

Emily
Dana De Young

Chapter I

Sunday April 4, 345 A.D.R.

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Seaton, Seaton Parish

April 4,

Another New Year has arrived and with it the terrifying reality that I am now only four weeks from my sixteenth birthday and thus my wedding day. I can't believe how time has me passed by. It seems like only yesterday that David Marsh forced this stipulation on our family when he took over our land. I don't want to marry his son, Jonathan. God willing, this wedding will be called off. But I have no idea how that is going to happen and I don't think Ma and Pa do either. All these years they promised that this day would never come and yet here we are, only twenty-eight days away from it. I wonder if Pa ever really thought of me when he signed that contract. I wonder if he really thought that he could save me from this nightmare or did he just think with his stomach.

I suppose it is easy to let hunger go to your head. I am starving, I haven't eaten since our meager supper last night and I would do almost anything for a bite of bread. Ma has insisted that we adhere to the fast of Eternal Night that accompanies the New Years celebration. I realize that our ancestors did not have a lot of food during the dark years of Divine Retribution, but to insist that people like us, who rarely ever have enough food as it is, fast for a whole day is absurd. Not to mention no one in our family can even remember the names of our ancestors who survived those dark years, so I guess I don't see the point in fasting. I know Ma is a devout and faithful woman who is only doing good in the eyes of the Lord, but it's not like eating a few vegetables or scraps of meat will land us in Hell.

All I know is that this day and all its ills will be exasperated by the long monotonous sermon that I will have to sit through. Pastor Gertz will say the same thing that he says every year, that America was a big evil place and that we are living in the kingdom of God on Earth. It is so hard sitting there alone, knowing the truth about America. It's hard to keep quiet knowing all the wonders that were lost, it's hard not to scream when everyone else is so ignorant of the past and it's almost impossible to resist the temptation to shout out and tell them what a bunch of liars they are.

A quick knock came from the door and Emily La Rouche looked up from her diary.

"Emily, are you almost ready to go?" Her mother, Julia, called.

"Just about," Emily called back as she set the ink pen on the wobbly night stand next to her. She reached down for her necklace which rested adjacent to her diary on her bed. Her necklace was just an old American quarter dollar that her father had punctured long ago and threaded with a small length of twine through it. She lifted her hair and wrapped the necklace around her neck and quickly tied it. Emily stood up from her bed

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and pressed down the sides of her long slate gray dress. She gave one last glance at her diary closed the book and then joined her family in the eating room.

Inside of twenty minutes, the rest of the family had dressed and gathered in their wagon to make the journey to Seaton for the holiday services. As they approached the cathedral Emily could see a half a dozen flags of the Dominion that flew against the morning sky. The white banner, a symbol of purity and spirituality, fluttered in the cool breeze. The gold cross that symbolized the kingdom of Christ that dominated the sinful blood red continents of man danced brilliantly in the early morning sun.

The bells of the cathedral stopped tolling just as their wagon rolled by, and even though they were late, Emily could see that there were people still gathered in front at the entrance. Aside from Christmas and Easter, the twin holidays were the most attended services of the year. People who rarely attended church a few times a year would be here today and even some who lived in the country farther away than she would make the trek to attend the services.

Emily and the rest of the family disembarked towards the cathedral's main doors while her father, James, carefully secured the horses nearby.

As they walked into the narthex Emily could see her brother, Aaron, fall behind the rest of the family. Emily stopped to allow her brother to catch up and with each step that he took she could see his annoyance grow. This was his first time back to church since he received ten lashings for the crime of lechery in the public square. She glanced around at the other parishioners and it was clear that they were staring at her family. Emily looked down as she made her way to the nave and even though the service was in full procession she thought that she could almost make out the faint whispers of gossip that surrounded her.

As Emily and her family made their way into the nave of the Cathedral, she could hear the monotone voices of the congregation reciting the Oath of Affirmation in near unison, "I believe in the Church of Divinity and Salvation, the kingdom of God on Earth that saved our ancestors from death and damnation that rules as long as the Earth shall endure. I believe in the church's holy teachings, I renounce Satan and all his empty promises, I renounce all heresies of the word, I renounce all temptations of the flesh and of all technological false idols that led the generations astray..."

Emily mouthed the meaningless words along with the rest of the congregation as she and her family made their way to their seats.

As the congregation sat, Pastor Raymond Gertz took his place at the pulpit while Cardinal Nathaniel Stanton and Bishop Joseph Aldridge took their seats in the plush thrones that flanked the altar. Pastor Gertz, dressed in his traditional black robe, stood before his congregation and closed his eyes as he briefly reflected on the message that he was about to deliver.

"My children, God be with you on this day, the Fast of Eternal Night. Today we reflect on the past times of trial and hunger that our ancestors faced. It is by their faith that we are here today; the faith by which God saved them, it was that faith alone saved humankind from God's almighty and fearful vengeance. As God's children, we have been saved and been given the task for building his kingdom on this Earth as we await his second glorious coming."

