

There is a church at the end of the street- but there shouldn't be. The paint is chipping, and it's plastered with "Vacant" and "Do Not Enter" signs. The windows are haphazardly boarded up, but the door is wide open, an inky darkness awaiting inside. The fence surrounding the property is rusted, its gate's door closed.

Ash runs into its fence while walking home from work. It was an empty lot just this morning. They know it was. They always cut through the lot rather than go around. They can even see the worn path of trampled grass and compacted dirt from years of walking the same way every morning and night.

It is too old for a new building, far too old, Ash thinks. They give the gate a shake, and the gate opens easily with a piercing groan. They feel it in their teeth and their skin prickles. They clench their jaw shut, scratching at the goosebumps, and look up at the church. The open door feels... inviting.

Ash takes a step forward unconsciously, frowning as they try to understand why they did that. They shake their head and pull the gate back closed, ready to leave, but the second they turn their back, there is a sound. Faint, but clear. A melody that tickled a buried memory. Ash whips around to look back at the church, and stumbles backward, falling to the ground.

"That... that can't..." they say, heart pounding. The tips of their fingers go numb. They can't control their breathing. "Im...possible."

The gate is missing, and the church now sits right up against the fence, its door sitting perfectly where the old gate had been not a moment before. The church looms above them, the doorway much bigger than before. Ash still cannot see inside.

The melody continues to play, barely audible over Ash's breathing. The melody floods their body, entering their ears and filling up their chest with static. The doorway expands and

contracts slowly, almost imperceptible. Ash could have sworn they were imagining it if they didn't feel the church's sticky, warm breath on their skin with every breath it takes.

They stay there, staring at the church, unable to blink. Unable to move. Every part of them screaming to get up and run, but a small part, a part that barely felt part of them, whispers that if they did, the church would move again and swallow them whole.

How long has it been? Seconds? Minutes? Hours? Ash can't tell anymore. They can't look away to check their watch, and the sun shows no indication of rising. Their body aches from sitting on the cold, hard ground. Their eyes droop from exhaustion. Still, Ash does their best to keep them open and fixed on the church. With each involuntary nod of the head or droop of the eye, they feel it get closer. That cursed melody, a hair louder. That rotten breath, a touch warmer. That endless darkness in the doorway, a bit darker. The church knew it could outlast Ash. It's hours until sunrise, and longer until their bus would pass by. Ash was utterly, and completely helpless.

Their exhaustion grows as the seconds tick by. They could see the beginning licks of sunlight reach out from behind the church, but it all feels so pointless. Ash could barely last another 20 minutes, let alone hours. That soft melody was the only thing they could hear anymore, and at this point? It's almost a comfort. The church's breath, while disgusting, was warm compared to the cold ground. With how close it was, the neverending darkness in its doorway feels like outstretched arms, ready to catch them if they fall.

Ash knows they need to hold out. That if they can, they can return home like none of this ever happened. *You'll be okay.* Something whispers, and Ash almost believes it. Why are they resisting so much? *It'll be okay.*

"Will it?" they mumble as their eyelids fall. "How can you be so sure?"

The melody encompasses them, the static in their chest feeling more like a weighted blanket. *It's okay.* The church's breath, a warm breeze. *You'll be okay.*

And against their better judgment, they fall into the mouth of the church.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

Ash sits up with a start, thrashing enough to fall out of bed, a scream caught in their throat. The sound of their own alarm causes a panic as they swipe at it until it stops. Their heart pounds in their stomach as they jump to their feet, slowly taking in their surroundings, recognizing it as their own bedroom.

"I'm... home...?" their voice cracks, as they fall back onto their bed. "A... dream?" Ash clenches and unclenches their hands. They can't believe it. They let out a shaky laugh and nod. A dream. Of course it was.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

The alarm goes off again and they jump. The alarm reads 9:22am. They spring to their feet, muttering a string of curses. Ash overslept, and they are going to be late for work. They hastily pull out a new set of clothes and change, ignoring the fact that they are wearing the same thing they were the day before. They grab their bag, ignoring the fact that it was in the bed and not by the door. They hastily search the bed for their keys and phone, ignoring the dirt littering the sheets.

