

Ascension From Hell

As dawn breaches the horizon, a crimson light shines through my window and into my tired golden eyes. Today is October 31st. More specifically, Initiation Day. Covering my face with my hands, I groan. No doubt one of my parents will be knocking on my locked door any minute now.

Just five more minutes...

Hiding under my blankets—which I have dragged over my entire body—to block out the light, I close my eyes, hoping to drift off again and forget about the nightmare to come. Soon enough, three sharp taps on the door catch my attention. I sigh. Why can't they just leave me alone? Lowering the blankets off my head, I glance at the Roman numeral clock beside me. It's 9:00 in the morning.

"Heaven! Are you awake?" my father's deep voice calls from beyond my closed door. I sigh bitterly, still irked by having been forcefully woken by the bloody sunrise.

"Yes!"

"Remember; it's Initiation Day. C'mon, get up! Hurry now! You want to be your best, don't you?" I can hear the disgusting optimism in his voice. How sickening. I suppress the urge to laugh scornfully at his rhetorical question. You see, being "my best" means I have to commit whole-heartedly to a life ruled by ruin and death. Not for me, of course, but my helpless victims. Why does everyone insist that I go through with this ceremony? I never asked to be born this way, damn it!

"...Fine." I reply without even attempting to mask my contempt. My father does not seem to notice—or perhaps he simply chooses to ignore—my change in tone.

“Come downstairs as soon as you’re dressed. Your mother is waiting.”

His heavy footsteps grow softer as he walks away. I reluctantly rise from my bed, then walk over to the bathroom and shower. As the hot water drenches my pale flesh, I reflect on a moment from my childhood...

“Heaven, honey, are you awake?”

“Yes, Mama.”

“Come now, it’s time to get up! We are going to the Divinity Festival today, remember?

With all of that delicious food and those fun games, we shall have a wonderful time together!

And tonight, we shall celebrate your brother’s initiation as a Son of Satan! Your dress and robes are hanging in your closet. Please dress quickly. We have much to do to prepare. I’ll see you downstairs!”

“Okay, Mama.”

I shudder at the memory as I shut the water off. Vyrus was twenty-one when he was conscripted. Meanwhile, I was only eleven; a mere child who knew nothing of the truth. I didn’t understand what the Divinity Festival and the Initiation Ceremony actually symbolized. I didn’t understand the seriousness of the mysterious rite that occurred every Halloween night inside the cathedral. I didn’t understand how corrupt the Council of Divine Sinners truly was. Not until I watched my brother, Vyrus, go through initiation did I discover the truth. Unspoken evil lurks in our society like a disease; how clear it should have been! Yet I simply shrugged it off. I didn’t know any better. And how could I have?

Vyrus had looked so proud with that smile, joyful tears glistening in his shiny crimson eyes as he stood at the pulpit alongside the legendary leader of the Council—Lord Xarnon.

Shaking the thoughts from my mind, I dry myself off with a clean towel. I then return to my room and change. Looking at my reflection in the mirror, I scowl. I don't look enough like a tiefling. Yes, I have our lovely signature horns that curve upward like a broken halo. Compared to the rest of my family, though, my bluish-gray hair, pale flesh, and bright, golden eyes scream "human" rather than monster. But I am a tiefling. We're supposed to be scary. We're supposed to be dangerous. We're supposed to be hateful and cruel.

We were and still are a damned race.

You must understand; our reputations have been ruined by the intense xenophobia of every single other race. All because of those dreadful humans who made all the wrong choices long long ago. Giving in to their sinfulness, they made deals with demons and fiends, and in response to their prayers, were presented with everything they ever wanted, like twisted genies. Of course, these deals came at a cost, one those humans could never hope to pay. As a result of their vices, those humans transformed into hideous monsters, consumed by their own desires. Cursed with eternal damnation, they developed sharp teeth, dark flesh, and a hellish glare in their eyes. Everyone hated them. And thus, the broken humans earned the name "tieflings" as their final punishment. With every generation afterwards, their traits were passed down until their human origins were forgotten. Now, we remain here as monsters in their place.

Our society has transformed their actions from a simple spark into the blazing hellfire of rebellion against all other races, especially humans. Our ancestors were the ones who created us. And so, we now treat all of humanity as our mortal enemies, choosing to openly commit torture and murder against any who should wander into our homeland.

