

Heart of Gold

Jessica stood just outside the church. It was a plain white building, situated between a pair of oak trees in a quiet suburb. There was nothing distinctive about it, no stained-glass windows, no bell tower, no golden cross above the door.

But Jessica knew -- from bitter experience -- that looks could be deceiving. She sensed wrongness here. It tainted every molecule of this world.

She opened the church's door and heard singing. Two hundred worshippers sat in the pews: fathers in suits, mothers in modest dresses, children fidgeting in their formal clothes. A few people turned around and stared at Jessica, but no one recognized her. She wore a short-sleeved white dress and sensible shoes and no makeup. She didn't want to stand out.

One man stared at her for an extra few seconds, licking his lips and leering. She felt the wrongness again, thick and nauseating. Then the man faced forward and continued singing.

Jessica had never heard this hymn before. It was a song of gratitude, thank you Father, thank you Lord. She found a seat in the last pew and focused on the priest standing at the altar. He was a tall handsome man with short black hair and a winning smile. He spread his arms wide, encouraging the congregation to sing louder. The sleeves of his white surplice swayed to and fro.

Then the worshippers let out a triumphant "Amen!" and the priest turned to one of the families seated in the front row. "Okay, it's time for the main event. Let's call the Andersons to the altar. Come on up, Mike and Kate. And you too, kids."

They rose from the pew, a gawky thirtyish man and his petite blond wife, plus two towheaded boys, maybe five or six years old. The family approached the altar, a simple table of varnished wood, and the children beamed as they turned around to face the congregation. The father grinned too, pasty-faced and nervous, but the mother kept her head down and rocked the infant in her arms. The baby was wrapped in a pink blanket and wore a white woolen cap. It was a newborn, Jessica guessed, tiny and sleeping.

The priest moved behind the table and lifted a ceremonial red cloth from a white basin, about the size of a turkey platter. He stretched his hand toward Kate Anderson, urging her to come closer. "It's a blessed day, folks." His voice was jubilant. "As we always say, giving birth to a third child is a sure sign of our Father's approval. So we celebrate it. We give thanks for our bounty and humbly beseech the Lord for more good fortune."

The mother stayed where she was. The priest waited a moment, then stepped toward Mrs. Anderson. "Don't worry. It'll only take a minute." Still smiling, he slipped his hands under the bundled infant. She let go of her baby, but kept her head down. She seemed to be fighting a desperate battle to calm herself.

The priest unwrapped the pink blanket and removed the infant's cap. Naked and probably cold, the baby started to cry. It was a girl,

Jessica saw, with downy hair and a ruddy scrunched face. The newborn wailed as the priest placed her in the basin.

This wasn't a baptism, though. The basin was too shallow, only an inch deep. And there was no water in it.

Jessica stood up, her knees shaking. At the same time, the priest lifted another red cloth from the altar, revealing a long bone-handled knife.

#

Jessica wasn't naïve. She knew what people were capable of doing. She'd seen so many appalling things in her travels, in churches and temples and palaces on hundreds of parallel worlds.

But this was an atrocity. Something was seriously awry in this branch of reality.

She rushed out of her pew. Glaring ferociously, she pointed at the priest, who held the knife above the basin, its silvery tip aimed at the infant's heart.

"Stop!" She took long strides, hurtling toward him. "Don't touch that child!"

The worshippers gaped at her, their eyes widening. The mothers and fathers recoiled, clearly outraged that she would dare to interrupt their service. Several of the fathers jumped to their feet and tried to intercept her, but Jessica was too fast. She raced to the altar, stepped right up to the basin, and scooped the wailing baby into her arms.

The priest backed off and dropped the knife. He was surprised, and maybe scared too. He swiveled his head, looking for help. Half a

dozen men from the congregation had followed Jessica to the altar, but they kept their distance once they saw her holding the baby. She'd gained an advantage over them, she realized. She'd seized their sacrifice.

Now she needed to get out of that church. She had no idea where to go or what to do with the baby. She didn't know if it was even possible to find a place of refuge in this hideous version of Earth. Nevertheless, she was going to try.

