

Scurrilous

Lictor Rhsynia stalked the dark halls of her cloister like a child in a rotting womb, torn between clawing her way out and allowing herself to be suffocated. The cloister, the Adjunct Sisters of Misery, was ostensibly an organ of the church dedicated to bringing new life into the world. The Sisters took in young girls, some even infants, and raised them into instruments of grace for the church. Grace, however, was whatever the church wanted it to be. Grace could be tearing you limb from limb for speaking against the Sacrifex, the hidden council said to have the very words of God in their mouths. Usually, though, they convinced you to do the punishing yourself. Lictor Rhsynia was a master of punishment. Every day she wore the roughest sackcloth under her vestments. Every day she touched herself with the cat of nine. And every day she drank from the cup of atonement, herbs so bitter they often induced vomiting.

“Lictor Rhsynia,” came a tepid voice from behind. Rhsynia stopped and spun to meet it, her conical hat and silver mask swiveling with her head.

“Yes, sister?” said Rhsynia, looking at a small woman in dour black, the standard for women who were not assigned an office.

“The Mathoms -- no one has performed them today!”

The ritual was to be done by noon, or by dawn on feast days.

“That is strange, indeed, sister. Thank you for bringing this to my attention. Does the Matron know?”

“No. You are the first woman of rank I’ve seen.”

“It was good of you to tell me. Now, go, return to your duties.”

“Yes, Lictor Rhsynia.”

The woman whirled in a flutter of robes, one of many filling the cavernous halls, ornately designed, the stone given care their flesh would never receive, the stained glass mirroring their faces stained with sweat and tears, the few rays of light shining down like judgment from above.

Lictor Rhsynia walked to the Matron’s office, her bare feet slapping on the rough, uneven stone. The Matron was knelt before a Father of the Cathedral of Light, engaged in a removal of his sin. This was a service the fathers had told them was necessary for their salvation, as they would bear the sin of their brothers and purge it out with their daily rituals. Lictor Rhsynia waited in the doorway, watching, her expression inscrutable behind the impassive silver mask she wore. The Father let out a groan of relief as his sin was removed, now contained in the Matron’s body where it would stay until it became a part of her and was lost in the blood she bled daily from the Cat. The Father closed his robes, bent to whisper something in the Matron’s ear, and left without acknowledging Lictor Rhsynia as she stepped aside to open his pathway. The Matron wiped her mouth with her sleeve and got up to sit in her chair behind the great oak desk in the office whose ceilings vaulted, yet the walls seemed to close in on all sides. It simultaneously made one feel small and trapped, as though you were both the tick on the backside of the great beast, and the rabbit it chased.

“Lictor,” said the Matron.

“Matron,” said Lictor Rhsynia, who curtsied low.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“The Mathoms have yet to be performed.”

“What?” snapped the Matron, her jowls quivering with anger as she lurched forward in her high-backed chair.

“A sister just informed me,” said Lictor Rhsynia.

“Who was scheduled to do them today?”

“I do not know, Matron.”

“You must perform them yourself,” said the old woman.

“Matron—”

“Do not question me, Whelp.”

The woman’s abuse lashed like the familiar whip, and Lictor Rhsynia took it humbly, as was her duty.

“Yes, Matron.”

“You disgust me, Lictor.”

“Yes, Matron.”

“You should have been aborted the moment you slithered out of your mother’s slit.”

“Yes, Matron.”

“Get out of my sight.”

Lictor Rhsynia bowed again and left.

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Father Brackett walked the long hallway back to the Cathedral of Light from the cloister with a spring in his step. He always felt like a new man after a removal, so pure and so clean. Sin could not be spilt on the ground, where it would evaporate and immediately be breathed back into the lungs. It had to be released into a human vessel, where it could be transformed into blood and drained from the body through penance. The sisters bore sin so the brothers could focus on their work without having to waste time on penance, and the sisters were made more holy by the practice of abjuration, the drawing of blood and bile, the exhaust of processed sin, which passed harmlessly into the ground.