They run out of the house, attempting to catch the next bus, but stop cold before reaching the corner. Around that corner is where the church is. They swallow hard and fidget with the buttons of their top. They already missed their normal bus, and they are already late... They pull out their phone and open the ride share app. Maybe it's ~~safer~~ quicker to do this instead. The bus is unreliable anyway...

Thirty minutes later, Ash is sitting in their boss's office apologizing. They had missed an important meeting and kept all the documents locally, making their boss look like an unprepared idiot in front of an important client.

"Do you even understand what you lost us?!" He paces behind his desk as Ash stands, staring at the floor. "If we don't land this contract, *no one* is getting bonuses this year! Do you hear me? *No one!*"

"I'm sorry." Ash says again. "Should I email them and-"

"Oh, you've done enough, *Asher!*" their boss spits, and they flinch. He puts his hands on the desk and stares Ash down. "All I want you to do is go sit at your desk and hope you still have a job by the end of the day! Get out!"

Ash all but sprints out of the room and to their cubicle, keeping their head down as their coworkers whisper and laugh. They can feel everyone's eyes on them. Their coworkers keep their voices just loud enough so Ash can hear. *Again? That's what, the third time this week?* Ash walks faster, squeezing their nails into their palms. *He's probably done for this time right?* Ash shakes their head, trying to ignore them. *I don't know why he doesn't just-*

Ash slams their bag on the desk, trying to drown out the sound. It's silent for a moment. *Jeez, what's his problem?* The whispers stop and turn to something else, the voices fading back into the normal office hum. Ash takes a deep breath, and rests their head against the desk. The cool wood calms them down. *You're okay. You'll be okay.*

They pull their laptop from their bag, and stare blankly at their emails. The work day only just started, but they are already so exhausted. *Maybe being fired would be a blessing in disguise?* They think as they click through the new unread. Spam. Spam. Meeting invite. Spam. Church inquiry. Spam. Meet-

Wait.

Church inquiry?

The hairs on their arms stand on end as they stare at the unread email. Their thoughts race as they think what this could be — and why it was sent to them. This isn't their department. Maybe... Maybe someone just sent it to them by mistake? Yes. That must be it. Of course. Slowly, slowly, Ash moves the mouse and clicks the email.

It shows an image of a church. The church. The same one Ash saw in their... *was* it a dream the night before? It's in a different place. Not at the end of their street, but near their grandparents' house, several states away. They see a younger version of themselves standing outside and smiling.

Their mouth goes dry. "But.. it was..." They bite their lip and scroll down. Under the image is the text: *Don't keep it waiting, Ash*. They slam the laptop shut. A fuzzy memory tickles the back of their mind. They hold their head in their hands. "It was real... It was all- Ack!"

A sharp pain pinches the side of their head as an old memory rears its ugly head. The reason it felt so familiar. The picture. It all makes sense. Almost. The memory refuses to surface, only vague images and feelings. They see themselves inside. They're scared. They're trapped. But that's all Ash can remember.

"It's right there, so just..." They murmur to themselves. "I was...?"

They pull at their hair. They... found something. It... let them... out? No. It wouldn't-

"Everything, uhm, okay? In here?" A coworker holding a stack of papers knocks on the cubicle wall. She smiles nervously, as Ash slams their hand on the desk and whips their head to look at her. "You look..."

She doesn't finish her statement. Ash's eyes dart from their coworker, to the stack of paper in her arms and back. Ash can just barely read the title of the top page as "Recently Sold - Church". Their stomach is in knots, and their hands are clammy. They open and close their mouth, flopping open and closed like a fish. They try to say "I'm fine," but all that comes out is a small squeak.

She clears her throat and bounces on her heels. "Well, I'll... see you around!"

"W-wait!" She quickly turns to leave, but Ash jumps up and grabs her arm. Her eyes widen in a combination of shock and fear as she rips her arm from their grasp. They point to the papers. "Are you scanning those for marketing? Let me."