But then Mrs. Anderson screamed and charged toward her.

The infant's mother was unstoppable. She leapt at Jessica and snatched the baby, clutching it with both hands and pulling it to her chest. Then she ran back to her shocked husband.

A moment later, two men grabbed Jessica from behind and yanked her away from the altar. One of them, a thick-necked brute with a bushy red beard, twisted her arm behind her back and juttied his chin over her shoulder.

"Piece of filth!" He sprayed her face with spittle. "Get moving!"

The men dragged her to the back of the church while the other worshippers cheered. Jessica managed to look over her shoulder and catch a glimpse of the Anderson family, still lined up beside the altar. The mother had already returned her baby to the priest, who laid it in the basin and picked up his knife.

#

The police took Jessica to the local jail. Two officers in black uniforms led her to a holding cell in the building's dank basement.

The cell was huge, more than sixty feet across, and yet it was still crowded. Hundreds of men were packed inside, most of them sprawled on the concrete floor. Some women were in there too, maybe a dozen, each lying naked and half-conscious under a heap of writhing men.

The officers unlocked the barred door and shoved Jessica into the cell. At first the prisoners scrambled backward, desperate to keep their distance from the guards. But after the officers walked off, the inmates edged toward Jessica in a ragged semi-circle. She could tell right away who was their leader: a bald, bare-chested giant with a tattooed spiderweb on his forehead. He stepped forward and looked her over. The men in the cell quieted down, and all Jessica could hear were the sobs of the women.

The leader came closer. He towered over her. "What's with you?" He pointed at her dress. "You a nurse or something?"

She shook her head. "I wear white because it symbolizes goodness. And hope."

He let out a sharp laugh. Then he pointed at her face. "But your skin's black."

"I am who I am." She shrugged. "What about you? What's your name?"

He cocked his head, grinning, definitely amused. "You're a strange one, girl. Ain't you scared of me?"

"Of course not. You're a child of God." She turned away from him and looked at the other men, who were grinning too. "You're living under a terrible shadow here, because this version of the world is

darker than most. But you can still rise toward the light. You just have to try harder."

The bald giant grasped the back of her neck. He turned her head, forcing her to look at him. "My name's Warren. Got it?" He wasn't smiling anymore. He clamped his other hand on her waist and pulled her closer. "You and me are gonna get better acquainted now."

Jessica narrowed her eyes, concentrating, but the man's grip on her didn't loosen. She had less control over people and things on this world. She felt as if she were deep underwater, everything muffled and muted by a vast ocean of malevolence. She closed her eyes and focused harder, thinking of Warren's hands, the fingers pressed into her neck and waist, and she felt something more painful than the stinging pressure of his fingertips. She could sense everything his hands had ever done, all the beatings and rapes and torture. It was terrifying.

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

But who created those hands? Who fashioned the fingertips, molded the knuckles, smoothed the palms? Who spurred the multiverse into motion, propelling everything down the forking paths of existence?

Jessica whispered the answer, and it gave her a modicum of power even on this benighted world. If Warren is truly a child of God, his hands should do God's bidding.

As soon as she had this thought, he let go of her. Warren stepped back and crumpled to the floor, unconscious. Then all the

other men in the cell collapsed. The women fell asleep too, their suffering finally eased, at least for the next few hours.

When the two guards returned to the holding cell that evening, Jessica was tiptoeing past the sleeping inmates, looking down at their becalmed bodies and finding shreds of beauty in each face. One of the guards whistled in amazement. The other glared at her.

"Shit! What happened here?"

She raised her head and smiled. "I put them to sleep."

"What? You drugged them?"

"No." She stepped toward the cell's door, which unlocked and opened at her touch. "They're dreaming of a better place."

#

The frightened guards took her to the jail's warden, but he dismissed her explanations. Instead, he became convinced that she had psychic powers. (Ignorance walked hand-in-hand with evil in this branch of reality.) So they sent her to a military base to be tested.

