

[UNFINISHED]

# Bride of the Bastion



## i.

The castle was as far from holy as a place could be, so Isah ran towards it.

Everyone in the village knew of it. Even the chapel's hush could not keep its stories silent, for they were murmured by healers who ground bitter leaves to soothe the brides' trembling; and carried on the breath of the Sisters who taught him how to kneel.

Some tales spoke of how it had been built in a single night by the hands of devils, its iron walls forged from underworld itself. Other claimed it had grown from the bones of the dead, fed by the blood of all those who sought its refuge and found only ruin.

But all tales agreed upon the nature of its master: a monster made as much of darkness as the fumes that belched from the keeps's blackened towers. They said it had gleaming claws for hands, that its eyes glowed with spectral light, and that its voice was a thing of curses alone—a sound that burned the ear and poisoned the soul.

Isah's foot caught on a root of twisted iron that jutted from the earth, and he fell to his hands and knees. The golden veil upon his brow fluttered forward, nearly brushing the dirt—and he seized it quickly, pressing it to his lips in prayer that filth had not stained it. Blood welled from the delicate seams of his shoes, worn now to shreds by the grit of the Wastes. His stomach burned from where he had crawled between the rough stone of the village's walls, and his arms were streaked with cuts that stung beneath Night's chill.

Like all the brides before him, he had not been shaped to run. Since he could remember, his feet had been bound tight to remain narrow and delicate. His hands were meant for prayer, not for hauling himself up crumbling slopes; and his voice meant for hymns, not the ragged sobs that now tore at his throat. In the cloisters, his steps had only ever traced reverent circles—ending always at the Angel's altar, where it was his duty to be unmade.

Behind Isah, the chapel bells began to toll; and to his ear, no sound had ever been so terrible or so holy. They sundered the valley with their cries, a ringing that split the

night like a blade drawn across tender flesh. Isaiah felt the marrow in his bones grow cold at the sound, for he knew what it meant: they had discovered his flight.

He had seen only once, when he was yet a child, what price a bride's defiance demanded. There had been a woman who faltered, who had clawed at the Sisters' hands and made the ceremony but a breath too late. For her selfish blasphemy, the river had turned black for moons after, and the barley all withered beneath a sky like rust.

So he knew, too, the lengths to which the village would go to reclaim what the Angel was owed.

He lifted his head, careful still to keep the wedding veil from the blood and dirt on his hands. The castle slouched over the valley. Its walls were sheathed in plates of black metal, their seams riveted tight and crossed by ribs of iron that jutted like the bones of some vast beast. Even the gate was a brute thing, with bars thick as his wrists, holding back the creature that prowled within.

Isah rose, and though his limbs trembled beneath him, he set his body once more to the grim task of moving toward that monstrous place.

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The bells tolled. Poorly.

Too many imperfections in the metal, perhaps. Too much strain upon the frame.

Kaveh set the final screw into the brace at his knee, and, with some difficulty, rose upright. The iron joints of the watchtower shifted beneath his boots in creaking lament.

He limped to the window and leant upon the sill to observe. Outside, the Wastes lay vast and sallow. Mist coiled between dunes and hid the yawning crags below. And there, at the valley's edge, the village huddled beneath its white spires.

The bells howled on, strangled and broken.

*The pendulum was unbalanced*, Kaveh concluded. Such was the cause of its faltering song—too great a weight set upon the wrong end of motion.

A simple problem, though perhaps one beyond minds too dulled by rote and ritual to question anything at all.

He turned away, content in his judgment, and had resumed his work when something caught his eye: a lone shape down in the Wastes, small and stumbling.

Kaveh reached for the brass scope among his table's clutter. He worked it free from a tangled nest of wire, and pressed it to his eye.

No beast was it that crept across the sands. Tattered silks clung to bare, pink legs, and a narrow shoulder caught the moon's light beneath a veil of gold.

A bride, then. One of the Blessed.

Left alone in the Wastes, it would not last the night.

The scope was snapped shut and returned to its place. The figure once more became nothing more than a smudge in the ruin of the world.

Kaveh turned back to his work, eager to reclaim the time lost. There were pistons to coax back to life, pipes to scour of the grit and rust that choked their throats. Even the smallest of these tasks weighed heavy today, for his old wounds burned bright, and every step set his leg to aching.

