

Testify

“Do you ever think of Him?” Jacob Mavers leaned against a wall and rubbed gray dirt from a window to see a gray world.

“Who?” Lenny Broock knelt at a battered chest that held folded ribbons and strips of aged cloth.

“Him. H. I. M. Him.” Jacob pressed his face against the window. “Do you ever really think about Him?”

Lenny quickly turned to Jacob. “This really isn't the place to talk like that.”

“You don't ever want to talk about Him. You just follow Lynn and Daniel like they know what they're doing.”

“They're all we got now.” Lenny pulled a faded ribbon out. “Some say He ain't coming back.”

Jacob jerked his head from the window, his face and loose hair ash stained. He stepped toward Lenny and stopped. “That's what They want you to believe. Don't say that again. Not again.”

Jacob went back to the window. Outside, the sun leaned toward the level horizon. The sky, as usual, paled like all the colors had been bled away. The blocky, uniform buildings had only the color that concrete would give, sick and dirty white. The buildings sat in bunches

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and long lines circling into the center of the city, which was like all cities these days. Only at the center would you find monuments, towering statues to Them that cast shadows on everything and stretched out to the rest of the town.

“Have you ever seen one?” Lenny had finished his search. He had a pair of dead-brown ribbons at his feet.

“Once.” Jacob lowered his head. “He was just as tall as men, and I was a kid. Everything seemed big then, but he wasn't all that big. I saw him. He didn't look at me, but I knew he saw me too.”

“His wings?”

Jacob felt his eyes water and drip. He hurriedly wiped at them. “They... were beautiful. I still dream of them.”

“Sorry.”

* * *

Lynn Madges gnawed at her fingernails, which weren't much. She watched Daniel Teller paint Their symbols on the casket. She hated Their marks, loops and swirls that meant nothing in the beginning, but now people had given them value, mainly false hopes and forbidden promises.

“This is the best I can do.” Daniel stepped back. His hands trembled, and he didn't know why. “How do they look?”

Lynn walked up to the casket, which was glossy black and gold trimmed, something

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that had cost them all their meager savings to get and keep secret.

“It'll do,” she said and wiped at her eyes.

“I don't think we need, 'It'll do.’” Daniel threw a bottle of paint against the back wall. It bounced slinging white streaks all over the floor. “It has to pass Their eyes, not ours. Theirs.”

Lynn bit her words and nodded.

“Sorry.” Daniel slumped. “I just have the worst feeling about this. Who wouldn't?”

“All we have is this bad feeling. And it's all we'll ever have....”

Daniel raised his hands to stop her.

“I'm not wanting to back out,” he said. “I'm just breaking down. That's all.”

Lynn took his hands and held them until they stilled.

Jacob and Lenny came in silent. Lenny handed Lynn the ribbons and tried to say something but just mumbled.

“I need to do this alone.” Lynn began to cry. Jacob, Lenny, and Daniel slowly left her.

* * *

“Here we are. But this isn't where we're going to stay.” Michael Swan shook in his blanket. He had propped himself up in an old wooden chair that creaked constantly like it was tearing apart inside, much like Michael. Gathered around him were the few who still dared to come and listen.

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“We will find our way again,” Michael said, voice growing harsh. “And one day we will knock on every door.”

Some candles blew out in the back of the room. Candles were used because it was believed They can't see in candle light. Daniel lit the candles, and Michael continued.

“The vision came again. I saw a man walking in a desert. He is alone and tired.” He stopped, hacking coughs taking his words and breath. His round, pale face blushed deep as his coughs became thin.

Lynn wrapped another blanket around him and took his hand. Soon, he was able to breathe again.

“And that man had traveled far in the desert seeing many things that are to come. He wore two large rocks tied to his feet. When he walked, the sand rippled like water. The sky turned blue like the seas of yesteryears. A face appeared before the man. The face had no eyes and said one word that caused the mountains to rise out of the desert. And the man let loose the waters upon the desert for us to come and drink.”

* * *

“Everything ready?” Daniel let his tears fall and took his place at the casket. Jacob and Lenny took their places as well.

“Yeah,” Lynn answered and got behind Daniel. “Everything's ready.”

