

SACRIFICIAL LAMB CAKE

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Sacrificial Lamb Cake

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To Aunty C, Lamb Cake's first reader

PART ONE

“And what does anyone know about traitors, or why Judas did what he did?”

-Jean Rhys, *Wilde Sargasso Sea*

CHAPTER ONE

THE LAST TIME JUDAS ISCARIOT had found himself in the main hall of the Trinity Corporation, he'd been unceremoniously convicted of treason—a conviction that had earned him banishment to the white hell between planes of existence for all eternity. He shook his head. Never mind. This time would be different. The conviction had been almost two thousand years ago. Lifetimes past. Still, being in the same place, staring at the same polished marble, made him *itchy*.

Judas pulled a comb from his front pocket and ran it through his thinning black hair for the third time. His usual assurances and immaculate grooming wouldn't be enough for Trinity Corporation's board of directors. They knew him too well. His past. What he'd done. Hell, some of them had even witnessed it firsthand. Thinking about it, Judas shouldn't have accepted the invitation to present this idea, no matter how good it sounded. But the reward—how could he refuse something as tempting as redemption?

The conference room sparkled with readiness. Assorted doughnuts and pots of fresh coffee in three flavors—almond, vanilla, and coconut—covered a table along the wall. Rather than use the outdated white board, Judas called in a favor for something a little more high-tech. The collapsible projector screen framed by black velvet curtains took up the entire back wall.

He placed a clean, white packet at each board member's place at the main table before checking his watch. Five minutes to spare. Judas smiled.

At exactly nine thirty, the doors opened, and a bearded man built like a brick wall entered.

He met Judas's eyes and groaned. "You've got to be joking."

“It’s good to see you too, Peter.” Judas kept his hands firmly clasped in front of him.

“Does Joshua know about this?”

“I should hope so. He’s the one who asked me to come.”

Peter sat in the chair two places to the left of the head of the table and thumbed through the packet. “Yeah, well, this’d better be good.”

Judas didn’t have the chance to respond before the others trickled in and took their places. He recognized a few faces; others he could only guess—stand-ins to make him feel intimidated, maybe. Thomas and Matthew lingered over the coffee before sitting, shooting weary glances over their shoulders that Judas pretended to ignore. The last to enter were Joshua of Nazareth and the CEO, known inside the boardroom as G. They sat at the head of the table and looked up expectantly at Judas. Joshua waved and pointed to his hair, cut short and tight. He’d always had a thing about his hair. At least it was short now. Back in the day, it seemed Judas couldn’t eat one meal without finding one of the Son’s long hairs in his food.

G sat, wearing the grating expression Judas had grown to expect, as though there was something He wasn’t telling. Which, of course, there was. “Well, well, Judas. My son tells me you have something to show me.”

Judas nodded, rubbing his hands together, palms slick with sweat. “If you’ll all open your packets to the first page, we’ll get started.” He waited until the rattling of pages settled. “I’m here because the Trinity Corporation and its affiliates, Christianity, Catholicism, et cetera are in need of an image clean-up. The public views Trinity as antiquated and irrelevant.”

The board members shifted in their seats. Good. They *had* to know how much they needed him.

Judas continued. “The plan I’ve detailed in those packets is going to change all that.”

“The Second Coming?” Peter tossed his packet to the middle of the table. “You call this a plan?”

Always the overachiever. Judas should have expected Peter to read ahead.

“Yes, but not in the way you’re thinking.”

“How exactly are we supposed to think of the Second Coming except in terms of the apocalypse?” Thomas batted a pen across the table between his hands. “That’s, like, amateur dogma. Even the priests know it.”

“This isn’t what we talked about, Judas,” Joshua said.

“How is the destruction of the Earth meant to improve Trinity’s image?” Peter grumbled.

Fucking hell, they’d turned on him already. No matter. He’d dealt with worse. Roman soldiers leapt to mind. Judas retrieved the remote from his breast pocket and aimed it at the projector suspended from the ceiling. Lights dimmed, and an image of a woman appeared on the screen. The angle of the photograph made it look as though it had been taken from the street, aimed at an apartment window. Only her face was visible. Choppy, poorly dyed tangerine hair hung in her wide eyes. A tattoo of a small, black feather decorated the side of her neck, leading to a plaid poncho covering her shoulders.

