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**TERROR  
AT  
THE GATES**

SCARLETT ST. CLAIR

*Bloom books*

## TRIGGER WARNINGS

Religious trauma, sexual assault specifically by an authority figure in the church (NO on-page sexual assault, but referenced on pages 51–52, 138–139, 351, and 459–460), child abuse and emotional abuse by a parent and authority figure in the church.

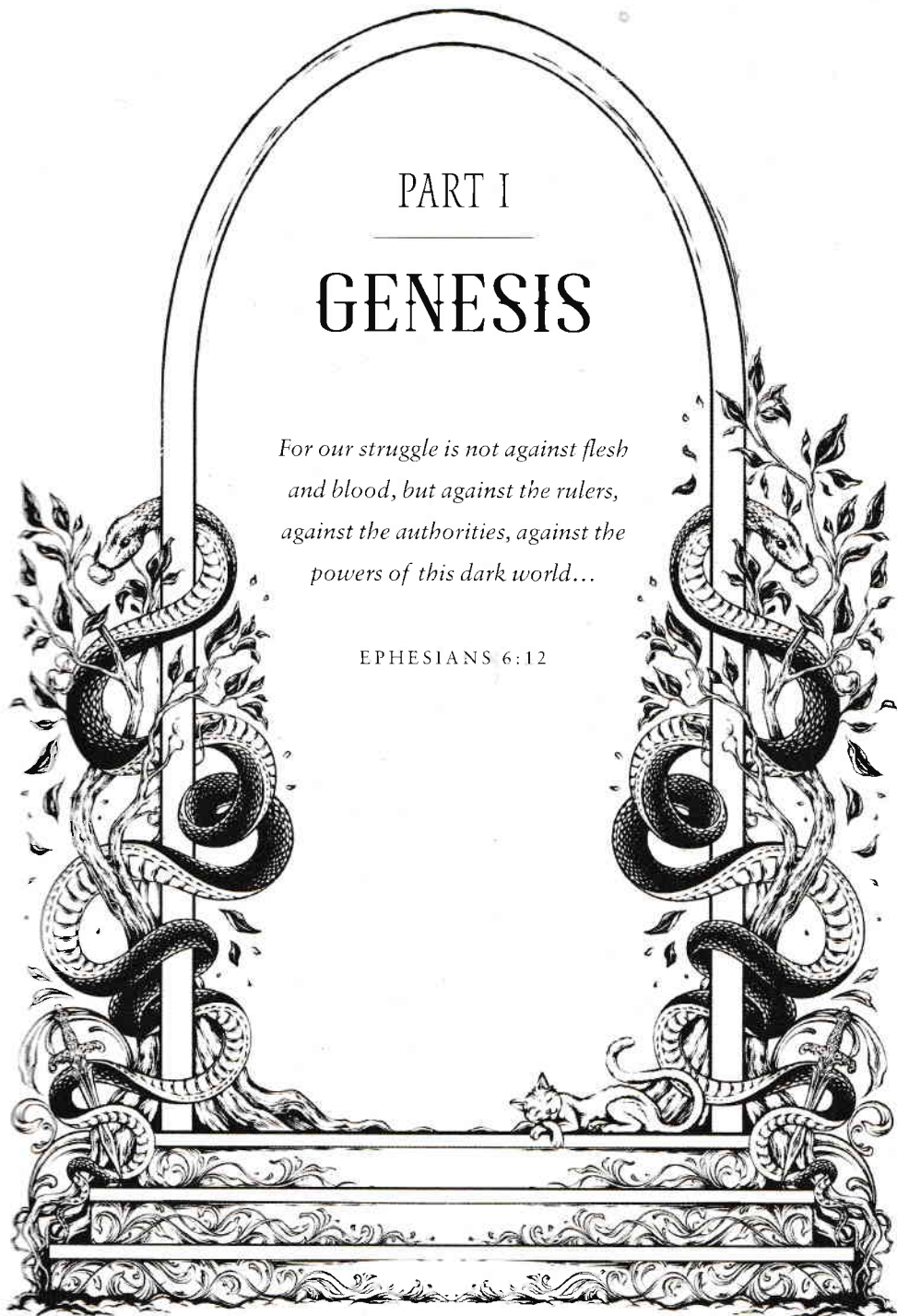
Are you a survivor? Need assistance or support? Call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-HOPE (4673) or go online to [hotline.rainn.org](https://www.hotline.rainn.org).

