



DIABLO
BELIAL'S RETURN

ALL WHO LIE

A SHORT STORY BY
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ALL WHO LIE

It was not the first time the father had used his wheelbarrow to move a corpse. He had filled it with the butchered remains of his neighbors when the goatmen last came howling down from the heights. He had used it to carry away the dead from a village overrun by fever and boils, despite the parishioners' fervent prayers. In a better world, the little wooden cart would have known only honest farmwork, transporting heaps of fieldstone or night soil. But the father didn't live in that better world. He and his wife scraped their livelihood from the hard ground of the Fractured Peaks. His wheelbarrow bore stains of plague and bloodshed, and now it held the small, fragile body of his daughter.

The couple felt too ashamed of their purpose to travel by day, so they reached the ruin under the cold, thin light of a waning moon. The ribs of the fallen chapel jutted upward, jagged and scorched. The arched portal where doors had once stood open before them like a gap-toothed mouth frozen in a silent scream. The father and mother paused at that threshold, but not from indecision—they had both already made the same choice, for different reasons. They were simply afraid to take the next step.

A hooded figure emerged from the shadows of the ruin into the meager moonlight. "We expected you yesterday," he said. "I was beginning to wonder if you would be true to your word."

The father set the wheelbarrow down, and his spine cracked as he unbent it. "It wasn't an easy journey."

"I expect it was quite arduous," the figure said. "And it will only get more difficult from here."

"Are you trying to talk us out of this?" the mother asked.

"Not at all," the figure said. "A change in course now would only result in a great deal of . . . unpleasantness."

"For who?" The father clenched his blistered hands into fists.

"For you, of course." The figure drew closer, and within his cloak glinted the pommel of a dagger at his waist. "And for me, since I am the one who brokered the arrangement. There are other parties involved now, and it would not do to disappoint them. But none of that matters, really. We both know you are too far down this road to turn aside."

The mother stepped in front of the broker and looked up into his hood. "Then let's stop all this talking and do what we came here to do."

The broker nodded. "I assume the wheelbarrow holds . . ."

The father pulled back the burlap he had used to conceal the body of his daughter. The freezing mountain winds had staved off decay. She wore the shroud in which she should have been buried, and beneath the moon her pale skin seemed to gleam with the luster of pearl. A strand of her fine brown hair had fallen across her forehead and cheek, which the father bent to tenderly tuck behind her ear, as though she were simply asleep in her bed. The mother didn't even look at the girl.

"Such a beautiful child," the broker said. "How old?"

"Six years," said the mother.

"Once again, allow me to express my sincere sympathy—"

"We don't need your sympathy," the father said. "We need your associates to hold up their end of the bargain."

The broker bowed his head. "Fair enough. They await you inside."

THE FATHER

In previous years, the ruin had been a large chapel, serving the patrons of several villages. Its thick walls had offered safety to worshippers and supplicants, its stained-glass windows glimmering through the long nights with the promise of hope, but only for a time. As with all things made by mortals, hope failed. After the Great Enmity, all faiths had diminished in strength, and this chapel—like so many others—now stood abandoned, leaving it vulnerable to desecration.

The broker led the way through the rubble. Shards of glass crunched beneath their feet as they passed through the shadows of broken columns and climbed around the wreckage of wooden pews hacked to pieces. The father glimpsed what remained of a holy visage, depicted in a mosaic on the floor, and quickly looked away.

“Should we be doing this . . . here?” he asked.

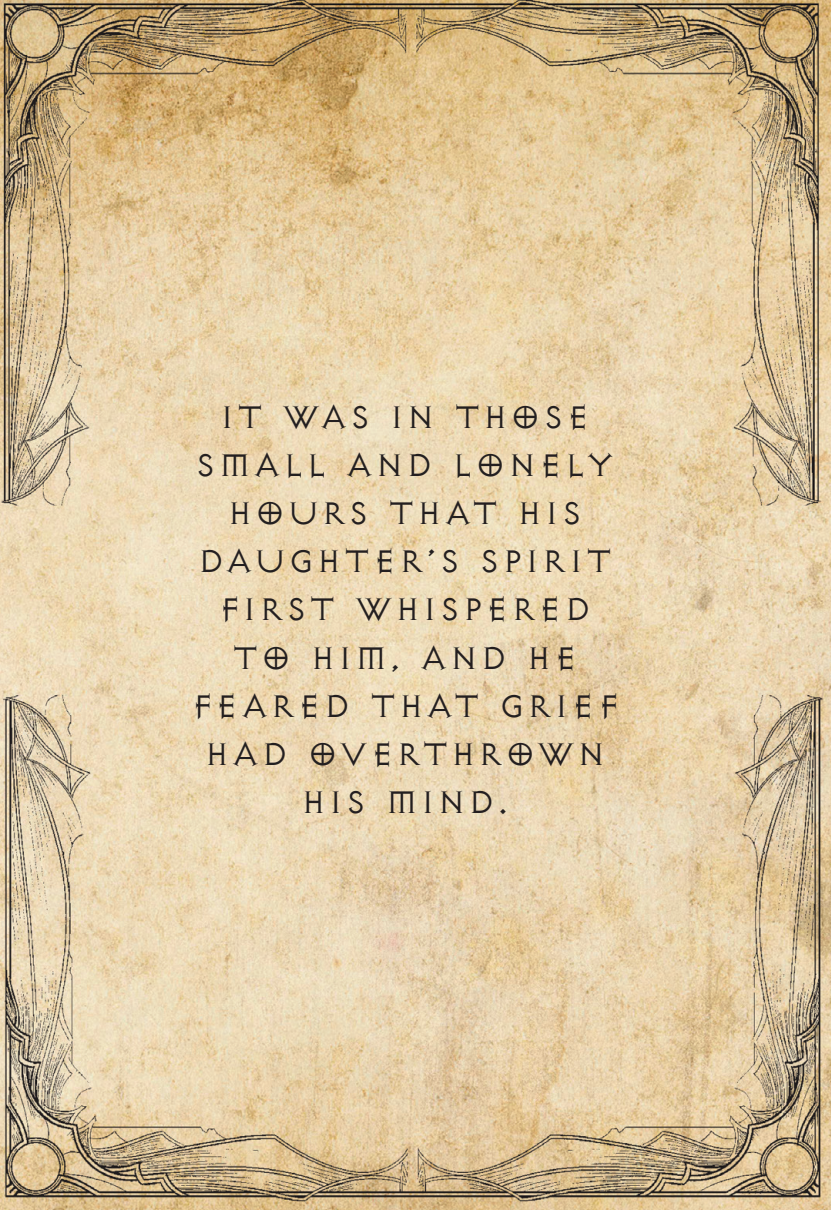
The broker smirked. “I didn’t take you for a religious man.”

“I’m not,” the father said. “But I don’t go pulling at spiderwebs without cause neither.”

