Iphigenia

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Iphigenia

by HeraldofEntropy

Chapter 1: Nyarlathotep

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Lilith holds him before even his mother.

It is a home birth. Home, of course, not being the well-used townhouse in London where the newlywed Lesters lived, but the basement of the gentleman’s club the cult normally met in. It is cold, and dank, and water drips off the exposed piping. The screams of pain echo in the cramped room, coming from the woman lying on a glossy black slab.

The woman howls like a dog, like she is being murdered, her hands tight on the fine obsidian edges even as it makes her palms bleed. The candlelight glints off her sweaty skin, the air thick with the haze of scented tallow and suffocating smoke of incense. She is not alone in her pain, or rather her pain is not private.

A small congregation observes, silent, sat shoulder-to-shoulder on benches crammed in to the too-small space, dressed in black robes with varying amounts of silver embroidery. At the woman's feet stands a balding man, his robes with more silver than the rest, who stares down upon her with a gilded dagger in his grip. A high priest, though he cannot sense Lilith's presence and Lilith does not bother to remember his name.

He has no training or even much experience in childbirth. It is his position, not his expertise, which grants him this honour.

Finally, after far too long in Lilith's opinion—the human body was designed so poorly, the unfortunate creatures—an infant is born.

Not crying. The priest makes a noise of alarm and Lilith peers down upon it from the unseen shadows, an invisible, ghastly spectre looming over the scene like death, and the small little face is still and ashen and– *ah*, the umbilical cord is wrapped around its neck. For a moment, Lilith feels something like relief, though it must be disappointment; the child is born mercifully dead.

Then the priest takes the dagger and cuts the newborn free. Faster than Lilith expects and against all odds in this dank cold basement, the infant takes a breath. Even swifter, does it begin to scream.

Muriel—the mother, favoured of Lilith, born into the cult like her own mother and her mother's mother and many mothers before that—does not reach for her infant, Lilith notices. Instead her eyes flutter close with a prayer, letting go of the waking world like she had been waiting, begging, to be released from its cruel chains through the whole ordeal of birth, and perhaps more generally the ordeal of life.

The priest takes the infant, still coated in afterbirth, and places it upon the hewn-stone altar engraved with silver. The pipes continue to drip as the congregation breaks into uneasy

whispers. They rise on stiff legs and file out, the priest departing last, the mother left to her exhausted slumber and the infant to his futile cries.

The infant wails. His mother does not stir, training and medicine and true exhaustion keeping her sleep heavy and absolute. Lilith waits for a time, tracking the condensation trickling down the walls. He needs to learn that no one will come when he screams. It is only when his cries fade to whimpers does she appear.

Lilith forms from the night and absently brushes a taloned hand across her worshipper's sweaty brow. It is not grace she offers, but a simple obligation; an honouring of the contract between god and a favoured servant.

Nightmares and premonition; pain, but meaningful pain, the pain that teaches. Every fear revealed to the new mother, made clear in the subconscious truth that the waking mind flinched from. Lilith finds Muriel's nightmares are more of failure than the possibility of her child's pain and misery.

Lilith glides across the damp stone to the altar where the infant whimpers, eyes sealed shut and no longer with the energy to scream. The scent is rich and animal, his skin left tacky and unclean.

Loneliness. No one to hold or care for him even on the momentous day, slipping right out of the womb on to the cold offering plate rather than into warm arms. His mother, perhaps, could be excused—though, Lilith knows she would've slept willingly rather than hold her infant. The rest simply listened to their higher power. The rest would just as easily place him in her open maw.

Their obedience pleases Lilith, their willingness to leave their newborn child at just her word, but some part nonetheless felt a strange resentment. The father and mother hadn't even asked to stay or what their god intended. It serves her interests, it is part of why they are two of her favoured, and yet… it grates. So easily they leave him alone on the altar. So carelessly do they place this feeble life in her lethal hand. So unquestioning of her plans for him, or perhaps so uncaring.

There is no real reason for this. She just demanded it and had it done. There is no reason for why she had the infant left to her upon the altar, no need for her plans or herself. It was but a whim. Maybe just to see if they would, as they always did.

The infant whimpers and whines, a little fleshbag of organs and blood and not much else. It is grotesque in proportion, skin loose and wrinkled and middle bulging like its innards just a bit too big. It is strange to think it will grow from such a small creature of instinct to something just a little bit more.

Not much more. But more.

Lilith's hand is less human than a paw and a talon, a broad, scaley palm with soft black pads and strong, sharp fingers that curled inwards, delicately sliding under the newborn with pragmatic gentleness. He is so small he fits neatly within a single hand, and his flesh is cold from the stone and air. She trails a sharp claw down the middle of his red-streaked chest and

round stomach, quietly contemplating how this little spark of life—brief, flickering, small, like a candle's flame—could be the thing to end her torment.

The infant sobs, wriggling in her palm, and she draws him close. It is pragmatism, nothing more, that sees him warmed by her feathers. With a single breath from her he falls asleep hungry, as he will many times, and the chill indifference of reality leaves him even as his nightmares begin. She already knows him and his mind from the womb, formless fears of sudden noise from somewhere outside the warm dark, but now with less than an hour in the world there is more to spin his fear from.

In her arms he is safe for the moment, but this makes no difference to what must happen, or what fate awaits him. In his mind he fears the cool emptiness, the hard stone, and the aching absence of the one who carried him. That is what he will remember from this experience, as she intended.

(His mind will not remember, but his fragile body will know the feeling of the warm feathers as well, and the irregular beat of her heart)

Lilith holds him before his mother.

~o0o~

They name the child Arthur after his grandfather, some insignificant nobody Lilith had never met but haunted Joseph's nightmares as a large, lumbering presence always stomping around and smelling of the same alcohol Joseph now drank every night. Arthur Lester, a painfully dull name for the potential key to her freedom.

"You don't want to be called Arthur, do you kid?" Lilith drawls, her massive monstrous form draped terrifyingly over the crib's edge. "It's so boring. How about I give you a better one. It'll be our secret."