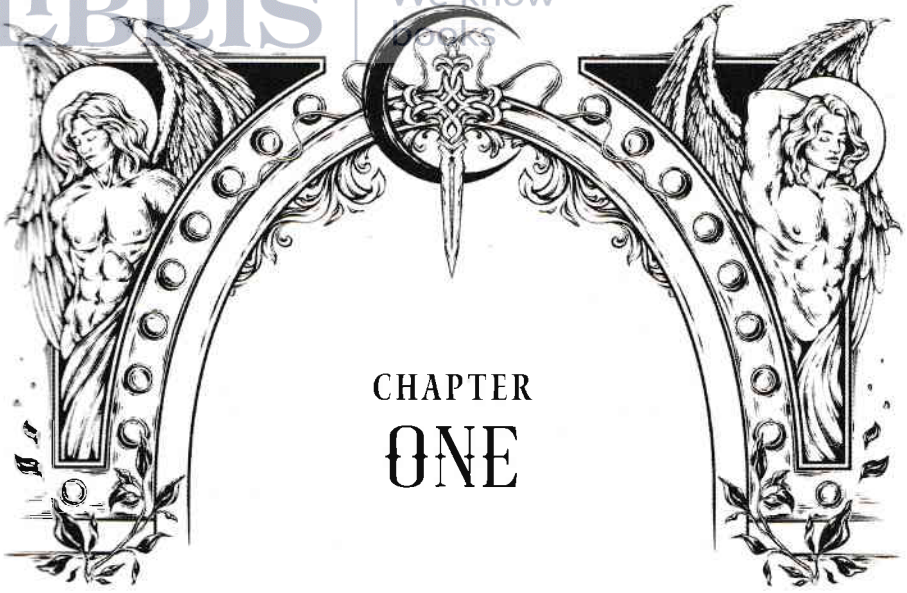
## PART I

## GENESIS

*For our struggle is not against flesh  
and blood, but against the rulers,  
against the authorities, against the  
powers of this dark world...*

EPHESIANS 6:12





## CHAPTER ONE

Ritual was teeming. Glossy tables and velvet couches were already overcrowded, leaving people standing shoulder to shoulder beneath pulsing blue and purple light as they waited for the entertainment to begin.

They would come from above, the aerialists, their red silks unfurling in the dark like ribbons of flame, hypnotizing the audience with their strength and grace as they soared, suspended in the smoky air. It was a popular attraction in Nineveh. Those who came down from the other four districts would have the church believe it was this tame performance they'd come to see, but we all knew otherwise.

Their descent began like clockwork. On Friday at three, Procession Street, the only road in Eden that connected all five districts, would fill with bumper-to-bumper traffic. The onslaught started with the financiers from Hiram, then the industrialists from Temple City, the merchants from Galant, and the artists from Akkadia. Though once they crossed the border into Nineveh, where they were from didn't matter. They were all just hypocrites.

*Crits*, the locals called them.

Most spent the weekend roaming from club to club on Sinners' Row, returning to their respective districts to worship at temple early Sunday morning. By Monday, they would be cleansed and forgiven, ready to live piously until the weekend.

*Forgiveness is an invitation to sin. It will be our ruin.*

I ground my teeth as my mother's words came unbidden, roaring to life in my mind. Her doctrine was etched into my memory, conditioned to surface anytime I came into contact with anything that contradicted her teachings, though this was one of few I actually agreed with.

Forgiveness *was* an invitation to sin. I witnessed it every week, which was why I'd decided a long time ago that I did not care to be forgiven.

I'd rather be a sinner than a hypocrite.

I wove my way through the flock dressed in red, as vibrant as the aerialists' silks, but unlike them, I went unnoticed. It was a choice. I could draw attention if I wished, but among those present, I had yet to spy anything of worth.

And tonight, I needed something expensive.

Rent was due, and my landlord had just hiked the price again.

My roommate, Coco, short for Colette, had gone into work down the street where she danced at Praise. She'd asked me to stay home, but only because she didn't like the way I managed to make ends meet.

I was a procurer of goods, usually of the religious variety, but I wasn't picky. I'd sell anything if I could get a good price. The issue was, my job was technically illegal since the church prohibited the sale of holy items.

Coco called my methods stealing, but I called it using my resources, which just so happened to be *magic*.

Honestly, I wouldn't need to if Zahariev, the head of the Zareth family and the district of Nineveh, would let me dance at one of his many clubs, but he refused.

*You would start a war, Lilith*, he had said.

I rolled my eyes. *You are dramatic, Zahariev. No one has to know who I am.*

*You are the daughter of House Leviathan*, he said, as if that explained everything. *Besides, I like my balls, and your father would cut them off and feed them to me if he found out I let you dance.*

*Let me.*

*Zahariev.*

*Zahariev.*

*Zahariev.*

He was a beautiful, frustrating man. I had known him my entire life. He was eight years older than me and had ascended to the head of his family after his father died five years ago. He had always been quiet and controlled, mostly unemotional, as were all Elohai. That was the name of the bloodline that gave each family magic and, with it, the right to rule.

