

Dominus Miseriae



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"Ellie, if you're reading this," the note, written in her mother's disheveled handwriting began, "put it down, and walk away." Up until the last few months of her struggle with dementia, she knew her children. She knew her sons wouldn't care in the slightest about some dusty old books in the attic. If anyone was going to dig through every box, and give every book a once-over, it was going to be Ellie. Not that she made it easy for Ellie to find the musty book in front of her, looking to be somewhere between two-hundred and two-thousand years old. It was hidden in the bottom of the most tucked away box in the attic. "Do not open it. Do not read it. If you must do anything, bury it."

Rambling, psychosis-fueled threats weren't uncommon among the plethora of possessions her mother left behind. *Do not open on penalty of death* would be scribbled on an envelope of 30 year-old tax returns. *Absolutely do not touch* would be emblazoned on a box full of some painfully outdated glassware. The specificity of whom the message was addressed to was the only thing that even stood out as unique about this one.

Sadly, Ellie had grown so used to the paranoid scribbblings of her declining mother that she barely even paid it any mind. She peeled off the note, and then observed the cover further. It was made of tanned hide, but it didn't feel quite as rough, and it wasn't as dark as normal leather. She cringed as she looked further at the book. It had been bound by her mother- likely for a reason that only made sense to her- with twine so tightly it had left a deep indent. Not only did this diminish any collectible value the book may have held, but also, as a lover of antiques and old things, it hurt to see something irreplaceable like this damaged by something so nonsensical. She then checked the pages. Thankfully, the cover of the book spared them from any further damage. They were battered enough in their own right. The edges of each page peeking from behind the cover were darkened from the oils of however many hundreds of hands undoubtedly had gone over them, and some of the corners seemed to be disintegrating entirely.

"God, Mom..." she muttered under her breath, as if her mother could hear her from the afterlife. As gently as she could, Ellie untied the string and released the book from its shackles. She then glanced it over while running her hands along its beaten edges. And, summarily disregarding her mother's paranoid ramblings, she opened the book.

What met her eyes was not exactly what she was expecting. Ellie wasn't sure if she was planning on seeing her parents' wedding photos, more tax returns, lurid details of a love affair her mother wanted to keep hidden away forever, or something else entirely, but she knew she didn't expect to see pages completely filled with something that was entirely unintelligible to her. Not messy handwriting- something written in a script altogether different from English. It was beautifully penned, in scrawling, calligraphic strokes. Regardless of the penmanship, though, it meant nothing to Ellie, as she wasn't able to read it.

She turned the first page, and the second, and so on, and was met with lines upon lines of the same sprawling script. But after flipping through myriad pages as furiously as she could without

further damaging the fragile paper in her hands, she came across something that she didn't need to read to be able to understand.

A full page portrait of a large, shadowy black figure with skeletal wings sprouting from its back, hunched over. Its head was encircled by what looked like a halo of fire, and its mouth was open, gnashing fangs on display. It was holding a terrified looking man in its hands like he weighed nothing, gaping maw set to devour him whole. Compelled forward by her morbid curiosity, she continued flipping through the grim compendium. A number of pages later (twenty-three, to be exact), another intricate, macabre illustration greeted her. A church, precise age indeterminable but clearly old, was burning down in a fiery inferno. People danced about in the flames like ghosts, their hair ablaze and their flesh singeing in immortalized agony. The black figure was hidden in the background this time, ruby-red eyes locked on the gruesome display. Its face was small and Ellie had to squint to see its eyes but it didn't just look pleased; it looked nearly euphoric. And it was gilded with the same indecipherable scribbles at the bottom of the page.

She pressed forth, and every few pages, there would be another chilling illustration- poor victims being torn limb from limb, rivers of blood, fire falling from the sky- but each one had that black figure included somehow, and each one was adorned by the same indiscernible cursive. The most disturbing of the included pictures, all of which had a style reminiscent to her of ancient Roman art, was of the black figure in the background holding an incapacitated human in its arms and burying its face in the person's neck, blood spurting aimlessly and running down its face in thick streaks while dogs foaming at the mouth chased down people and ripped them apart in the foreground.