So lost was he in the dread of the exertion to come, that he did not look up when the knocking first began.

It was soft at first, a timid, distant tapping. Then louder. More insistent. Knuckles cracked against the great metal gates with such fervor that it might well have splintered bone.

Kaveh stood up, and shut the window.

Yet, still, that pitiful hammering continued. As though its maker imagined that bare flesh could prevail against steel.

Drawing his hand across his jaw, Kaveh exhaled in exasperation.

By now, the people below ought to have learned to keep their wretchedness contained. To bleed themselves dry and call it rapture; to let their faith rot within their own walls.

Yes, this was the only real Blessing left in these lands—that he might be left in peace.

Problems were not to spill over from the village.

And yet here was this thing, dragged up to his gates.

The bells roared again, their discord muffled through steel and steam. The creature at his door began to scream.

And Kaveh knew well that the beasts of the Wastes had keen ears.

The gate's lever was stiff from years of disuse. His left hand clinked against the haft, and slipped. He tried again, then once more.

The bride's cries grew sharper still. As the noise rose, shadows danced where nothing should have cast them. The sand murmured as something vast shifted beneath it.

At last, Kaveh locked his right hand—the one still of flesh—around the lever. Scar tissue pulled taut, and a cry of pain stalled behind clenched teeth. But, with a set of his jaw, Kaveh forced the mechanism down.

The gates shuddered open.

And at last, the screaming stopped.



## ii.

Isah thought he would find only darkness.

He had braced for the kind of blackness that swallowed the breath from the lungs of those abandoned to Night's mercy. Some tomb where no light dared linger, and the air settled rank with rotting.

Yet the castle was not silent, nor empty, nor still.

Veins of dim, golden light pulsed along the walls in a steady rhythm. The air was thick with steam that coiled from slits in the iron. Pipes snaked through the chamber like sinew, and beneath it all thrummed a ceaseless, droning hum.

Isah's own chest rose and fell in gasps. His throat burned with the salt of his breath. He lifted his gaze to follow the serpentine rise of a winding staircase that curled into the gloom above. There, at its crown, was a figure.

The stranger stood tall and rigid, a dark cloak falling about his frame and pooling at his feet like a shroud. Behind him, fractured panes of painted glass stretched into a dome. But no Angel graced these panes, only pale starlight, which poured through in rivulets and caught in the darkness of his hair like a halo of silver.

It was neither the beast nor corpse of the village's fables, though they were not tales entirely without truth.

The weight of the figure was carefully settled to one side, the other braced by a cane of metal. One hand clutched its haft—long fingers, fine-boned and lined with scars.

The other hand was no hand at all. It grasped the rail with talons that glinted cold in the moonlight. There was metal where skin ought to have been: smooth and much unlike crude ironwork from the forges of village smiths. Beneath the swathes of fabric, Isah could not discern where flesh gave way to steel, or if the division had ever been there at all.

The figure's mouth opened, and Isah tensed, certain that the shadows would rear and the weight of Night herself would soon split the seams of the hall.

But no ruin crept from the figure's pale skin. No specters came howling from his throat. No tongues of black flame spilled from his lips.

"You," he said, simply and with great disdain, "are bleeding on my floor."

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Isah did not move. Not when the figure descended the stairs, not even when he reached the final step and stood close enough that, with a single flick of his cane, he might have run Isah clean through.

Before Isah could swallow it, the word burst from him like bile. "*Heretic*."

The figure inclined his head, as if regarding some curiosity in a jar. If the word held weight, he did not show it.

"They call me that now, do they?"

For too long—for a heartbeat's pause—Isah hesitated. Then his body moved on its own. His knees struck the floor, pain blooming bright through his ruined legs. He shuddered in relief. Here, at least, was certainty. Here, at last, was something he knew.

He had gone too long without kneeling. Too long with his back straight; without order, without the guidance of grace, without the press of fingers tilting his chin downward. Now, forehead pressed to the cold floor, he could almost pretend he was home.

Oh, but he knew well that mere submission was but half the ritual. Prayer had to follow, else the gesture meant nothing.

"Thank you," he whispered into the ground. "Thank you." Then again, and again. A paltry tithe it was for mercy, but he had nothing else to give.