Except that was all really bullshit, because the blood of the Elohai—the blood of God—only gave magic to *women*. It made *us* powerful, a power we could not even utilize because we were subservient to men.

*It is what we deserve for tempting the First Man*, my mother would say.

She liked to quote the *Book of Splendor*. It was the religious doctrine that ruled our society, that said men should be wary of women.

It also meant that unlike Zahariev, who had been trained to ascend to the head of his family, I had been trained to be a wife, and since I was the only child of my house, my father would choose my husband, the next head of House Leviathan.

I fucking hated it, but that was why I'd run away.

And while Zahariev might not let me dance, he did let me take refuge in his territory.

A hand snaked around my waist, and I was pulled against an older man. I put my hands out, flat against his soft chest. He wore a buttoned shirt, open at the collar and sweat stained. His forehead was shiny, his hair thinning. He chuckled as he drew me closer.

"Where are you going, pretty girl?" he asked.

I narrowed my eyes and glanced at his person. His suit jacket hung off the back of his chair. It was cashmere, evenly stitched, and accented with genuine animal horn buttons. The man was obviously from Hiram, the financial district. I was more than familiar with the area. I was born and raised there.

It was also where my father, Lucius, governed as head of the Leviathan family.

The man looked me up and down before his gaze settled on my breasts. They weren't really that big, but in this dress, a sheath with thin straps, they swelled over the neckline.

"They don't make them like you anymore," he said.

I raised a brow. "Say that again," I said. "*To my face.*"

The man lifted his gaze. I had felt his lust from the moment he drew me near, rampant and dark, but now I could see it. His pupils were blown, swallowing the color of his irises, his skin was flushed, and his cock was hard, straining against the fabric of his dark trousers.

“Defiance,” he said, a thin smirk curling his mouth. “I like it, but you’ll never find a husband with it.”

I kept my hands planted on his chest, both to maintain distance between us even as he tried to pull me closer and to give me more control over his arousal.

“Let me tame you, sugar,” he said. “I’ll be real good.”

A violent shudder went through me, and I suspected few women ever left this man’s clutches alive.

I let one of my hands drop to his thigh, the other remaining at the center of his chest. His lips pulled back from his teeth as he chuckled in triumph, but I was reaching into his energy, seeking the parts of him that fueled his sex drive. I knew his by feel—a dizzying, nauseating force. I pulled it into the space between us. Outside his body, it no longer had purpose or intention—it was just fuel I could use to kill his sex drive.

“Let go,” I said, imbuing my command with magic.

He dropped his hand, and at the same time, his cock deflated as if pricked by a needle. His slimy smile fell, and his pupils constricted so that I could see the color of his eyes, a dull gray. Now pale, he looked far older than before, almost frail.

It felt like a just punishment.

I slipped back into the fold without a word, wanting to put distance between us before he recovered from the effects of my magic. They varied among men depending on their emotional state, stamina, and age—and those were just ones I’d observed. Either way, some recovered faster than others. I suspected this man would have difficulty achieving equilibrium, and the thought filled me with rapturous joy.

I smiled despite shivering, recalling the feel of his hands on my body, clammy and rough. I’m sure he thought he was entitled to me. *She was asking for it*, he would argue,

as evidenced by my exposed skin. I wondered if Zahariev or his brother, Cassius, had caught the exchange. If so, my magic wasn't the worst thing that would happen to him tonight.

As much as I despised men like him, I should have been more aware. There was always one whose desire was so raw and uncontrolled, it broke through my shield. I hadn't figured out how to fix that flaw yet. I assumed I just wasn't powerful enough, and if that was the case, then I was fucked.

I pushed those thoughts away and instead focused on the clientele.

While there were quite a few women, most were men. I could tell where they were from by the way they dressed. People from Hiram were white-collar and wore wool suits; people from Temple City wore polyester. Those from Akkadia dressed more casually, in cotton, linen, or blended fabrics, while those from Galant were more blue-collar and wore durable and dark fabrics. Visually, it was easy to see where we all fit in the hierarchy, but here, in the City of Sin, we were equal in one thing—*desire*.

And right now, I desired something valuable I could sell on Smugglers' Row that would pay my rent...and I might have glimpsed just the thing.

