing. And as though I did not exist anymore, nothing existed: for the world existed solely through me. Yet, nipped within this void was one sensation remaining, a strange feeling contradicting my non-being—the darkness. It could not be described, for no thoughts or words were framed in my mind, and yet it was there, like the sensation of my own hands when I am not paying attention to them, or anything else, known not by my senses but by some other unfathomable way. It was a curious discomfort, and it flooded me with an unpleasant fullness, leaving me constantly on the brink between existence and non-existence. Was this the awakening of the Curse inside me, or did it awaken from the very moment that I killed that man? I do not know. It all felt too deranged in that moment, too rampageous, as if there was a battle going on within me that I was not a part of; that I was but a mere spectator, or perhaps rather, it was so grand a war, that there was no place within it for an insignificant creature such as me. Yet, like the certainty of death, I took cognize of that peculiar will inside of me, impelling me to command, to domineer and to conquer, as though it would require only an order from me, and it would all be over. Everything was in my command—a command that I had forfeited. But something—something ominous, something I knew

for sure was not under my control—came near to me as I opened my eyes in reflex, only to see a crow screaming right in front of my face:

"Wake. Up!"

3

As I subsisted in the liminal space between reality and dream, my senses floated in a fog, and I felt as though I were entrapped within a coffin, as if an anchor was pressing on my chest. As a distant pain gradually sharpened—one that pulsated in my head in intervals—the feeling of reality stabbed me, tapering me awake from that state of half-consciousness, and with it came the awareness of my body, onerous and solid, and with the body, the pain: the rapid heartbeat that craved to claw its way out of my chest; the sound of my lips peeling to take shallow breaths, each after another, each more desperate, as if the lungs could not grasp the air; the coldness that rent my flesh though the sizzling pain of my wounds smoldered beneath its ice. And I awoke, with that intense dryness in my mouth, that insatiable thirst, and I wonder, how can I explain what was seen, what was done? Was it madness?

I believe it began the very moment I tore my eyes open, and as the smell of blood and cigarette entered my nostrils, as my vision blurred, as I saw that vague shadow lying on the floor, the madness, it took root in me—the kind that you slowly descend into it, step by step, unaware, like a disease, only to be realized after you are claimed. What I remember from that day is how madly I blinked to force the murky smears away from my eyes as I lurched my head around like an animal, desperate to make sense of where I was. But I lay sprawled on the rough wooden floor, limp and flaccid, for I found no energy in myself to

stand. I had lost too much blood. My head throbbed from the pain of even that slight movement, but eventually, I saw that—the corpse.

The memories of that moment are still clear to me. In my mind, there was a tornado of thoughts, as every word swirled around, only for all to once again reach the starting point, the heart, a single question: why? Over the years, I have tried to deeply analyze and dissect those thoughts, for I am strongly convinced, that in a certain way, all my actions, all my motives, all my beliefs, all are related to this single moment. The first thought that formed in my head was that I didn't know. I didn't know what was happening, how was I alive, was it a dream? I could only look towards the corpses and take a deep breath. I was afraid—not of the world, but afraid of how much this human loves to live, of how tenacious this will inside me is, for it dreams of flying when I have drowned. It fights a war I have already surrendered. It runs on legs that are already broken. Its head sliced neck to neck, it keeps it by hand from falling on the ground. It wants to live, with a corpse that has already been buried. I didn't know what to do. I found myself lost in a blur of reality and illusion. Each moment, past and present, felt too heavy and void of meaning at the same time. I felt overwhelmed, and tired, as if swimming in a raging sea of other people's ideologies, where they owned the world, and I was just a floating corpse, witnessing how they lived, and I raged at my own self—at my own childish musings. I blamed myself, for I had always manipulated myself by thinking that I had some kind of power over this vast cruelty of a world. I always found a way to trust those who could not be trusted, to find safety in an unsafe world, to control something uncontrollable, to have power in a helpless life, to protect myself from a world of evil, not even able to care for myself, to love myself, to cry for myself. I wanted to give up, to

die, as I was drowning not knowing how to swim, and there was no solution.

Yet, human beings are strange creatures. They deceive themselves in ways that even they themselves cannot imagine. They deceive themselves to live, even when they should not. And nothing in this world is scarier than that—than how great is the desire of the legs, to step once again on a thorny path. And so, I stood, even as all wounds started to bleed, even as I dragged my cracked soles toward the stairs, a line of blood trailing behind me. Each step heavier than the last, I walked. I walked even when I felt like dying, all in the will of surviving. And when those seemingly endless steps came to an end, when I finally reached the door, I felt such ridiculous happiness. I knew that it would not work. I knew about this damned Curse within me. I had touched the darkness in my dream and I knew, knew for sure how they would react, how they would scream, and yet, I opened the door, and a morning full of sun welcomed me. The sky seemed clearer than ever and the clouds slight pink. I walked outside of the building into our alley, and with my new found energy, I called for help, shouting that I needed a doctor, all while walking toward the main street, for the alley seemed too empty. I chose to go to the shopping district—which was only a street away—for I was certain it would be bustling with people in the morning. I could hear the noises, alive noises coming from that street—the footsteps, the occasional hum of the carriages and horses, and the din of humans.