Pastor Gertz paused to let his words sink in.

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“Three-hundred and forty-five years ago today, God unleashed the Four Horsemen upon the Earth to punish the generations for their sins. It was on that day four asteroids fell from the heavens and with them they brought war, conquest, famine and death and the nations were thrown into great turmoil. He wiped away the world’s decadent democracies that perpetuated so much sin unto his good world. It was only after two years of continuous darkness that God brought forth the light on the few who remained...”

Emily let go an impatient breath and folded her arms in front of her. She knew Pastor Gertz would go into great detail about the first of the Seven Pillars of Faith, the evil of democracy.

Gertz continued. “...I need not remind you what this place was like before Divine Retribution. America was a land of sinful, vengeful people. It was a land consumed with sin, greed, and pleasures of the flesh. It was a ravenous society. Men fed off the lives of other men, for their own personal gain. Brother slaying brother for a little bit of money. Sodomites, bastards and whores governed the land and were elected by the immoral masses. It was these wicked people that led their children away from the saving power of the word of God.”

“But I tell you, brothers and sisters, God had a plan for these people, a plan that was as old as history itself. God gave fair warning to the wicked people of America. He told them in the holy book of Revelation. He even sent prophets like his holiness, Pastor Kane, to create this good church and to warn the world of the times of tribulation. All the signs of the coming of the end were there, but the people went on living their wicked lives, filling them with the sins of the flesh, technical idols, and unbridled hedonism. But when the holy day of Divine Retribution came, those idols failed them and they were consumed with sin, death and everlasting damnation. Let me tell you, God could have destroyed all of mankind with a blink of his Almighty eye. He has the power to erase the world from existence, but he chose to be merciful. Like Lot, Noah and their families, God saw a spark of righteousness in his Holiness the Pastor Elijah Kane and his flock and saved those good and moral people. It was these people; our ancestors that God chose to save and build his kingdom upon the Earth. I tell you, brothers and sisters, that spark has now become the fire of righteousness as we continue to spread back over the old lands of America.”

“For it is in accordance with His holy book of Revelation that these things have come to pass, and that the days are surely coming where Christ will come to claim the last of his chosen people. Let me remind you of those sacred words of Revelation chapter twenty verses two through four...”

Emily bit her lip as she detached herself from Gertz’s seemingly endless sermon. She grabbed her necklace and spun the coin on the rope until this too no longer held her interest. She looked up at the masses in front of her. It never failed to amaze her the difference that only a few pews could make. The wealthy landowners and church patriarchs were sitting up front in their best attire. The men wore their pressed darkened fine cotton suits and had stuffy brimmed hats, while their wives and daughters wore eloquent white and blue satin gowns, bustled tightly to show off their feminine forms. But in a matter of a few feet the styles and clothing changed abruptly; most people wore clothes that were ragged from everyday wear. The women and girls dresses were dusty

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and dirty and there lingered the smell of sweat and grime that enveloped the laborer and indentured servant's existence.

Emily looked at each one of the parishioners closely as she began to play a game she had taught herself to occupy the long services on the Fast of Eternal Night. The game was quite simple. She would look at each parishioner closely to see whether or not they were observing the fast. It was usually pretty easy to tell. Those who did always looked tired and had trouble concentrating on the sermon. Instead, they simply closed their eyes and tried to drown out the quiet agony that was building up inside of their bellies. Those who ate breakfast always looked alert and energetic and had no problem concentrating on the pastor's message. She looked across the sea of faces toward the chancel where Cardinal Stanton and Bishop Aldridge sat. Both men sat sturdy as they looked over their flock with a somber and steadfast gaze. Clearly they both had a breakfast fit for a king.

Emily looked back over to her family's tired faces. Her mother, who clung to tradition and stubbornly did not make breakfast, somehow managed to find the strength and resolve to stay focused on Gertz's message. How she did remained a mystery to Emily. It was the same sermon year after year. Powerful the first time you heard it, but after the fifth time she could practically preach it herself. Her father, by contrast, looked like he was about to collapse. He had dark circles around his swollen, bloodshot eyes and he rubbed his face endlessly in a futile effort to try to stay awake. He looked far sicker than a man should be halfway through a twenty-four hour fast. His face bore the expression of a man in desperate search of some sleep, but had the misfortune to be trapped with a mind that would not shut off. Emily looked at her brother who looked fiercely annoyed. She thought he was just upset at having to come back to church so soon after being whipped in the town square, not that she blamed him. If it had been her, she would have never come back. She looked away from her brother and back into the worn faces of the other parishioners.

Aaron sat and stewed with quiet annoyance. He was upset at being back in this place. But what aggravated him even more, was when he spotted Elizabeth Mason sitting in one of the front pews with her husband, Alexander Rothchild, the man who had him whipped. He looked closer at Elizabeth's sad face. Her eyes were closed and her lips were locked as tight as her heart. Aaron sighed. Rothchild had crushed his soul with what he had done to him, but parading Elizabeth so close to him, knowing that he could never touch her again was like being whipped all over again.