A woman’s sin was self-contained and converted into blood which exited her body naturally. A man’s had to be processed, and the woman was the vessel for the man and his sin, a human philosopher’s stone that converted the necessary evil into neutral, inert substance. Thus was the pattern of life, a holy life. Birth was the ultimate sin, and thus the gonads the source of all sin, the woman’s sin hidden, the man’s exposed, needing release and exculpation. The masses bore the guilt of reproduction, the layfolk only serving to produce those blessed few who went into the clergy, the clergy serving to perform the rituals that covered the sin of the masses, and so staying the wrath of God upon them all. Father Brackett wondered why they should not all die, but the church had commanded them not to kill. Apparently, that job belonged to the Divine, and when it was done it would be complete, final. The

Church could never hope to slay all the world, for they were far too numerous, and if they did, there would then be no purpose for the church, it would only be processing its own sin and no longer also covering that of the masses, a self-serving organ fit only for destruction. That could not be allowed to happen. They were an unhappy byproduct of a great accident, the creation of man, a blight wrought upon the world when the Devil stole from the tree of life. Soon, God would cleanse them all with fire, but until then, the sin of the world needed containing, and that was what Father Brackett intended to do.

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Lictor Rhsynia left the cloister through the rear entrance, the wooden doors creaking as they closed behind her. The sun outside was blinding, even with her mask on, conditioned as she was to the stale, dark halls. The sky was blue as a forget-me-not flower, the kind she'd only seen in books -- the desert surrounded her in all directions, yellow dunes like waves frozen in time. Already birds were gathering in their usual place, expecting the ritual feast that had been so rudely forestalled. She walked out several paces into the small, sandy clearing where the crows had gathered and knelt. The screams of the birds were deafening. It had been a long time since she had performed the Mathoms herself. Lictor Rhsynia disrobed, undoing the sash around her vestments, then pulling the sackcloth over her head, revealing a body scarred like the face of an ancient lava field. There wasn't an inch of her body that hadn't been torn open and resealed. With blind impetus the crows tore into her flesh, sparing no part from their indifferent beaks. Only her face was preserved beneath her mask and mantle. Lictor Rhsynia did not scream beneath the onslaught. This was how she saw God.

Soon she collapsed and sisters came out to send away the birds before they picked her to the bone, and brought her inside for healing.

The church's surgeon closed the Lictor's wounds and bound her all over with muslin wrap and herbs of purification. She would be relieved of her duties until she could walk and was laid in the infirmary where many women were recovering from their own rites. It was something they all had to do when it was their time, some women doing it many times in their lives, though it was usually given to the younger sisters. Performing the Mathoms was one of the ways a sister rose through the ranks of the cloister, to duties that did not require as much bloodshed, as they had already rid themselves of much sin. For Lictor Rhsynia to do them at her rank was not unheard of, though certainly a rare occurrence. The sister who had failed to perform her holy duties would be gravely punished, and Lictor Rhsynia would likely be the one to punish her. This was one of her primary tasks, one she excelled at, though she took no pleasure in it. It was necessary for holiness, but it was not something she would wish to do were it not required of her. Yet, she knew it was good for the women she punished, and for her, to be an instrument of God's will. Punishment was the purest form of love, after all. This was one of the primary tenets of the Adjunct Sisters of Misery. "Punishment is proof of salvation," the holy text said. "God punishes those whom He loves." She wondered, then, what did He do to the wicked?

A week passed before she was able to walk again, and then only with great care. However, she would not be kept from her duties. She once again donned her sackcloth and vestments, though the

entirety of her body was still bound in wrappings and herbs that had been changed daily by the nurse-sisters, and these ironically provided a small relief from the roughness of the sackcloth, though the pain beneath them was far worse.

Lictor Rhsynia was given a cane and discharged from the infirmary. She made her way back to the Matron's office, where she was once again performing a sin removal on the same man, Father Brackett. When she had finished him, he closed his robes and when Lictor Rhsynia stepped aside to let him by, this time he took notice of her. He saw her bandaged hands, neck, and feet, and said "Ah, you're the one who performed the Mathoms in Lysia's stead. How good of you." He lifted her chin with a curled finger and looked into her eyes through the holes in the mask. "I trust you will give her a good thrashing when you find her, yes?"