I still remember the first—and only—time I killed a human. He'd been scheduled for a public execution simply for becoming lost in our hidden realm. He told me his name was Melchor and begged me to spare him. I suppose a small part of me had sympathy for him then, but I'd been able to ignore the emotion due to what I can only imagine was “overwhelming joy” at the idea of spilling blood. Unfortunately, I could not change his fate—or mine—as a mere teen. I remember my father carefully setting an ornate dagger in my hands. He had proudly purchased the blade for me not long before this event. And though he'd shown me where to strike, I was so excited that I ended up decapitating Melchor. Oh, how proud my father was of me that day. As a prize, he cut out Melchor's heart and gifted it to me. Looking back on it now, I only really remember Melchor's tears. His heart sits in a jar on my desk all these years later.

I wish I hadn't killed him.

How ironic that despite our society's atrocities, my family's cultish faith, and my evil ancestors' crimes, I still find myself pretty. Maybe the humanness of my appearance is a secret blessing. Nonetheless, my red robes and the dark magic symbol displayed on my chest make me feel stained, impure. Another reason why I often avoid mirrors. I have no choice right now; the Council of Divine Sinners forbids anyone not to wear them for the ceremony. Once I've finished dressing, I walk downstairs to find breakfast awaiting me. My mother and father exchange glances, then look at me with wide eyes.

Are they... afraid?

Impossible. Absolutely no way they've sensed my inner conflict.

“You look positively lovely, Heaven!” my mother says, patting my head. A small smile crosses my face when she does so. Unfortunately my smile is short-lived.

“I’m so proud of you, little one,” my father says, grinning.

“Dad, I’m not little anymore. I’m eighteen years old,” I protest. He just laughs. I sit at the table. After my mother sets a plate of food in front of me and pours me a drink, we begin to pray.

“O Great Myrkul, we call upon you today to ask for your guidance during the Divinity Festival. May our beloved Heaven’s ceremony be successful. Hold her hand as she joins you in the realm of twilight and...”

I choose to ignore the rest of the prayer. I don’t care for it; I never have. Only now do I fully understand the reason why. Shortly after the Council of Divine Sinners inducted Vyrus, he left home and never came back. A part of me died that day, knowing I couldn’t save him. Now I see through the lies. I don’t say those prayers anymore. With every minute spent immersed in this horrifying cult, I hate myself more for staying here. Neither of my parents seem to care that he’s gone. I can’t stand it anymore.

I must change my fate today.

“Nazra,” my parents finish in unison.

“Nazra,” I whisper. Never in my life have I been so terrified.

Before the ceremony begins tonight, I have something I need to do. On the outskirts of our town, a traveling cart sometimes sets up shop out of nowhere. Someone is waiting for me there; my dear friend, the owner of that traveling cart.

I still remember the day I met her.

Once, when I was thirteen, I wandered through the forest all the way to our town’s border. Amidst the rain falling through openings in the trees, I spotted her. An ethereal young

woman with chest-length wavy white hair and silver eyes sat beside her cart, sharpening her sword. I had never seen a more elegant weapon. Cautiously approaching her, she looked up and smiled at me. She was coldly beautiful, a drop of moonlight shimmering in the mist. I couldn't find my voice to speak to her. Luckily, she started the conversation for me.

"You are far from home, little one."

Somehow, even the gentle sound of her voice seemed to radiate magic.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Asphodel Whitestar," she answered simply. "And you are...?"

"H... Heaven Woevari," I replied.

"Heaven. A title worthy of a lovely tiefling such as yourself."

She complimented me?

"What brings you to my shop, Heaven?"

"...I don't know, honestly."

"Mm. Never fear; I believe I understand. You see, I come here to read, to collect and sell items from my travels, and most of all to develop my sword skills. Your forest here is quiet and deep. It is a perfect place for solitude. You, however, have ventured here for another purpose. Looking at your eyes, I'd say you seek redemption for something in your past."

"How did you—"

"I've learned how to read others' eyes. After all, they are the window to the soul. Am I correct in my conclusion?"

"Yes... I have committed a horrible deed and I wish to redeem myself, but I do not know how. Can you help me?"

“Of course. You need only ask.”

On those nights she'd set up shop—she told me which nights she'd be there—I'd sneak out of the house to see her. She told me she was a member of a class of knights called paladins. She taught me about her deity; Selûne, the Goddess of the Moon. She gifted me an old dagger of hers to train with. I enjoyed spending these secret hours with her at dead of night. When I'd return home, I'd feel cleansed.