The infant squirms in his crib, blurry child-blue eyes staring up and right past her horrifying visage, the swaddling cloth he had been wrapped in long since escaped. She giggles (quite cruelly) and lets an inhuman hand dangle above him. He wiggles in infantile curiosity, arms he does not know how to use flailing uselessly as he tries to grab at her.

"What about Enki? How's that sound, kid?"

His tiny face screws up in frustration as her still hand continues to elude his clumsy reach. She knows that expression well enough to predict screaming in the next five seconds. Taking mercy on his torment, Lilith lowers her hands to one of his and gently wriggles a knuckle into his closed fist.

"What about Baldur? Or Imho?"

She grins, flat, owlish face baring a lion's fangs. "Or Grah'n?"

Arthur tries to pull her very sharp, taloned finger into his toothless maw. His face twists in dismay, then turns distraught when she doesn't let him impale himself on her claws. A

promising sign, that he is so eager to throw himself on the blade.

"Not till you're older," Lilith chides. Arthur opens his mouth and starts wailing at the injustice.

He is left alone, much of the time. He is rarely touched or held. This will not change even as he grew older and can leave the house—Lilith chose a British cult for a reason, so touch-adverse as a culture relative to many others. It is half a chance either of his parents will investigate his cries. The windows in the nursery are warped to the point the afternoon sunlight casts shattered bits of rainbow across the small room.

Outside the room, Lilith hears movement. Muffled shouting. Someone bangs on the door as they pass. No one comes in.

"Aw kid, don't be like that," Lilith sighs as Arthur continues to scream. She doesn't mean it. This is exactly how he's supposed to be.

She supposes Arthur will have to do.

~o0o~

She does not talk to her father often; hardly at all, now, as his interest in her faded eons ago. But she knows at any time he could be watching her; he didn't care to interact with her, or even tolerate her presence most of the time, but she still is his and so she is something to control. Such is the nature of Outer Gods.

Her plan exists in her head alone. To speak it was too great a risk. Even too revealing an action could tip her hand and bring it all crashing down, bring *him* down upon her. And he could be watching her. He *would* be watching her.

Not so long ago, barely a moment for one as ancient as her and likely even less so to a being like Nyarlathotep, he called on her. He was being polite, letting her arrive under her own power, or perhaps it was a test, but she had no illusion that it was a choice.

Her father in a form not unlike that of a human man—but, incomplete somehow, like he was trying to fit all the parts together and still figuring out how—stood in the center of a mass grave. Lilith dressed herself to match in the form her cults found most appealing, the one that her father declared was "enough," beautiful and human and so terribly vulnerable.

The carrion squelched beneath her feet and how she wished she could rend it with her non-existent talons. Rend *him* with her talons, teach him that she was more than what he restricted her to. Every breath came tight within the limitations of her form, made small and finite when she was so much more. Lilith gritted her teeth hard enough she could taste the warp of her gums, aching to shift into something more threatening.

Nyarlathotep rambled. He spoke of Azathoth and godhood and freedom. He preached madness, as was his nature, but a madness Lilith had never heard from him before except on the edges of his darkest resentment. More than that, she didn't believe him. Freedom?

He may not be interested in her but she was, and forever would be, his daughter. He would never let her forget that. He would never let her be free and if Azathoth were their jailer, she would just be trading one warden for a far more personal one. Whatever he was offering, madness or genius, promised no liberation for her.

She refused, emphatically, and he let her go. But his words still leave her uneasy even now, and she knows his eyes followed her as she left. She lingers in Lesters' nursery, watching the crib from the darkest corner of the room, and considers how important her plan may truly be. Her stomach aches as Arthur stirs wretchedly in his sleep.

~o0o~

Still so new, Arthur's fears were similarly infantile. Loud noises, bright lights, pain, and of course being alone. This one, loneliness, Lilith drew to the surface quite often and very rarely had to enhance. An intense enough fear of loneliness would eventually become a fear of unfamiliar, easily-lost intimacy, validated by parents who vacillated between adoration and indifference.

Arthur's mother holds him, and rocks him, and feeds him as she should, a frown marring her face as she stares down at her spawn. Most of the time she cannot even bring herself to do that, preferring to stay in bed and pray for her god's blessings and, when Lilith is not feeling generous, imbibe until sleep comes for her regardless. Her sympathy for her child waxes and wanes like the ebb of the tides but it rarely goes beyond a distant pity for the strange creature whose cries now haunt her nightmares and home.

Arthur's father has brief but intense periods of affection for him, but it rapidly cools and becomes distant once more when whatever in his child caught his interest has grown dull. The day-to-day existence of his son seems unable to hold his attention for long when there were new truths to uncover and intellectual exchanges to be had with his "brothers" in the gentlemen's club.

This is why she chose the Lesters out of all her cultists dedicated enough to dedicate a their own flesh and blood to her. Depressed and distracted, young Arthur was so often left alone with only his nightmare as company.

She keeps a close eye on Arthur and who is, admittedly, not that exciting. He mostly exists and does what biology demands he do to keep existing. But he is her ticket to freedom, to her father's defeat; something which she is beginning to get an inkling of being more important than first assumed. From her night and the dreams of shifting infinities there are scattered whispers she is beginning to put together into some much larger and more terrifying than planned, and his offer to her not so long ago squirms uncomfortably in her mind. She cannot banish the case he made to her atop a mound of cooling corpses, each one bearing Azathoth's favour in their flesh and bone.

It cannot be anything more than the usual plots and machinations, some horror he would inflict upon her to spite her weakness. It is nothing but the usual spiteful words of a madman lashing out at a creator he cannot reach.

Still, it digs into her mind, a nail of niggling madness driven into her skull and she wishes nothing more than to wretch it out.

Arthur screams, long and terrified when night falls. His parents leave him to cry it out, bags growing under their eyes as the screeching of their child nonetheless keeps them up. Lilith hums an old song, one from when humanity was still in its cradle, when she was already older than the mountains but still somehow new, as she watches him howl himself to exhaustion. She makes his slumber just as lonely as his waking hours. She terrorizes him with visions of empty rooms and loud voices and a tall, pale woman of unimaginable beauty who regards him with icy indifference. When winter comes and the heating goes out, she holds his small form close so he doesn't freeze to death.