Aaron closed his eyes and tried to get through the remaining service by sleeping through it. But just as he began to doze off he was quickly awakened by the booming voice of Pastor Gertz.

"...Let me tell you now, good brothers and sisters, we are living in the third and final age of God. The first age, the age of the father, ended when he sent His son to die for us. The second age, the age of Christ ended when he sent the four horsemen upon this world to Judge us for our sins. That day began the third age, the age of the Holy Spirit, a new age of righteousness in which the word of God has been painted on the hearts of every mortal man. It is with the guidance of the Holy Spirit that we have rebuilt Christ's Kingdom here on Earth and at the end of this good millennium, he will return to call us home to heaven. Right now I'd like to share the words revealed to Pastor Kane from the Book of the Trials, Chapter six verses nine through twenty four..."

As Pastor Gertz resumed his monotonous reading of the Bible, Aaron resumed his quest for sleep. This time nothing would deter him from his quest for slumber and much to his mother's annoyance, he remained seated with his eyes closed for the rest of the service, even when the congregation stood to sing a hymn or departed for communion.

Slowly, the service finally concluded itself and Emily and the rest of her family began to make their way back to their wagon which would return them home to the never ending chores of their farm. The afternoon was brilliantly bright and unusually warm with only a slight cool breeze. Just as they reached their wagon they were detained by the polite musings of their landlord, David Marsh.

"Happy New Year to you James, Julia," said David. "James, I hope you don't mind, but there are a number of things I need to talk with you about."

David Marsh pulled James to the side and began to discuss matters of the farm and other business with him in private, while the two families stood around the stairs of the cathedral in an awkward silence. Jonathan, the Marsh's only son, quickly grew bored and decided to attempt to talk to Emily.

Jonathan considered himself to be a smooth talker. He knew he could get almost any girl his age and had even succeeded in getting older, more dignified women. Unfortunately, he had never had much luck in gaining any interest or affection from Emily. She had a snobbishness that was misplaced for a person of her social class and it was simply this reason above all else why he couldn't stand her. But he still found her mildly attractive, even though she had little for breasts. She had a face that was innocent and pure and she had long auburn hair that contoured to her slender, petite frame. Jonathan knew she couldn't resist him forever. He would break through the he impenetrable barrier she used to keep him out. It was his destiny.

Emily shivered as Jonathan made his way in her direction. She had only been near him a handful of times in her entire life, but she simply could not stand to be close to him. When they were children, he was the little boy who would always pull her hair, or tried to look up her dress, or find something to say that would make her cry. Jonathan hadn't changed much since then, except that he was either talking about sex or how rich he was going to be.

"Afternoon Emily," Jonathan said as he paused for a moment to think of what he would say next. "You know...after we are married, I will throw the biggest dinner reception and you will have the biggest feast you have ever eaten."

Emily did not reply, but instead glared into the distant horizon in the opposite direction as she waited for him to leave.

"And you won't have to sleep in that shack you live in now. You'll have warm rooms with comfortable furniture and a big bed to sleep in...with me," Jonathan flashed a sly smile as Emily, mortified with the thought, turned around and shot a glaze of object disgust and loathing.

"You know I happen to like where I live now because you're not there," Emily said and promptly turned and walked away.

"Stupid peasant bitch," Jonathan muttered under his breath as soon as she was out of earshot.

Emily shivered again as she walked back to her mother as she thought about her impending wedding. She knew that arranged marriages were fairly common throughout the Dominion of Divinity, but that offered her no peace of mind or reassurance

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whatsoever. It was common that wealthier families pawned off their children to other wealthy families to consolidate power and wealth throughout the area where they lived, or as in her brother's sad case, a wealthy man simply selected a young woman for nothing more than her physical beauty. As for her, David wanted to ensure that his son would be able to continue building his legacy.

James concluded his discussion with Marsh and was making his way back to his family when David interrupted him again.

"Oh James, why don't you bring your family out to our house next Sunday for a little pre-wedding celebration," David said.

"And Emily, we need to find a time when you can be fitted for your wedding dress," David's wife, Andrea, interjected.

"Looking forward to it," Emily said, and she was too, even though she hoped to God that she would find some way out of the wedding. But for now, the dress fitting would give her a chance to wear something other than the old, tattered rags she had been accustomed to wearing all her life.

"Okay, we'll be there. What time?" James asked.

"Be there about five-thirty; we'll make an evening of it. I think I'll hire a photographer friend of mine to get us some good pictures," David replied.

"All right, we'll be there," James said and sighed aloud when the Marsh's had left.

David was taking everything so seriously, especially hiring a photographer. James knew there were few around this area and the cost to hire one was probably more than his family made in a month. To make matters worse, he would have to come in for church, back to the farm for chores, and then back to town, which wouldn't be so bad if the journey didn't take so long.