Without waiting for an answer, they snatch the papers from her hand and scurry to the scanner in the side office. Their coworker says nothing, standing in stunned silence before slowly walking back to her desk. Ash slams the papers down on the desk next to the scanner and rips the top open. They take a better look at the papers, expecting the worst, only to find them as listings for recently sold commercial properties. The church on the top of the list is a new building an hour away. They sigh with relief. Nothing to do with *that* church.

They place the papers in and punch in the correct emails to the machine. It hums as it scans, and the droning noise drowns out all the rest. They fall into a rhythm, only interrupted when certain pages need a signature. Place page. Enter email. Send it off. Place page. Enter email. Send it off. Sign page. Place page. Enter email. Send it off. Sign page. Place page. Enter email. Send it off. Sign-

"*ASHER, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!*" They jump at the sound of their boss's voice bellowing from down the hall, followed by stomping footsteps. He is in the office at record speeds, face red and hair full of sweat. "*ARE YOU TRYING TO RUIN ME?*"

"I- I'm just- Marketing- The scans-" Ash stumbles over their words, looking anywhere but at their boss. Their thoughts race as they try to figure out what they did wrong. They were only scanning documents so what could possibly-

"The SCANS are exactly what's WRONG!" He grabs the page Ash just finished signing and shoves it in their face. "What is WRONG WITH YOU?!"

Ash takes it, hands shaking. The page is a normal work document, but in red ink is the phrase. "There is a church at the end of my street. It waits and waits for me to come back, but it has gotten impatient." Over and over and over again. Ash's chest tightens, and frantically goes through the rest of the papers. They know they only quickly signed the bottom. So why-?

All the papers they signed repeat the same phrase. All in neat handwriting. *Ash's* handwriting. They clutch the papers tightly, until their knuckles go white and their nails pierce through. *When did they?*

"What was the point of all this? Are you trying to get fired?" Ash opens their mouth to respond, but he holds up his hand to shush them. "Don't answer. Just pack up your shit and go home. And don't bother ever coming back."

~

The bus ride home is shorter than it's ever been. The entire ride, Ash sat in grim anticipation for what waited for them when they got off at their stop. They thought about calling a car again, but decided against it seeing as they just got fired. As the bus rounds the corner, Ash's stomach drops as if they just went down a roller coaster. In the lot across the street, there it sits: The church. They get off the bus, and stare it down, expecting it to swallow them up just like in their dream the night before, but it never does. Its door is closed.

Before it can change its mind, Ash spins on their heel and speedwalks down the street opposite their home. They assume if they can avoid it, nothing bad will happen. As they walk, a burning sensation creeps up the back of their neck, as if someone is staring them down. They ignore it, and pick up the pace. The burning sensation grows, and something grabs at their legs, like a cat pawing at their legs to get attention. The wind picks up.

They scratch at the back of their neck and focus on the stop sign on the corner. This is the church. It has to be. It *wants* them to turn around. It *wants* them to give in and do what it wants. But they won't. They know if they turn around now, the church will be there ready to devour them whole.

Ash can almost touch the stop sign on the corner. How have they not reached it yet? The burning sensation lessens, replaced with lead weights at their ankles, like they're trudging through thick mud. Their chest feels heavy, like someone has their arms wrapped tightly around them. A sound floats on the wind. A voice? They shake it off. If they can just reach this stop sign, they know they'll have made it out. It's so close.

They reach out, lunging toward it, and grab the sign with both hands. They squeeze their eyes shut, breathing heavy, hands holding onto the cold metal of the stop sign for dear life. The burning is gone, and the weights at their ankles lessen. They smile and look up at the ~~stop sign~~ church. It looms over them, taller than they remember. Their hands tightly grip the open front gates.

The door is open.

But how did it...? They were at...? They don't take time to make sense of it, and pull the gates closed. Not again. NOT. AGAIN. Just as the gates slam shut: It goes dark.

"What...?" Ash says, touching their face to confirm their eyes were still open. They frantically look for the gate's latch, only to be met with damp wood, and a small knob. "No, no, no, nononononono."

Somehow, they are inside the church.