They handcuffed her and slipped a black hood over her head, so she couldn't see anything on the base, but when they took her out of the prison van she heard the shrieking of jet engines. The soldiers led her into an air-conditioned building, marched her down an echoing hallway, and shoved her into a hard metal chair.

When they finally removed her hood, she found herself seated behind a table in a windowless room. On the table was a gray steel rod, a yard long and an inch thick. Five men in camouflage fatigues stood on the other side of the table, four of them aiming pistols at her, ready to fire if she did anything supernatural. The fifth man,

standing in the middle, was obviously the commander; there were three stars on the collar of his fatigues.

The commander scowled. He had a creased, leathery face. "I'm Colonel Belphegor. You shall call me Sir. Understand?"

Jessica nodded. "Yes, sir."

"My subordinates say you've refused to reveal your last name?"

"I don't have one, sir. But you can call me Jessica."

Belphegor's scowl intensified. "I'm a man of little patience, so let's make this quick. The prison authorities claim you have telekinetic powers. Is this true? Did you open the door to your prison cell with the power of your mind?"

She thought it over for a second. "It's true that I didn't use a key."

"I need you to demonstrate your abilities." The colonel pointed at the steel rod on the table. "Can you bend this rod without touching it?"

"Is it very important to you, sir?" She looked him in the eye. "The power of my mind, as you call it, is limited on this world. But I could try."

His cheek twitched. For a moment Jessica thought he would smack her. But he controlled himself. "Yes, do it. Now!"

She stared at the length of steel. On most of the Earths she'd visited, the physical world was like an airy sculpture, a cloudlike carving she could refashion with a breath, stilling the waters with a whisper, parting the seas with a sigh. But on this plane of existence, evil had hardened every atom. The gray rod was as

unyielding as an executioner's heart. It seemed to mock her, stubbornly perverse.

But God will not be mocked.

Slowly, the rod began to bend at the middle. It reluctantly bowed to her, forming a hard gray L on the table.

The colonel stopped scowling. His eyes lit up. "Well, I'll be damned." He stepped closer and touched the bent rod, gingerly fingering its new corner. "Guess it's my lucky day, eh? The boys in Special Operations are gonna love this." He turned to his soldiers and pointed at the shortest man. "Go to the detention cells and bring one of the prisoners here. Doesn't matter which. Any of them will do."

The soldier shouted, "Yes, sir!" and dashed out of the room. Then Belphegor turned back to Jessica.

"Nice little talent you got there." He leaned across the table. "Where do you come from anyway?"

She shook her head. "No place in particular. I'm a wanderer."

"That's all right. You don't have to tell me." He smiled. "Our interrogators will get it out of you."

"Sir, let me offer you a more important piece of information. You don't have to live this way. If you put your mind to it, you could become a better person, even here. You could help raise your world out of the darkness."

He stared at her for several seconds, looking curious and amused. Then the short soldier returned, dragging a handcuffed man in a filthy gray jumpsuit. The prisoner was limping and emaciated and

missing half his teeth. His face was unshaven and pocked with bruises.

Colonel Belphegor grabbed the prisoner by the elbow. "Here's the next part of the test. It's actually easier than the first part." He yanked the man forward, slamming his stomach against the edge of the table. His gaunt face quivered above Jessica's. "All you have to do is crush his throat. That should be a cinch for someone with your powers, right?"

The prisoner's eyes were vacant. They'd already beaten the fear out of him. He was so far gone, he probably couldn't even see her. Ending his life would be a mercy.

But Jessica wouldn't do it, of course. "No, I won't hurt him."

The colonel squinted. "Really? Why not?"

"Please, take a moment and think. Every life is precious. When you—"

"Enough!" He shook the prisoner, making his head wobble. "Your talents are worthless if we can't use them for military purposes. Which means killing the enemy. Understand?"

A string of drool hung from the prisoner's chin. To Jessica's dismay, she couldn't touch his mind, couldn't reach him at all. Although he was just inches away, the space between them was impenetrable. That was perhaps the worst thing about this parallel world, its resistance to sympathy. The air itself seemed to push everyone apart.