The thought of the dinner stressed him out even more as it reminded him how time had passed him by. It also interfered with his daily routine and would interrupt things he needed to get done. He climbed aboard the rickety wagon and sighed once more he felt like a man who was about to fall off a steep cliff.

* * *

The week passed before James like a blur. Life was slowly returning throughout the countryside in the fevered rays of the spring sunshine. The week passed before James like a blur. Life was slowly returning throughout the countryside in the fevered rays of the spring sunshine. The work seemed to be almost never ending. The earth needed to be tilled, the crops needed to be planted and the livestock cared for. Sometimes James was able to lose himself in his work and forget about the impending future, but inevitably something would remind him of it. Every time he thought of the wedding his heart would sink into his stomach and his thoughts would be mired endlessly in problems for which he had no solution.

Soon Sunday was upon him once again. The day was filled trying to finish up farm work and getting the family ready for the evening. James was fatigued to the point of sheer exhaustion. He hadn't been able to sleep more than a few hours or so each night, and with the necessities of the planting season in full swing, he had been pushing himself

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longer and harder than at any part of the year besides the harvest. He hadn't been able to motivate himself to get out of bed until half-past ten, and by then it was too late to go to church. Throughout the day he had been taking small shots of homemade wine from a flask he had hidden away to try to calm his frayed nerves and to try to steady his shaking hands.

Julia remained as steady as a rock, as she was able to push the thought of Emily's wedding aside and live as though almost nothing were different, while finding strength through her family and reveling in the moments they were together.

Aaron and Emily seemed almost apathetic to spending an evening with the Marshes. To them it was something like cleaning manure from the barn; unpleasant but unavoidable. Neither of them could stand Jonathan Marsh, but despite that, the prospect of having elaborately prepared food was enough to slog through the evening.

James tried to make sure that everyone dressed their best for the night's occasion but still, that wasn't saying much. There was a common saying around town 'you only have one suit, the one you're married in and the one you're buried in.' Unfortunately there was more than a little truth to that because James was indeed wearing the suit from his wedding, which was over twenty-years-old. The last time he wore it was for Sarah's funeral, nearly eleven years ago. The suit had fit him better back then. Now the pants and sleeves had shrunk, revealing parts of his bleached white legs contrasted by his tanned forearms. Julia and Emily wore slightly less shabby versions of their everyday clothes, which consisted of a cotton black dress with a white lace apron trim. Aaron just wore his field clothes. He was never one for formality and was only going for whatever feast the Marshes would feed him. He didn't figure they'd turn him away for dressing shabbily.

James and Julia took their place at the front of their small wagon, while Aaron helped Emily climb into the back, and they began their slow trek toward Seaton.

"Emily, can you promise us that you'll try to be polite towards Jonathan tonight?" Julia asked. "We don't want any trouble with the Marsh's."

Emily wanted to protest. She wanted to scream out to the heavens how unfair her situation was. She hated the lack of freedom and choice she had in her life and wanted to drastically take control of her own destiny. For the time being, though, she thought the better of it and returned her mother's plea with a slight nod.

"Yeah, you wouldn't want to have your other mother yell at you too," Aaron said playfully.

"Oh, shut up," Emily said jokingly as she looked back at her brother. "Though I guess Andrea's really not as bad as the rest of the family."

"Are you sure you're not just saying that because she buys you things?"

"Oh come off of it, all she got me for Christmas was a cheap scarf and you're acting like she bought me a diamond ring."

"Hey, it was more than I got," Aaron said.

Emily smiled at her brother as she remembered the fairly inexpensive scarf she had received from Andrea. Of course, she no longer had the scarf. It became threadbare soon after she received it and her mother had used the material to mend some other clothing.

"I don't understand why I'm the one who get's chastised. I mean you're the one who always gets in a fight with Jonathan."

"I wouldn't say always, just most of the time."

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“When was the last time?”

“It’s been a while, I think I was eleven. It was back when we went to school together and back before his parents hired him a private tutor.”

“Oh, yeah. What did you do?”

“Well you know how Jonathan is right?”

“Of course.”

“Well in school he was one of those kids the other boys looked up to because he was rich, but he’d always throw huge fits and yell if he couldn’t get his way. He usually picked on other boys who he thought were beneath him. I remember this one day before school opened, he was making fun of my clothes and how shabby they were, so when he turned his back to me I pushed him face first into a drainage ditch that was filled with water.”

Emily laughed a little before replying, “Good.”

“What was even funnier was that his clothes were so wet and muddy he had to take them off and wear nothing more than an old blanket for the rest of the day. You should have seen how everyone made fun of him.”

She laughed even more, “Lord, I wish I could have seen that.”

“Yeah.”