“You have nothing to fear from this place,” the broker said. “It was deconsecrated. Whatever sanctity or power it might have once possessed has long since forsaken it. This is a fine place to do what you have come to do.”

That failed to reassure the father, but before he could speak, his daughter whispered in his mind. He carried her body in his arms, with her head lying upon his shoulder. “Do not fear, Father,” she said, though her lips remained shut. “You are where you need to be.”

She had spoken to him in that way since the night she had died. Since the night his wife’s medicine had failed, and his little girl had taken her last desperate and gasping breath. He had stayed beside her body until long after the candles guttered and his wife put their other children to bed. It was in those small and lonely hours that his daughter’s spirit first whispered to him, and he feared that grief had overthrown his mind. But he knew that voice and couldn’t ignore it. His child had reached out to him across the chasm of death, and she spoke about a path of return for her to the realm of the living. He had promised to restore her—he owed her that much and more—but he knew better than to acknowledge her voice in the presence of others. Even his own wife would think he had gone mad.



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In a far corner of the chapel, the broker stooped to lift a grate in the floor. Its rusted hinges shrieked in the night, causing the father to startle and wince. Beneath the grate, a narrow staircase descended into the earth, its bottom steps drenched in a dim, reddish glow. The broker motioned them downward, and the mother balked.

"You must take us for fools if you think we're going down there with you," she said.

The broker sighed. "This is not the sort of thing that can be done in the open, even in a place such as this. Besides which, and I mean no offense when I say this, but you are hardly the kind of folk worth luring all the way here if robbery were my intent."

"Go, Father," his daughter whispered. "Go down."

The father looked at his wife. "We've come this far, love."

"That don't mean we need to go heaping stupidity on foolishness." She scowled and shook her head. "But I suppose . . ."

The father went first, followed by the mother. Partway down the stairs, they heard the grate squeal shut behind them, followed by the clang of a key turning in a heavy lock. Before either of them could protest, the broker announced, "It is for our protection. An open hole in the floor would be an enticing invitation to the horrors that dwell in these parts."

With reluctance, the father and mother continued down the stairs until they came into the chapel crypts. Burning torches filled those vaults with a smoky haze, beneath which the damp air smelled of mold. Offerings and remembrances, left for the dead outside their stacked coffins, had all rotted away. A few of the grander sarcophagi had been wrenched open and plundered by grave robbers, leaving scattered bones behind. In a small side chamber waited a young woman and an old man.

The broker introduced the woman as a sorceress from the powerful Vizjerei clan. She had crimson hair and wore embroidered robes of fine silk and satin. Her haughty green eyes seemed to simmer with arrogance in the firelight. The old man stood beside an altar where a small brazier burned. He was small in stature, with thinning white hair and deep-set eyes, his attire of plain wool the color of charcoal. The broker identified him as a priest.

"A priest of what?" the father asked.

“I am not from the Cathedral of Light, if that is your worry,” the priest replied, his voice like the hollow scraping of a spoon against the bottom of a kettle.

“I’d be surprised if you were,” the mother said. “We already went to them Cathedral folk for help, and they told us it were blasphemy.”

“Are you a Priest of Rathma, then?” asked the father. “We talked to one of their lot as well, and he scolded us like children. Said we had no respect for the Balance.”

The priest shook his head. “I am not a necromancer—”

“Then what are you?” asked the mother.

It was the broker who interposed. “He is willing to help you. What more do you need to know?”

The mother planted her hands on her hips. “I’d like to know something about the people we’re dealing with. And why they’d agree to help the likes of us.”

The priest smiled in a way that darkened his eyes, but he did not offer more.

“I will answer your question,” said the sorceress. “I am here for what was promised. Do you have it?”

“I do,” answered the father.

The sorceress held out her hand. “Payment in advance. That was the agreement.”

With his daughter in his arms, the father couldn’t easily produce what the sorceress wanted. It was the priest who gently said, “Come, lay the body here, at the center of the circle I’ve prepared.”

The father looked down and noticed that an intricate ring had indeed been scrawled with chalk upon the crypt’s floor. Its arcane sigils and symbols appeared caught in a lattice of overlapping geometries. The father stepped inside the circle, careful to avoid scuffing its lines with his boots, and laid his daughter at the center, her body curled inward as if chilled by the cold stone beneath her. He then left the circle, and from within his coat he pulled out a wand that appeared quite ancient. It had been fashioned from a dark metal that refused to hold a polish, shaped into a thin rod around which a serpent coiled. It bore no jewels—or else they would have long ago been pried out and sold—but it had been etched with fine markings not unlike those found in the circle on the floor.

“This is what was promised,” the father said, extending the wand toward the sorceress.

She took it from him with slow reverence and turned it over in her hand, studying every inch of its length. The priest sidled up to peer at the relic over her shoulder.

His eyes widened. "Is that . . . of Viz-Jun?"

"It is a wand of legend," said the sorceress. "Its maker was Ranslor, a chief crafter of the Vizjerei." She looked up at the father. "How did you come by this?"

He shrugged. "It's been in my family for generations. An heirloom, you might call it. The story goes it was found in a cave."

"More likely a *grave*," murmured the broker with a glance toward the pillaged coffins, but the father ignored this slight against his forebears.

The priest rubbed his jaw, then said to the sorceress, "Have a care with that wand. I fear its power might be too great for you."

The sorceress seemed to bristle at that. "You have no idea what power is in me."

"But you accept that wand as payment, yes?" asked the father, and when the sorceress nodded, he sighed.

"Soon," his daughter whispered from the floor. "We will be together soon."

THE SORCERESS

“And what of my payment?” asked the priest.



The sorceress glowered at the old man as she slipped the wand inside her robes, incensed at his attempt to patronize her. He reminded her of the dour, withered mages of the Yshari Sanctum, the jealous cowards who hid behind their precious Covenant and used their endless rules to restrain anyone who possessed real power. Perhaps if they had been less fearful, their Sanctum would not have fallen when demons overran Caldeum.

The dead girl's father handed the priest a small leather pouch. The priest tested its weight in the palm of his hand and said, “I don't even need to look inside to know this contains but a fraction of the agreed price.”

The priest closed his fist around the leather pouch. A shocking menace crept into his eyes as he turned toward the broker, whose own reputation had just been threatened. The sorceress wasn't sure the father even saw the danger in which he and his wife now found themselves.

“The fault is mine,” the father said, showing either foolishness or more bravery than the sorceress had assumed he possessed. “I knew we didn't have the means to pay you, but we came here anyway. I'd hoped we could make some new arrangement.”

The priest turned toward him, sneering. “What kind of arrangement?”

The father stammered, “Well I—I don't rightly know. But I pay my debts. I've a strong back, and I work hard.”

The priest grinned. “You are proposing to serve me?”

The father paled and balked, perhaps unnerved by the old man's demeanor, or his choice of words, and the sorceress couldn't blame him. But he was obviously desperate. “I suppose I am,” he said.

