

“They appear as distortions in the side of your vision. You look at them awry, and visions of the Abject overtake you. Death. Blood. Putrescence. All the things you fight to push away from yourself are thrust upon you. You are reminded of your own mortality.”

Samael’s voice was tired and quiet, like the night after a new moon. Lilly sat in the passenger seat next to him, clinging onto his every word. She had heard the speech before. He said it to her every night this week as they waited for the man, but there were still parts that confused her. That worried her. She wanted to understand. She had never seen the Abject in person before, only heard it talked about like a ghost story. This was her chance to understand.

“You grasp onto something. Maybe your mother. Maybe some representation of your father. Anything that can remind you of the symbols we’ve put in place; there are ways of dealing with the Abject. But they mock your humanity and the symbols that you hold dear. Your mother is a woman; a woman is a body; body is flesh; flesh decays. Your father can be replaced.”

Samael was worried: for Lilly mostly, but also for the boy, Isaac. Isaac’s father, Dan Christian, had suffered greatly at the loss of his wife, but they had been able to cover the woods behind the target’s house with sigils. If the father was lost, then one of the sigils was sure to stop him. It was unlikely that anyone was at risk of violence, but it was not violence that worried him. They were both young.

The boy couldn't have been much older than 12. Once they got him out of the woods, he would be fine. It was Lilly that worried him. Her eagerness frightened him. She had just turned 13 and was beginning her training. She was smart and capable, but she was too young to witness the Abject. He reminded himself that life rarely picked opportune times for strife. He clung onto pauses in his speech, praying that if he did so, maybe the boy's father would hang onto his humanity for another night. Then they could postpone it again and all go home.

"Your symbols mean nothing to them. And soon, they mean nothing to you. You gaze into the truth, and you are one of them."

Lily squirmed in the passenger seat next to him. The leather upholstery squeaked, betraying her apprehensions.

"What does that mean?" She cleared her throat as if to ask him to answer before she finished her question. "To become one of them?"

"You tell me. You've started your training after all." He adjusted in his seat, staring out through the thin frames of his glasses.

Spots of the night were illuminated by periodic street lamps, humming yellow light onto the pavement below. Driveways dotted the street, serving as entry points to the various unseen houses. Past the sidewalk was a woods that formed a barrier against any nosy onlookers.

"How can I? I still have my symbols." Her eyes fluttered back and forth. He gave no sign of assurance. "I'm still a person, so I can't know. Right?"

“If you think you’re a person then you’re a person.” He opened the car door, and motioned for Lilly to do the same. “It’s time to go.”

“Already? But-“ She moved robotically, following the motions of her mentor. “I still have questions.”

“You always have questions,” he said, “but we don’t always have the time for them.”

She blushed, and moved hurriedly to his side, her short legs struggling to keep up with his long strides. She strained to show no sign of effort. He took out a small, plain black book out of his coat pocket. His fingers slid down the fore edge before opening to a dog eared page. His pace slowed.

“It’s alright. We have some time.” He closed the book and slid it back into his pocket. “He stepped in the Sigil.”

---

“Will it hurt?”

“Yes,” Isaac’s father spoke, “and then nothing will hurt ever again.”

The moon hid itself behind the clouds, forcing the world into a blanket of black. Isaac’s eyes strained to make an image out of the blurry silhouette of his father. He was sitting on the stump Isaac’s mother was buried under. They had planted a vibrant oak tree as her gravestone in order to reflect his mother’s lively personality, but Isaac’s father couldn’t stand the sight of it. He screamed one night that it was taunting him. He grabbed a chainsaw from the shed and cut it down.

The sun had set since Isaac last saw his father move. If he had moved since, Isaac would not have been able to tell. The night was dark. It revealed nothing. They were in a clearing of the otherwise dense woods, but the thick clouds blocked out the moon. Still Isaac recognized the motions his father repeated in the darkness. He always wrung his hands when he thought of Isaac's mother. His hands were two serpents coiling around each other, scale scraping against scale: Isaac knew the sound well by now. One hissed for forgiveness; the other for an apology; and both assured the other that there was no other way.

"Will mom be there?" Isaac's voice was weak and trembling, strained from doing his best not to cry. His father turned to face Isaac; his head was turned painfully against the facing of the rest of his body.

"No." His eyes were strained open, his pupils wide in the darkness. Isaac could see the dry, cracking skin around his father's eyes. Even in the darkness, the deep marks stood out against the otherwise soft featured man. "And neither will I."