She ignored the colonel and just stared at the prisoner, wordlessly struggling to grant him a moment of comfort. After a few

seconds, Belphegor let go of the poor man, who hit the table with a thud and slid to the floor.

Grimacing, the colonel removed a pistol from his holster. He stepped around the table and aimed the gun at Jessica. "Okay, I'll give you an incentive to cooperate. If you don't kill the prisoner, I'll shoot you. I'll pick a non-essential piece of your anatomy, some sensitive part that'll really sting. Then we'll try again."

She steeled herself. She'd expected this. "I forgive you, sir. You know not what you do."

Belphegor shrugged. Then he pointed the gun downward and shot her left foot.

The bullet went right through the top of her sensible shoe and shattered all the bones in her instep. When the pain hit her, it was stunningly familiar and just as horrible as she remembered. She couldn't numb herself to it; she was vulnerable to this kind of torment wherever she traveled. She'd suffered agonies on every world she'd visited, in all the trillions and trillions of permutations of reality. That was the bargain she'd made at the moment of Creation.

She screamed. She wept.

But she refused to hurt the prisoner.

So Belphegor shot her other foot. Then he undid her handcuffs and shot her once in each of her palms. He grew angrier as the torture continued. He unsheathed his combat knife and flayed the skin off her fingertips. And when this failed to persuade her, he plunged the knife into her belly and tugged her viscera out of the wound.

Finally, he lost all patience and slashed her throat.

But Jessica didn't die.

She couldn't die.

#

She sat alone in the windowless room, still in the chair behind the table. Her white dress was now soggy and red, and a purple coil of her intestines dangled out of the gaping wound in her belly. Her carotid artery had been cut, and most of her blood had splattered to the floor. Yet she was still conscious, still breathing.

Her failure to die had clearly unnerved Belphegor and his men. They'd fled the room in disbelief and locked the door behind them. Jessica assumed they'd gone in search of a superior officer, perhaps the general in command of the base.

She still felt the terrible pain, but she was getting used to it. Her agony was like an old friend who'd come back to visit. Her oldest friend, actually. She was never really alone, no matter where she wandered, because there was suffering in every parallel universe. The pain might be less tenacious in other versions of reality, but it was never entirely absent.

After an hour or so, the door to the room opened. A slender young man in a dazzling gold uniform stepped inside and strode toward her. His face was angular and attractive, with sharp cheekbones, swooping eyebrows, and a neatly trimmed goatee. His uniform was bedecked with medals and ribbons, and a ceremonial sword hung from his belt. Jessica found it strange that such a young man had risen so high in the military ranks, but the social hierarchies might be

distorted on this world. Perhaps he'd done something extraordinarily appalling to distinguish himself.

The man halted beside the table. He gave her a careful once-over, examining her injuries. Then he smiled.

"It's good to see you again." His voice was cheerful. "Although, to be perfectly honest, you don't look so well. I hope you don't mind my frankness."

Now she recognized him. She saw through his handsome disguise and heard the clatter of his hooves.

It was her Adversary.

He bent over to take a closer look at her wounds. His yellow pupils gleamed, and he licked his lips with a forked tongue. "The pain must be awful. But that's why you came here, correct? You're a glutton for punishment."

Jessica raised one of her bloody hands to her neck. Her windpipe had been cut, but by clamping her fingers over the gash she could draw in a breath and speak. "You know why I'm here. I won't abandon any of the realms I've created."

He shook his head, pretending to pity her. "But this particular realm is quite biased in my favor. I'm sure you noticed the general disregard on this world for all the usual commandments?"

"I noticed." Her words were indistinct because her breath leaked out of the slit in her throat. She adjusted her grip on her neck to make a tighter seal. "Every branch of reality can take a turn toward evil. But they can also turn toward good."