The priest left the broker and approached the father, who managed to stand his ground, though he shifted a bit on his feet and struggled to look the old man in the eye. A few moments passed. The sorceress watched and waited. She was not without compassion for the father, and a part of her wanted to warn him against incurring any kind of debt to the priest, especially a debt of service. But it wasn't her business, so she kept silent.

“Very well,” the priest said at last. “I will do you this kindness. As a favor. And in return, you will do a favor for me.”

“What favor?” the mother asked.

“An equitable favor,” the priest said. “You will know it when the time comes. Are we agreed?”

The father hesitated, then looked suddenly at his daughter’s corpse, as if startled. He stared at the body in a strange way for a moment or two and said, “We are agreed.”

“Excellent.” The priest’s attitude reverted completely to the geniality he had previously shown. He offered the leather pouch back to the father, who accepted it, appearing somewhat bewildered. “Let it be witnessed,” the priest said, “that we have agreed upon new compensation, and I consider the matter of payment resolved.”

“So witnessed,” said the broker, with obvious relief in his voice.

“And now,” the priest said to the parents, “I suggest you make yourselves as comfortable as you can and allow us space to continue preparations.”

With a parting glance at their daughter’s corpse, the mother and father returned to the main chamber of the crypt, ushered by the broker, while the priest returned to the tome that contained the instructions for the ritual. The sorceress had never performed such a spell, nor had she ever seen a book of such magic. It appeared quite old, with yellowed pages, bound in some kind of deeply weathered hide. She could decipher little of its contents, but the old man appeared to understand it well. He sat cross-legged on the floor with the heavy volume lying open in his lap, while the sorceress leaned against the wall nearby.

“Are you really a priest?” she asked.

He kept his gaze on the parchment. “I am.”

“Well, if you aren’t from the Cathedral, and you’re not a necromancer, then—” She could think of only one other church. “You—you’re not Zakarum, are you?”

He bowed his head. “It is as you say.”

“I thought you had all died out.”

“We very nearly did. But there remain a few who are faithful to the true church.”

A lingering irritation at the old man led the sorceress to take a jab at him. “It is said that your church was corrupted beyond redemption by the demon Mephisto.”

At that, he finally looked up from the tome, and she felt a brief moment of satisfaction at having roused him. “And what of you?” he asked with a calmness that somehow seemed to be mocking her. “Are you truly of the Vizjerei mage clan?”

She straightened her neck. “I am.”

“It is said that your people were the first to summon demons into our world.” He smiled.

The sorceress forced a laugh to emphasize the absurdity of his statement. “That was a very, very long time ago.”

“Of course it was,” the priest said. “That is why you, more than others, can surely understand how it might be offensive to hold the sins of my forebears against me.”

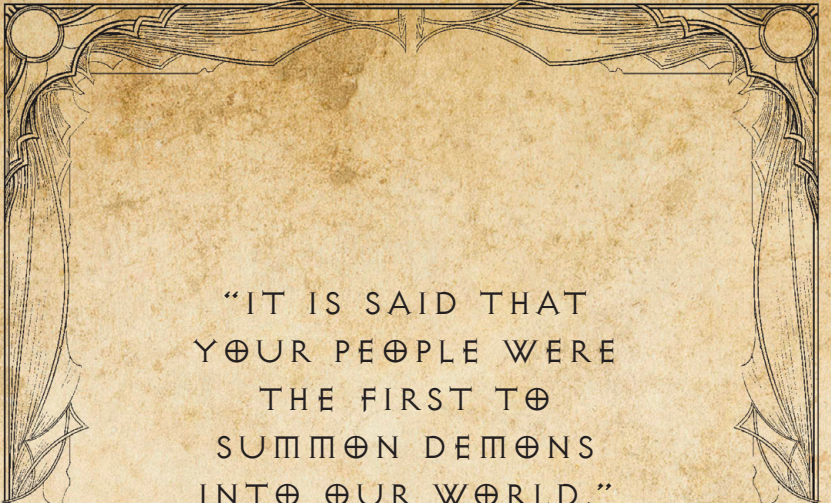
Her pride would not allow her to admit he was right, and she glanced around the crypt. “Would your church approve of this?”

“There is much Light in a parent’s love,” he said. Then he added a moment later, “I notice your robes bear none of the signs or markings that you have completed your training.”

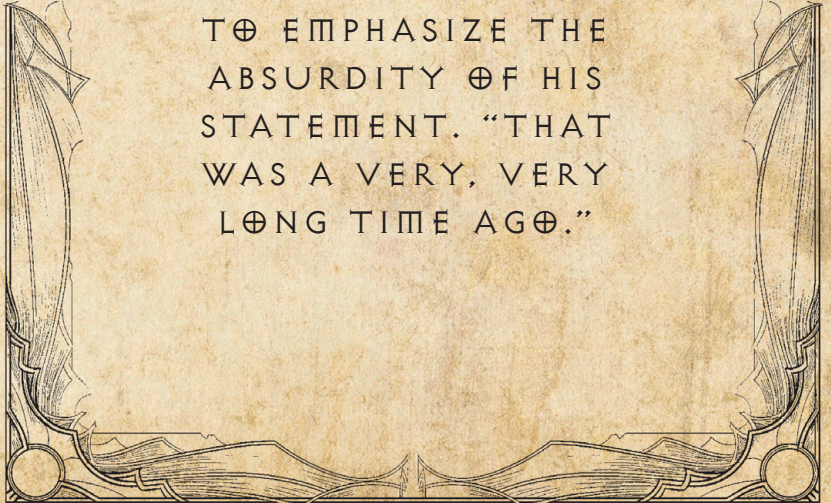
At that, the sorceress pushed off from the wall toward him, anger renewed, but only because he spoke the truth. She had been ejected from her order before her training was complete, although she kept this to herself. “They had nothing left to teach me,” she said. “So I left them.”

“I can respect that,” said the priest. “The pursuit of power calls for boldness. But a ritual of resurrection is perilous. I must risk offending you to ask if you are capable of performing your part of it.”

The sorceress knew the old man posed a valid and reasonable question, and he deserved an honest answer. “I am more than capable,” she said.



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THE MOTHER

While the priest and the sorceress went about their preparations, murmuring incantations, burning things, and scratching sigils on the floor and the walls, the mother sat with her husband and the broker. The smoke in the air stung her eyes, and the chill in the crypt put shivers deep in her bones. She wished for the whole affair to be over.

“How much longer?” she asked the broker, more an expression of impatience than a question.

“I wouldn’t know,” he said. The man had yet to lower his hood, but she could see firelight reflected in his eyes. “You wouldn’t want to rush them, would you?”

“Course not,” said her husband. “They must have whatever time they need.”