Emily looked down to the ground abstractly as the smile receded from her face. “I can’t tell you how sick I am of this whole marriage arrangement. It doesn’t seem real, you know. It’s like something out of a bad dream, but every day I wake up, I’m one day closer to that nightmare.”

“I’m sure Father will think of something.”

“I suppose. I just wish there was a place where I could live where I wouldn’t have to worry so much. Some place where I could just live my life the way I wanted.”

“I’m not sure such a place like that exists, Em.”

“I guess,” Emily said reflecting on the situation. “I’ve read stories about how this place used to be a place of unlimited freedom, where people could live the way they wanted to.”

“I’ve heard those same stories. How the streets were paved with gold and how men walked on the moon, but they’re nothing but rumors and myths.”

“How do you know? You know just because things aren’t like that now, doesn’t mean they didn’t used to be like that. I mean, where would the stories come from if there weren’t some truth to them.”

“Maybe, who knows? It doesn’t really matter what happened in the past cause it’s over. All that matters is what’s here and now and where we’re going from here.”

Emily grabbed her necklace between her fingers and looked at the worn face of George Washington. She sat idle for a moment as she gazing into Washington’s vacant stare. She didn’t want to believe that the past didn’t matter and she longed to hold on to more of it than just the decaying fragment that she held in her hand. Unfortunately Aaron’s words held more than a little bit of truth in them, and as much as she wanted to, she could not turn back the hands of time. She looked off into the horizon, then gradually back to the ground that was rolling slowly beneath her.

“I’m worried about father. He looks like a man on his death bed,” Emily said as she glanced back toward him.

“I know he hasn’t been sleeping as well as he should be.”

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“I hate to see him in such shape. I wish there was something we could do.” Emily said as she looked to her brother.

“I know, I don’t think I’ve seen him like this since Sarah died.”

Emily turned her head to look at her father again. His eyes were fixed rigidly on the road ahead, but somehow they were vacant. It was as if the man she knew as her father had left and was in a place far, far away.

“You think they’ll serve good wine with dinner tonight?” Aaron asked.

Emily looked away from her father and back to her brother. “Aaron I don’t think you should be overindulging yourself tonight.”

“Trust me, I think the thing this family needs right now is a little overindulgence.”

“Right,” she said sarcastically.

“Have you ever really had wine?”

“No, not really. Well just with communion.”

“You’ve obviously never drunk enough to feel those happy kinds of feelings. Seriously, all your problems will melt away.”

“Yeah, happy enough where you didn’t get out of bed all day, so that I had to do all your chores or happy enough to vomit all over the floor so the house stunk for a whole month,” she retorted.

“Well I was feelin’ good the night before.”

“And the day after?”

“Hmm, I guess not so good,” he said with a slight chuckle. “Listen, don’t worry too much. It will all turn out for the best.”

“I hope you’re right, Aaron. I hope to God you’re right.”

“Don’t worry Em. I always am.”

She laughed warmly at his joke. For the remainder of their journey into town, they talked of trivial matters, the weather, animals in the field and distant childhood memories. Somehow, it had a way of breaking some of the tension that hung over the evening.

The church bells were ringing six o’clock when the family’s wagon finally entered Seaton. They were late and it would still take them a few minutes to reach the Marsh estate which was on the other side of town. The streets were largely deserted as people were busy preparing their supper. As they passed the church the family could hear the melodic sounds of the near hundred-year-old pipe organ signaling the beginning of the evening services. Past the church the houses began to grow progressively larger and more luxurious. Soon their wagon turned at one of the few brick streets. The street was narrow enough for only one wagon or coach. Fortunately, the street was not long enough to worry about more than one carriage using it at once.

The Marsh estate was a modern Garden of Eden confined behind a thick brick wall. Everywhere lush trees and bushes were in the full bloom of a new spring. A willow tree towered over the west side of the mansion and its long wispy arms shielded the house from the sun’s barbarous rays. The lawn was freshly cut and watered from a small stream that ran just behind the Marsh mansion. Through every window on the main level white light emanated from a multitude of candles and gas lamps.

As the family approached, the Marsh’s hired hands retracted the gates allowing them to pass through, and after a moment, they traveled up the inclined drive to the front terrace where David and Jonathan sat waiting for them. They sat and relaxed in the cool spring evening as they slowly sipped away at some tea. James felt like a beggar upon

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seeing David and Jonathan, who were both wearing expensive dark brown suits made of the finest eastern cotton with crisp bow ties fastened snugly around their necks.

“Good evening, La Rouche family,” David said as he watched them climb down from their wagon.

“Good evening David, Jonathan. We’re glad to be here,” Julia said returning the greeting.

“Please excuse Andrea for not being here to greet you. She is busy with the help getting everything ready for tonight’s feast.”

“It’s okay. I understand.”

“James, are you feeling all right? You don’t look so good,” David asked empathetically.

“Please excuse my husband. He’s coming down with a bug of some kind. Shall we go in?”