~o0o~

Joseph and Muriel's interest grows in Arthur as he gets a little older, a little less a helpless grub squirming in place. He rolls over at first and then Lilith watches as he begins to crawl, begins to even stand with both hands gripping something to steady him. When Lilith looms over his crib—a nightmare of teeth and claw and inhuman monstrosity—he reaches up and makes a sound that he only makes when he sees her, or at particularly interesting shadows.

"Ilyth'ya," she croons like spiders skittering across warped glass. "It is Ilyth'ya." He should know the name of his god, the older name, even if he will not remember her.

"Ee-wa!" Arthur squawks instead, meaningless gibberish he keeps repeating over and over with no reason, and reaches, still so new he has not learned to cringe in horror at her true form. He was talkative, even if his constant noise meant nothing.

He will not remember this so Lilith does not shy away from the chubby hands that grab her feathers. They loosen easily—she is a god, they can be pulled without pain if she so allows—and Arthur is left with a fistful of divinity that he lets fall to the crib bottom, watching in rapt fascination. The kind of token great nations have fought wars over rests on the threadbare cushion of the crib like bits of fluffy void—until Muriel notices and, unknowing of their origin, throws out the feathers of her deity with an ignorance that makes Lilith shriek with laughter.

Looking in his eyes, dark and soft in his chubby face, Lilith for a moment is struck by the belief that somehow even in his infancy, Arthur knows far more of the world and his place in it than he is letting on. Then she dismisses it—what is she doing, searching for the ocean in the depths of a puddle?

~o0o~

Time passes. Indifference melts from his mother, still often frowning or sad; some days she can barely get out from bed, praying day and night for Lilith to bring her the nightmares she found more tolerable than her existence. But she holds her son and some dreams bleed fear for what is intended for her child, so small and trusting, and Lilith is honest enough to let those fears remain.

Joseph is intrigued by his child. He regards Arthur with the fascinated interest of a man seeing an exotic animal at the zoo and his attention lingers longer as Arthur does more and more, but rarely does this extend to true interaction. Muriel, who can barely stand the waking world, is left to assume that responsibility. Lilith scoffs at the sheer irrational society of it all but… this is why she picked their child. This is what she wanted.

Regardless, Arthur seems to enjoy it, soaking up the attention like a flower in the insufferable sun. His babbling even begins to resemble some kind of English. Lilith, meanwhile, tries to teach him the occasional word in R'lyeh (not that he understands what she has him say). He'll forget it before he's grown but it's amusing to hear his tongue struggle with the alien phonics, and know that she'll likely get to see him call one of her priests—the ones that knew a little of the communing tongue—several creative insults, if by accident.

Arthur is left out of the crib most days now, but still frequently unsupervised. Except for Lilith of course; it would do no good if her bait fell down the stairs and cracked his head open. Lilith does not know why but he had taken to throwing himself bodily into the darkest shadow he could find and she was getting rather sick of catching him.

~o0o~

There is an altar in Joseph's study.

Arthur is not supposed to go in there. He is also too young to truly grasp that. Mostly he knew to avoid the study when Joseph was inside, if only to avoid being yelled at by the man. But when Joseph was not there, Lilith could see the study fascinated him. It was by far the most furnished room in the house.

Arthur is not old enough to read the poetry on the wall that would soon enrapture him or even speak beyond a few fragmented phrases. He is not old enough to admire the leather-bound books lining the bookshelves. But he is old enough to gawk at several interesting artefacts and trinkets hanging from the walls, at the strange symbols scrawled on paper hanging from a board in a dizzying display, and at the high table framed in dark curtains and silver.

He is old enough to crawl and even walk short distances—sometimes lurching at shadows with a shriek, reaching out as if he expects something to be there, and sometimes there *is*, catching him in deadly hands—and he is old enough to climb when he drags over a chair to the altar and clambers on.

Lilith observes absently from where she lingers in the slanted shadow as Arthur goes from the chair to the top of the table, sitting on the edge among the snuffed candles and silver offering bowls. Some part of it feels bitterly right, her sacrifice willingly climbing to sit upon her altar just like he was gifted to her so few years ago.

Arthur yelps, suddenly, and Lilith jerks out of her idle musings. He had opened the curtains and course of it is a painting of her—beautiful, resplendent, pale-skinned and dark-eyed, the woman who haunts his nightmares—and Arthur had recoiled in shock, falling back off the table. Lilith, with inhuman reflexes, lunges and catches him in her talons moments before he hits the floor head-first.

For a brief moment, he stares up at her with frightened, teary eyes. His skull is so fragile cradled in her palm, his small ribcage expanding with each breath against her. For a brief moment she feels the absurd urge to close her fist, to crush his head and feel the bone and brain ooze out from between her fingers, to end this absolute farce once and for all in a single moment and spare them *both*–

"Ithya!" Arthur sniffles, then bursts into tears, and she drops him like he was fire and such things could burn her.

~o0o~

Arthur sleeps. Lilith spitefully regards his peaceful face and thinks how he will die, she thinks how he will scream, and is too revolted by him to even twist his dreams into something cathartically cruel. She rattles the windows until he wakes up crying and before he can notice her presence, shoves him off the bed with an inhuman shriek that will leave his ears bleeding. Thin red lines on the skin of his arm ooze beads of crimson where he scrapped them on the floor, or perhaps where her nails grazed his skin.

Arthur screams, terrified, laying stunned on the ground but Lilith is gone before he can properly see her. He wails loudly, then breaks into sobs. The whole house should've heard him. The whole house had. But no one comes, the same way they haven't come before.

She stops appearing to him except in his nightmares as the same pale human woman who so frightened him on that altar. It was time anyway. He was getting older and she couldn't have him remember her as anything but a bad dream.