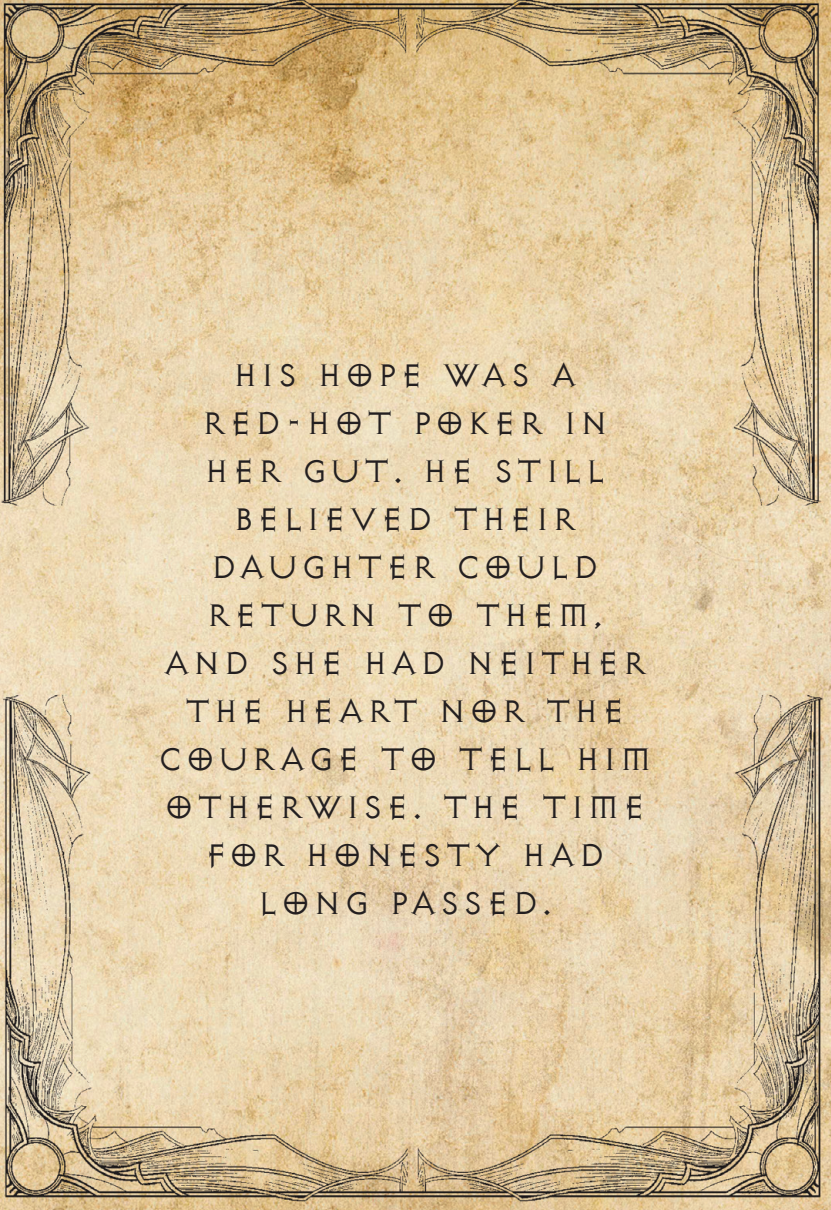
His hope was a red-hot poker in her gut. He still believed their daughter could return to them, and she had neither the heart nor the courage to tell him otherwise. The time for honesty had long passed. If she had known how far he would take things, she would have tried harder to dissuade him from the purpose that had brought them to this cursed place. She would have spared him the pain. It had seemed easier at the time to let him grieve in his own way, but with every step he had traveled down this path, she found it harder and harder to speak the truth, until it was simply impossible. But what she had done, she had done for him.

“I suppose we must see it through,” she whispered.

A short while later, the priest emerged and said, “We are ready.”

The mother and father followed the old man back into the smaller chamber. The circle on the floor had been divided, with peripheral rings marking its four quarters. At its center, the body of their daughter had been removed from its burial shroud and repositioned so that she lay on her back, with her arms spread wide. Each of her delicate hands pointed toward a smaller ring, while her head and her feet pointed toward the other two. She looked so little, like a doll with pale white twigs for limbs. The mother could not bear to look at her and glanced at her husband. He had covered his mouth at the sight of his daughter, stifling a gasp, but then he shored up his posture and nodded as if agreeing with something no one else in the room had said.

“What must we do?” he asked.



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The sorceress answered, "Take your positions."

She already stood in the ring at the girl's right hand. The priest directed the father to stand in the ring at the body's feet and the broker to stand in the left-hand ring. The mother went to stand in the small ring near her daughter's head, but she kept her chin level and avoided looking down at the child's lifeless face.

The priest went to stand in front of the father, holding a curved knife and a small bowl. "This ritual requires a small quantity of your blood," he said. "Please, hold out your hand."

No one had mentioned any bloodletting to the mother before that moment, but she couldn't well refuse, especially when her husband offered his without any hesitation. When the priest eventually moved in her direction, stepping over her daughter's arm, she reluctantly extended her hand toward him. He sliced across the meat of her palm, not too deeply, but enough for a dram or two of her blood to drip into the bowl. He then set the dish and the knife upon the floor, and with his cold and bony fingers, he wrapped her wound with a strip of cloth.

"The pain is momentary," he said. "Unlike your grief, which will soon be assuaged."

He retrieved the vessel of blood from the floor, leaving the knife where it lay, and strode toward the altar with its burning brazier. He picked up the dead girl's burial shroud, and from it he rent two lengths of fabric. Then he dipped a black quill into the blood he had just gathered.

"And now," he said, looking at the father, "you must offer a memory of your daughter. Speak the truth of your love for her in life."

"My love?" The father looked down at the corpse, and tears glistened in his eyes. "What can I say? She were my youngest child and my only daughter, my joy in this cursed world. Even when she got sick, she never lost her smile. She—she used to make up silly songs that could cheer my heart after the hardest of days." He seemed to have become transfixed by what he saw on the floor. "There—there are times when I can still . . ."

"Still what?" the mother asked.

The father shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut. "Never mind. You want the truth, priest? Well, the truth is, I failed her. I failed to protect her." He looked up from the body to his wife on the opposite side of the circle. His expression had gone as cold and blank as a weathered tombstone, and she wondered what he knew.

“That is sufficient,” the priest said, scratching at the burial shroud with the bloody quill. When he had finished writing, he set that piece of fabric aside, picked up the second, and waited.

The girl’s mother sensed it was her turn, and even though she knew the ritual would fail, she couldn’t bring herself to lie. When she finally spoke, she directed her words at her husband.

“I . . . I did love her, you know. But it weren’t the same as with the boys. I never took to her, somehow, nor she to me. Even when I nursed her, it felt like she were someone else’s. Like a changeling. I know it’s wrong for a mother to say such things.” Her gaze fell to the round face at her feet, and she found to her shame and horror that her affection for the girl had not grown in death. “You want a memory, Priest? I remember the joy she brought my husband. I suppose a part of me loved her for that, at least.”