The first was a woman, and I still remember her down to the smallest details—middle-aged, dressed in a gray coat, a woven basket in her hands holding a few groceries. Her eyes widened for a moment, as if she had seen someone familiar, her right leg took a small step toward me, her free hand moving in a way that seemed to be her trial of

reaching out to me, but she stopped in a fraction of time that has been repeated in my mind forever. She looked away sharply, her lips pressed into a tight line as she retracted her steps, quickening her pace as she darted in a direction against me.

“Help!”

I tried to shout, but the voice came out too weak. Yet, I am certain, that she heard me clearly. She didn't break her dash, didn't stop, didn't look back. She walked away as fast as she could, and I only stared in pure nothingness at her back, her shoulders cold, the sound of her footsteps fading.

Then it was a man. Then, a family. And all of a sudden, I found myself surrounded by people. They all seemed to have the same thought in their heads, for their eyes gave them out: to run. The sound of footsteps buzzed in my ears as they distanced themselves, and tried to hide themselves in places that I could not see. Some behind alleys, some behind barrels, and some behind others. Some began to run, grabbing the hand of their loved ones. Some, they screamed in fright. I felt like a rope was tightening around my neck, not letting my voice out. I wanted to say something, to ask something, to scream something. Yet every word felt so distanced from me that I could not even decide how to react, how to speak. Only then did I realize, the haze of the fog that surrounded the skies, and the coldness, as it clambered up my spine, up my tattered self, and I heard the pigeons cry on the gables, for perhaps, they too had heard the sound of my heart screaming. They were running away from me, in the warmth of their imperforate skins, and the ardour of their sentinel coats—warm coats, in all colors, while I, alone, had no cloth, no warmth, no sound. Not for me to nestle in the

softness of tweed. Not for me to be embraced by hands, to protect me from monsters. Not for me to feel loved. I, alone, was in hell. I, alone, was cold, was pained, was lone. And I saw one—a beautiful, miraculous coat, warmly black, perfectly my size, in a shop I had always visited with my family, and it felt too alluring, and it made my worthless self crawl to it like an insect, and I touched it, and by the Divinum, it felt so warm, and I wrapped my body inside that tepid darkness swathe.

I wish that today, I had the strength of that day, the ravenous will inside me that craved for living, that wrung every forlorn thought out of my mind, as it moved my legs in a familiar direction, towards the house that I had once thought as haven. I followed the trace of blood on the ground, and once again, I reached that metal door of genesis. I pulled the collars of the coat closer to my skin, staring at my own reflection on the door. The silence stretched on, and it swathed me with an embarrassing sense of shame. I always wonder, why did I feel shame? Yet I find no answer. Perhaps, in that moment, I also looked upon myself—my worthless self. I loathe that image of myself. One who has lost everything, has nothing, is nothing. Someone... weak. All I wanted, was to simply hide away from everything. I felt like I was hated by the world. I was in continuous pain, not born with the strength to endure it. Some people are. They endure, and become stronger through that pain. I shattered. Shattered so thoroughly that even if I somehow mustered the strength to find all of my pieces, fixing them would be impossible. The void within me had grown so deep that I could scream for hours and it would not fill. My life just didn't work. It couldn't even be called a life. I was just a small painting of a human, so far in the background that only one stroke of black color was enough to paint me. Breathless and motionless, I was stuck in a never-ending scenery of darkness, forced to

watch second by second of my destruction. All that I ever wanted, was just somewhere safe...

4

Today, I read the former parts of this diary, and as I am writing right now, I leaf through my fingers the memories of that day and the expressions that I saw on their faces once again. I have forgiven them. I do not find them to be heartless. In the same situation, I admit that I would have also done the same, and they were right to do so. Although it was merely rumors to them, I now know the truth, that killing a Cursed One had awoken this accursed Power in me, and they feared not me, but the possibility that they too would be cursed if they dared to touch me. They feared that they too would be hunted by the Blessed Ones if they helped me. It is not their fault that they did know the whole truth, and I have stopped blaming them, for they were only thinking of their own safety, and I cannot selfishly expect others to forgo their serene lives for me. The pain, it belongs only to oneself. It is not a burden to be shared by others.

I learned this truth most wholeheartedly on that day, as I rummaged through our house, the blood of my family still wet on the ground, and I scavenged for any item that could be used to treat my wounds. After I enkindled the fireplace, I undressed to see the wounds on my body. Most were only surface injuries, and some already closed, seared shut by that man. As I sat on the sofa, I quickly tore off a strip of clean fabric—picked out from the wardrobe of Mother—and I firmly pressed the fabric against my stomach, the place where the wound seemed more dangerous. My body jerked at the pain of that pressure as a groan escaped from my lips, but I endured all while cursing, bedamning the

world and its people. Still pressing on the fabric, I grabbed a flask of whiskey and uncorked the bottle with my teeth, then proceeded to pour some over the fabric and onto my wound, making my screams uglier than before, so much that I felt cracks form in my throat as the dryness in my mouth intensified.