“Sure,” David said as he turned around to go inside. Emily, Julia and James followed, but Aaron lingered for a bit on the terrace to take a further glimpse of the Marsh estate.

“Nice of you to dress up tonight,” Jonathan said sarcastically.

“Well, I debated between this and the towel I have, but I didn’t want to run the risk that you would see what was between my legs and get jealous,” Aaron retorted.

“You son of a bitch, you’re just lucky that...”

“You’re just lucky your father owns half this town, otherwise you’d be some poor beggar on the street selling his ass for a loaf of bread,” Aaron retorted, as he turned and intentionally bumped into Jonathan’s shoulder as he went into the house to meet up with the rest of his family.

The luxury of the Marsh mansion didn’t end with the lush verdant lawn. Exotic and luxurious furniture from all over the Dominion rested against the walls; a red velvet sofa built from cherry wood sat nestled by the door, while golden yellow chairs sat between a bookshelf full of ancient texts. The cloth that lined the chairs seemed to be made out of burlap that covered layer after layer of stuffing, and with a touch of his hand, Aaron could feel himself becoming part of the chair. This was a piece of furniture that one could easily get lost in for days. The thing that struck him most about the furniture was its cleanliness. There was not a speck of dust anywhere, and he wondered whether any of it had ever been used. The walls were colored light beige that radiantly reflected a thousand dancing lights from the crystal chandelier. Expensive art decorated many of the walls. Most of it had probably come from lands outside the Dominion. He didn’t believe any of it could be produced and sold here.

One of the pieces Aaron came across, entitled the *Mistress of Orleans*, clearly violated the Sixth Pillar of Faith for its offence of decency. The piece featured a young woman wearing nothing but a thin cloth over her stomach; her perfect breasts were exposed as she lay against a backdrop of an ancient, crumbling city. Aaron wandered down a long wide hall towards the sitting room. The hallway showcased the finest artwork that Marsh owned. Intricate jade and ivory figurines decorated small tables while paintings that were hundreds of years old lined the walls. Some of them were damaged by centuries of dust and neglect. One such piece was a fragile painting that bore the image of a bald, aging man with a serious vacant glare holding a pitchfork with a shorter, worn woman standing by his side. The piece had been painted on a number of boards that were

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worn and warped and looked like they had once been touched by fire. But the piece next to the burnt image caught his eye, because it looked as if it were only painted a year ago. The portrait showed a human arm breaking through an egg that was itself a map of the world. He examined it closer, looking at its bright yellowed hues and half-tones when the voice of David Marsh took him by surprise.

“That is a piece from a man named Salvador Dali. It’s four-hundred years old.”

“It’s amazing. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like it.”

“I don’t expect that you have, and as far as I know that’s the original print. It was found in the ruins of New York City, still encased in layers of protective glass. The story that I was told was that it took over two days to retrieve it.” David paused and looked at Aaron to see that he was still examining the painting

“You know, I have ancient books that show hundreds of works such as this one. I often wonder what has happened to them all. It’s sad to think that most of them are gone forever because nothing can ever bring them back.”

“How much did this cost you?”

“Probably about five hundred dollars,” David said reverently as he gazed into the painting’s elegant curves. “Come now. We can discuss art later if you would like. For now though, we should begin the evening.”

Aaron followed David back to the sitting room where the rest of the family was waiting for him. Jonathan was also there with both families. A sly smile appeared on his face as the thought of what he had said to Jonathan reentered his brain. He would have to tell Emily about it later.

“La Rouche family, I thank you for coming here tonight, taking time out of your busy lives so that we can celebrate the coming union of our families,” David said as he addressed both families. “To commemorate the first of what I hope to be many happy occasions, I have hired my friend, Owen, here to take some photographs.”

“Who’s the young boy you have with you Owen?” Julia asked politely.

“My name is Douglas ma’am,” Douglas said politely.

“Why don’t you set up the tri-pod while I prepare the film,” Owen said to Douglas.

The two families watched with differential impatience as Owen gave his apprentice instructions on how to set the camera up and focus the lens and held set up the poses. The first photograph Owen took was of the two families together, seating the men in the row with the women standing behind them, their hands on the shoulders of their spouse or fiancé. To Owen, the photographs seemed incredibly mismatched.

The Marsh family was truly a work of art. Both Jonathan and David were dressed in their best suits. David was poised and his golden beard trimmed to perfection. Andrea wore the finest evening gown. Her round feminine face was powdered in the soft, youthful make-up with her long, silk brown hair draped flawlessly around her shoulders.

The La Rouche family was a ragged bunch by contrast. James’ scraggily black beard, ill fitting suit and exhausted expression gave him all the grace of a homeless street urchin. Julia was above plain. The lines in her face pronounced for all to see. Aaron’s clothes were caked with dirt and dust and with the exception of his sandy blond hair he was a spitting image of his father only twenty years younger. Emily alone stood out among the family. Her beauty was in her simplicity. Her face timeless in her youth, her

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fair dress and her fine braided auburn hair gave the illusion of grace and civility. Owen could see why David had once referred to her as the diamond amongst the coal.