The Adversary sat on the edge of the table. He was clearly enjoying the conversation. "But you have to admit, my influence on this universe is firmly entrenched. You saw one of my churches? And the faithfulness of my followers?"

She said nothing. The memory of it was more painful than any of her wounds.

He chuckled, relishing her distress. "My worshippers are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice. They acknowledge my lordship by rendering unto me every third child that a woman bears. Tell me, do your own believers have that kind of devotion?"

Jessica felt something rising within her, something she hadn't felt in a long time. Her wrath. Her righteous fury.

"I came here to show your followers a better way. They'll remember how I tried to save that baby girl." She raised her other hand and pointed a skinless finger at him. "Even on this world, your dominion isn't absolute. If I have to, I'll come back to this universe again and again."

"That's your long-term strategy?" He winked at her. "You plan to mingle with the evildoers here, searching for a heart of gold in the vast crowd of sinners? You think a handful of saints will start a holy revolution?"

She nodded. "It might take a hundred thousand years, but I'll reclaim this world."

"No, I'm afraid not." He got off the table and reached for his ceremonial sword. He pulled it out of its scabbard and held it up to the light. "You made a serious error when you decided to come here."

Jessica gazed at the weapon with contempt. "Your sword is useless. I am everlasting."

"Oh, I know I can't slaughter you. That's not my intention." He swiped the sword over her head, making it whistle. "I'm going to trap you on this version of the Earth. I'm going to bury you in a very deep tomb."

"It won't hold me. I'll—"

"You'll do what? Roll the stone from the tomb's entrance, like you've done before? Sorry, that won't work. I control the laws of physics in this corner of reality, so I can keep you buried here forever. You can barely manage to bend a steel rod on this world, so you'll certainly have some trouble when you're lying under a billion tons of solid rock."

"You really think you can defeat me? You think you can stop me from wandering across the multiverse and ministering to my children?"

"Yes! You've made a catastrophic mistake." He flourished his sword again. "I'll finally be free of you! And everything will be permitted!"

To celebrate his victory, the Adversary swung his sword at the table, which instantly caught fire and turned to dust. The air in the room caught fire too, and the walls blackened and crackled. The blaze incinerated Jessica's hair and dress and shoes, but she wasn't impressed. She still felt nothing but contempt for him. She curled her charred lips and clenched her burning hands.

In response, he thrust his sword into her chest and pierced her sacred heart.

#

She was disfigured and disemboweled by the time they brought her to the cemetery, but one of her eyes was still working, and she could see that night had fallen. It was a magnificent graveyard, with dozens of obelisks casting long shadows in the moonlight. Hundreds of rows of tombstones surrounded her, and standing among them were thousands of celebrants in scarlet vestments.

Jessica lay at the edge of a pit at the center of the cemetery. The Adversary, still in his gold uniform, crouched over her and looped a heavy chain around her broken torso. He looked deliriously happy. His face seemed to throb under the moonlight.

He crouched lower so he could whisper into her one remaining ear. "You should feel honored. This is the biggest and most important cemetery in my Kingdom." He gestured at the acres of graves. "And just look at all the people who've come to see you off. Can you hear them?"

The celebrants were singing the same hymn she'd heard in the church yesterday, but now the lyrics were different. They were in a language she'd never heard before, a foul tongue full of sharp consonants and shrieking vowels. And yet the singers seemed joyful. They eagerly bellowed their jarring hymn, aiming their voices at the night sky.

Jessica yearned to call out to them, to argue and persuade, to lead them out of darkness. But now she had no voice of her own. The Adversary had ripped her windpipe from her throat.

He bent still lower as he fastened the chain around her. His breath smelled of sweet decay. "Let me give you a little preview of the ceremony. First I'll make a short speech. Then I'll throw you into the pit." He pointed at the gaping hole in the ground. "The shaft is only ten feet wide, but it's two miles deep. My men have been digging it for years. Because I knew that someday you'd make the mistake of coming to this universe." He looked at something in the distance, something Jessica couldn't see. "Over there are five hundred dump trucks loaded with rubble. They'll pour it into the shaft after you've landed at the bottom."