They scream. They curse. They kick and throw themselves at the door until their body aches with pain. They fall to the floor and curl up by the door, burying their face in their stomach. What did they do wrong? What could they have done differently? What-

"You came back." Ash tenses. The voice is light and feminine. It swirled around, once by their ear, then across the room, then above them. Every word comes from somewhere different. "Why? Why did you come back?"

Ash slowly stands and looks around for the source, taking a few steps deeper into the church. They open their mouth, but before any words can leave their lips, cold, unseen hands cover their mouth. They can feel someone standing behind them, but they couldn't feel any warmth that a human would have. They knew someone was there, but physically, Ash couldn't feel them.

"Don't," the voice whispers into their ear. Ash strains to turn their head to see who, or what, is behind them, but sees nothing. A nervous laugh bubbles up from Ash, and the hands grip them tighter. "Shhh... Look up."

The hands remove themselves from Ash's mouth, and gently tilt their chin up. The window above the door has morphed into a stained glass eye. Its pupil darts around, looking for something. "It looks for you."

Ash whimpers, and the presence of the voice moves away from behind them. They knew it was still nearby, but couldn't pinpoint its exact location. Ash is filled with questions. Who are you? What's going on? Can you help me? But all they manage to squeak out is a pitiful, "Help."

It is silent for a moment before the voice speaks again. "This is all I can do for you now. The rest is up to you."

Though Ash could not see it, they could feel the voice's presence fading, and before they stop themselves, they call out. "Wait-!"

The room turns still. Silent. Ash couldn't hear themselves breathe, if they were breathing at all. A red light glows from above them, and they slowly.

Slowly.

Look.

Up.

The light comes from the window above the door. A stained glass eye staring down at them. Ash staggers backward, deeper into the church, an intense pressure pressing down on them. Their chest tightens, and their limbs fill with static. The air becomes heavier. Their mouth goes dry. They are forced to their knees and they grab at their shirt. The static filling their extremities made it feel like they were touching nothing and everything at the same time. But instead of distress, Ash feels... relief?

The back of their throat goes tight as they hold back tears, but they don't know why. Is some part of them... happy to be back? Reassured to be back in a place like this? Comforted to be bathed in this light? Logically, they think this is wrong. Something is wrong. But the longer they sit in the light, the more they realize they don't know how they can go back to before they entered it. Ash reaches out toward the eye in offering, a terrified smile plastered on their face.

A satisfied groan reverberates through the building. Slowly, the eye closes, and the red light with it. "N-no!" they scramble forward, chasing the last licks of the light before it's gone. The pressure alleviates and all the comfort the light gave with it, replaced with a devastating loss. The window returns to its normal, swirling state.

Ash hugs themselves and bows their head until it touches the floor. They choke out one large sob, unable to deal with the loss of that red light. That light made them feel whole. It made them feel safe. It made them feel-

How did it make them feel that way?

It's a sobering thought as Ash blinks the tears from their eyes. "Why did I...?" they mutter to themselves as they climb to their feet, looking at the church window. They wipe the tears and snot with their shirt sleeve. "What was that...?"

They dig their nails into their hand, realizing they need to be more careful in the future. The church wants them to stay here, and they almost let it win. They turn away from the window, and almost trip over something in front of them. On the ground sits a flashlight, and a piece of paper. They pick up both. The paper feels thin, like it could fall apart at any moment. The flashlight seems to be battery operated, and turning it on shows it gives off enough light to easily see what's around them. They should be able to explore with this.

Holding the flashlight with one hand, and the paper with the other, they examine what's on it. The paper reads: "Find the heart and **destroy** it. The church will try to stop you. It will do anything to keep you here. Stay out of its **sight**. Do not become its next **meal**."

Sight? Meal? Ash shudders at the thought. The church's sight warped their thoughts and reasoning. A part of them still longs for the church to see them again, and is grieving the thought that it might never do so again. They cannot let that happen again. If the church sees them

again... They shake their head, trying not to think about it. They wonder if that's how the church entices its prey, like those corpse flowers attract flies. A way to keep prey docile while it slowly absorbs them. How long does Ash have until the church fully digests them?