Photo after photo was taken and after each shot the same routine followed. The film cartridge was loaded and the lens adjusted and refocused. The final shot featured Emily and Jonathan together standing together arm in arm in a pose to symbolize unbreakable embrace and lasting commitment. As soon as the last photograph was taken, both Emily and Jonathan broke their embrace as quickly as they could and took their respective places with their parents.

“Thank you, Owen. We will see you in three weeks,” David said as Owen was packing up his things.

“Oh, right,” Owen said distantly, “What time?”

“The service starts at five in the evening, so we’ll grab a couple quick photos afterwards.”

“All right,” Owen said and he and Douglas finished packing up the tripod.

“And now if everyone will follow me into the dining hall where a special feast awaits you,” David said.

From where Emily was sitting she could not tell that anything had been prepared, but nevertheless she followed David back through the hallway, past the entrance and through the drawing room. When she walked through the double oak doors, inviting aroma fully engulfed her senses. Scents of succulent roast beef and chicken along with steamed potatoes, corn, green beans, yams with fresh breads and cheeses with several kinds of sweet cake were prepared and waiting for them.

The Marsh family had clearly spared no expense for tonight’s feast. It was clear to James that he would do the same for the wedding ceremony and the reception following it. The thought entered his head that nothing was beyond this man’s scope of control. It was hard to tell what he would be capable of sacrificing for his own need and for a second the thought struck him that David was the type of man who would sell his soul to the devil to freeze the seas solid if he thought that it would in some way benefit him.

“James, Julia and Aaron, your places have been set for you over here,” David said as he motioned to his left. “Emily, please join Andrea and Jonathan on this side.”

David took his seat at the head of the table while the servants pulled back the chairs for the women. When everyone was seated David extended his hands toward James and Andrea. “Shall we say grace?” David asked.

Emily reluctantly extended her hand to Jonathan and as soon as he latched onto it David began his prayer. “Dear Lord, thank you for this meal which we are about to eat. Bless us all and keep us in good spirits and health. Amen.” As soon as David had finished Emily quickly retracted her hand and everyone else began to fill their plates with the food for them. With the exception of polite exchanges and gestures, conversation was intentionally kept to a minimum until the meal was finished.

As Aaron had hoped, David Marsh did indeed supply some of the finest wines in his collection. An aged red wine was brought out and despite its bitter, negligible taste, Aaron found himself drinking glass after glass.

Emily, feeling awkward and paranoid sitting so close to Jonathan, also began to drink more than her fair share. She hadn’t initially set out to drink so much, but with each glass she consumed she found that Aaron’s words were coming true. She did feel happier

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and less reclusive as her inhibitions slowly slipped away and soon her eyes began to lose focus and parts of her face became numb.

David surmised that Emily was drunk by the way she kept touching her nose and wobbling in her seat, and felt that he should try to keep the evening moving forward.

“Everyone, at this time I would like to say a few words if I may,” David said as he stood up from his chair and raised his glass. “I want to wish my son and his soon-to-be bride the best in life as long as they as they live, that their union will produce children for our families to delight in...”

A slightly delayed laugh that turned into a series of small choking coughs came from Aaron as he looked at Jonathan and Emily together. His faux pas caused a slight smile and quiet laugh to come from Emily, while everyone else looked on with serious stone-like faces.

“Sorry,” Aaron said half-heartedly as the smile remained on his face.

David recollected his composure from the outburst and tried to finish his toast. “Anyway, here is to you. Jonathan and Emily, wishing you all the happiness in your lives together.

As Emily raised her glass to Marsh’s toast it slipped from her fingers, spilling red wine all over Jonathan in the process. His bleached white shirt was covered in a blood red hue while his brown suit jacket and pants would be ruined by the setting stain. After she realized her blunder, she did the only thing she could think of-- she laughed. Once she started, it was almost impossible for her to stop. It was a silly type of laughter which could only be produced by the comic folly of a drunken haze.

Jonathan, though, was not amused. He was roiled by the fact that his clothes had been ruined and, to make matters worse, some peasant girl was mocking him.

“Jonathan, why don’t you take Emily back to the sitting room and then go change into some fresh clothes,” David said his voice hinting at his burgeoning annoyance.

Jonathan said nothing as he rose from his chair. He grabbed Emily’s bicep and pulled her from her place. Since he was almost eight inches taller than she, he was able to guide her effortlessly from the room. Once they had left, James and Julia sat quietly with worried expressions on their faces as the seconds ticked slowly away.

David’s breathing became heavy and agitated as he found his patience beginning to slip away from him. Everything he worked so hard to plan for a week now was quickly coming undone.

“David, can I see you for a minute, privately please?” Andrea said, breaking the silence.