He calls for "Ithya" in the night, and will until he finally learns it's as much a waste of breath as calling for his mother and father.

~o0o~

Arthur learns his prayers, his mother dutifully coaching him through them with the same patience she had been taught. They come easy to him. His mouth is already familiar with the strange phonics of R'lyehian (or the equivalent humans could pronounce), not that he knows what he's saying. He comes to cult meetings on his mothers hip, eyes wide and watching as cloaked figures perform the less secretive rituals and later, as the men discard the trappings of occultism to smoke and drink on the main floor. He participates in what capacity he can, clumsy tongue following in the chants and prayers. He is the only child in a room full of adults, left to either follow along blindly or ignored as the adults talk around him.

There are no other children in the cult and whatever interest his presence brings the adults is lost quick. They don't know Lilith's plans for him; they don't even know that she lingers around him, these proud devoted experts on all they claim she is. All they know is she had demanded him upon his birth, something which most now agreed was more a test upon his parents than anything innate to such an unremarkable child.

His black child-sized robes—*adorable*, some part of her thinks, a mocking amusement only for herself—have the least and plainest silver embroidery in the cult, barely a single line

along the hood's brim. More than anything any other child of a cultist has since Arthur is an official member, but still less than even the lowest-ranking adult.

Something about that grates on Lilith. Her little sacrifice, his tiny life born straight into the palm of her monstrous hand, somehow marked as less hers than nameless worshippers who grovel at the feet of a suffocating unthreatening costume.

It merely grates, though. She doesn't care enough to demand it be made reality. What god truly cares which colours a toy is adorn with? That is something only lowly humans obsess over and even these black-silver robes denoting seniority and authority were a creation of her worshippers alone.

When Arthur learns to open his mouth more freely, or perhaps when silence becomes too difficult for an impatient child who is always fidgeting, he spends much of his time in the gentlemen's club suffering various forms of discipline. He's curious, and stubborn, and he keeps asking questions and– well, Lilith cannot claim she didn't encourage some of it. His dreams of robed men are easy to turn sour and dark and all the more honest for it, and it is even easier to allow with some bemusement nightmares where Arthur can steal even some kind of spiteful victory from them. Her followers, so certain every punishment is bringing him further into line, do not understand they are only driving him further away, left on the outside of even their warped community.

It makes her giggle, to see the humans gasp and stutter when one of their larvae calls the priest a pile of disgusting shed skin in a god's tongue. His parents are less amused, horrified and embarrassed when informed and he is thoroughly disciplined with a belt and salt water on the open welts. Arthur does not take this quietly—and Lilith is pleased he does not, the stubborn little fleshmite—trying vainly to argue his innocence.

But he cannot say who taught him such words without him knowing the meaning. The resentment of it festers in Arthur and his nightmares even as he begs at his father's feet for attention, clings at his mother's skirt for love. He is too young to put a name for it, but it pulses hot and familiar to Lilith.

~o0o~

Arthur plays on the floor, some make-believe story about a fox and a dog and Lilith had stopped paying attention a while ago. In fact, Lilith is bored. Lilith is deeply bored and yet here she remains because… well, she doesn't even know why. Which is only more frustrating, why she found herself here, again, watching Arthur like he was a fish swimming circles in a pond.

Arthur babbles, narrating a grand chase that ends with a fox eluding a dog through basic trickery. A strange narrative choice to have the prey escape the hunter. The way of the world, and the satisfaction of a proper end, was prey caught and killed.

Lilith shoves a lamp off the side table and it shatters, so sudden and loud Arthur freezes before bursting into messy tears. He immediately runs for the bed and hides under it, fist shoved in his mouth to stifle his crying.

Joseph comes in and upon seeing the lamp, his face twists. It does not take him long to find his son, the muffled noise of terror giving Arthur away. He grabs Arthur by the arm and pulls him out, then yanks the boy up by the limb until he's trembling his tip-toes. Arthur doesn't plead his innocence anymore—he has learned not to—and instead apologizes blindly, panicked.

Joseph shakes him until he cries harder. Joseph smells like gin and ritual candles and Lilith makes no move to stop it—she knew the man Joseph could be when she chose his child for her purpose—and when he strikes his son across the face for lying, she is not surprised.

~o0o~

Lilith breaks Arthur's things quite regularly. She can't quite say why, though surely it would help damage him in some way beneficial to being the kind of mortal her father so obsessed over. But there was also a part of it that felt… satisfying. She was a cruel capricious being after all, a malevolent god who cared not for the pathetic mortal worms except as entertainment; it only made sense breaking a child's few possessions would soothe some kind of ache within her.

Arthur does not have many toys. He does not have much at all. His parents believe in an ascetic life, at least for their son, and they were hardly wealthy enough to spoil a child. Even what Lilith gave them in return for their service did not translate to money. Arthur has clothes and food but not much more, which could be fine—Lilith has seen families raise thriving children on less—but also sparse is his parents' attention.

Lilith shreds his good shirt and the frantic, panicked boy could not convince his parents of his innocence. Nevermind that he had no access to knives or scissors or razor-sharp claws. Six swats against his palms leaves him snivelling but it is more regimented that Lilith expected.

Arthur had a stuffed bear, purchased during one of Joseph's bouts of interest. Lilith tore off its head and Arthur was inconsolable until Muriel resigned herself to sewing it back on. Arthur lit up when handed back his friend and hugged his mother and for a brief moment a smile lit up Muriel's sullen expression.

The bear disappears and Arthur never sees it again.

~o0o~

One day, Arthur is brought before her in the dank, crowded basement. At least in an official capacity. It is Lilith as she was meant to be seen by her cult, tall and beautiful and almost human except in her perfection. It's his first time having an official audience with her and Muriel presents him like a gift, like that infant left alone on the altar some years back.

It is a big deal among the cult who discussed and speculated like she couldn't hear them even when she wasn't visible to them. She had shown so much interest when he was born and then suddenly none, while the immediate fascination had faded the possibility she *might* do something upon seeing him was renewing it.