She had never spoken the truth so plainly, and she looked up at a room gone silent and still. The priest had paused in his scribbling. The sorceress and the broker stared at her, but her husband looked away. She knew she had just broken his heart, and the rest of the truth would destroy him if she uttered it.

“Is that enough, priest?” she asked.

“That—” He cleared his throat. “That is sufficient.”

After he had finished writing upon the second torn piece of shroud, he intoned some words in an unknown language and placed both strips together on the brazier. Their burning filled the room with acrid smoke.

“Why—?” the sorceress began, coughed, then continued. “Why do you destroy the memories?”

“What do you mean?” asked the priest.

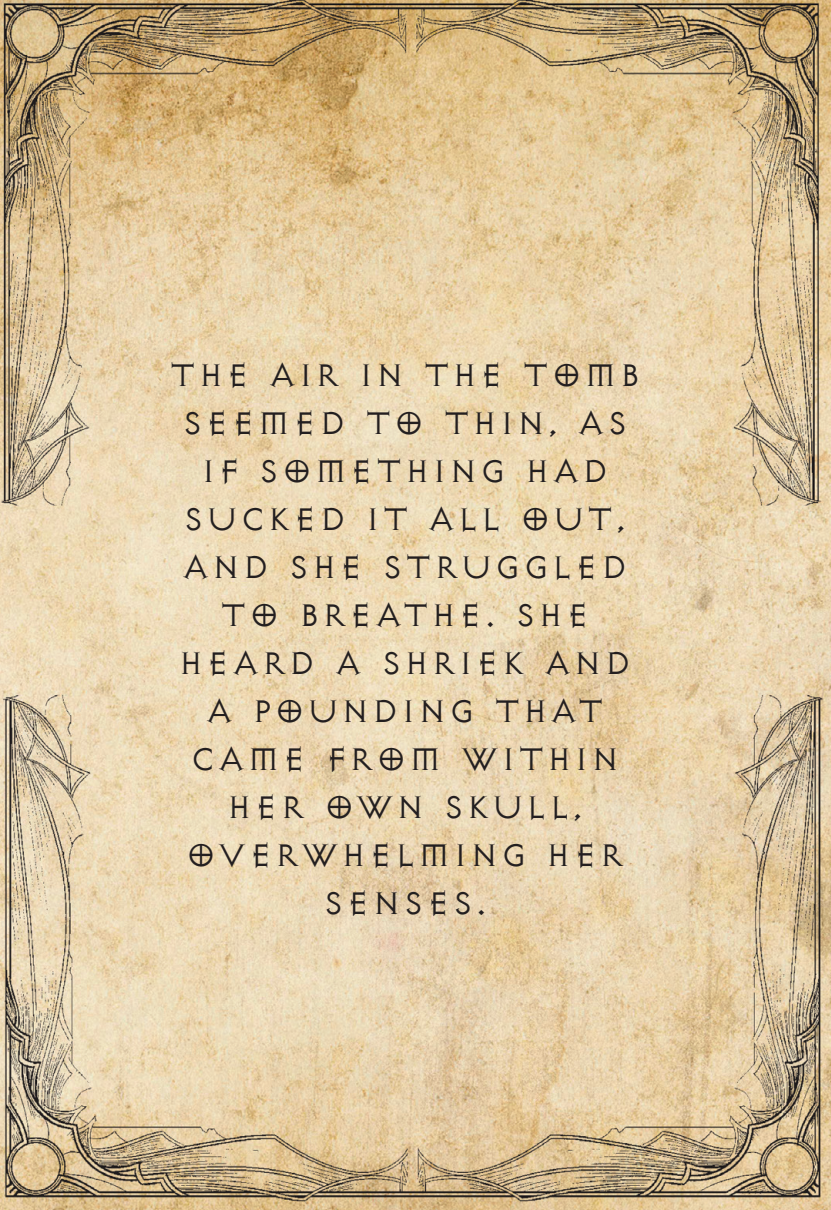
The sorceress frowned and seemed confused. “Aren’t those memories a tether between the parents and the child? Why do you burn them?”

The priest regarded her with obvious contempt. “If you believe I have made a mistake, please, consult the text. I welcome correction.” He gestured toward the heavy tome that sat on the altar beside him.

The sorceress swallowed. “No. I’m sure you’re correct.”

The priest nodded, then raised his arms and his voice in chorus with the sorceress. Their bellowing of the final spell words filled the crypt, and the mother

thought she heard whispers returning to her ears on the backs of the echoes. The torches dimmed, or perhaps it was her sight that darkened. The air in the tomb seemed to thin, as if something had sucked it all out, and she struggled to breathe. She heard a shriek and a pounding that came from within her own skull, overwhelming her senses. She thought her mind would be lost to an abyss opening inside her, but the pressure suddenly released her. She inhaled a desperate gasp and opened her eyes.



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THE PRIEST

The ritual had succeeded in its true purpose and could not be stopped. The others in the crypt would be unaware of that, at first, and they might die before they learned it, but that changed nothing. The priest had served his master well.

A spasm racked the small body on the floor, drawing a shriek of fear from the mother and a cry of joy from the father. He fell to the floor next to the body as it trembled to life, and he cradled it, sobbing. "She's breathing!" he said. "She lives!"

"No." The mother just stood there, eyes and mouth agape. "It can't be."

Her husband seemed not to have heard her, or else he was listening to something louder in his own mind. "You were right," he whispered. "You were right."

The mother slumped to her knees, back bent, shoulders hunched, the priest's knife on the stone floor before her. "You fool," she whispered. "You've doomed us."

The father looked up. His tears had smeared the filth on his face, and he blinked at his wife in confusion. "Doomed us? But the magic worked! She lives!"

"And we will die because of it!" she shouted back at him, growing frantic, hysterical.

The sorceress stepped toward her. "What do you mean?"

The mother had gone pale with helpless terror. "She were always sickly. It—it seemed the right thing to—or not the *right* thing, but the best thing." She clutched her stomach and began to rock. "I did it for us," she whimpered. "I did it for us!"

"What did you do?" asked her husband.

The girl's mother revealed what the priest already knew. "A fortnight ago," she said, "I dreamed I was out gathering kindling, and a wolf caught me alone in the forest . . . a monstrous beast. I—I never seen the like, and I thought it would tear me to pieces. But it weren't no common wolf. Its eyes burned in its skull, and it could speak. I swear to you, it was real, and the wolf *spoke* to me!"

"What did it say?" demanded the sorceress.

The mother shivered at the memory. "That it would hunt down everyone I loved—my husband, my children—and eat them slow. It would suck the marrow from their bones while they yet lived . . . unless I did what it asked."

"What did you do?" repeated the husband.

The mother continued: "The wolf promised to spare the rest of us if . . ."

"If *what*?" bellowed the father, causing his wife to flinch.