They try not to think too hard about it. Instead, they focus on what they can do. *Find and destroy the heart.* They think about what the heart of the church would be. Is it a literal heart? The church is a building, so maybe they need to destroy the structural supports? That feels too easy. Perhaps it's more figurative? A sacred artifact or...? They throw up their hands in frustration, wishing that voice was more direct. They don't know where the "heart" of the church is, so they do what they can and search the area. Scanning the body of the church, the main body is a podium facing pews, with a confessional off to the right side. On the other side are stairs leading up into a longer hallway.

"Well, here goes nothing..." Ash says, and approaches the pews.

Ash searches the pews. There's eight total, two columns, with four pews each. They search from front to back, left to right. They feel underneath and the back to make sure nothing is glued or taped to it. They move slowly and methodically, making sure they don't miss anything, but find nothing but dust.

With a huff Ash plops onto the last pew they searched, taking a well deserved break. They close their eyes and rub their face. *What am I even looking for? What is even the point?* They lean back in their seat, eyes still closed. How long will it take for the church to eat them? Does it matter? If they find the heart will they even be able to destroy it before the church retaliates? Surely it won't sit idly while Ash tries to kill it. They should really move on, sitting here is a waste of time and mental energy. They should check if the stage holds something of use.

Before Ash can build up the motivation to keep searching, a church organ begins to play, and their eyes snap open. A red spotlight shines up at the stage, illuminating the podium, and giving off enough dim light to the rest of the room. They look around to see the pews filled with people. Ash can't make out any face or distinguishing marks, just the general shape of people, their image flickering in and out of view. They're not fully translucent. Ash can see through their edges, but the center is fuzzy, almost like a thick white smoke. They sit next to Ash, but don't acknowledge them.

What Ash assumes to be a priest climbs the stage. The priest is more human than the others, its form more tangible. Its face is hard to look at, and Ash's eyes kept sliding off it no matter how hard they tried to focus. The priest begins to address the crowd and Ash can't understand what's being said. It sounds more like grunts and groans than language. The "people" nod or growl in agreement. Ash, instead of feeling tense or out of place, surprisingly feels at ease. They feel similar to being in a concert full of fans waiting for the main show to start. Ash didn't know anyone in the crowd, but the energy of those nearby is contagious.

Ash listened to the priest intently for what felt like an hour, even nodding along at points, before catching themselves. Nodding along? They can not even understand what he- *it*, is saying, and they listened for an *hour*? Ash needs to find a way out and sitting here sure isn't helping. They need to slip away. Slowly, they rise to their feet, intending to sneak behind the pews and into the nearby stairwell. They step into the center aisle, and the spotlight shifts, landing on Ash. They tense, bracing themselves, but unlike before, nothing happens. No pressure. No flooding of emotion. If anything, it just feels warm, like standing in a sunbeam on a cool spring day.

"Ah, there... you... are..." The priest says, each word drawn out and emphasized. Its voice is raspy and harsh, like it's not used to speaking human language.

The priest on stage is beckoning Ash to join him. All eyes are on them. Their chest tightens as fidget with the buttons on their shirt, not sure what to do with their hands. They feel like a child getting called on by the teacher, but they don't know the answer. They take a few steps back shaking their head, and try to leave. The light follows their movements, and Ash can feel guilt rising as they move further and further from the stage. As they turn to walk opposite the stage, the priest stands in their path.

"How did you-?"

"Wrong way... The stage is... this way." The priest grabs Ash by the shoulders, and leads them to the stage. The pastor's hands are cold, as it guides them, but the warmth from the light counters it. "We were.. waiting- for you."

Ash is led to the stairs on the right of the stage, just past the confessional. The priest stops leading them, climbing halfway up the stairs, then offering a hand for them to take. They reach out to take it, but hesitate. Their eyes dart from the confessional to the priest and back. The priest continues to beckon, and the longer Ash does not comply, the warmer the light becomes. A bead of sweat rolls down their temple. They take a step back.