My consciousness waned at times, but I kept vigilance by slapping my own face to remain tethered to this awful reality. I grasped a sewing needle, and plunged it along with some threads into the bottle of whiskey, shaking it a few times before taking them out by pouring the contents on the floor. Afraid that I might tore my throat if I screamed any more, I placed a leather belt in my mouth, in between my teeth, and bit into the coarse texture. I threaded the needle, then tied a knot at the end. I firmly clenched my body to stop it from shaking, and plunged the needle through my flesh with a sudden motion. My body spasmed even harder as a strangled cry ripped its way out my throat, nonetheless I worked my fingers quickly, snitching the wound close with rough, uneven stitches to finish it as fast as I could. As the thread pulled at my skin, each tug caused a fresh flare of pain that darkened my vision and mind alike. I felt like I was dying, but still the needle dipped in and out as screams were stifled in my mouth. Finally, I tied off the final stitch, cutting the thread with a scissor. Again, I grabbed another clean strip of cloth and pressed it firmly over the crude sutures, binding it tightly with another shirt. The rest of my visible wounds were not deep enough to need stitching, and though I knew that the wounds on my back were worse than the one on my stomach, I could do nothing to them but pour alcohol onto them like the rest of my wounds and firmly bind each with a piece of fabric.

As I sat on the sofa again when every wound was tended, I grabbed a new bottle of alcohol, one that my father had always prized as something precious among all the bottles. I knew nothing of the names or types of the alcohol, for I had never been fond of its unbearable taste. I raised the bottle and the bitter taste on the glass touched my lips, and as the alcohol entered my body, a slight warm feeling penetrated my stomach, seeming to gradually spread throughout every part of my body. Things were happening in my chest, imperceptible emotions that I am unable to turn into words. I wonder, where had all that pain gone, when it died inside me on that day? It may have passed, but never forgotten. My heart, it seems to have a memory of its own. Even now, it still throbs in my chest, and it wants to say something, it wants me to write something, but I have gotten deaf to all those screams. My soul, it is tired. Nowadays, when I look at the mirror, I only see a flesh that has survived. Perhaps, I feel empty for I have left a part of me at that room.

How... can I say to my scars, that it was all just an accident?

The first time that I used my Power, it was then, in that exact moment. As I lay curled up on the sofa, I folded up my self to embrace my tired knees with my heart, closed my eyes, and tried to shrink till I could not be seen anymore. I wanted to disappear, to be lost in the corners of that sofa, the creases of its fabric, or anywhere was fine. I just wanted to hide away from everything, to die and for everything to stop, but I could not. I simply could not take my own life. I could only wish that it would all somehow miraculously stop. My eyes burned as if they were thrown in boiling water. I wanted to gouge them out. My head was exploding with screams and I screamed louder than any of them for them to die—to not exist anymore. I knew that I had to fight

these voices. I felt as if a part of me had already died, and the rest would die alongside it if I let them inside my head. But I was tired. Tired, and hopeless. It felt like the cold night I had spent outside the house when I was a kid, trying to open the door only to see they had locked it. How many times should I push the door only for it to not open? I was tired. It wouldn't open, no matter how much I cried, no matter how many times I pushed, it just wouldn't. The noise in my heart grew louder: how I had wished for nothing but a normal life. How I longed to sit by the beach and observe the sea for hours and hours, yet all I got were noises. Noises, in my heart, in my head. Why had the world fated me to live such a life, not even giving me a single chance to escape from it? My life was just a series of regrets, of unfortunate incidents, of wrong choices that I realize only when it is too late, of a darkness that had grown too deeply to see the shine of light again. I felt like a land slowly emptied of its soil with each thought, only for it to dig a grave for the corpse that I would become. My brain hurt. It hurt from the spoken and unspoken words, from the heard and unheard words. It hurt from the words, and I wished from God to bless me with silence, yet there was nothing but noises. I could feel it inside my ears, under my skin. It was all and everywhere.

And with the noises, again came the sensation of darkness. I could feel it even more profoundly than my own body. It felt like it had opened its embrace for me, and it was beckoning for me to nestle within it, to seek solace from everything within its warm hands. I pressed my eyelids shut with more force so that I could feel that darkness closer, deeper, and submerged my head lower in between my knees and chest so that I could feel its welcoming envelopment. With each thought that took place in my mind, with each question, with each

fear and each hopelessness, I walked a step closer to it. I wanted to merge with that darkness, to not exist anymore. I wanted to hide within that nest of blackness. The more I moved towards it, the quieter it got, and it filled me with a sweet feeling of nothingness, with a lack of pain and emotions. As the final question clawed its way to my mind, as it reverberated in every dimension of my body, asking me “Why? Why? Why? Why?”, I took the last step toward the darkness, and everything finally stopped. I could feel nothing anymore. No pain, no noise, no thought. I felt as if I was as light as a feather, as if my flesh was dust. I slowly opened my eyes, staring at my own hands. I was not afraid of losing this sensation. Once you use the Power for the first time, you will never forget it. It will be your curse, but in that moment, I felt as if God had finally blessed me, for I found that my wish was granted: I could hide away from everything.