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## **The Clandestine Nature of a Lamb**

Her fingers trembled, aching bones epoxied onto paper skin. The door is locked and the key in her pocket was frozen to the touch and she could feel the sanguine quality of her veins pumping as she twists the knob of her front door. Those lava filled venules that force sweat to bead across the apex of her forehead. Anxiety thrums in her ears. He shouldn't be home yet. He can't be, he's not.

He's in the bathroom.

The uncomfortably white bathroom that reeks of stale urine and bleach. Stained tile aged yellow and eggshell curtains to match--her mother's doing, a wedding gift per say. She pauses in the doorway as the distinct clang of metal against ceramic greets her eardrums. He was close, so close. She hadn't even fully stepped into her home and he was just *so* close. She can't knock on the door. She shouldn't, she won't.

She does.

"Everything all right in there?" Her accent startles her. It's flat, empty almost. An aftertaste of her birthplace. A handful of peridot stones tumbling in earl gray tea.

"Fine," the response is muffled, half by door and half choked on thick liquid. "Just fine."

"Thomas?" Her husband gargles a response out, one she can't decipher before he's thrown the thin door open, nearly knocking her in the face had she not stepped back at the last second. An indistinct gasp, hands thrown over her eyes, a step backward. She hadn't even realized she'd fallen until her eyelids had been forced open, only to look up and see the mess of a man she called her husband.

As she blinked, and stared, she saw glimpses of the man she'd married. Full, rosy cheeks marred with gaunt skulled ones. A smile charred into a sinister smirk. A ghost of the boy he used to be. The most horrific subtraction, though, was the gouged out hole where his nose used to be. A deep, pulsating and ugly red black void that seemed to pull any and all secretions of light into its depths. His nasal bone jutted out at an uncomfortable angle semi-attached to cartilage remnants dangling from its end. There was a substantial amount of blood dripping down his teeth and onto the dingy wife beater clinging to the sweat wetting his uncomfortably pale skin.

"My sweet, innocent Charlie," he gags on the words. "Why don't you come up here with me. There's so much you need to see."

"Please, I don't understand. I can't," she sobs. A stream of tears leaking down her cheeks alerts her senses that she must be crying, though she hadn't comprehended them until that moment. Her emotions had been doused in a vat of gasoline and the man in front of her had set them alight with the tilt of his head.

On top of it all, Charlotte Kincaid was wholly incapable of standing. She can't, she won't.

He lifts her slowly until she's awkwardly situated on her feeble, feelingless legs. There's no point in fighting it, him; she's not sure she could if she tried. She's still sobbing as she allows him to lead her the few feet into the bathroom until she's seated on the closed toilet seat with her knees bunched up against her chest. She failed to register the disgusting surplus of crimson cascading down her bathroom sink's drain.

"Charlie," he tsks lowly, almost unable to push the syllables through his teeth. "Look at me."

His voice wasn't loud. It never had been, despite the fact that he outweighed his wife by a solid fifty pounds. It had always been just forceful enough to dredge Charlotte from her dreams as the sun powdered in through the sheer curtains. The beige ones. His voice was deep and raspily warmed her insides, almost as if she'd managed to swallow molten gold, gulping the fiery liquid down by the gallon as mornings morphed into months. As the gold became tinged with arsenic and tasted like tequila as it slipped down her esophagus.

Thomas leans closer, hands pinned to the edge of the porcelain bowl beneath her as he cages her beneath his gaze. Sage green eyes that almost cease the trembling of her limbs. His knees clash against her shin as he maneuvers around her, forcing her eyes to meet his.

This man that surely couldn't have been her husband. No, he can't be. Not Thomas. *Her* Thomas. He can't be, he

isn't.

He is.

"Look at me, Charlie." There's a gravel in his voice that she doesn't recognize. The arsenic.

"Why?"

"Why what, sweetheart?"

"Please don't play me for a fool." Another broken sob, the words were weak and shaky, leaking down her chin.

"You're no-" He's cut off by his own cough, a spatter of blood wetting her cheeks. Charlotte mustered up the strength to grab the still damp washcloth hanging in their shower and gently press it against the gaping mass of his face. She could still picture his facial shape like this. What'd he'd looked like just hours prior. This morning. This morning when he'd buried his face to rest just above her collarbone, murmuring sweet nothings that went in one ear and out the other.

"Why, Thomas?"

"My darling, this is the start of something magnificent. I have been chosen. *We* have been chosen!" he cries out. The cloth had already soaked through and was dripping a diluted lifeblood onto the tile. Cherry sweet saliva meeting almost, barely white tile.

"But, your nose..." she trails off. Her fingers were sticky with sweat, now, and her eyelids were growing heavier at the loss of tears. Sun flares engulf her corneas.

"Just a small price to pay. I was called on, and in reparations for my sins He called for the flesh of His servant, of one He's miraculously gifted the breath of life." A price, it's always a price. There's always a price. She felt the bile rising at the back of her throat, taunting her gag reflex. Her stomach must've been just as disgusted with him as she was.

She allowed his fingers to rest atop her own, stroking the delicate skin there with a calloused thumb. It was a wholly familiar feeling but so overwhelmingly different. There was a disconnect. Between his touch and his intentions. Like his brain was lagging a second behind his body.

His hand drops and the rag makes a violent sloshing sound as it collides with the floor.