Now, five years later, I have come to see her one final time. She's in her mid twenties, but still smiles upon seeing me approach. Asphodel has listened to my struggles, my insecurities, and my fears for all this time. I am going to change my fate. After a long conversation discussing my plan, she gives me one more gift; an enchanted moonstone necklace, the last of her holy relics.

“Be safe, Heaven,” she says, “and come find me once you have escaped. We'll search for Vyrus together.” She hugs me. With teary eyes, I thank her, then head back to town. A few short hours remain until the ceremony begins.

I need to prepare.

Come mid afternoon, I explore the square with some money my father has given me. In the market, dozens of shops sell trinkets, clothing, and all sorts of other festive items. Various smells from delicious food fill the air around me. I choose not to go home in between the start of the festivities and the ceremony. I've already packed my necessary belongings and dropped them off with Asphodel. Neither of my parents noticed (or cared, if they did actually notice). Quite the opposite, in fact. Both my mother and father are busy spending these precious hours conversing

with other townsfolk and preparing their own goods for selling. I'd rather not face them again if possible.

Upon seeing the ghost-shaped sign lit up in white neon, I smile. Spirit Gaming, the local arcade, is my favorite place to hang out, and I need something to calm my nerves over tonight. Heading inside, I immediately spot my best friend Eterna at one of the machines. She waves me over excitedly.

"Heya, Heaven! How're you doin'? Ready for your initiation tonight?" she asks.

"Y-Yeah. A bit anxious though." I had hoped she wouldn't ask about the ceremony, but she's my best friend, so I'm not surprised. I focus all my energy keeping my emotions bottled up.

"No worries! I'll admit, I was nervous too. You'll be okay, though! Lord Xarnon is wonderful! He'll keep you safe." She grins. Something about Eterna's smile unnerves me.

"You really think so?"

"Oh, I *know* so! Becoming a Devil's Daughter was the best moment of my life!"

"Good. I-I'm... glad you're happy, Eterna," I wince softly. She doesn't sound at all like herself anymore. She's been manipulated too.

"Heh heh! C'mon, Heaven, let's go play some games!"

Nodding, I follow her over to one of the virtual reality stations and watch as she selects her favorite game. We don our eyewear and pick up our weapons. A vast, dark garden realm called the Bonemeadow stretches as far as our eyes can see. As we play, I decide to try and ask her some innocent questions about the ceremony. More information on the ritual could give me vital insight on Vyrus' disappearance. Eterna kills several targets within the first few minutes.

"Hey. May I ask something?"

“About how I’m much better at this than you?” she sneers playfully. I let out a light chuckle. Now *that* sounds like my best friend.

“Obviously. After all, it is your favorite game. I have a different question though.”

“Okay, shoot.”

“About your initiation experience...”

“Ohhh, I see! Ask away!”

“What happens when you become a Devil’s Daughter or Son of Satan?”

“Oh, it’s wonderful! As you know, the Council of Divine Sinners rules over our town and provides for our every need. Lord Xarnon, the Council’s founder, organizes this huge festival full of activities and good food and a formal dance with special music. He dons his ornate robes and goes around meeting with others throughout the festivities.”

“Y-Yes, I remember all of that.”

“Oh, right, right! Sometimes I forget you were there seven years ago. We hadn’t met yet. And you didn’t meet Lord Xarnon yourself, did you? He’s truly wonderful, but very private. I love seeing him out and about.”

“Mhm. And the initiation ritual?”

“Well, before the ritual, Lord Xarnon quiets everyone down and makes a powerful and inspiring speech. I’ve always enjoyed—”

“About what?”

“I uh, don’t remember all the details, but he starts by sharing the history of our conflict with humans. He then speaks of Myrkul, the God of Death. According to him, it is by his divine power that we shall no longer be oppressed. He finishes with some passionate, honorary words

about those who have chosen to become his disciples. It's my favorite part! Sometimes I wish my faith was as strong as his!"

"...Wow." I have no words. Eterna has changed since her induction last year. She's had her entire personality erased and she doesn't even realize anything's wrong.

"Yeah, it's all so fascinating! I'm really looking forward to you joining me!"

"Okay. Now, explain Initiation."