Inside the casket lay Michael Swan. In his eyes were pennies pushed deep by Lynn's tender hands. The same hands had cut his tongue and placed a makeshift crucifix between the

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stiff halves. And on his bare chest, she'd sown the brown ribbons into his flesh forming a crooked, sunken cross. The stitching was loose because his flesh gave so freely, but Lynn had made sure they would hold long enough.

“Everything's ready,” she repeated and stopped her tears.

They stood at the doorway waiting. The sky darkened slowly, light lingering like their hopes of forgotten things. But finally the sun set, and the land gave to darkness.

Trumpets roared. Crowds cheered and wailed as Saturday's parades began. Those who were able began marching toward the glowing center of the labyrinthine city. And just as quickly as things began, the spiraling streets hollowed and emptied, like a bone giving up its marrow.

“Now,” Daniel said. The four leaned forward and began carrying Michael Swan, who even with the casket, didn't weigh much, but at the same time, felt more than the world.

Cemeteries poked holes throughout the city and surrounding landscapes. Their ringed walls of stone rose with steeples fashioned with waning moons, drooping curves, and bent stars. There were many pillars slanted and spiraling inward. The tombs inside had letters carved above their doors. The letters' meanings were lost. When a person died, they were assigned letters that marked their sepulchers.

Michael, since he wasn't reported as deceased, had no letters. Daniels had selected one that read XXXVI.

Slowly, they circled inward to the tomb, dragging their feet and carrying the casket low.

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“I can't do this,” Lenny whispered. “They know. I know They know.”

“Of course They know,” Lynn said. “You can't back out now. They know. So you can't back out.”

They hurried now. Lynn realized their path was simple and straight, but the cemetery had sought to slow them, curving in, raising, lowering, and casting shadows of its own. But finally, they reached near the center and found Michael's tomb.

“Here.” Daniel eased the copper-green door open to the greasy, sour odor of spoiled flesh.

“No.” Lenny gagged and let go of the casket. “No. This ain't right. We can't do this.”

The others gently put the casket down. The ground, usually solid, was moist and gave a little.

“Jacob, take him out of here. He's done his part. Both of you have,” Lynn said.

“Be careful.” Jacob took Lenny by the hand. “Be safe.”

Lynn noticed Daniel. His lips were cracked and swollen. Her own mouth tasted of cotton. She turned around and didn't see Jacob or Lenny.

“We have to hurry.” She tasted copper and spat.

Lynn and Daniel, whose whole body trembled now, pushed and pulled at Michael's casket. Lynn had to step inside the tomb and pull. Her feet slipped on the mushy floor. She was thankful for the darkness that kept her from seeing what rested there.

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They got the casket inside and closed the door, which sealed immediately. After its heavy click, they heard Jacob and Lenny cry out once. Then one of them managed a wet yelp.

Neither Lynn nor Daniel had to say anything. They ran hard.

They made it to an outer ring before the screaming began. But they didn't belong to Jacob or Lenny. These screams filled the sky and shook at the stars.

Lynn and Daniel grabbed each other and threw themselves behind a pillar trying to hide. They watched the stars blur and fall as Angels wailed inside the cemetery.

Lynn reached down and scooped up some dirt. She tried to spit on it, but her mouth was empty.

The wailing came again and the ground shook as well as the stars. Lynn and Daniel lost their breath for a moment.

Lynn let go of the dirt and dropped to her knees searching for a rock. She found a jagged chunk of concrete. She climbed up Daniel and grasped at his face. Without warning, she pressed the concrete at his forehead and pushed hard, piercing his flesh. She scraped down, gouging deep. Daniel moaned but didn't stop her. Next, she carved across his forehead completing a cross.

She did the same to herself, biting into her tongue as the pain bit at her. Her blood dripped down her face burning her skin.

Lynn Madges dropped the concrete and took hold of Daniel Teller.

The wailing came again from all around them. A white flicker grew as if fueled by fire,

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but white, not familiar orange. It lit everything and forced shadows to hide.

Amidst the great wailing, Lynn and Daniel could make out the sounds of mighty wings. And just before the light became too bright to keep their eyes open, they saw the faint outlines of Angels above them. Now it was Lynn and Daniel's turn to cry out, but they didn't scream long when the Angels fell upon them.

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