When he turned to face his audience, Judas was met with sneers. “Page four details everything you need to know about her. She is to be the new face of the Trinity Corporation.”

Thomas raised an eyebrow. “She’s a hippie.”

“Joshua is a hippie.” Judas nodded in his direction.

“It’s true,” Joshua agreed.

“Oh, give me a break.” Peter rubbed the bridge of his nose. “You can’t be serious. This woman... she’s pathetic.”

“So were you, once upon a time,” Matthew said.

“She’s a lesbian, for God’s sake.” Thomas threw up his hands.

G cleared his throat. Thomas muttered an apology.

Judas put up his hand and waited for quiet. “Yes, yes, she is all those things, but that’s why she’s perfect.” He pressed another button on the remote, and the woman’s image was replaced with a graph. “This is your demographic. The world isn’t the same as it was when you all lived. The harder you fight against the current of change, the quicker you’ll drown.” Judas clicked back to the woman. “She has the potential to reach people who otherwise would turn a blind eye to your message. That’s all she’ll be: a messenger.”

“A messenger?” Thomas asked. “We did that. Remember Joan of Arc? That was a disaster.”

“A figurehead then. All of the representation with none of the actual power.”

“Like the Queen of England,” Joshua said.

“Like Joshua.” Thomas snickered.

“Oh, *real* funny, Thomas.”

Judas rolled his eyes. Two millennia and the trauma of death hadn’t changed a thing. They still bickered like children.

“Sorry, Joshua, but it’s not going to work. Judas is blowing smoke up your ass. Again.” Red bloomed in Thomas’s cheeks.

Judas stiffened.

“Figurehead or not, should these events you’ve outlined take place, there could be severe consequences.” Thomas scooted forward in his chair. “What happens when the guys with the fire see this woman acting like she’s the Second Coming and proceed with their end of the deal?”

Gabriel told me the watchers have had their hands full trying to keep tabs on the increasing number of scouts, which, I might add, is a fucking chore in and of itself.”

“They won’t.” Judas struggled to keep his tone calm. “The Grigori are prone to exaggeration. Who really takes them seriously, anyway?”

“Look who’s talking,” Peter said.

“I wonder then. Who put you on to this woman in the first place, Judas, if not a watcher?”

G eyed Judas over his glasses.

Judas reddened.

Thomas leaned forward over the table. “You could inadvertently put the wheels of the apocalypse into motion, and then we’d have a real mess on our hands.”

“It won’t.”

“But how do you know—”

G smacked His hand on the table. Silence fell over the room. “I’ve heard enough arguing for one afternoon. If you knew the half of what constantly bounces around in my head. The whining alone... Anyway, Judas has a point. We’re losing them. The message I gave to Joshua to carry into the world has been twisted beyond recognition thanks to time and tongue. This woman is perfect.”

A surge of grumbles washed over the room while Judas breathed a sigh of relief. One step closer to freedom.

G continued. “Okay, then. That only leaves the matter of an escort, someone to implement the points in Judas’s plan on behalf of Trinity.”

“I think Thomas would be an excellent choice, sir,” Judas said.

Thomas glared.

G smiled. Judas saw that mischievous look again. “I disagree.”

Judas’s fists clenched. “Dare I ask...?”

“As a matter of fact, I’m glad you did.” G waved his hand dismissively. “The rest of you can leave. Judas and I have something to discuss in private.”

Judas felt sick. It was happening all over again. He wanted to run but couldn’t. Where would he go, anyway? Back to the pit? No, thank you. *Idiot*. This had been His plan all along. How could Judas have been so stupid as to think G would actually *solicit* and then *accept* advice from him? Judas had gone soft in his afterlife.

Thomas shot him a wicked grin before exiting the conference room behind the others. Only Joshua looked at him with any sympathy, though Judas wasn’t positive it was genuine. Joshua’d probably been part of it. *Never let it be said the Son didn’t believe in an eye for an eye.*

Once the room was cleared, G gestured to a seat beside him. Mentally bracing himself, Judas sat, keeping his gaze focused on the area between G’s eyes. He couldn’t bring himself to look directly into them, but Judas knew better than to look completely away.