Isaac looked forward to death as it was described at church. He wanted to see his friends and family all together, perfectly alive and lively. He wanted to be able to run outside again with his father and mother, smiling like the whole world existed for them. He wanted to be happy again. Church death promised all these things. But there was a nagging inside Isaac's head.

The people at church said that the Lord rewarded good people and punished wicked people, but Isaac wasn't sure he believed that anymore. There wasn't anything he had done to deserve this. At least there was nothing he could think of. It made more

sense, or so he thought, that everyone had a certain amount of happiness to distribute throughout their life. He had simply used up all of his. All good things pass, as his father had told him.

That is why his mother died, because all good things pass. He was young then. He remembered clutching at her casket as he had clutched her hand during stormy nights, hoping that she would awaken if he bellowed loud enough. His father, smiling past tears, cooed gentle words. When Isaac had calmed, his father scooped him into his arms. He pressed his round forehead into Isaac's and promised that all would be well.

*"That's not Mother in that box; it's just her body."* He was still young now, but old enough to understand it was his mother's death that caused his father to slip into madness.

Scars of light pushed past the heavy clouds, illuminating hazy patches of ground. Isaac blinked. His father sat, gaze unwavering like a beast staring into a mirror. The light revealed a glint of metal leaning against the stump; Isaac hadn't noticed the knife there before. He of course expected it, but seeing it forced a quiver to his lips.

"What's that?" He pushed air into his tightened throat, his voice squeaking past. Saliva formed in his cheeks, but he couldn't swallow. He wiped some of the drool off with the back of his trembling hand and slurped the rest back into his mouth.

"I don't know," his father replied. He turned his attention to the thin blade. He grasped it gently and held it out at face level in front of him. "But it is sharp. And it will do."

“It’s a knife, Dad.” Isaac had swallowed finally, giving strength to his voice but releasing the flow of emotions he had kept dammed. He wiped his cheeks with the back of his other hand. “It’s a fucking knife.”

His father stood and turned, knife held awkwardly in front of him like a toy soldier. He approached Isaac slowly and calmly, eyes wide and unblinking. Isaac stared through tears at the blurry figure. Light caught the knife, glinting starbursts past his aqueous lens. He squeezed his eyes open and shut until his father returned to focus. It had been quite a while since Isaac had looked into his father’s eyes, especially at such a close distance. They were brown at one point, but now they were cracked and broken. Bile pooled in his cracked iris. His father’s cold, staggered breaths pressed in, making the air feel stilted and unbreathable. This body was no longer Isaac’s father. He was a corpse pushing air out of his broken lungs.

The knife moved closer, pressing against the thin fabric of his shirt. Isaac took a step back. His father’s large yellow eyes searched Isaac’s face.

“Don’t delay this.” His father’s voice was quiet, faltering slightly against the breeze. Isaac took another step back. Cold bark halted his retreat. He wrapped his arms behind him, gripping onto the tree. He assured himself, he was ready to die, but there was a nagging in his head. There was nothing waiting for him after death. His mother would stay under the stump, and his father hadn’t existed since she died. His father beckoned him forward. Isaac stayed grappled to the tree.

His face contorted like an angered beast; his father lunged forward. The cold blade cut into his shirt; Isaac could feel the sharp tip like a thorn in his chest. But the

blade sunk no farther than his skin. His father pushed into the knife's handle, grunting and heaving his weight against an unseen force. His wild, yellow eyes pleaded for Isaac to die. Just moments ago, Isaac would have obliged, but now with death staring helplessly in front of him, spasming like a child, he spat at the request. His quivering lips aimed for his father's face. The spit landed at his feet.

"Boy, I wouldn't do that." A voice from the woods carried calmly on the breeze. "It might damage the sigil."

Two strangers, a middle aged man and a young girl, stepped into the clearing, gingerly pushing past branches. The man's steps were slow and methodical as if to ensure that his steps harmed the least life possible. The girl's steps were quick and purposeful and right behind the man's. Once she stepped, she had no hesitation, but she often glanced at the man's footprints as if to reassure herself that she was in fact on the right path.

The man, who looked to be around the same age as Isaac's father, had a full head of platinum blonde hair. Or it could have been white; it was difficult to tell in the hazy moonlight. Thin-framed glasses held thick lenses that glinted at the catch of the smallest ray of light. His glasses hid his eyes behind two squares of white that fluttered as he stepped. He had a foggy beard that was only visible when he looked just past you, allowing the moonlight to reflect off its pale fibers. He held a calm expression; the sides of his mouth raised gently assuring control to those around him.