"Oh, sorry! I'm rambling, huh? All right. Here's a breakdown: after his speech, Lord Xarnon brings you into a dim room lit by eighteen candles: six have red flames, six have purple flames, and six have black flames. It's really quite beautiful. And the atmosphere is vital here! All of the other eight members of the council surround you, whispering the necessary magic spell incantations. Meanwhile, Lord Xarnon makes sure you're comfortable on the bed in the center of the room before proceeding. Holding out his grimoire, he murmurs his own incantations, the ones required to summon Myrkul himself. One by one, the members of the Council then pour a cup of pure human blood on you. Supposedly the scent of blood is a key element in summoning him too. I can remember everything so vividly!" she says. My heart squeezes in my chest. I can't believe what I'm hearing. I remove my eyewear and turn to her.

"...How does it end?"

"Haha! I won!"

"Eterna!" I shout. She flinches. I realize that others are staring now.

"What's wrong, Heaven?" She removes her eyewear. "Are you okay?"

"Do not... stop now. Tell me... how it ends," I command, breathing ragged.

“Ah, sorry. I suppose I’m reminiscing. Once Myrkul arrives, inky shadows creep up from the sigil in the floor and enter your body, unlocking your new black magic. Lord Xarnon says something along the lines of ‘our master has shown himself. We humbly ask you; carry out your deathly deed.’ Myrkul then hovers above you, touching you with his skeletal hand to mark you as his child.” Eterna brushes her dark purple bangs out of her face to reveal a crimson, inverted cross symbol. “As you can see, I am his daughter in death.”

“...Does it hurt?”

“Oh, yes. Once you make it through initiation, though, everything’s all right from there!”

She smiles sweetly at me. I suppress the urge to vomit. You mean to tell me that *this* is what happened to Vyrus?!

“I... I have to go.”

“Oh? So soon?”

I don’t give her a response. Luckily, the chime of the town square clock answers for me.

“Oh, shoot! It’s nearly time! See you later, Heaven!” She calls after me. I run as fast as I can, terror blazing into wrath.

A bloody sunset illuminates the heart of town when I re-enter. I cannot wear this mask of excitement any longer. I’m spooked this Halloween night. Now that I know the truth about what Vyrus experienced, I want to murder the whole Council myself. I don’t know if my brother is alive or dead, but they must have been responsible for his disappearance after the ceremony! Worst of all, my parents don’t seem to care at all! I will not share in my family and friends’ fates. I cannot fall victim to that demented ritual. I must escape. All of the buildings and houses look

ominous with their blood red lighting and demonic banners. I soon spot my father and mother amidst the animated crowd.

“Good evening, my little angel!” my father says cheerfully.

No. Stop. I do not deserve or want that nickname. Not from you.

“You’re awfully quiet. Are you feeling okay?” my mother asks a moment later.

“Oh, uh, yeah. Sorry, I’m... a bit worried about the ceremony.”

“Ah, I see. Don’t be afraid. You’re going to have a wonderful time,” he says.

“All your friends will be there too!” my mother says. And then my father, smiling his signature fanged smile, has the audacity to say...

“Vyrus would be so proud of you.”

My fingers on my right hand twitch with rage, ready to grab my dagger and drive it into his chest for using my brother’s name, especially in that tone. I hate how my father acts friendly. He too is manipulating me into becoming a heartless monster. How cruel, all of it! As if such a thing as a “divine sinner” exists in the first place! Impossible! Curse those ancient demons who ruined our humanity!

I leave them behind and walk around the town, exploring everything there is to offer. I decide not to sample any of the food, no matter how tasty I suspect it’ll be. Everyone goes all out for the Divinity Festival: hosting events in their homes, baking dozens of sweet treats, playing fun games, creating gorgeous artwork, mingling with other townsfolk—everything feels alive (and in a sick and twisted way, it is). Luckily, I manage to avoid running into any more of my friends.

I want nothing more to do with the Damned Executioners—the “honored” title of our horrible cult. I am going to commit one last sin: treason. Against my own people.

Suddenly, after several hours of celebration, the clock strikes midnight. Lord Xarnon stands at his pulpit, surrounded by a bloody halo of red and purple light, and I watch him lead everyone in prayer.

“O Divine Myrkul, we praise your name on this wonderful day and ask that you capture our hearts and minds.” As he continues, I sneak through the crowd and come as close as I can to him. His void-like flesh and massive storm gray horns give him quite the presence. Still, I am confident I can escape him. Mid prayer, he opens his crimson eyes and gazes upon me. I stop moving and breathing as my blood runs cold.