It was a dagger. I noticed it because the gems inlaid on its hilt and sheath glimmered, catching the scattered light at the slightest bit of movement from its owner. It was not unusual for people to carry blades if they worked in the temples or guarded the gates, but those were most often plain. This one looked expensive, looped on the belt of a middle-aged man from Hiram.

With my target chosen, I studied him from afar.

He was handsome and sported short, graying hair and

a well-manicured beard. He looked fit and relaxed, almost reclining at the bar, one elbow on the tabletop, another perched on the back of his chair, a glass of amber-colored liquid clutched between the tips of his fingers. He didn't wear a ring, which meant he wasn't married or he'd taken it off.

The problem was he wasn't alone. Two men, likely his colleagues, sat beside him. I couldn't hear what they were talking about, but the story must have been amusing, because now and then, their laughs erupted, rising over the roar of the crowd. I wondered if my target's friends would get in the way of my work. I could attempt to charm them all, but that would take a lot of magic, and a lot of magic made a lot of energy, which would alert security to my presence, and I didn't want to get dragged away before I got my hands on that blade.

As if he sensed my gaze, the man's eyes slid to mine and then down my body. I took that as an invitation to approach and wandered up to the bar, slipping between him and his two companions. I didn't look at him immediately and instead hailed the bartender. There was a downside to coming to places where I was familiar, and that was being recognized.

The bartender, Eli, raised a thick, disapproving brow at me as his gaze flicked to the man beside me.

"Hey, Lils," he said. "What can I get for ya?"

"My usual," I said.

My usual was a strawberry daiquiri. I don't know why it was my usual; I just liked that it was sweet and Eli always added a whole strawberry to the rim.

"You got it," he said.

"Thank you, Eli," I sang.

He tried not to smile, head down, focused on his task.

I took a moment to glance at my target's two colleagues.

"Here, beautiful." The one nearest me said, giving up his chair. "Take my seat."

I didn't protest and instead smiled. "What a sweetheart," I said. "Thank you."

There were no other empty seats at the bar, leaving the man standing. His colleague winked at me before slipping from his chair. Together, they wandered into the crowd, leaving me alone with their friend.

I turned to face him. His eyes matched those of the man from earlier, so blown out I couldn't tell their color. I didn't need the physical cues to know he was aroused though. I could feel it flare in the air between us.

He smiled, showing his teeth, a row of straight pearl-white veneers.

"Hello," he said. I thought he sounded like someone who had to put in effort to deepen their voice.

"Hello," I said in the most sultry tone I could muster, rising onto the tips of my heeled feet so I could slide onto the barstool.

His eyes dipped down again, bouncing over the contours of my body, launching his lust into overdrive.

My claws were in him deep.

Eli slid my drink toward me. The sound of glass grating against granite set my teeth on edge.

"Put it on my tab," said the man.

"Oh, you don't—"

"I insist," he said.

I smiled again and offered my hand. "Lilith."

"Ephraim," he said.

"It's nice to meet you, Ephraim," I said, holding his gaze as I sipped from the straw in my drink.

"What brings you out tonight?" he asked.

"Oh, I just wanted to have a little fun," I said. "You?"

"I can be fun," he said.

His desire rose, each wave stronger than the last. I could feel the ebb and flow, my magic anchored to his energy. It made me dizzy, but not sick like the last man.

When my powers first developed at eighteen, the whole experience made me violently ill. It still did if they had an appetite for violence.

My magic was the downfall of my obedience. It wasn't until then I realized everything the church had tried to say about women was a lie. We were not responsible for lust in men. We existed, and they desired.

Sometimes that desire was mutual. Sometimes it wasn't, but men had a hard time wrapping their dicks around the word *no*, and since our world valued them more, we were the ones who suffered.

"That is a beautiful necklace," said Ephraim.

"Thank you," I said, taking the pendant between my fingers. It was a gold cross with a pointed end that made it look more like a dagger. My father had gifted it to me on my sixteenth birthday. He called it an amulet, said that it had been forged from gold found in the Nara-Sin Desert and imbued with some kind of protection properties.

I didn't know if any of that was true, and I didn't care. The necklace mattered because it had been a gift from my father. I hadn't taken it off since.

Men always commented on it, though I didn't know if they actually appreciated the beauty or if it was just a universal excuse to look at my boobs.

"You are from Hiram," I said, still clutching the pendant. It kept me focused. "What do you do there?"

"Investments," he said.

I tilted my head to the side, frowning a little.

"What does that mean exactly?" I asked, pretending not to know. I didn't get far with many men from Hiram if I didn't let them feel important.

"I make money for people," he said.

"A lot of money?" I asked.

He chuckled. "More than you could imagine."