As if she needed to wait until he was brought before her by these mortals.

He stares at her, wide-eyed and terrified to see the woman from his dreams—his nightmares. He tries to recoil into his mother's side but she shoves him away, left to stand alone in new black robes, made slightly too large so he can grow into them. Funny, how Lilith frightened him now when tooth and claw never scared the infant.

"Who is this?" she asked with an elegant raised eyebrow. There is a second line of silver along the edge of his hood. If he possibly was something important to her, like some still wondered, how did anyone think that was enough?

"Our son," Joseph says, oddly proud for a man who spent most of what little time he had with his son in anger. It annoys her. Almost expectant, he looks at her like he was waiting for something. "You requested him upon his birth and we gave him to you."

This clearly is news to Arthur whose eyes widen. He looks up at his mother who doesn't even glance at him, busy drinking in the sight of her goddess.

"Hmm," Lilith says, tapping her mouth with one delicate finger like she was trying to remember something insignificant. Then, like she has just remembered, she says "Ah, I recall. Come forward, child."

Arthur does not.

Muriel scolds Arthur for his disobedience. Joseph hisses like a snake. The audience begins to whisper and a tension builds. Arthur merely looks away, tiny fists clenched and something unnaturally unreadable and tight on his chubby face. Once he grew into it, Lilith's father would adore this expression, she thinks.

But Lilith merely smiles, mysterious and alluring, and the cult relaxes.

"He'll come to see his place someday," she assures Muriel who smiles, wane and weary and deeply relieved, and neither parent not know enough to fear as they should.

"So he's worth nothing?" Joseph asks instead, disrespectfully unable to keep a little incredulity out of his tone. Always a man of desire more than faith.

The cult titters. Arthur's expression grows more… whatever it is, tears gathering in his eyes.

"He is no more significant than any of you," Lilith says haughtily, a clear dismissal.

Muriel picks up her child and as she turns away back to the benches, Arthur watches Lilith over his mother's shoulder. Joseph puffs up, then sighs, frustration draining from so easily when not behind closed doors.

They were still two of her favourites, these mortals; Muriel's dreary nightmares she found more merciful than living and Joseph's passion for knowledge and art. How they treat their son was exactly to her plan. But their son was no doubt feeling that small hard ball of resentment in his chest like a tangle of thorny vines.

~o0o~

She can stop.

She hasn't crossed the point of no return yet. She has not made Arthur anymore a target than other followers she had expressed interest in in the past. Nyarlathotep would take the intentional expression of favouritism as not just weakness but defiance, of a rejection of his lessons.

She could kill him now even. A merciful, quick end; he wouldn't even need to wake. Like many other children who passed silently and suddenly in the night, and out of her re– of her father's reach.

But. She needs– she *will* be free.

It is night. The white light of the moon breaks when it hits the warped windows, casting shattering fragments of light across the room. The kindness catches in her throat and claw. What comes out instead is the boy’s damnation, Lilith’s greatest curse since the very first day she existed. “My favourite,” she whispers, and she loathes how it isn't–

"My favourite," she tries to lie.

“My favourite,” she says, and it sounds almost like “I’m sorry.”

She has no apologies though. This is no mistake. She would do it again, and again, and again.

She strokes his hair, knotted with casual neglect. "My favourite," she croons more steadily as the child slumbers in his bed uneasily.

"My favourite."

It still tastes like metal in her mouth.

Chapter 2: Kayne

Chapter 2: Kayne

Lilith learns of her father's—*Kayne's*—true plans. It's worse than she ever expected.

How stupid of her. She should've never expected anything different.

~o0o~

Nyarlathotep summons her and comes obediently like a whipped dog, a beaten wife, teeth gritted and kept humiliatingly blunt the whole way there. But it is not Nyarlathotep—not her *father*—who greets her.

It is a man—the shape of a man, a chaotic sprawling infinity so tightly bound it fits inside the the finite edges of a man so neatly that it made her father seem like a toddler who couldn't colour inside the lines—with a face like her father had taken to wearing, only more complete somehow, more… coherent. He comes into view as her surroundings shift into laquered wood and crushed velvet, the air hazy with smoke and soft yellow lights. Immediately she is on edge at the effortlessness of her displacement. She had never been her father's equal, but she took pride in never being easy for him to force into anything.

The being who is not her father, and Lilith cannot say how she knows this only that she does, meets her eyes and they fill with some kind of unspeakable raw emotion whose intensity she knew from the moment of her creation would never be directed at her. Then he clears his throat and straightens the collar of his holy-white suite and opens his mouth to give her a taste of what cosmic horror must be like for a mortal.

He tells her what is forbidden, what takes Azathoth's power to know, and he tells her a story about how she—how another version of her—was so loved she was willing to die.

And she must've been loved, truly and openly loved in a way she could not bear imagining, in a way so foreign to her that its alieness can explain the inexplicability of this version of herself's action; loved and known she was loved in all the ways that in a brief burst of maddening clarity she envied, because there was no other way any version of her would've stupidly died for her father.

It is horrifying. It is incomprehensible. And also all that stuff about Azathoth and the multiverse is upsetting too.

And then—this man-shaped being who is not her father, who is revealed as wholey different to the offshoot that spawned her by the honest grief in his eyes—he tells her that her own self-interest is no longer the only stake in her plan.

Lilith's scheme just became about far more than her freedom and she's only a little bitter about it.

~o0o~

Nyarlathotep– *a* Nyarlathotep summons her. Nots hers. Not anymore. He says his name is Kayne now, his face now finally settled into one just like the man-shape who tries so hard to not be Nyarlathotep or Kayne, and he drips red red red with the blood of himself murdered an exponential times over (and her blood, at least once, as well). His black suit ripples with a black hole's density made to (poorly) resemble mortal fabrics, and his laugh is unrestrained and mad and for all he tries to be different, just like she remembers it.

"Heya kiddo!" he says, he screams, and without warning he lunges with an unhinged cackle.