David angrily set his glass down, splashing red wine on the table and together with they left the dining hall and walked to the kitchen. As soon as they entered, David motioned to his servants to begin cleaning up the remains from supper leaving them behind in peace.

“David, what are you thinking? I’ve seen that look before on your face and every time I see it, it means that you are about to lose your temper.”

“I am just about just fed up with it, Andrea. First, Aaron interrupts me, and then Emily makes a fool of herself, and then she mocks Jonathan in front of everyone.”

“Oh David, you’re too much of a perfectionist. Nothing can go your way all the time. Besides, this was probably Emily’s first time drinking wine. You know they don’t

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have such luxuries out where they live. Besides, it is not as if we were entertaining the Bishop or someone like that.”

“Perhaps, but...”

“She is going to be our daughter-in-law. You will have to show her and her family some patience and remember that they don’t have the luxury or class that we have been blessed with.”

David looked into Andrea’s eyes and began to relax, “I suppose you’re right, but still...”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sure once Jonathan gets changed and Emily’s had a chance to rest, the remainder of the night will go smoothly.”

“All right, fine. Let’s go back and take the others to the sitting room and see if we can get this evening into some sort of order.”

* * *

It took Jonathan a minute of careful guidance to get Emily to the sitting room, as she couldn’t seem to be able to put one foot in front of the other. With each lumbering step they took, Jonathan became more enraged. He was angry for his best clothes being ruined, for the insult that Aaron had leveled on him earlier and for the many number of times Emily had refused his company. He was sick of her and this whole idea of marriage. But if he had to go through with it, he would at least make it clear that there were lines of conduct for which she would have to follow, or else.

When they managed to reach the sitting room, Emily stumbled into Jonathan’s chest at which he pushed her away but held onto her wrist with an iron tight grip.

“Am I am amusing to you Emily? Huh? Am I a joke to you?” he said, his eyes reflecting the rage that boiled within his soul.

“Ah calm don Jon, huh, it was jush a little wine, huh besides you got more of em,” Emily said, not being able to control the slur in her speech.

“You think you can do whatever you want in your life, well think again. When we are married, you will show me some damn respect or so help me God I will show you what I am capable of doing and I promise you, it won’t be pleasant.”

“Oh, go da hell! I ain’t gonna marry you!”

“No? Good, that’s fine with me. Why don’t you tell my father all about it and then see how you and your family like living in a dark prison cell with the drunkards and whores, but I am sure you’ll feel right at home there.”

“You bastar...” Emily began to say but her voice gave way to a slight scream in pain as Jonathan began to twist her wrist. She tried to pull away and at the same time Jonathan used his weight to push her down, causing her to lose her footing and smack her head against the edge of a solid wooden chair. As Emily lay moaning Jonathan felt relief almost vindication. He had achieved a victory over his soon-to-be bride. She would think twice before crossing him.

In an instant, lightning struck and a blinding white flash consumed his eyes as it felt like a horse kicked him in the back of the head. Jonathan felt himself falling down

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and when he landed he found that all of his energy had melted away. He rolled over and saw Aaron standing over him and the remaining energy surged through him like an untamed river current. He pushed himself up off the ground to try to strike back at Aaron but it was no use. Aaron hit him square in the mouth and he fell back down again. A few seconds later everyone else had made their way into the room. James stood idly as he tried to assess the situation in front of him while Julia ran over to her fallen daughter. James looked from Emily to Aaron and then to David and Andrea as they walked into the room. James closed his eyes for he knew what was to follow was going to be unpleasant.

For a few seconds, David and Andrea stood frozen in the horror that lie before them. David upon seeing his only son lying bloodied on the floor became incensed and in one second his renewed patience vanished.

“Just what in God’s name is going on in here?” he bellowed.

Jonathan, weak but sensing an opportunity to prevent his actions from being known, took it, “He...attacked me, Father, and I was knocked over into Emily and she fell down and struck her head on that chair.”

David didn’t believe that his son would intentionally hurt anyone, and turned an accusatory eye upon Aaron.

“Sir, he’s lying. He...”

“Enough! That’s it! I want you all out of my house at once. I’ve grown tired of all your antics tonight.”

Without a word, James and Julia got Emily up and aided her to the door while Aaron followed right behind.

David stopped James at the door. He wished to deliver a message to him in private.

“Aaron, why don’t you help your mother get Emily to the wagon,” James said. Once they were out of earshot, he turned back to Marsh.

“James, our families are about to become one here soon, but that doesn’t mean I won’t make your life miserable if one of your brood displeases me, so a word to the wise, keep your children under control.”

With that, Marsh slammed the door on James leaving him standing alone on the terrace as the night began to fall over him. Marsh’s words pierced his heart like a wooden stake. He had hope for much more this evening. At the least, he had hoped for a good evening that would have brought the families closer together so that when Marsh found out that Emily would not marry his son, there was a chance he could see through it. But like the sunlight, that chance was rapidly fading and James wondered if it weren’t his own life that was fading, too.