A touch of cold steel came to rest beneath his chin. The cane lifted his head.

"Are you finished?" asked the Heretic.

Isah's mouth closed at once. He looked up, and saw two glass coins resting before the Heretic's eyes, held in place by coils of wire. They caught the light and threw it back, blank and cold, such that Isah could not find the Heretic's gaze.

"Then stand."

The habit of Isah's training kept his palms pressed to the floor, even as the command drew him upright. Never once had he been ordered to *rise*.

The Heretic frowned. The cane fell away and settled against the floor with a dull tap.

"Have they taught you language at all?"

Isah nodded.

"Then *stand up*."

The Heretic's gaze held the same quiet dispassion as the villagers' when they watched foragers come back empty-handed, or guards too broken to keep fighting. It was the way the village measured those with nothing left to offer. It was a look Isah had never seen turned upon himself. He stared up at it, stricken dumb, even as the final decree came:

"If you have made enough of your wretched noise, then get out. You've wasted enough of my time."

Isah had heard the villagers jest before, though never in words meant for him. It had taken him years to learn the shape of humor: the shift in tone, the raise of a brow. But there was no sign of jest in the Heretic's voice now. He truly meant to cast Isah out.

Isah's body ached in protest. His legs throbbed, and his hands shook, raw and bloody. He did not wish to leave. He could not. Every ragged beat of his heart screamed to cling to this last refuge, to be allowed to stay.

But still he obeyed, for obedience had been sown into him long before his first step.

The doors yawned before him, enormous and dark, and swam now in his vision like some ancient mirage summoned from the fever of the Wastes. Still, his hand reached forward, to meet the ruin outside that would surely swallow him.

Behind him, the Heretic's cane had resumed its patient rhythm, like the slow toll of a bell.

Some fevered thought stole over Isah then: of the Sisters, white-robed and red-handed, dragging him back through doors of alabaster and gold; of the village's hymns rising to smother his cries, just as they had done for every bride before him. He drew back from the doorway, shuddering.

“No,” he whispered. He coughed and swallowed the taste of copper, and said it more loudly. “No.”

Behind him, the measured beat of the cane faltered, then resumed its deliberate march.

“I cannot go,” Isah rasped. “I will not.”

The castle’s walls sighed around him, the pipes shuddering and floor trembling in quiet accord. His voice was frail, but it had carried enough nonetheless, for the Heretic’s footsteps had stopped altogether.

“I will work,” Isah pleaded, breathless. “I will sweep. I will bear buckets, I will do whatever you command. I will scrub every floor, and polish the—” he faltered, gesturing to the vast iron wheels that ground ceaselessly overhead— “the metal teeth. ”

“I have no need of a servant,” came the reply, cool and cutting, “and less still for the incessant bleating of one.”

Isah staggered forward, catching himself with a cry against a warm metal vein. “Please,” he begged once more, “if you send me back, they will give me to Him. And I have seen what His love leaves in the garden.”

The Heretic continued to walk. “I do not care. What your village does with its meat is no concern of mine.”

Isah dragged himself closer still—on hands and knees now, nearly crawling. Something hot and bitter rose within him, unfamiliar and fierce. He seized the hem of the Heretic’s cloak just before it could slip beyond his grasp.

“If you cast me out,” he croaked, “I will scream.”

The Heretic paused.

“I will run back to the village and scream until every man, woman, and Sister hears me. I will tell them there is no monster in the castle. Only a man. A craven man, who skulks and limps and hides in an iron carcass.” Isah’s knuckles grew white around the coarse fabric. “And when they see that you are made of blood, not smoke—then what do you think will become of you?”

For a moment, there was no sound save for the castle’s patient breath.

Then, at last, the Heretic turned.

The ebbing glow carved sharp lines in the narrow press of his lips. Isah had seen before fury in the Sisters when offerings bled too thin; had witnessed loathing laced in litany. But what graced the Heretic’s countenance now was neither.

For a fleeting moment, his brow lifted, a flicker of surprise that smoothed almost at once into the faintest curl at the edge of his mouth. Something in the set of his face—unweathered, almost boyish—gave Isah pause. He was younger than Isah had first believed, though the iron and ire of him made it easy to forget.