"Yes, Father," said Lictor Rhsynia.

"Good girl," he said, and left, spinning on his heel.

Lictor Rhsynia squared herself to the Matron and curtsied low as always.

"What is it, Sister?" said the Matron in a voice like glacier ice.

"The sister who missed the Mathoms... was it Lysia?"

"It was indeed."

"Is she missing?"

"What gives you that notion? You've been unconscious for a week."

"I don't know, Matron. Just the way Father Brackett spoke of her. He said, 'when I find her.'"

"You were always keen, Lictor Rhsynia. Too keen, in fact."

"It is my job to be observant."

"You know why I keep you around?"

"No, Matron."

"Because you're good at your job. You always obey orders."

"Thank you, Matron." Lictor Rhsynia stood, looking above the old woman, unmoving.

"Forget about the girl," said the Matron.

"But Matron..."

"Do as I ask."

"Yes, Matron."

"You are dismissed."

Again, Lictor Rhsynia bowed, with great effort, and grabbed her cane and left, hobbling down the great hallway to her quarters.

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Father Brackett stood in his rectory, preparing himself for the day's rites. Today was the first day of the week, and he would give his sermon before performing the ritual for the masses. He put on his robes and hat and went before the congregation.

The walk from the door in the wings was time for the audience to cheer as he made his way to the podium. Hundreds crowded the beautiful cathedral, as imposing as the cloister but more open, with more light, and more ornate. The masses were dirty, clothed in little more than rags that symbolized the state of their hearts, the very reason they were here. Father Brackett was the only way to their salvation, and they loved him for it. He stood at the lectern and smiled knowingly, waving at his children. The cheering continued until he gestured for it to cease and instantly it did. They remained standing as the father's voice boomed out.

"My children. Blessed be the day that the Lord hath made."

"Blessed is the day," responded the crowd in unison.

"And blessed be His name. Today, we will look at a portion of the holy text we do not often see, and it speaks of something not taught often enough anymore – the wrath of the Lord. You see we are created as objects of wrath, vessels to be destroyed and cast upon the burning heap of His indignation. We are so odious to Him," Father Brackett said with a smile and a sympathetic chuckle. The audience mirrored his reaction. "He hates sin, and we are full of it. We are vessels of sin, and it can only be covered by the shedding of blood. This blood the church sheds for you. Our bodies, the clergy, bleed so that you, the unwashed masses, may remain on this doomed Earth another day. This bloodshed you receive when you partake of the cup, which symbolically cleanses you. It does not, however, cleanse you completely. Only actual bloodshed can do that. But you are not responsible enough, nor disciplined enough, to shed your own blood, to forgo the mixing of sin with one another, to avoid the cataclysm of birth. And yet, even in your sin, God uses this to save you, that out of the foulness of your wombs, come the few, the faithful few who become clergy, who swear off the mixing of sin and shed their own blood for you, so that you can be free to live the lives that you please, as we await the coming judgment."

Father Brackett looked out over the crowd, seeing their faces, plaintive, pleading for his mercy, his righteousness, that would give them a new lease on life, another week free from the fear of God's judgment.

"But one day, and one day soon, He will come for us all, to bring on us what we deserve, the full destruction of our wretched lives, worthless before His endless light. Amen?"

"Amen," replied the masses as one.

Father Brackett stepped down from the podium to the table in front of it, and took a golden chalice filled with crimson liquid and held it aloft with both hands in front of the crowd, watching it gleam, as though both longing for it and rejoicing in its possession.

"Behold, the sacrament. Let it bless you."

One by one, the laypeople came to him to take a drink from the cup, then returned to their pews.

"The light of God be with you," said Father Brackett, dismissing them.

“And also with you,” came the reply from the crowd, who then filed out of the cathedral like ants from a hill.