"I suppose introductions are in order." The man walked more freely now that he had moved past the heavy foliage. The girl followed in his shadow.

“Leave,” Isaac’s father grunted, still pressing his weight into the knife’s handle.

“I am Samael, and this is Lilly.” The ghost of a man motioned behind himself. Lilly took a brief step out of his shadow to acknowledge the introduction. She returned before Isaac could see her properly.

If they got any closer, Isaac’s father would be able to reach them. Isaac pleaded with them to go, tears welling in the sides of his eyes. Samael assured them that he was here to help them. “Both of you.”

His father was beyond help, Isaac tried to tell them. But if they heard, they didn’t listen.

“Lilly,” Samael said. She moved to his side. “Would you please take—Isaac, was it?” He paused questioningly, staring at Isaac over his thick lenses. His eyes were a clouded hazel.

He was dumbfounded. His father was trying desperately to push a knife into his heart, and these two were making introductions. He wanted to scream at them. He wanted to shake them, and make them understand that they couldn’t help. He wanted to break *Samael’s* glasses, shatter them to pieces, and watch as he walked aimlessly without them. But instead, Isaac confirmed that that was his name.

Samael gave a small nod and pushed his glasses back up his nose. He pulled out his small black book, and quickly turned to a dog-eared page. “Lilly, would you please take *Isaac* to the car? I want *both* of you to wait there for me. Do you understand?”



She nodded slowly, but kicked at the dirt beneath her feet. Samael stressed the importance. She grumbled something incoherent but clearly unhappy. Her feet moved quickly in short, choppy steps. She groaned that she understood.

Isaac did not understand. These two were just as psychotic as his father. They paraded around like this was normal. When Lilly moved towards him, his father swung at her with his open hand. She jumped back, gasping. Isaac's father yelped. Instead of meeting her face, as he had aimed, his fist crumpled against an invisible force. She glanced quickly at Samael, who had his attention deeply focused in his black book. She turned her attention back to Isaac's father, who was now cradling his injured hand. She moved slowly towards him, her eyes darting quickly from him to the ground. Isaac's father swung again only to meet the same force.

Lilly bent down slowly, paying his violence no mind, and brushed a few leaves and foliage away, revealing a thick white line. She smiled and turned to Samael. "The sigil!" Samael looked up and nodded, a thin smile doing its best to keep from spreading across his face. He motioned for her to continue with Isaac. Isaac traced the line with gaze. He could make out the general form of a square hidden roughly beneath the foliage of the woods.

Lilly ushered Isaac away from the tree he had pressed himself into. He struggled against her; the knife's tip staining his shirt with beads of red whenever he tried to move. She pulled at Isaac's shoulder.

"Come on. Just do it quick." She had a child's voice, but her actions were filled with the confidence her voice lacked. She pressed a hand on his shoulder, urging him

toward her. Her grip was surprisingly firm for such a small figure. “Like taking off a band aid.”

She smiled, and suddenly he was aware he had been crying. He wiped his eyes with the bottom of his palms. Doing his best to flatten his body, he sucked in his stomach and shimmied against the tree. His father grunted, pressing harder into the handle of the knife. A thin wound was cut into Isaac’s shirt. Pale red slowly grew from the tear like the shirt was bleeding.

Free in a way he had not been in many years, he stared at his father. Isaac’s father beat his hands against an invisible cage. They stared without a word. A squeeze on his shoulder reminded Isaac that he wasn’t alone. Lilly asked how he was feeling. He sniffled and rubbed his leaking nose with the back of his hand. He was fine. He had had worse cuts before. That wasn’t what she meant. He knew.

“Lilly. I’d like to start,” Samael said. He had his pointer finger placed lightly about halfway down the dog-eared page.

“We should go,” Lilly said.

“Why?” Isaac looked at Samael and back at his father, whose gaze hadn’t shifted. “Is he going to kill him?” She squeezed harder on his shoulder. “I want to see him die.”

“No, you don’t.”

Isaac could feel emotions slamming into the dam. She didn’t know what he wanted. He had spent a year watching his father slowly die; he wanted to see him finally be laid to rest. Isaac remembered him being a compassionate, intelligent man when he was younger. He found shelter in his father’s arms from all fears and evils, but his

mother's death had done something to his father. He had trouble remembering words, referring to them as their use. He became angered by complicated sentences, and eventually took him out of school. He lectured Isaac daily about the *truths* of the world. *Life was a lie. We were all already dead. We were never alive.* When Isaac talked back, his father turned to violence. He was never allowed to leave. Whoever this was, it was no longer his father.