Lilith fights. Lilith barely has time to raise up her arms in defence. Lilith rips free of her humanoid guise moments before he's upon her and still, *still*, with him indulging in his pathetic two-arms two-legs finite form and hers unleashed, unfolding and stretching out into the cosmos, unfurling wing after wing after wing in layering kaleidoscopic infinity, she cannot beat him. He tears her feathers and peels her scales and he beats her into crust of Mars, creating new indents on the planet's surface with her body.

He keeps going after she yields. He keeps going until she goes limp and still, until she stops trying to even soften the blow, and even then he rips in one last chunk of feathers to reinforce the point. He does it with his two human hands, somehow, impossibly even for a god, and his limiting human costume and *he* isn't made vulnerable and weak despite taking on the shape of it. And Lilith can do nothing but *take it.*

For a moment, for far more than a moment, as he *doesn't stop,* Lilith is terrified he is going to kill her.

Lilith survives. She lives. But– she knows, she *knows* it is because Kayne let her. It is a mercy. It is now a mercy.

"This is just a little warning," Kayne says casually as Lilith twists in the crater. Her ichor drips, clumping black in her nostrils as she chokes weakly on her body's damage. It is not pain, she doesn't feel pain unless she's in that pathetic mortal guise, but her shattered form distresses her in its helplessness. That is, of course, the point. "Going forwards I'll be having none of your tricks and none of your… your schemes. You're my kid so I'm going easy, but I can't have you messing around. It's time to be a big girl now and let the adults do what they need to do."

There is a threat in his voice, and not an idle one.

So that's what he wants. For her to let him end all of reality, including herself. To lie down and let him kill her and everything she– Or, if not that, let his mind and his dreams and his desires be the shape of the world she exists like Azathoth's do now; let him control her more than he already does.

(At least until Lilith found a way to follow in his footsteps and kill him in turn)

Lilith wants to spit at him. All she manages is a low moan.

He is not her father. Not anymore. This man was not her father. Yes, her father had beaten her into submission before—such was the way of gods—but not so unprovoked, and not for so long after she had stopped fighting back.

Not to the point she realized letting her live was a choice he was making, rather than something she could expect. The lines she knew not to cross, the lines that kept her safe in her avoidance of them, were suddenly closing in, already underfoot.

Lilith is running out of time. She didn't realize she had so little of it left.

Lilith drags herself back with broken wings across the mortal plane, back to Earth, back to England trailing feathers and shedding nightmares, and she plots and schemes and wants to see her fa—Kayne—dead.

He is not her father anymore. She is the daughter of Nyarlathotep and Nyarlathotep is gone. She must remember that.

She will be free.

~o0o~

Muriel and Joseph appeal to her and it is about their son.

Which is unusual. They asked for dreams and knowledge respectively to the point of predictability, and it has been a while—months. Years, maybe? Time is hard for Lilith, currently noted as Arthur getting bigger and Kayne's movements—since they brought up their son to her directly. In whatever time had passed, the silver on Joseph's robes now curled up to his knee while the silver border on Muriel's robes had grown at least three tiers thicker, but still less than her husband.

For a brief moment Lilith wonders why now. Why, when ever since Lilith so casually dismissed Arthur's importance it seemed they and the rest of the cult had written Arthur off as at most of passing whim of hers, or more likely something that failed to keep her interest? The child wasn't even standing with his parents, instead sitting quiet and stone-faced in the audience, eyes burning holes into the bench in front of him. The cult's disappointment in the boy's failure to appeal to her was ill-concealed at best, including from his parents who also mixed that disappointment with a sense of shame, so for what purpose did they speak of their son to her now?

Arthur's robes were getting a little too small for him and still only had two lines of silver along the edge of the hood like he was barely above those the cult assumed were the least favoured. Lilith felt no annoyance about that at all.

"Please," Muriel requests, not quite begging but certainly with a hint of desperation. "Please, honoured Lady Lilith. For our son, we ask for both mercy and guidance."

And Joseph… Joseph bows his head as well. "We request your aid," he says softly, stiffly, the words forced out of him like he barely wants to say it but still without any hesitation. It takes

her off guard. They have nothing to offer her at the moment, except for what they have already given her. This is no deal, but a request.

A plea.

The cult watches. Except for Arthur, who simply glares down.

"We are worried that he is being influenced," Muriel continues, carefully, cautiously watching Lilith's face as she speaks. "He is but a vulnerable child and we suspect… Joseph and I suspect, that despite the great faith he is growing into, he is too young to ignore the whispers of false idols."

And Joseph nods gravely, his face lined with what Lilith may dare to call concern.

Lilith is then presented drawings of owls and what must be a child's view of her true form, filling pages of scrap paper Arthur must have been given to draw on. A texture that might be meant to represent feathers, large silvery eyes, and a body that is inaccurately shape except in its largeness. And also several monstrous caricatures of what must be the pale black-eyed beauty she took on for the cult, rendered as a tall, twisted presence with a cruel grin. A few of them she had even watched him scribble and then hastily shove under his mattress.

Lilith is almost surprised Joseph and Muriel cared enough to bring it to her, let alone ask for help with nothing to offer her in turn. She doesn't know if it is a pleasant surprise or not.

Regardless, Lilith wants to laugh in their faces. Lilith wants to scream. She wants to kill them both, feel them break and scream beneath her hand and she thinks *ah, this is what human insanity feels like.* The irony of it is maddening, these parents so concerned about a few scribbles when there was so much worse the be scared of. Knowing so much that they do not know, that they can never understand, and left alone with it– well, it is infuriating, which is just another word for madness.

They don't know what is coming for them and their sad, pathetic attempt at a family. They don't know the incomprehensible suffering that awaits their child. The fact that Muriel and Joseph were so worried about mere drawings only reinforces that. And they come to Lilith, the one who marked them for it, for help.

Muriel and Joseph worship the god who will bring that evil down upon them. Arthur has no choice in the matter, and correctly fears Lilith, but has no escape and even his darkest fears do not capture the true horror that is to come.