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Lictor Rhsynia opened the door to her quarters. They were scant and spare, though they were hers alone. A small, wooden desk, an oil lamp, a painting of the countryside, a bunk, a chest. She sat in her chair and laid her cane against the wall. She took out a quill and inkwell from the drawer and some parchment, when a rap came at the door.

“Yes?” said Lictor Rhsynia, her voice characteristically muffled by the mask.

The door creaked open and a tall figure in black entered.

“Father Brackett,” said the Lictor, and pushed herself away from the desk to rise and bow, but the father stayed her with a raised hand. “To what do I owe the honor?”

“Sit, child, you have need of rest.” The father came in and closed the door, staring at her. The Lictor returned the stare, the lamplight glinting off her silvered face.

After too long of a pause, the father spoke again.

“It was good of you to take that girl’s place, Lictor Rhsynia.”

“I did what had to be done.”

“Yes,” said the father to himself, nodding, looking down. “As do we all. For the good of all. We serve with our bodies. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Good.” The father nodded some more, looking around the small room, taking it in. As though speaking to the room, and not to her, he said, “They don’t know. The masses. The laypeople. They don’t know what’s coming.”

Lictor Rhsynia waited for him to explain, and when he didn’t, offered, “what do you mean?”

“The end, Lictor Rhsynia. The burning, bloody end. This will all come crumbling down upon us, and God will have his vengeance. He will destroy us with His breath.”

“May it ever be so,” said the Lictor, without hesitation and with all earnestness.

The father looked back at her, as though just noticing her, and smiled. Another of his small chuckles. “Good, child, good. You understand, don’t you? I know you do. I can see it in your eyes.”

Lictor Rhsynia kept staring, unblinking, though she doubted he could really see her eyes in this dim light, and through her mask.

“Keep the faith, child,” said the father, nodding one more time, continuing to look at her, a skeletal vestige of his smile remaining but fading as the morning fog, frozen on his face but not really present. He opened the door, keeping eye contact with her for as long as possible before finally turning to leave.

“Yes, Father,” said Lictor Rhsynia with a bow of her head before he departed. The room darkening, the faint blue light of the cloister now gone, she returned to her records, the pen full of ink that waited to impart knowledge to the page, itself utterly bereft of thought and wisdom.

Father Brackett returned the next day, this time with tea. He made conversation and lectured her about the finer points of hamartiology. He returned the day after that, and again.

“Let me help you with that,” he said, when he entered upon her changing her bindings one day.

“No, Father. This is part of my duties.”

“We must bear each other’s burdens,” said the father.

Lictor Rhsynia hesitated. She wore only her mask and her muslin wrappings, though they covered her entire body.

The father unwrapped her carefully and helped her clean her wounds. He was gentle as he reapplied the herbs and wrapped her up again, his touch lingering.

“Thank you, Father.”

“It is my duty to care for God’s children,” he said with his skeletal smile, the one that never made it to his eyes, that came from some hidden place and went in darkness, like a stillborn.

“Father,” said Lictor Rhsynia as he was putting the last of the wrappings on.

“Yes, child?”

“How did you know it was sister Lysia’s turn to do the Mathoms that day?”

His hand hesitated mid-wrapping, briefly. “Whatever makes you ask that?”

“Nothing, Father, forgive me. It’s only... the Mathoms are selected at random, and the one who draws them is sworn to tell no one until it is done.”

“And what makes you think I knew it was Lysia?”

“Well, you mentioned, that day in the Matron’s office, that I had done them in her stead. You said her name, Lysia.”

“Oh, well, of course I did. She had been missing a whole week! Everybody knew it must have been Lysia who had drawn the Mathoms for that day.”

“Right,” said the Lictor. “Of course. I suppose it would be quite a coincidence if the girl who went missing were not also the one who missed the Mathoms. But still, to be certain, they would have to find the missing ticket, which would require an inventory of all the sisters’ belongings in the whole cloister.”

“I’m sure they’ve done that, my child.”

“Do you mean to say that you don’t know if they’ve taken inventory?”