He rubbed his throat, trying to force away a frown. He coughed.

"Fine." He didn't want her to see him cry. "Let's go."

Her black hair swayed as she walked. It swept just under her chin and grazed her sharp jawline. Her thin form moved easily between the branches, despite one hand staying firmly on Isaac's shoulder. He just tried his best not to trip, his vision still blurred. Whatever it was that Samael was doing, Isaac could hear it starting. Low hums and echoed words passed through the trees like a pagan chant.

"Wait." Lilly stopped, tightening her grip on Isaac's shoulder. His feet lurched from under him. "I want to hear."

"To hear what?" Isaac regained his balance. She stared back towards the clearing; a single finger raised in front of him commanded quiet. It was impossible to see past the thick foliage in the dim moonlight, but the sounds could be heard growing in strength. "What is that?"

Lilly ignored him. Her eyes were closed, her brows furrowed. She leaned forward slightly. Isaac stepped forward. Lilly's grip had weakened in her inattentiveness. He took another step, watching her carefully. She was faster than him in these woods; if he ran,

she would almost certainly be able to catch up with him. He swallowed his guilt.

Pressing his weight against her side, he shoved her to the ground and ran. He needed to see it. Whatever it was; he needed to see it.

Lilly called out, cursing and pleading with him. He ran as fast as he was able through the branches and roots. The thin twigs whipped like a switch; sudden stings reminding him of the cut on his chest. His step stuttered, his foot catching a protruding root. A nearby tree served as a ballast, and he was back on track again.

Isaac flung himself into the clearing. His chest heaved up and down; his cut stung with every movement. He could hear Lilly just behind him; she took no time to recover. Samael stood before Isaac's father, reading from his black book; his head turned briefly towards Isaac's direction, but he quickly returned to his reading. Isaac knew those words.

He felt heavy, like arriving to a funeral. His father was still standing, yellow eyes wide and beaming. His father was calm, staring at Samael like he were a pastor reading the sermon. The cracks around his eyes had deepened, threatening to consume the rest of his face. Lilly burst behind Isaac, huffing and covered in scrapes. She wrapped her arm around Isaac, pulling him back into the woods. She whispered threats, imploring him to come without a struggle. "Or else."

Isaac had found new strength in the pain of realization and pushed her away. She gaped, blinking and stammering. He was crying again, but he didn't care.

"He's reading her eulogy." He sobbed. "My father read that when she died."

Lilly moved a hand to his shoulder, assuring him that they needed to leave. But he stayed still. Isaac wanted to watch. How dare this stranger remind him of what his father once was. How dare he force this longing onto him. How dare he take his anger from him. Isaac looked at his father, now nothing more than a rabid beast in a cage. He prayed to whatever God was listening that this strange magic would return his father to him. Though he knew, even if his father returned, he could never love him as he once did.

Isaac watched as his father crumbled in time with Samael's words—his father's words. The cracks around his father's eyes grew until his skin peeled off like rotten fruit. The skin from his face peeled first revealing blackened flesh; steadily his body followed. The flesh squirmed with every movement, with every breath. As Samael continued, the flesh steamed and sizzled as if it had been placed on a hot skillet. Bubbles formed at the surface, swelling until blood and pus finally burst. His flesh fell to the ground and seeped into the dirt. Without the strength of his muscles, what was left of his father collapsed to its knees. All that remained was a pristine skeleton and two beaming yellow globes that fluttered around inside a cavernous skull. Samael finished the eulogy, "She is with the Lord now." The skeleton cracked and broke apart. Crumbling to dust, it returned to the dirt.

Samael slid the book into his pocket. He frowned at Lilly, who stammered an apology. He slid his glasses off and cleaned them with his shirt. He shook his head. She stopped talking. He placed the thin frames back on his face and moved towards Isaac. Lilly followed his movements, an open frown trying its best to show her regret.

Nathan Scott  
[scottxcreatives@gmail.com](mailto:scottxcreatives@gmail.com)

“I’m sorry you saw that.” Samael placed a hand on Isaac’s shoulder.

“I wanted to see it.” Isaac swayed gently on the wind. “How did you know that speech?”

Samael smiled weakly, removing his hand from his shoulder. He turned to Lilly.

“This complicates things.”