He grinned proudly, admiring his meticulous preparations. Then he stood up straight and turned around to address his followers.

The crowd stopped singing and let out an enormous cheer. The Adversary raised his arms and basked in their adoration, turning to the left and right, soaking it all up. He seemed to grow several feet as he stood there, enlarging like a human-shaped sponge.

Then his gold uniform tore apart, and a pair of huge black wings unfurled from his back.

The crowd instantly hushed. All the celebrants fell to their knees. The Adversary stepped forward until he stood beside one of the tombstones, a granite rectangle about five feet high. He placed one of his hands on the stone and caressed its rough surface. Then he started to speak in the same vile language his followers had used. He howled and shrieked, his voice rising in ecstasy.

Jessica didn't understand a word. At first she was grateful for her ignorance; it would only increase her suffering if she understood

what the Adversary was saying. But it was also disturbing. How could she be ignorant of so much in the multiverse? Wasn't she supposed to be all-knowing? Didn't she light the spark that ignited Creation, the everlasting explosion of parallel universes and realities? So how could she fail to understand her own handiwork? How could her children grow into monsters she couldn't even recognize?

Clearly, she didn't deserve her grandiose reputation. She was neither omniscient nor omnipotent. And a few minutes from now, once the Adversary tossed her into that deep dark hole, she wouldn't be ever-present either. She would be locked in one place forever, utterly powerless. For the rest of eternity, she and all her children would suffer alone.

The worst moment, though, was when she gazed at the faces of the kneeling celebrants. They beamed at the Adversary as he howled at them, his wings idly flapping, his hands clutching the granite tombstone in a claw-like grip that seemed almost loving in its possessive fury. His followers were indisputably happy now. To Jessica's dismay, they looked euphoric. Doing evil made them feel better than doing good. And if that was true, what was the point of goodness?

Her despair was infinite.

Oh, my children! Why have you forsaken me?

But then another thought occurred to her. She stared again at the Adversary's hands on the tombstone. And she remembered what he'd said about this place, how it was the most important cemetery in his Kingdom.

Which made her wonder: who's buried here?

They acknowledge my lordship by rendering unto me every third child that a woman bears.

This was the burial ground of the sacrificed. That's why the Adversary gripped the granite marker so fiercely. He thought of them as his children.

But they weren't. If given the chance, the murdered infants wouldn't acknowledge his lordship. If they were to come back to life, they certainly wouldn't kneel down before him.

With what was left of her face, Jessica smiled. If there was one thing she was really good at, it was resurrection.

Even on this grim world, her thoughts could descend into the soil. She could awaken the hundreds of thousands of slaughtered newborns. It was as easy as whispering a lullaby into their ears.

Within seconds their tiny hands burst out of the ground. Then their soft heads and begrimed bodies. Some were still rotting, and some were just skeletons, but they were all charged with the same spirit, the same primal impulse. Although they'd been murdered long before they could comprehend any notions of justice, somehow they knew who'd ordered their deaths. They sensed his stench and crawled toward him.

The celebrants fled. They abandoned their king.

The Adversary stepped backward, but he was already surrounded. Hundreds of small skeletons pounced on him at once, propelled by all the agony of the lives cut so short. Thousands more clambered on top of the mound of clacking bones. They weighed down his giant wings.

They piled on his hooves and his angular face. They didn't try to hurt him -- Jessica couldn't wish suffering on anyone, not even the Adversary -- but they pinned him to the ground.

A smaller group of infants crept toward her. Using their toothless jaws and brittle fingers, they unraveled the chain from Jessica's mutilated body. And as they brushed against her, their own bodies began to transform. White feathers sprouted from their skeletons, and pinkish beaks protruded from their skulls.

They became a flock of doves. They burrowed under her and took flight, carrying her on their backs.

They lifted her toward the night sky. Toward the starry heavens. Toward the black void beyond the cosmos, where the infinite tendrils of the multiverse are branching in all directions.

Toward the next stage of her journey.