“Not that I’m aware of...” the father trailed off, that bone-white smile still present in ghostly form.

“So, you did guess, then?”

“Guess what?”

“That it was Lysia?”

“Am I being interrogated, Lictor Rhsynia?” the father said with a hint of humor, some life entering the corner of his smile.

“No, Father, of course not. Merely thinking aloud.”

“Thinking is for the weak, child. Faith is for the strong.”

“Yes, Father. I’m only trying to do my job.”

“Of course, child. You are our Lictor, after all. I’m sure Acolyte Assynia has the investigation well in hand. You need to rest.”

“You’re right, Father.”

He nodded, and the Lictor stood shakily, bracing herself on the chair as she did. When her arm faltered, Father Brackett reached out to steady her, but grabbed her breast. It was covered in bandages, but still relatively exposed. He did not immediately pull his hand away, but let it slide off. A muffled noise came from within the mask, a sort of cough. Lictor Rhsynia reached for her sackcloth, and this time the father’s hand grabbed her arm, stopping her. She looked back, frozen. He pulled her closer to himself, their bodies now touching.

“Father...”

“Shh, be quiet, my child.”

He pulled off her mask and set it aside.

“You’re quite beautiful beneath that fearsome thing.”

“I –” she was cut off by his lips pressing against hers, as his tongue forced its way inside. She pulled away and tried to free herself but could not in her weakened state.

“What are you – do you need a removal?” she asked. “I can find someone who is well...”

“No,” was his only response, as he kissed her again.

She attempted to pull away again. “Father, please –”

“Stop talking.”

He pushed her down onto the bed and undid his robe, displaying his wickedness.

“Father, no, I can help you,” she said, trying to keep her legs closed. “Please, don’t do this. You don’t understand what you’re doing.”

He pulled away the bandages and forced himself inside her as she continued to protest.

“Please, Father, no, anything but this. I’ll give you my mouth. I’ll give you my bottom. Please. Don’t do it in there, Father, please.”

Her tears and protestations did nothing to dissuade him as he completed his dark deed and pushed himself up, closing his robe.

The Lictor stared at him, her face more stoic than the silver mask he had removed, her tear-stained cheeks reflecting the dim lamplight, looking like a fire burning inside of her.

“God will repay you for what you’ve done,” the father said before leaving, the smile on his face long gone.

* * *

Father Brackett once again dressed himself in his rectory, adjusting his collar and smiling in the mirror, always looking like he was wearing someone else’s face.

Today was a very special day. Father Brackett, the Matron, and rows of sisters and deacons had lined up on either side of a red carpet that had been unfurled on the sand in front of the Cathedral.

Four men carried a palanquin, along with four elite halberdiers in ceremonial armor.

They set the carriage down in front of the Matron and Father Brackett, who watched as a wizened man in flowing robes and a large hat stepped onto the carpet. First the Matron, then the father, knelt before him and kissed his ring.

“Archbishop,” said Father Brackett, almost breathless. “You honor us with your presence.”

“Come, child,” said the older man.

The father followed as the archbishop went in through the large Cathedral doors, opened by his attendants.

They met in the father’s rectory.

“My child,” said the archbishop, the words tumbling out of his mouth like loose gravel. “The Sacrifex have heard of your trials in this remote land, and your successes. You have done the impossible -- you have brought water from the rock. This parish is profitable for the first time in a century. You have relieved the burden on your brothers and sisters in the diocese and made your parish a shining example of holiness and rectitude. For these services and more, you are being promoted to the rank of Bishop.”

“Archbishop,” said Father Brackett, kneeling, trembling, with tears in his eyes. “Thank you.”

“You will be given governance over this entire diocese and report directly to me. If there are any troubles that you yourself cannot resolve, you will bring them to me.”

“Yes, Archbishop.”

The old man rose slowly, using his holy staff to help him up, and walked to the door which his attendant was holding open.

“Archbishop?”

The old man stopped and turned around.

“Yes, child?”

“Do me the honor of staying under my roof this night.”

“As you wish.”