“You may stay,” the Heretic allowed. “Polish the gears, for all I care. Lose yourself in the ducts and die unseen. Fall into the machines and let them grind you to dust.”

Isah said nothing, for it took all the courage his trembling frame could muster to simply hold the Heretic’s gaze.

The golden veins in the walls flared once, then fell dull.

“But should you ever lay your hands upon me again,” added the Heretic, his voice descending into something lower still, “I will unmake you so thoroughly that not even the worms of the Wastes shall find a scrap to feed on.”

The Heretic tore his cloak from Isah’s grasp.

Then, he turned at once, and left Isah alone in that vast and breathing hall.

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The first mercy Isah found was water.

It dripped, thin as thread, from the mouth of a rust-darkened pipe behind some hulking steel husk whose purpose he could not name. The water ran warm, bitter, and faintly stained with the taste of copper. He drank kneeling, cupping it in trembling palms while the grating bit into his knees; and there he remained until his breath grew quiet and the parch at his throat ceased its burning.

Food came more reluctantly.

In a chamber heavy with dust, he wrest open a bank of narrow drawers. Within lay shriveled roots wrapped in oiled cloth, and a heel of bread turned nearly to stone. He held it over pipes that bled steam until it softened enough to yield to him, and took it into his mouth with reverent care.

But not all things that bore the scent of food were safe to eat. Once, he pierced the flesh of a bulb too far gone, and rot burst from its core in stringy pulp. He spat it into the furnace’s mouth at once, retching until his ribs gave protest. He had not forgotten the lessons taught in the hush of the cloister: how mold could curdle the lungs and sour the blood.



He knew too, that he could not afford to fall ill here, where no healer would come clattering with tinctures, and where no Sister would inspect the bloom in his cheeks or fret over whether he would be ripened in time for the altar.

Worse than the hunger was how his body had did not forgotten what had been asked of it. His palms, flayed open from the climb, stung terribly; and the skin at his knees split anew each time his weight bore down. His shoulders throbbed, rubbed raw where the veil still clung about him. The thought of slicing its golden silk to bind his wounds stirred in him a revulsion beyond terror.

The veil was holy. It was the only thing left of him that remained so.

Instead, he tore lengths from the seams of his robe, and wound them tight about the worst of the the gashes. When those grew stiff with blood, he pilfered from the velvet drapery of forgotten rooms—cutting only from the inner hems, and only where the theft might go unseen.

When the hours turned and night came again—marked not by bells nor the Sisters' chants, but by the dimming of winking furnace-eyes—Isah sought corners of the keep where the groaning of the ironwork masked the howls outside its walls. There, he found a cradle of warmth in the great, black metal beasts that breathed steam through iron grates and wept heat from narrow slits. He crept into the shelter of their ribs, and curled there with the veil clutched tight at his breast.

There were no Sisters here to murmur hymns over his sleeping body, no bowls of sweet wine to coax color into his cheeks; no gentle fingers to part his calves, no oils pressed tender where he was meant to receive grace.

But for all that the castle was a tomb of iron and ash, Isah had never lain in a warmer grave.



### iii.

He saw the Heretic thrice more in the days that followed—if days they could be called, measured only by the cooling sigh of the brass arteries that wound through the keep.

The first time was from afar. Isah had crawled through a corridors lined with threadbare tubing and climbed, hand over burning hand, to a mezzanine where light slanted in

through a breach in the metal hide. It was just a sliver—just enough to catch the motes and stir in Isah some pitiful hope that it might lead to the sky.

There, across the vastness of the keep, he glimpsed a tall figure limping along the latticework, a coil of copper lengths slung across one shoulder. The shape paused, and Isah flattened himself against the wall at once, veil clutched close to his lips in prayer. But the Heretic neither turned nor looked; simply adjusted his weight, leant heavy on his cane, and disappeared into the rafters.

The second sighting came beneath the great wheels—that which the Heretic had termed gears. Isah had been foraging for cloth, drawn by the memory of dusky gauze glimpsed through a half-cracked door. There, swallowed by the gut of a vast iron shell, knelt the Heretic. His back was to Isah, cloak soaked through with oil and soot where it dragged against the grating. Sparks flared in bursts from the steel talons of his right hand, and the scent of burning mingled with something fouler still.