Before she knew it, she was almost all the way through the book. Taking the last page and flipping it over, she was met by the final two things that this book had to offer. On one side, another disturbing picture, though less morbid than those that came before it. The black figure, once again prominently featured, sat in a golden throne, piercing red eyes staring straight forward and its mouth spread wide in a razor-toothed smile. The background of the picture showed ash and glowing embers mixed with a void of nothingness. And from the top of the page descended two skeletal hands, completely free of flesh, lowering a golden, ornamental crown, replete with sparkling gems and ornate, regal flourishes onto the abysmal, black head of the creature. On the opposing page was the only text different than the cryptic, inscrutable characters that filled the rest of the book. Her eyes surfed over the script, and it didn't make much more sense to her than the rest of the writing, but at least it was in familiar characters.

Magne revertere

Ut dolorem meum consumas ut me consumas

Te ex regno igneo evocabo et exaltabo

Manum meam cape et benedic mihi Domine miseriae

She squinted her eyes, as if that would help her decode what was in front of her. The part of her brain that belonged to a Catholic in remission was able to recognize that this passage was Latin, and it feverishly grasped at the couple words it could make sense of. She recognized

bless me and *pain*, and something related to the Lord. She was also able to infer one of the words was *hand* from her rudimentary understanding of Spanish, but that was about it. She slowly read it aloud, trying to sound out each of the words, hoping that saying the words aloud would help her to remember if it was some part of a long-forgotten catechism.

As soon as the words left her lips, she wished they hadn't. She was overcome with a wave of infernal dread, so powerful it made her sick to her stomach. Completely disregarding the caution with which she had been treating the document, she threw the book down and ran to the bathroom.

Once there, she fell to the floor in front of the toilet as quick as she entered. It didn't take long for the sound of loud retching to fill the vacant house. After dry heaving several times, she slumped over on her side slightly, exhausted and disturbed.

She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to settle the several conflicting, screaming feelings in her head. In that moment, an all-too-familiar voice gently broke the silence from just outside the bathroom door.

"Hey sweetie... Not feeling the best?" Ellie's head shot up like a gun had gone off right next to her temple.

"M... Mom?!" That wasn't possible. Her mother had died in this house a little over a month ago. She had the mental scars of finding the lifeless body to show for it. But, regardless, her mother was standing right there in front of her.

"Hey, it'll be okay... Some rest and I'm sure you'll feel much better."

"How are you here right now? You can't be here."

"Yet here I am," she retorted, looking down at her arms as if to check she was really there and flashing a smile that was very much her mother's.

"You have no idea how much I've missed you. And I never felt like I even got to say goodbye."

"Well, Eleanora, I wasn't really all there towards the end. I'm not sure how much of me was left to say goodbye to." Ellie felt a pang in her heart. It had been so long since anyone had called her that. Her mother was the only person who had ever used that name for her (to everyone else she was just Ellie), and in the last 6 months of her mother's life, she wasn't Eleanora anymore because she didn't understand who Ellie was anymore. It was like having an unspoken prayer answered, being able to have this last conversation with her.

"I still don't understand how you're here right now."

"That doesn't matter. What matters is that I *am* here. Come now, take my hand and we can go downstairs and talk some more." Ellie's mom approached her with her palm outstretched. Ellie was still on the ground, and almost instinctively reached her hand back out to her mother's while looking up at her.

She examined her mother, caught up in a dreamlike fugue state, as if it was the first time she had seen her. She appeared as she was right around the last couple of months she was truly lucid. Before she started declining, before she became paranoid, before she was no longer able to care for herself, before... Everything that came after. Her gently graying, dark, wavy hair resting on her shoulders. A little bit of extra meat on her bones, but not to the point where it would ever be a health issue. Kind, loving smile, always happy to see her and always sure that there was joy to be found in the world somewhere. Those thin, metal-rimmed glasses covering up her gray eyes. As she looked into them, she knew that as impossible as this seemed, it was really happening, and her hand drew closer to the outstretched hand of her mother. But in the moment when their palms were about to touch, she saw something. A brief glimpse of it, like a fleeting moment of radio interference exposing a layer beneath the surface. For such a short moment, those gray eyes transformed into hungry, malicious orbs, red as rubies. As soon as they had morphed, they changed back, as if it was an unintentional mistake.

Ellie pulled her hand back.

"You're not my Mom," Ellie said, face transforming from one of awe and wonder into one of shock and primal horror.