"If I sacrificed our youngest child!" she said. "She . . . she would have died anyway, don't you see? And I was so tired of caring for her. She were nothing but a drain on us!"

Upon hearing this, the sorceress looked at the priest. Then she marched across the small chamber to the altar, where she seized the ancient tome and opened it. The priest made no move to stop her. If she possessed the knowledge and skill to read the book, she would never have allowed the ritual to begin, and even if she managed to decipher the truth now, she lacked the power to do anything about it.

"You . . . poisoned her. For the sake of a dream?" The father shook his head, as if the thought he was having couldn't fit inside it. "You traded your daughter's life for your own?"

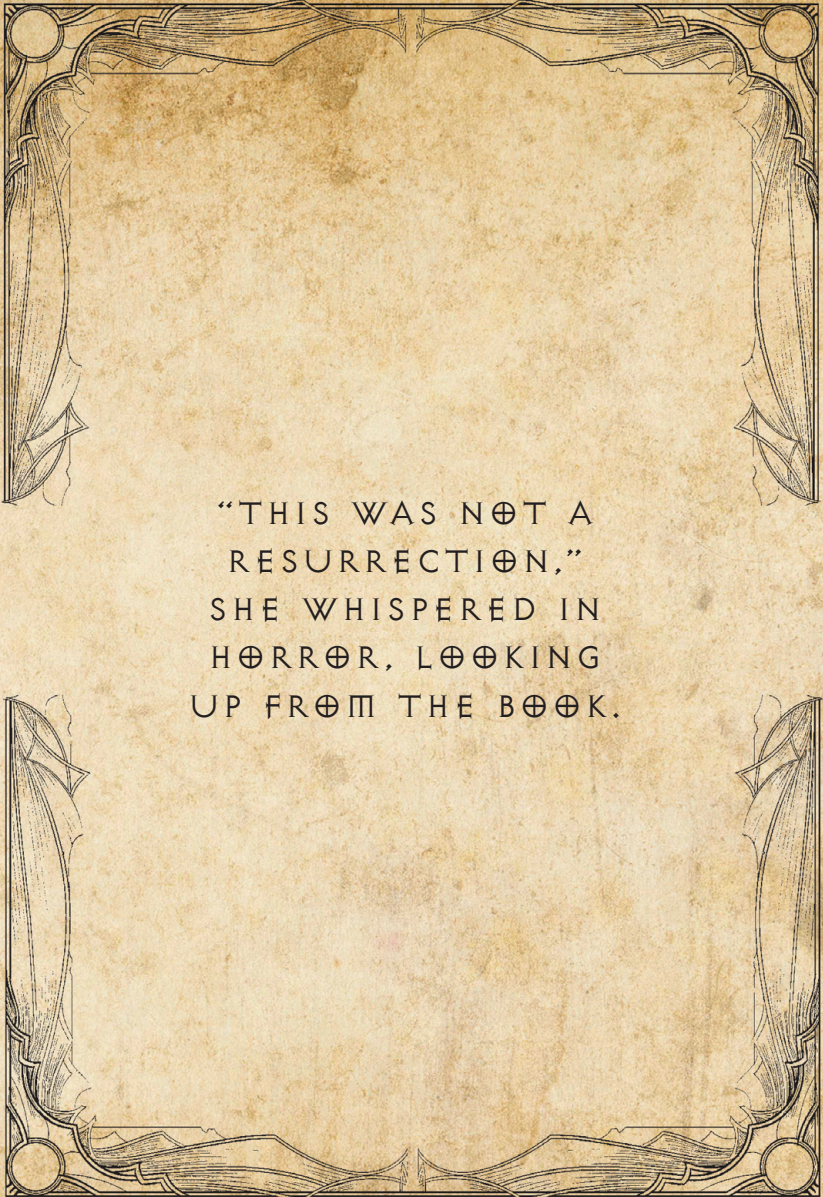
"No!" she cried. "For yours! For our sons!" She clutched her forehead with both hands. "But we have undone it, don't you see? And now the wolf will come for us! He will devour us!" She saw the knife on the floor, and in a terror-driven act, she picked it up and lunged at her daughter to sacrifice her a second time.

The father also acted without thought, leaping from his daughter's body to intercept his wife. They collided and went down in a tussling heap, grasping, scratching, pleading, screaming. Then the mother cried out, once. Her husband rolled away from her to reveal the knife, lodged high in her chest, between her heart and her throat. Her eyes bulged, and her jaw twitched as a hissing and gurgling came from her throat. The husband howled and scrambled back to her side, gently touching his fingertips to her cheek, her throat, the handle of the knife, saying nothing, *doing* nothing, until she died in his arms.

This had all happened in a matter of moments, during which the priest had held himself still. He noticed the broker had stepped back, also allowing the events to unfold. As for the sorceress, even had she cared enough about the couple to intervene, she was too consumed by a dawning realization.

"This was not a resurrection," she whispered in horror, looking up from the book.

"No?" asked the priest. "Then tell us, Vizjerei, you who had nothing left to learn from your teachers, what it was."



“THIS WAS NOT A
RESURRECTION,”
SHE WHISPERED IN
HORROR, LOOKING
UP FROM THE BOOK.

“Father?” said the girl’s body, eyes finally fluttering open.

“I’m here!” The father left his dead wife and rushed back to his daughter’s side, covered in her mother’s blood. “I’m here, my darling girl.”

The sorceress pulled the ancient wand from within her robes. “That is *not* your daughter,” she said. “Get away from it. Now.”

“What are you on about?” The father caressed his daughter’s forehead and smoothed back her hair, lost to reason. “Look at her. Who else would she be?”

“I do not know,” said the sorceress, sidestepping away from the altar and the priest, aiming the wand at the girl’s body. “I can only read a little of the spell. But I am telling you, that was not a resurrection. It was a *summoning*.”

“You don’t understand,” said the father. “She’s been talking to me all the while, guiding me, every step. She brought me here so I could bring her back.”

“You have been deceived,” said the sorceress, her voice quavering. “We have *all* been deceived. But it’s not too late. I can destroy that body before it is fully possessed. Now step away, or I will be forced to destroy you with it.”

“*Can* you destroy it?” the priest asked.

The sorceress adjusted her footing and her grip on the wand, and the priest could see her self-doubt emerging, the fear of her own inadequacy that she kept hidden even from herself.

“Do you honestly believe you have the skill?” he said, baiting her with scorn. “You may truly have great power, but you are a child without discipline. You lack patience. You lack the courage to admit what you don’t know, and that is why you have repeated the great sin of your ancestors.”

“No,” the sorceress whispered. In desperation, she turned toward the broker, who stood apart in the shadows. “We must stop this!”

“*We?*” he asked. “My part in your business is concluded.”