Isah had already taken a step backwards, when he heard the voice.

“Easy now,” the Heretic murmured. “I’ve not given up on you.”

Isah froze.

They were words not been meant for him. That much was clear—not only because the Heretic had not turned nor given any sign of seeing him, but because the voice itself bore no trace of the being he’d met at the gate. It was low and gentle, more tender a sound than Isah thought possible from a body half-made of iron.

The Heretic leant closer to the castle’s open body, the tangled mass of tubing and valves that hissed and trembled like a wounded creature. With sleeves pushed to his elbows, he dipped his metal hand into the cavity with a caution that startled Isah more than any violence might have.

For an aching moment, Isah wondered what it might feel like to be spoken to so. To falter, and find not rebuke but care; to be something broken, and still—*still*—held so gently.

The Heretic shifted then, bracing himself to rise. Isah fled before he could be seen.

The third time, he was not quite so lucky.

He’d rounded a blind corner too fast—heart alight with triumph, for he had found a tin of meat sealed tight and unmarred with rust. He had scarcely begun to imagine its brine on his tongue, when he looked up and found the Heretic standing not five paces ahead.

Though Isah tried to stop, his soles slid on the slick steel; he fell hard, tray and tin and precious scraps scattering from his arms. The clang of falling metal echoed the halls like bells. When he lifted his gaze once more, the Heretic loomed above him. Isah's breath locked sharp in his chest.

The Sisters had taught him well the price of failure. They had lashed the want from his bones until he could no longer tell it from guilt; for desire was a fault of the flesh—and to voice one's lack was sin made sound. It was his duty to be small, still, and silent; a vessel fit for sanctity alone.

But what stood before him was no Sister. This was a faithless thing, a beast choked in soot and clad in steel. It bore no promise of salvation, and no rite nor rubric to stay him from caprice.

Isah did not know what such a being might do to a creature fallen at its feet. He pressed the veil to his lips. The silk smelled of dust now, and oil, and his own blood. It would not save him in this godless place, but there was comfort, still, in the habit of prayer.

Yet the Heretic did not strike.

He looked down at Isah with a frown of weary disbelief, as one might regard a mouse in the larder. Then, with the hooked end of his cane, he knocked the fallen tin back towards Isah.

It clattered once against the stone. And without another sound, the Heretic passed him by.

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The keep was vaster than Isah had dreamed a place could ever be, save for the hollow where the Angel was said to sleep.

Isah wandered its halls in silence. The walls seemed always to be watching. They wept steam through copper slits and whispered to one another in hisses and clicks, as though intrigued by his trespass. He passed beneath arched vaults far taller than even the Chapel's dome, and beneath his feet, the floors shifted their song from room to room.

The first chamber he had dared to enter was filled with long tables and broken glass. Spindly-necked vials still clung to rusted metal racks, though most lay shattered across the tile like colored ice. Great tomes stacked in high, tottering spires, bound in sheaths of leather.

Isah did not linger. Whatever rites had once been performed there, he could not begin to guess them—nor fathom the damnation that awaited if he tried. He bowed his head, and moved on.

Some rooms yawned open with doors of thick iron, and within stood towers of strange brass cages, great wheels and furnace-eyes that blinked like the stars.

In one such place, he found a toppled iron colossus. It had split open on the floor, and from its belly poured a tangle of copper and gold thread. Where its heart should have been, he saw plates carved with runes so fine they seemed too small for any hand to have made. He'd turned and fled, sure he had glimpsed the innards of some sorcery that had never forgiven its making.

In another, he found a row of desks, each paired with a thin chair and strange, black slabs bristling with buttons. At the room's head loomed a broad, black board, upon which were symbols scrawled with such care that they must have once been the names of gods.

There were kitchens, too—made for more people than Isah could number. Great pots still hung above blackened hearths, and racks of blades gleamed dully in their mounts. In a far corner, a chamber sat colder than the rest. Its walls were lined with hidden coffers that hummed with breath, and when he wrenched one open, a gust of white breath spilled forth to sting his eyes and force him to flee.

Elsewhere, the halls narrowed. Doors opened into rooms with low beds, and drawers that still cradled folded clothes. Some tables were set for meals that never came. Some blankets still smelled faintly with the sweet trace of oils. A child's sandals had been placed neatly beneath a chair. A brass bird perched upon a barred windowsill, beak parted in permanent song.