"You'll understand. You always understand," he says definitively. There's a steady stream of blood sliding atop his tongue. There's no way one human could produce so much blood. So much of that vile, disgusting liquid that violates everything it touches. She can't believe her eyes. She can't and she won't.

But, she's forced to.

Thomas stands to gently open the medicine cabinet above the sink, seemingly avoiding his reflection as he does it. The first aid kit was haphazardly tossed on the bottom shelf, mountains of gauze spilling along the edges and a sewing needle that seems to be keeping the heaps in a purposeful mess. She remembers. She's the one that put it there after Thomas' incident with the letter opener. Charlotte's gaze keeps focused just under him, on the way his pants were a half-inch too short. On the inch or so of white sock available to her sight. The beautifully untouched fabric encasing his ankles, not a speck of that ugly red in sight.

She opens her mouth to say something, but her throat tightens in response. Her mind is screaming, thrashing at the helm. Begging. All she can focus on is the urge to empty her stomach and the way one of the bulbs is casting a hazy flickering light over the small room.

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"In reparation for your sins, *all your sins*, He calls on you. He calls for the flesh of His loyal servants." The pastor's voice boomed over the small congregation. Thomas' chubby, primordial legs knocked against the cheap ochre of the pews. The word reparations is still ringing in his ear, weaseling into the crevices of his mind and nesting there.

Even as his mother delicately packed him up in the car an hour and a half later, wincingly, he was still sitting on those thin cotton covered pads. He's still listening to Father, the homily.

"The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak!" he'd said.

Thomas remembered, he always had. That was his moment, His calling.

Thomas Kincaid is older now, stronger. Knowing of his mission. He was made for this, just as this ichor was constructed to sear his veins. Charlotte. Sweet, beautiful, magnificent Charlie. She proves this. Her festering hymn breeds benefactors, a stepping stone to glory. The divine gift of His mercy came in the form of his earthly wife and she was *proof* of his mission.

Charlotte's eyes rake over his malignant figure. Tantalizing as he hovers over the sink basin, cavity still steadily pitter pattering onto cracked porcelain as he attempts to heal the wound without catching his eyes in the mirror. Even now, he was still in that church. Small, seven year old Thomas with skinned knees and a hole in his gums where a tooth should've been. He was still keeling over the words of the Father.

"I have been called upon, Charlie," he repeats the broken, ephemeral phrase. The vow drips poison onto her tongue, tainting her spit.

"I don't understand. Make me understand. Help me understand, *please*," she pleads.

“The sins of the father must be paid sevenfold over the sons.”

The sins of the-

Charlotte’s eyes bulged against their sockets, amplifying the ache rumbling at the base of her skull. She’d seen the way his mother handled his father, the purpling of her wrists and the black spots above her hip.

“My sacrifice will be the basis of His church. My sacrifice has washed my soul clean, washed *our* souls clean.” The sage in his eyes had glazed into a deep juniper and the blood had dried his lips into a honeypot of sticky black. He tiptoed into a delicate silence before continuing, “A smoke in my nose, a fire that burneth all day... And I have been freed.”

Her breath stalls on her tongue. There’s a dull throbbing where her uvula should be and she notices there’s an alarming pressure around her wrist as her skull attempts to cave in on itself. She glances in the direction of her hand and the twisting of her fingers in her husband’s grasp. Patches of hellfire blooming on a canvas of milk white in the shape of his callouses.

“Please, I need to... I need to go. I need to think. Just-“ A gasp cuts her off, her own surprisingly. A cheap attempt from her lungs at pulling oxygen into her system.

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The Kincaids had always been an odd looking couple. There was an uncomfortable height separating them that seemed to grow if you stared at them for a moment too long. Just an inch too much, maybe two, that forced poor Charlotte’s neck to crane at an obtuse angle whenever their lips met, a sacrifice she’d been more than willing to make in exchange for the man. The pristine pumps she’d worn at the altar were barely enough to bridge that gap, but they’d managed.

She remembered that day, vividly so, as it danced around in alabaster daydreams forever purged in crimson. The petrichor of their relationship as it punctured the dirt, the way it stung in her nostrils. The incomplete smile of his wedding vows now forever skewed with odium as they closed the gap between together and *together*.

Thomas in that dreadfully old tuxedo that his father had worn on his own wedding day and Charlotte in that demure, winter white gown.

The ring he’d given her was glacial to the touch, even still, as Thomas traced its golden linework into her skin.

Crusty fingernails encased in a quilt of dried carmine that rub her skin raw. He paused, pulling Charlotte from her memories just enough to see her husband stand, dropping her hand and allowing it to fall, perched on her thighs in a precarious manner, still slightly sore from his ministrations.

Mumbled words breach the lull in her throat, “Can you get me a glass of water?”

“Oh, darling, of course,” his limbs jolted abruptly.

Her adrenaline jump started once she saw him click the door shut behind him. A single, solid block of wood separating them. Her fingers meet metal before her brain comprehends the fact that she’s standing and the lock deafeningly pops into place.

There’s a window above the toilet. Just large enough that she could slip through, but locked into place. Charlotte could already feel imaginary glass slashing into her shins at the fleeting thought. Her subconscious skims through her options as the clock beside the towel rack ticks in time with her pulse. A shiver conjures up her spine when she hears the doorknob begin to jiggle and her eyes meet the cacophonous bowl of gore just below her line of sight.