"Take my hand, Eleanora," it said again, the sing-song voice a perfect replica of her mother's as it drew closer. Ellie looked closer now and saw that there was so much wrong here. Like a replica that you don't begin to see the problems with until you realize it's not real, those frighteningly obvious flaws began popping out. Why was the skin on her face so tight? Not only was it not wrinkly, but it was as if it was pulled as tight as possible over her face. And her smile... how had Ellie ever thought it was hers? It was like the painted on smile of a wax figure, mock happiness impressed onto a soulless husk that had never known emotion. The smile was there, but the feeling was not. *And it's an it, not her*, Ellie thought to herself, trying to make sense of this.

"Go away," Ellie said loudly, trying to mask the shake in her voice as she defensively balled up in the corner of the bathroom.

"Take my hand," it repeated. This time, it sounded less like her mother. Like a record slowing down, it distorted into something similar to the original but a sick, poorly made copy. It also sounded desperate. *Hungry*. The red eyes showed themselves once again, and this time stayed. And as the facade this thing had put up slowly deteriorated, the skin of her mother's outstretched hand seemed to dissolve, exposing a jet black paw with fingers tipped in claws that glinted in the sunlight dancing through the windows.

“Go away!!!!” she shrieked. Suddenly, there was a flash of light brighter than the sun, blinding her even through her tightly shut eyelids. And then... silence. She stayed curled up in the corner, eyes tightly closed for a moment, expecting to hear the voice of that thing once more, or worse yet, feel its touch. But... nothing. She opened her eyes, and the bathroom was as empty as it had been when she first entered. And aside from her hysterical breathing, elevated heart rate, and the warm tears running down her now traumatized face, there was no sign that anything had ever even been there.

“Mom...” she weakly whispered, barely audible to anyone but herself. And then she burst into tears. Tears of fear, tears of confusion, tears of wounds that had not been fully healed being ripped back open. Scared and vulnerable, she sat, chest heaving and face palpably wet. She sat there until the sun began to set, and the world became still, and it was apparent that nothing- not her mother, not some *thing* that perverted her form, nothing- was with her any longer and she was well and truly alone.

Ellie whipped her head around, startled by the sound of rustling from behind her. It was nothing more than a squirrel, digging in the fallen autumn leaves. She laughed at herself, although she knew her paranoia was pretty well justified. Not only had she just had an encounter with something that she couldn't even begin to process... something she could only conceptualize as a demon, even though she felt like there was more to the story that she may never know. But she was also fairly certain that if anybody came upon her digging a shallow grave way off in the wilderness, she would have some explaining to do.

She looked down at the hastily dug hole at her feet, and the book sitting beside it. She unceremoniously kicked the book into the hole, making a solid thud as it hit the earth a couple feet down. She couldn't even bear touching it after the whole ordeal. She knew she needed to get rid of it, but getting anywhere near it made her feel sick, and she had only been able to get it out into the woods in the first place by nudging it into a bag with her foot back at the home. And as soon as she had moved the book, she noticed burn marks in the floor outlining where the book had been, as if the wood had been lightly scorched by some intense heat radiating from those infernal pages.

She began throwing dirt onto the book, trying to get this over with as quickly as possible. And as the soil filled up the hole, first burying the pages and then enveloping the cover, she felt a mix of hate and desperation emanating from the ground before her. And more than anything, she felt that deep, petulant hunger of something starving, something that had its sights set on her as the meal but hadn't gotten to feast. But that was no longer her problem.

She tossed the last bit of dirt onto the hastily dug hole at her feet. She patted it down with the broad side of her shovel, and paused for a moment, not sure if she should say something or just stay silent. In this moment, she no longer felt alone, but the presence she sensed was a warm, comforting one.

"Thank you Mom," she finally said. She had warned Ellie, and even if she was gone towards the end, she was looking out for her children. She didn't know, and likely never would know what experiences her mother had with that thing, but she did tell Ellie exactly what to do with it. And, just as her mother had wanted, she tied the note back to the book after scribbling her name out and bound it shut tightly, and brought it out here, as far from any intelligent life as she could get in a single day to get rid of this thing once and for all.

Though it wasn't truly gone. Not really. Evil like that never truly dies. The most she could hope for was that it would be gone until long after her flesh had decayed and her bones had turned to nothing more than dust in the ground. This book and the untold terror within had already brought her enough misery for one lifetime.