“You look good, Judas.”

Judas stretched his lips over his teeth in a kind of smile.

“The last time I saw you, your face was a much more dramatic shade of purple, wasn’t it? Eyes rolled back in your head, rope burns around your neck. Gruesome.”

Judas shifted uncomfortably. His death had been long and excruciating. It would have been longer had G not intervened.

G folded his arms over his chest. “We find ourselves in a fortuitous situation, Judas. I believe what we have here is an opportunity.”

“Nothing is fortuitous with you. Planned or connived, maybe.”

G raised an eyebrow. “Don’t be coy with me. You owe a debt, and it seems I am in need of some assistance.”

Judas’s voice rose. “Then why bother with this whole bullshit charade? Putting me up in front of the men like that! *And* Joshua... You forced me to face their contempt after I’d already been punished.”

Two thousand years in that white room. Waiting. Feeling every torturous second.

The door opened, and one of the Archangels, Gabriel, peered inside, illuminated by his sword, which shone so brightly it appeared to be on fire. “I heard yelling. Everything okay?”

Judas breathed deeply. It’d been a while since he’d felt such intense loathing. It cleared his head a little.

“Everything’s fine, Gabriel. Thank you.”

The angel nodded and closed the door behind him.

G turned to Judas, His eyes narrowing. “I don’t have to justify my actions to anyone. Least of all you.”

Teeth clenched, Judas stared directly into those burning blue eyes. In them he saw the futility of arguing further. He couldn’t win this fight. But somehow, simply giving in again after all he’d been through felt like more of a loss than anything *He* could do to him. “Why me?”

G smiled. “Because it has to be you.”

Judas remembered the reward he’d been promised in exchange for the presentation. “What’s in it for me, if I go along with this insanity?”

G touched his nose. “Besides settling your debt? I haven’t quite decided. Though, I think you’ll agree *not* going along with it would be exponentially worse.”

Debatable, Judas thought.

“Shall we begin?”

Reluctantly, Judas nodded.

G gripped Judas’s hand tightly enough to break it. “I’m trusting you with my plan. Don’t fuck it up.”

A wave of invading thoughts flooded Judas’s mind, images and sounds he’d never seen or heard before with G’s voice over it all, directing his mind, guiding him. All that was to happen, had happened, and could possibly happen should things deviate from the plan.

“Free will,” G said. “It’s a bitch.”

Aches wracked Judas’s head. It felt as if the sound of G’s voice would bleed out of his ears. Just when he thought his brain would explode, a shock pierced his hand and traveled up his chest, hitting his heart like a punch.

“Clear.” G laughed.

Another jolt came, more painful than the first. Breath filled his lungs, and his vision fogged. Judas fell backward, the girl’s image the last thing he saw.

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The Archangel Gabriel held his flaming sword aloft to better admire the blue-green flames licking the steel. After the war, he’d been one of the few loyal to the Father and had been granted not only a gift but a sacred duty.

He straightened his breastplate, polished to a blinding gleam, and continued pacing the hall outside of the main conference room where G sat with the traitor. Gabriel shuddered. Thinking about the traitor sent waves of disgust through his body. In his opinion, the traitor

should never have been allowed to desecrate the halls Gabriel was charged with protecting. It was an invitation for trouble.

Gabriel passed the doors and heard a crash. It had to be the traitor. Even he wouldn't dare lay a finger on G. Honestly, Gabriel would rather have ignored the traitor's cries of pain. Such was the life of an angel, however. Goodness won out once again, and Gabriel entered the room.

G sat alone at the head of the table, smiling.

Gabriel cleared his throat. An affectation—angels didn't produce phlegm. "I heard..." He hesitated as his gaze fell on a tipped chair. "A bang."

"A bang?"

Gabriel nodded.

"Ah, well, as you can see, everything is fine here."

"Right. Well, back to my post then."

"Actually." G stood. "Now that you're here, I need to ask a favor."

A personal favor for the Alpha and Omega? The honor was more than Gabriel could have ever dreamed of. *Won't Michael be jealous when he hears?*

"Anything, sir." Gabriel genuflected.

"I'll be needing that sword back."

He whimpered. *Anything but that.*