Arthur kicks the back of the bench in front of them. The entire cult goes still. Every breath his held. Muriel freezes, pleasant smile carved into her face like marble. Joseph's head snaps back to stare at his son, both terror and the promise of furious retribution in his eyes.

Lilith lip curves, all she can allow with the eyes of her cult upon her. Always watching, so hungry for ever scrap she did not hide. She smiles (mysteriously) and reassures them (demurely); "My form comes in many kinds," she promises. "As he grows he will come to appreciate my beauty and wisdom rather than fear my power. And owls are far from concerning omens to me and mine."

The collective breath that only Arthur did not hold is released. Arthur, instead, perhaps realizing what giving into impulse would lead to once he was home, was hunched over in his seat, eyes wet and chin trembling.

There is relief on Muriel's face. There is a tension that leeches out of Joseph. Muriel and Joseph accept Lilith's reassurances. Of course they do. They haven't even noticed the windows of Arthur's room are so warped they barely fit the window frames, or if they do they ascribe it to *their* status, even though the glass in their bedroom is barely rippled.

~o0o~

"Aww, isn't this just precious," a voice comes from behind her—behind the shadow she was inhabiting, behind the very curve of reality that even Great Old Ones could see—and Lilith goes very still.

The room is quiet except for Arthur's soft breathing and the muffled but familiar sound of drunken men loudly talking down the hall. The room is suffocating and Lilith can barely breath. A sudden draft tickles her feathers. Kayne steps into existence and the very life of the room seems to die.

He looks right through her concealing shadow and whistles. "Wow sweetheart, you sure are aiming to terrorize and disgust this one!"

Lilith recoils like his words hurts have the power to hurt her and she folds up herself into something more pleasing, skin milky white and soft. Her feathers vanish, her scales melt away, her body shortens and straightens into an ill-designed spine, teeth and nails turned blunt and useless and face so disgustingly, involuntarily expressive. She steps out into the faint warped moonlight that struggles through the window, draped in a glittering gown made of night and absence that shimmers when the mortal eye tries to make sense of it.

"What's this!" Kayne exclaims, the words of a question but a tone of utter delight.

Lilith glances at the door. Everyone is asleep, will *remain* asleep so long as she wills it, but Kayne could try to be a little more quiet. As if in response, Arthur's shifts in his sleep, his nightmare twisting from empty halls to a darkened maze with a grinning, sharp-limbed creature climbing the walls.

Kayne drips his way over to the bed and stares down at the sleeping boy. "So this is your favourite, huh? I thought I told you that you are a *god*. I thought I raised you to know better, baby. A being so far above these protozoa having a favourite germ, why," he barked a short, manic laugh that makes something within her both cringe and burn. "That's insanity, sweetheart."

Her chest is unnaturally tight as Kayne casually looms over the sleeping child, a position she has taken many nights before, only he does so in the shape of a blood-soaked man. She is still, so very still, because there is nothing she can do but try not to provoke anything more than what he is already going to do. He peers down at Arthur and Lilith braces for the inevitable like she has done dozens, hundreds of times before.

His unsettling grin turns to her. "I heard someone has been breaking the rules," he trills in an obnoxious, foul sing-song. Lilith had been wrong. She had thought she'd be given time, that Kayne would want to draw this out, that Arthur would have a *chance*– a chance to capture his attention.

Kayne's eyes glitter in an unseen light from dimensions and angles even she cannot fathom. He clicks his tongue. "What am I to do with you?"

Then Kayne is gone.

Lilith staggers in his absence, unsteadied by the horror that never came, braced for a flinch that never happened. Everything is suddenly happening so fast ever since her not-father showed up it. Arthur slumbers on, specks of red staining the edges of his sheets the only sign of how close he came to obliteration.

She is tempted, not for the first time, to kill the boy herself. Instead she sinks back into the darkness and traps Arthur in his nightmares of running and hiding long past the point he would've, should've, woken in fear.

~o0o~

Nyarla– *Kayne* summons her to the middle of the Sahara where the sun beats down on her, making her already vulnerable form—beautiful, soft, too close to mortal—feel heavier than a black hole and weaker than a human newborn. It is intentional, she has no doubt; not just in how the sun strips her of her strength, but the exact pile of sand Kayne had chosen to stand on.

Beneath them, buried in endless layers of shifting sand, is the ruins of a temple. Centuries ago she had walked those halls alongside her father as the mortals bowed and grovelled when they passed, Lilith a step behind, but… only a step.

It was this temple where Lilith's father taught her many lessons. Lessons such as how mortals screamed, and how as a god she was not to care when they did. There were names she had purposefully forgotten spoken in those halls with ill-advised warmth, names she had also screamed until she learned not too because she wasn't supposed to, not unless she wanted to see them bleed out on altars and floors and thrones alike. Her father had been creative in how he reminded her she was his to own and how she was to conduct herself.

Lilith had been going through a rebellious phase then, her father claimed.

Kayne's still form stands out against the endless dunes. The heat-distortion itself seems to bend around him, making him looks like the one thing to solid and real in a dream. There's something in his hand, half behind his back as he walks barefoot across the burning earth towards her.

Lilith's eyes lock onto the limp form he was half-dragging, leaving a furrow in the sand. Her expression locks in place.

It's a body, small and delicate with fragile bones she could remember feeling under her hand. Kayne grins in pure delight at whatever he sees in her face, however hard she tries not to emote at all.

Kayne holds the body up by the neck, jostling it while speaking in a high-pitched falsetto like a man with a puppet. *"Hi miss Lilith! It's me, Arthur! I love you soooo much! You're such a nice good person!"*

And it is Arthur. For a brief moment, Lilith *fears*– fears that it is all over, that her gambit hadn't paid off and Kayne snapped up her bait too soon; that he chose upsetting her over his own deadly curiosity. He was not above torturing children, but he found them ever so dull and she was banking on him waiting until Arthur was a little older–

But… her Arthur had longer hair, occasionally matted. This boy's hair was short, a mess but neatly cut. Kayne could've cut it… but across his nose was a scar. A small scar, but an old one, and Lilith knew her Arthur didn't have–

It's a sickening relief when she puts the pieces together. And there's a part of her that resents that it's not over.