I ignored his slight. I had nothing to prove to this man who presumed to know me, but the truth was he only thought he knew wealth.

"You must be *very* skilled at your job," I said, inching closer, letting my eyes drop to his belt. I let out a quiet gasp. "What a beautiful dagger."

The man's gaze dropped too, as if he'd forgotten it.

"Oh yes." He cleared his throat. "Isn't it?"

"Can I touch it?" I asked, lifting my gaze to his, trying not to cringe at my behavior. I didn't like what I had to do to make money any more than Coco did, but it kept us sheltered and put food on the table.

"Darlin'," he drawled. "You can touch anything that belongs to me."

A slow grin curled over my mouth, though what I really wanted to do was roll my eyes. Still, I would not pass on the chance to see that dagger up close.

The man took the blade off his belt and handed it to me. It was heavier than I expected, and as I pulled it from its gilded sheath, I tasted something metallic on the back of my tongue.

*Strange*, I thought, but chalked it up to the alcohol.

"It is beautiful," I said, looking into his eyes again. "Where did you get it?"

"I made a trade," he said.

I narrowed my eyes slightly, smiling, imbuing my voice with a sultry charm I reserved only for situations where I wanted more information.

"Are you lying, Ephraim?"

"Yes," he said, blinking, obviously startled that he'd told me the truth.

"Tell me, Ephraim," I said. "Where did you get the knife?"

I wanted the information for a lot of reasons, including leverage.

"I stole it from a man on the street," he said, speaking almost robotically, but that was because he couldn't stop my magic from sifting through his tangled thoughts, unraveling his bitter truths.

"Oh, Ephraim," I said in mock disappointment. "Who was the man?"

"I don't know him," he said, frowning. The look in his eyes was distant, as if recalling the evening he found the blade. "I think he worked for the church. He was not a bishop or priest. His robes were too simple."

"Where is the man now, Ephraim?"

"He is dead," he confessed in a whisper. "I killed him."

A trickle of fear shook my spine. I had not expected a murder confession. Still, I continued with my questioning. So long as he maintained this level of lust, I could keep myself safe.

"Tell me more, Ephraim."

"The dagger did not belong to him. Look at it. It is too lovely for a man of the church," he said. "So I followed him.

I didn't mean to kill him, but he fought back. I was protecting myself."

"Killing a member of the church is a capital crime, Ephraim."

"Please don't tell," he whispered, his eyes full of fear.

I twisted the pointed end of the sheath into the tip of my finger as if considering.

"What will you give me to keep this secret?" I asked.

"Anything," he said.

"The dagger?"

"Whatever you want," he promised.

He was so thoroughly under my spell, drool dripped from the corner of his mouth.

I leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you, Ephraim."

I left the bar and my drink behind, tucking the blade between my breasts as I merged with the crowd. I had a limited amount of time before my magic wore off and Ephraim came out of his trance. I didn't know if he would remember what he'd confessed, but I was certain he would remember me and accuse me of stealing his dagger.

Escaping wasn't about getting in trouble. It was about having to give the dagger back, which Zahariev would likely demand.

I kept my gaze on the neon exit sign, growing more and more relieved the closer it came, but then I broke through the crowd and found my way blocked by a man in a suit. When I saw him, I turned, intending to vanish into the crowd, but found I'd been caged by two other men in black shirts and cargo pants.

*Fuck.*

"This way," the man in the suit said. I turned to look at him as he gestured for me to walk in front of him.

I didn't argue and made my way down a dim hallway to an elevator.

Inside, the two men in dark shirts flanked me. I looked at each of them. They reminded me of every man in my father's employ, wannabe made men who played at being tough, their thick, muscled arms crossed tightly over their chests.

I called them *hopefuls*. They preferred *associate*, but that sounded far more official than it was. These men were desperate for a permanent position within the ranks of the five families and they'd do just about anything to get it, even things that ruined them.

I didn't envy their work. Next to my father, Zahariev was probably the most feared among the five bosses, a feat considering he had no wife, which meant he had no direct access to magic. He ruled through fear because his currency was information. He had enough dirt to ruin every man in power, even my father.

Sometimes I wondered how he was still alive.

The elevator came to a hard stop, turning my stomach. When the doors opened, the man in the suit stepped off, and I followed, the hopefuls trailing behind me. They herded me into a room at the end of the hall with nothing inside but a metal table. I turned when I heard the door shut, finding I was alone with the man in the suit.

"You must be new," I said.

I'd never seen him or the two other men before. It made me wonder where their predecessors had gone. Though it was usually one of two things: They'd either moved up in rank or were dead.

"Why is that?" he asked.

"The man who had your job before, he always let me go," I said.