The sorceress snarled a curse at him, then aimed the ancient wand at the body and cast a spell. The priest assumed she intended to hurl a firebolt, but instead the flames erupted back on her, engulfing her in a blaze that ignited her robes. She screamed and fell to the floor, writhing and rolling, perhaps trying to extinguish the inferno. The air thickened with meaty smoke. She managed to stagger to her feet and ran from the chamber, screeching ceaselessly, like an animal.

The broker drew his dagger and followed her without a word, while the priest strode to where she had dropped the ancient wand. He wondered if it would be hot to the touch, but when he picked it up, the metal was cold enough to put an instant ache in the arthritic joints of his fingers. The father sat on the floor next to his dead wife, holding the body of his daughter, apparently oblivious to all else.

A moment later, the sorceress stopped screaming.

Then the broker trudged back into the room, shaking his head. "All that racket may have drawn unwanted attention." His dagger was covered in bloody soot, and when he noticed the wand in the priest's hand, he pointed at it with the blade. "I'll take that."

THE BROKER

The priest scoffed. “This relic belongs in far more capable hands than yours. What will you do with it? Sell it?”

The broker’s tone darkened. “Whether I sell it, hang it over the mantel of my fireplace, or use it to scrape out my chamber pot, it’s no concern of yours. The terms you agreed to have been satisfied. That wand was not part of your price.”

“And I am not negotiating,” the priest said before shouting a guttural, blood-siphoning curse.

The broker was not a stupid man. He had entered that crypt prepared, and the amulet he wore around his neck—which had cost him almost as much as he would make off the wand—successfully shielded him from the priest’s dark magic.

“How tedious,” the old man said with a sigh. “I dislike the cruder methods.”

The broker rushed him, hoping to cut him down before he tried a different spell, one that might stretch beyond the limits of the amulet, but the priest was more agile than he appeared. He dodged the blade and leapt to the far side of the room. Between them on the floor, the father had regained enough presence of mind to shield his daughter’s body from the commotion with his own, still believing it was his child.

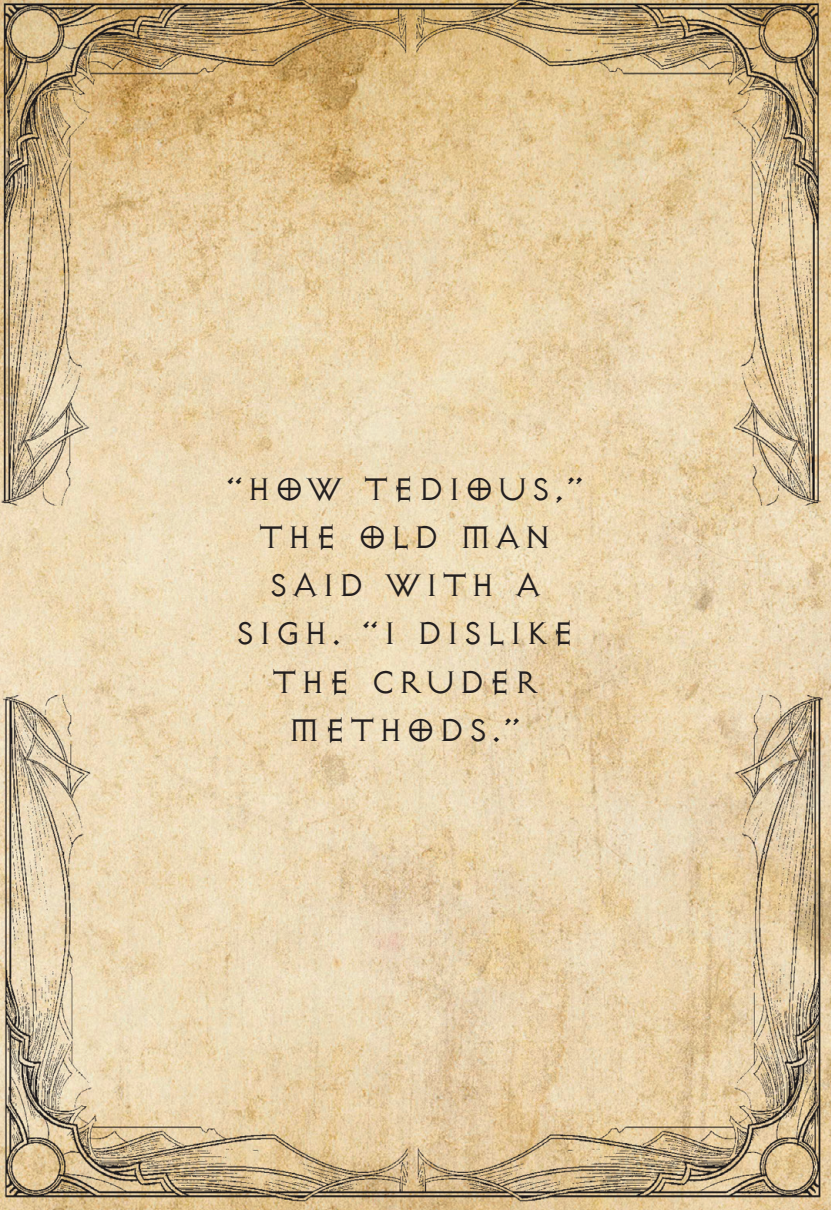
The priest shouted at him, “*You!* Repay your debt to me and kill that man!”

Even if the father had complied, the broker had little to worry about from the farmer. Other than the blade stuck in his wife, the man was unarmed and addled by grief. But the father surprised the priest by doing nothing. He just looked up at the old man with the dumb gaze of a fool.

“On your feet!” hissed the priest. “Kill him!”

The broker took advantage of the moment’s confusion, flew across the chamber, and ran the old man through. The shocked priest grunted and looked down at the knife in his ribs. The metal wand fell and rang against the flagstones. With both hands, the priest seized the dagger’s cross guard in a feeble grasp, but he didn’t know what to do with it. Then he looked up into the face of the broker, white eyebrows raised high in disbelief.

“What?” the broker asked. “Did your master promise that you would leave this place alive?”



“HΘW TEDIΘUS,”
THE ΘLD MAN
SAID WITH A
SIGH. “I DISLIKE
THE CRUDER
METHΘDS.”

The priest tried to say something, but the blood welling up in his mouth made him sputter and dribble red all over himself. The broker stepped back and wrenched his dagger free. The priest slumped to the floor.

"You did well," said the girl's body.

The father smiled down at her. "I did nothing. It was—"

"Not you," she said, looking up at the broker.

The father sat up straight, head tipped, smiling in puzzlement. His delusion was almost pitiable.

"That is not your daughter," the broker said.

"It is . . . the Lord of Lies," came a rasping voice from the heap that was the dying priest. "Belial."

The broker chuckled. "So you *did* know."

"Of course . . . I knew." The priest coughed, spraying blood onto the flagstones. "I was *sent*."

Belial lifted the body of the dead girl to her feet and spoke through her mouth at the priest. "You have also served me well."