* * *

Lictor Rhsynia cradled herself on her bed and cried. A few of her bandages were bleeding through. She had never felt so disgusted and violated in her whole life. A pit of darkness formed in her and threatened to consume her.

She changed the bandages that needed changing and dressed herself. She went to the chapel in the cloister and prayed for hours.

In the morning, she went to clearing where the Mathoms were performed, but did not stop there. She walked beyond that clearing, over a small dune, and into the wild desert. There was nothing out here, nothing but crows and waves of sand -- an ocean of stone.

She walked for hours, the sand getting into the bandages and wounds on her feet, the pain keeping her going, nearly drowning the pain that she felt inside.

The crows followed her. They were thick, the air filled with the dust of their wings, whirling always, disconnecting her from reality, as though she were walking on clouds in the sky-temple of the gods.

When she felt that she had gone far enough that the desert had swallowed her, she fell to her knees. About to strip herself naked once more, indeed, for the last time, the countless crows screamed in a cacophony of thirst, waiting to plunge their beaks into her flesh and tear until there was nothing left but white bone. She reached for the hem of her garments, but something stopped her. Amidst the ruinous sound, it was as though all had gone silent. A sleeve, flapping in the wind -- a black sleeve, whipping back and forth in front of her, only a few feet away. Lictor Rhsynia lurched and scrambled on all fours to grab it. She pulled and a robe came from the dust, a sister's robe. The Lictor dug with her hands and struck something hard. She pulled up a skull, hideously empty, and yet not at all ancient. She knew the skulls in the crypt, and this was not one of them.

She looked back the way she had come and saw the dim light of the sun through the dust.

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Father Brackett lay on his canopy bed, spreading himself for the archbishop.

“Please, Father, fill me with your holy seed!”

“I will, child.”

The archbishop parted his opulent red and gold robes and prevailed upon him with his holy staff.

“You’re so... strong,” said Father Brackett, straining. “For a man of your age.”

The door to the rectory swung open, slamming into the wall and blowing out some of the candles.

Father Brackett’s eyes widened, his sclera visible as the moon in the dim light. The archbishop pushed himself off of the father and fell backward off the bed, his face an expression of more surprise and shock than fear.

In the doorway stood Lictor Rhsynia, an elite halberdier on his knees before her, her feet shod in the Lictor’s boots of judgment. She kicked him back and the chain around his neck unfurled as he slumped. The moon highlighted the blood that dripped from the chain as her masked face hid her expression.

“Sorry to interrupt, Father,” said the Lictor.

She tilted her head and looked at the fallen archbishop, scrambling backward on his buttocks like a naked crab.

“Archbishop,” she said as she flicked out her chain, wrapping it around the old man’s neck and yanking him to the floor, eliciting a shriek of pain as his head struck the stone.

“You scream like a younger man.”

Brackett ran for the door, but Lictor Rhsynia dropped the chain from her right hand and with her left grabbed the fallen soldier’s halberd, bringing the point into the father’s groin, impaling him. The screams were horrid, unlike any the Lictor had heard, and she had heard many screams. But while the other screams had pained her to hear, these brought her delight.

“You have such a lovely singing voice, Father,” said Lictor Rhsynia.

She pulled the halberd loose, Father Brackett collapsing and howling like a wolf burned alive. Walking past, she looked at his pathetic display, saying to herself, “Pray without ceasing.”

Lictor Rhsynia found the archbishop hiding in the corner, cradling his bleeding skull. “How right it is for one of your station,” she said, “to die in chains.” She picked up the chain, still wrapped around his neck, and pulled directly up, hard, the metal links creating a tiny chorus building to a crack of cartilage and bone, with a flash of sound as she dropped the chain once more. Turning around, she saw the father was crawling toward the door.

“They’re all dead, Father. They can’t help you.”

“God will curse you,” he choked between ragged sobs. “He hears my prayers.”

“That may well be, Father,” said the Lictor, rolling him onto his back with her boot. She raised her halberd like the holy sacrament, the point above his chest. “But He answers mine.”