The Sisters had been wrong—Isah realized, even as the blasphemy of it closed like a hand about his throat.

The castle was not empty.

It was haunted, certainly—though not by the howling ghouls that clawed and gnashed in the Wastes. These were gentler phantoms; remnants of lives once lived.

Isah thought of the cloister's bare rooms, back in the village; of the Garden gone fallow. Of the brides with their hands folded in eternal silence, their eyes empty as graves.

Isah thought of what might have become of him, had the gates not opened.

He pressed the golden veil to his face and prayed once more—though, for the first time in his life, not to the Sisters, nor to the Angel. Only to the warmth of breath that still stirred in his lungs. To the hush of pipe-steam and the glow of furnace-light. To the memory of those who had once walked these halls, who had sat where dust now gathered, who had laid their heads upon these pillows and dreamt beneath iron ribs.

To the truth: that here, someone had once lived.

And now, so did he.

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It was by accident that Isah stumbled upon the attic's stair.

A seam in the wall gave way beneath his touch, and yawned open to a passage of stone. The air beyond was still. The further he walked, the less the keep seemed a place of flickering life and heat. Here, the air was thin and dry, and the walls whispered naught.

At the stair's end stood a door. When Isah pressed his weight to it, it opened without sound.

Beyond lay a chamber vast and cold, and filled—row upon row—with the dead.



iv.

Dozens—nay, hundreds—of corpses lay strewn across the chamber floor.

Bones blackened to charcoal, brittle as bark. Some had cracked wide at the seams, as though their marrow had boiled within. Others lay in pieces where they fell; shattered by some heat so great it had scoured them clean of flesh and sinew.

A few retained their posture: slumped against walls, heads bowed in a mimicry of prayer. One such figure lay just beside the door. In his haste to flee, Isah did not see it. His foot caught upon its outstretched arm, and he pitched forward, striking the iron floors hard.

When he lifted his head, he met its gaze.

The skull lay canted sideways, streaked black on one side where the bone had charred and bubbled. The jaw hung, wrenched askew in a scream long spent. One arm was flung

across the hollow ribcage in a final, feeble ward. And in that withered grasp, fused to the curled bones in melted metal, gleamed the ruin of a ring.

Isah reeled backwards. The sight stole the breath from his lungs. His palms skidded over bone as his limbs flailed for footing that would not yield. In his stricken mind, a grim clarity took hold, searing in its conviction.

The Heretic had done this.

The very creature he had bowed to; had thanked; had begged to spare him. It had not spared these people. It had burned them all, without rite and without mercy. How they must have screamed!

Isah pressed both hands to his mouth to stop the whimper rising in his own throat. If it escaped him, if even a whisper slipped into the air, the Heretic would surely hear. Then it would come for him.

Though terror gripped him yet, Isah found his feet, and fled.

He stumbled down the stairs, breath ragged and vision blurred with salt. Through passage and pipe-veined halls he ran, toward the faint memory of light—the foyer, the great gate, the emptiness of the Wastes beyond.

But just as he reached the stair that led down to the threshold, he struck something tall: a solid chest, and cloth dark with oil and soot. The Heretic staggered back with a startled grunt. His cane clattered across the metal, skittering over the railing and into the gloom below.

A moment later, they were both tumbling, tangled in flailing limbs and cloth, down the winding steps—and landed in a heap at the stair's foot. The Heretic hit the ground first. Isah landed atop of him.

The Heretic bit out a string of curses the Sisters would have scoured from his tongue with lye.

Isah scrambled backwards, and seized the first thing his hand touched. The cane.

He swung.

The blow glanced off the Heretic's metal arm with a high, hollow clang, then flew from Isah's grasp—bouncing off the wall and disappearing with a dull clatter across the foyer.

The silence held. The Heretic stared at him, and it was not fury that twisted his face now, but sheer, dumbfounded disbelief.

“Have you,” he said, with slow, terrible emphasis, “gone *absolutely* mad?”

Isah winced backwards, clutching the veil against his chest. “Please,” he whispered, voice quaking, “please don’t eat me.”

The Heretic blinked.

“*EAT* you?” He echoed.