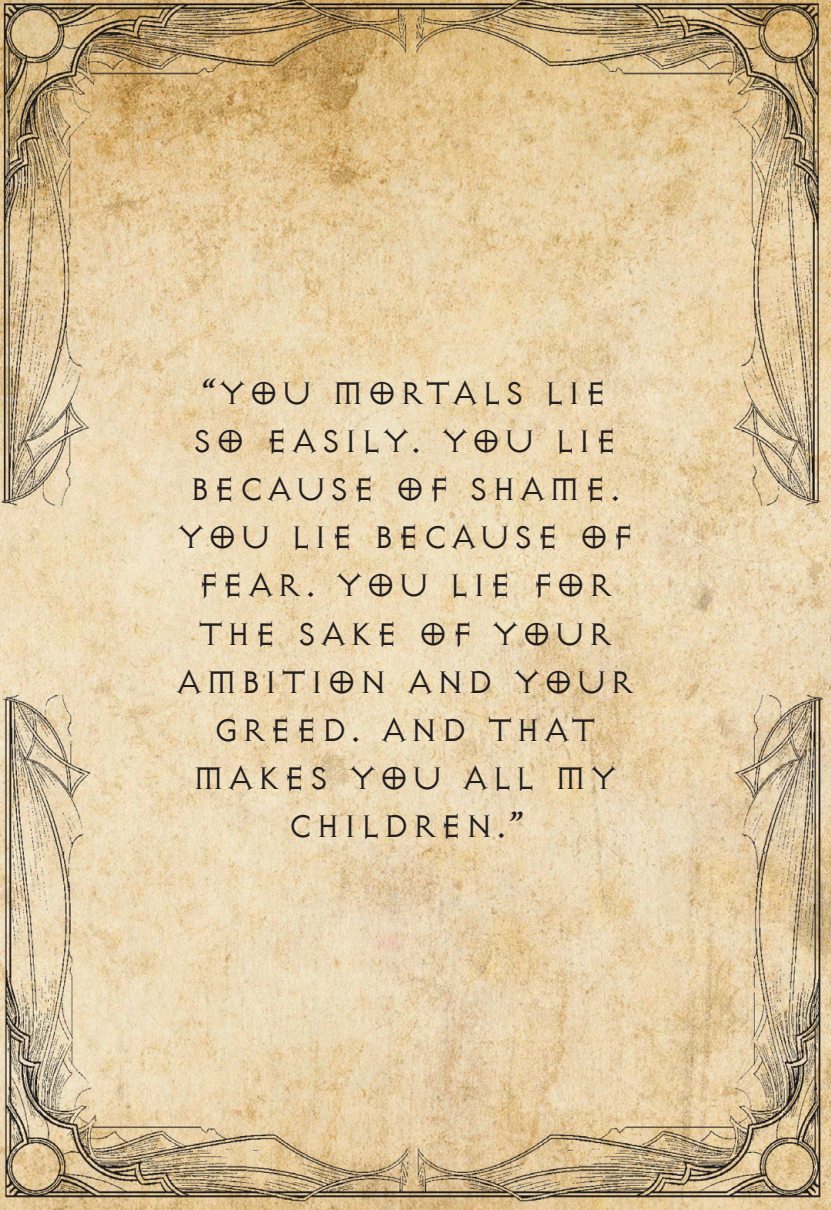
The priest growled and grimaced through his pain as he twisted his body to face the demon. "I . . . am not *your* . . . servant."

Belial laughed. "All who lie serve me." With the patter of tiny, tender feet, the demon moved toward the priest, crouched next to him, and whispered, "Do you suppose I am unaware of the one you *believe* you serve?"

The priest had collapsed, all strength gone, so that his cheek lay in a pool of his own blood. He could barely speak, but with his last breath he whispered, "You . . . are *his* . . . servant—"

"Daughter?" The dead girl's father knelt on the floor with his arms hanging loose at his sides. "What—what are these evil words you speak?"

Belial laughed, a low cackle from the dead girl's throat that seemed to claw at the walls of the crypt. "Even now, you lie to yourself." The Lord of Lies skipped toward him and leaned down to speak loudly in his face as if he were the child. "Your daughter is *gone*. Your wife murdered her. But you knew that, didn't you? You failed to protect her, which is why you did exactly what I told you. Why you put her corpse in a wheelbarrow to bring to me. Don't you see? You and your wife, and the sorceress, and the priest, and even the broker who gathered you together—"



“Y⊕ M⊕RTALS LIE
S⊕ EASILY. Y⊕ LIE
BECAUSE ⊕F SHAME.
Y⊕ LIE BECAUSE ⊕F
FEAR. Y⊕ LIE F⊕R
THE SAKE ⊕F Y⊕R
AMBITION⊕ AND Y⊕R
GREED. AND THAT
MAKES Y⊕ ALL MY
CHILDREN.”

you were all here because of your lies. You mortals lie so easily. You lie because of shame. You lie because of fear. You lie for the sake of your ambition and your greed. And that makes you all *my* children.”

“No,” the father said, shaking his head as if the bones in his neck had gone limp. “Please, my darling, no!” He lunged and pulled the demon into a desperate embrace, sobbing into the white shift of the dead girl. “I can’t believe it! I won’t believe it!”

“It doesn’t matter what you believe.” Then the demon wrapped his arms around the man and squeezed, cracking ribs. The father would have screamed, but all the air had been driven from his lungs, and he could only stare upward at the vaulted ceiling of the crypt with an open mouth and bloodshot eyes, finally seeing the truth.

The demon made use of the man’s living flesh, stretching into it and through it, slapping and clawing its way across the floor. The chamber resounded with the tearing of meat as horns and thorny limbs erupted from the quivering mass, grotesque mouths and beady eyes, until it had grown into an aspect of Belial in fullness.

The broker dropped to a knee and bowed his head. “Master, command me.”

Belial chortled. “Do you hope I will spare you if you grovel?”

“I am yours to do with as you will,” said the broker. “*All* of Sanctuary is yours.”

“No,” said Belial. “Mephisto still walks the land, sowing his seeds. But I am here now. Sanctuary is not mine. Not *yet*.”

The broker dared to look up in reverence at the horror before him. “But . . . all who lie are your servants.”

Belial’s shifting form floated toward the altar. “Their lies are not enough. Sanctuary will only be mine when its children cease to believe there is such a thing as the truth.” Belial turned. “That is why you will live, for now. Take that wand. Go forth and spread my gospel.”

The broker bowed his head once more. “Gladly, my lord.”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew J. Kirby is the critically acclaimed and award-winning author of many novels, including *The Clockwork Three*, *Icefall*, *The Lost Kingdom*, *A Taste for Monsters*, and *Star Splitter*. He has also written in the Diablo universe, including the *Book of Lorath* and *Book of Prava*, as well as the Assassin's Creed universe. His work has received numerous honors, including the Edgar Award for Best Juvenile Mystery and the PEN Center USA award for Children's Literature. He currently lives with his family in Idaho.