“...bless your name. Nazra. Now then, would Heaven Woevari please take the stage beside me?” he asks with an air of finality. Everyone around me turns to look at me. I swallow hard under my hood, then silently step up to meet him. We now stand face to face, and I meet his eyes with conviction. I must complete the Initiation Ceremony and allow the light within me to save me. “Miss Woevari, we’ve been waiting for you and now today is your day. May this moment of your induction be remembered for all time!” he says. And the crowd cheers.

He extends his hand. I breathe in. I breathe out. Grabbing his hand, I follow him into the abyss, preparing for my own torture and execution.

Upon entering the room, I immediately recognize the scent of death. Lord Xarnon gestures to the clean white bed in the center of the pentagram sigil on the floor. He makes sure I am “comfortable,” speaking softly to me the whole time. I hear nothing. Only my own heartbeat

as I stare at him in mute horror. He leaves my vision and the ritual begins. I hate the sound of their voices. I hate the taste of accidental blood spilt down my throat. I hate the feel of the shadows ripping through my body. All I know now is the excruciating pain of summoning Myrkul, the God of Death to whom my people show blind devotion. I do everything I can to keep myself from screaming. Just as I am about to lose consciousness, Lord Xarnon shouts and announces the presence of Myrkul, who now hovers above me in all his blasphemous glory. He reaches a burnt, skeletal hand for my face. I shut my eyes.

Suddenly, to everyone's surprise (including myself!), a blinding white light blasts through his incorporeal body, stopping him from touching me. All of my chains (yes, I'd been chained to the bed) shatter instantaneously. Now's my chance! Collapsing to the ground, I look up at Lord Xarnon. I'll escape, but I need him to experience the horrors of his atrocities.

He has made one fatal mistake in bringing me here.

"Miss Woevari! Are you all right? You poor thing..."

Without any warning, I grab the hidden dagger on my body and plunge the blade into his chest, ripping through him. Myrkul is gone, and I have now killed our dictator in cold blood.

All of the remaining Council members gasp and scream at what I have done. I turn to them, my golden eyes shining with resolve.

"Woevari! What have you done?!" one of them shouts.

"Move! Before I kill the rest of you!"

I threaten to stab them if they try to stop me. Only three of the eight make the attempt.

I rush outside and stand at Lord Xarnon's podium, covered in blood.

“Listen to me! All of you! You’re living a lie! Lord Xarnon has corrupted you into sharing his xenophobia towards humanity! You have been blinded by a madman! We do not have to be like him! He does not scare me! Lord Xarnon is dead! I killed him! What you’ve been doing is more than wrong; it’s pure evil! Stop this madness, and leave this hellish nightmare, or suffer your fate at the hands of Selûne!” I scream until my words finally die in my throat.

Silence greets me. Wrath soon follows.

“TRAITOR!” my father shouts. Everyone has turned against me. I need a quick escape. Calling out to my new deity, Selûne, I asked for healing and safety. Clouds overhead dissipate as the holy light of the full moon shines down on me. Blinded, my people shield their eyes while I run for my life, not looking back.

“SEIZE HER!” the remaining council members shout after me. No matter; they are too late. I have betrayed my people; every single one of them. Strangled, chaotic laughter escapes from my ruined throat.

Have I really done this?

As my feet pound against the soft, dark earth, I cast off my red cultist robes to reveal white clothing underneath. It’s not until I stop laughing that I begin to weep. I hadn’t realized until this moment how scared I’d been my whole life. I sought redemption and subsequently lost everyone I ever cared about; my mother, my father, all of my friends—gone, left behind. And strangely, I miss Melchor. His heart is with me, kept safe in that jar entrusted to Asphodel.

I can only hope Vyrus is still alive. After all, I have given up everything to find him. Once I pass beyond the border, I feel my heart beat in time with my steps.

Hours later, a white sun rises on the horizon. I feel the stains of my past sins wash away. No longer will I follow the wicked doctrine of my old society. I have a new purpose now; saving my brother from the fate Myrkul and Lord Xarnon bestowed upon him all those years ago. I whisper a prayer of my own, just as Asphodel had shown me.

“My beloved family and friends... forgive me. I’m so sorry. I promise, I did all of this for you. I hope we meet again someday. If not, I want you to understand... I’ve always cherished you... Amen.”

I continue running until I can no longer hear anyone else’s voice but my own.