Kayne then laughs, the pitched shriek of someone confronted with something truly absurd. He throws the body to the ground like it was nothing. Trash to be discarded. If there was once an instinct in Lilith that would have her reach for the body, she is glad it was killed long ago.

Lilith stares down at the tiny, limp corpse, small limbs splayed out in ways a human's should not go without intense pain. Its face is slack and unseeing. She keeps the expression on her face stiff and strained, like she was trying to hold back intense emotion—Nyarla– *Kayne* knew that face well, had routinely mocked her for it—even though it was nothing but a lie. A trick. She feels nothing but the satisfaction of fooling Kayne so well he was dragging little boys from their beds and across the multiverse just to upset her. She knew better. It was a trick.

Kayne giggles and pinches her cheek. "What's with the sour face, sweetheart? Upset cause I squashed the ant?"

She inhales.

"Don't worry, I'll get around to yours," Kayne assures, swallowing her hook whole. "But you've given me a brilliant idea. There's just so many of them across the multiverse. It'd be like a scavenger hunt! A itsy bitsy grub hunt? I'll be honest, I can't really remember his name but I think it'll be best if I saved your *favourite*-favourite till last–"

The grin on his face, the cunning, calculated gleam in his eye– he knows what he is doing. And he is relishing it. The loathing bubbles up within her, twisting foul and thick with relief–

She hates him. She hates him. She hates him she hates *she hates hates hateshateshates*–

~o0o~

She threads her fingers through Arthur's hair and the silken strands of his dreams, absently tangling his mind into knots beneath her hand as she picks apart the mattes and snarls. Muriel had forgotten to brush his hair, again. Muriel forgot a lot of things. She forgot Arthur, her her husband, and if she could manage it she would forget the world.

Lilith notices, then, what she is doing and recoils as if burned. The room is suffocating. The room keeps becoming suffocating.

Thousands years ago she watched a human mother untangle her child's hair with gentle hands and was filled with nothing but revulsion for the sickening ritual. She scoffed at the birds that preened each other, the lions licking their cubs, and all the other lesser animals cleaning and comforting each other as they picked insects off their filthy skin while rolling in the dirt. As a god, Lilith didn't need such degrading care or any care at all. She was greater than the flea-ridden masses since the moment she was born. The very concept of it made her skin itch.

She grabs the pillow and smothers the boy until he wakes and begins to flail, then vanishes into the ether to find something she *can* kill.

It's almost time.

~o0o~

Arthur loves his mother. He loves his father. Despite everything, he loves them. He aches for their attention, for their love, for their comfort. His deprivation only seemed to make him hunger for it more, to cling harder. He would do anything for them if they only were to look his way. He barely a boy, he hardly knows better, and he turns to them like they're his sun. His world. Lilith aches. Lilith pities. Lilith seethes.

It's all happening so fast. The last leg of her plan is here. It is time.

She knows what she has to do.

~o0o~

A year passes. She puts it off. She doesn't have to yet.

Not yet.

Not yet.

She can spare him a while longer.

(She doesn't care.)

A while longer.

~o0o~

She is summoned by her– by *Kayne.* She doesn't know why. He can't have sniffed her out yet, she had been so careful and his "grub hunt" had continued, the occasional body left in her

path for her to find even though she doesn't care, she doesn't care, and he hasn't summoned her since that day he called her to meet on the burning sand above the buried remains of their history, but… there is no more time. She can't risk him finding her out. She can't risk not coming back before everything is set up. She needs to prime her trap and set her bait. She needs to curtail the cruelty Kayne may inflict on him so for all he can pleasingly suffer there is nothing left that can break him. Her followers, desperate Muriel and voracious Joseph, do not deserve what Kayne would inflict.

Arthur does not either, but there is nothing she can do to spare him. If there was, she would've kindly killed him as an infant.

Muriel has been waiting for this dream all her life, has prayed for it in her darkest moments in a life of shadow. She accepts it with open arms, welcomes it even. Joseph, however, fights it. He protests even in his dream and resists and recites some pointless lines from a poem on his wall—and Lilith stops asking nicely.

Muriel rises and walks in a placid slumber. Joe staggers, stiff-limbed and eyes rapidly flickering beneath his closed lids with a voiceless terror as he tries to force himself awake. Neither of them in either their acceptance or resistance think of their son as they make their way to the kitchen and shut the door behind them.

It does not take long. Lilith ignores the wetness trickling out of Muriel's closed eyes or Joseph's shaking hands. She doesn't care. She does not care at all.

Lilith slinks down the hall to a familiar bedroom. The door swings open on moaning hinges but the still form in the bed does not stir. Even if he was not used to ignoring the creaks and groans of a haunted home, she would not allow him to wake. Not tonight. She would grant him that last gift.

She sheds her beauty as she enters the room, growing long and sinuous with pitch black feathers and papery white scales. Her taloned feet scrape upon the well-scratched floorboards and the window glass, already warped by her long lingering presence, strain within the frames.

She bends over the small boy in the bed, a looming nightmare stretched out over him like the night sky.

A hand reaches out, then pulls back. She remembers how he fit in her palm and her head tilts. He no longer did. She had watched him grow and still– and still– somehow she lingers on how small he still is. Fragile, flickering, and destined to be so terribly brief. Mortals… how valuable could such a short existence be? This flickering flame, snuffed out as easily as flicking closed a lighter?

She has known him since we was born. He was made for her and her purposes, shaped by her and her hands to be her tool. Her weapon. Her barbed lure. He is hers, and she thinks this was a stubborn, vicious defiance. She had him first.

She stares down at him with her inhuman gaze. Anticipation rests heavy in her chest. Despite herself, a loathsome burn traces the edges of her eyes and she hates it. There is only one thing

left.

"My favourite," she whispers, resolute. The Lester she is not able to spare. Her favourite, which she could do anything to but save.

But since when had that not been the case?

And she leaves him behind to face her own trial.

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