The priest's face contorts and warps into something furious. It snarls at Ash, and grows taller and larger, reaching out to grab them. Not wasting a second, they turn and rush to the confessional door. They fumble for the knob, feeling it getting closer and closer with each passing second. They feel something graze their shoulder. A scream bubbles in their throat, but never makes it out. Ash finds the knob and turns it, falling back into the confessional. They kick the door closed, then scramble toward it, using their body to hold the creature back. It never pushes back, but they can hear it growling on the other side.

There's one loud bang against the door, and the thing shuffles away. Ash gets to their feet, and peeks through the grate in the door. The creature is gone, but the priest on stage and "people" in the pews remain. The priest turns and looks toward them, and they jump back until their back hits the wall. Ash can hear the same low rumblings of the priest from outside. They're stuck here until mass is over.

"Maybe I should have just gone to the stage." Ash murmurs, as they flop onto the cold, wood bench. "There's no way the heart-" The heart. They're hiding in the confessional. A place where people confess their deepest sins to cleanse their heart and soul. Then maybe...

They look around the cramped space, doing their best to check every nook and cranny. Under the bench, in the corners, anywhere they can think. They don't find anything. They check through the door grate again. Mass is still happening. They sit back on the bench, leaning their head against the wall when they hear the curtain open and close from the other side of the divider. There are footsteps, then a soft thud of someone sitting on the bench. Ash tenses. Did one of those things enter the other side? No, they weren't physical enough to make a sound when sitting. Even when the priest, who was tangible, grabbed them, he didn't feel like he had mass. Does that mean it's a real person? Another person?

"Um.. hello? Is anyone there?" It's almost the same voice from earlier. The one that gave them the flashlight and note. But her voice is softer? Younger...?

"Hello?" Ash calls out, tentatively.

"Oh, it's not..." her voice tapers off. She's disappointed. "Are you... still taking confessions...?"

"Confessions? Oh, I'm not-" Ash starts, but the girl on the other side cuts them off.

"Please, father? I keep missing-" She is cut off by a coughing fit. Harsh, loud, wet coughs. "I- want-" She tries to say something else, but the coughing fit persists.

Ash waits, listening to the aggressive, wet coughs plaguing the girl on the other side. Each raspy inhale twisted their insides into a tighter knot. They want to dash to the otherside to comfort her, but they stay glued to their seat. Ash still doesn't know if she's real or not, and they're not ready for another fake. They pick at their nails, words of comfort stuck in their throat. Eventually, she stops.

"Sorry," she wheezes. "I'm really sick, so I was hoping that- Daddy's a priest so-"

Ash is *not* a priest, and certainly not a replacement for her father but... They want to be able to comfort her in some way. Hearing her talk more made Ash realize she is probably a child. They had little experience with children, but they didn't want to hurt her.

"You can talk to me?" It comes out like a question, but the girl doesn't notice.

"Really? Thank you, father!" Her voice perks up, and Ash hears her clap her hands together. They can't help but smile. She clears her throat. "Forgive me father, for I have sinned."

She's quiet. The silence stretches on, and Ash wonders if they're supposed to say something. They realize they don't actually know how to take a confession. They shift in their seat, but decide to stay quiet over saying something they shouldn't.

"I.. I have been lying recently. A lot." She pauses again. "Mom thinks I'm in an after school club, but I've been coming here instead. Daddy is-"

"What?" The words slip from Ash's lips, harsh and sharp. She can come and go from the church? "You come here multiple times? *This* Church?"

"Oh, uhm, well-" She fumbles over her words.

"Why *this* church?" Ash ignores her question. If that email was correct, then Ash had also been here as a child, and Ash was also able to leave. So then maybe if they use her...

"I'm sorry, did I say something wrong?" The girl on the other end coughs again. Ash snaps back to reality. The curtain opens. "I'm- Leaving-" Her voice is cut off by a massive coughing fit. "You- *You*" she wheezes between coughs. "Don't-"

"Are you-?"

The sound of the curtain tearing-

THud!

Something, no *someone*, hits the ground. Hard. Ash is frozen. They know they need to get up. Get out there. To help her. To do *something*. Their eyes lock on the door knob, but they do not move. Instead, they settle on calling out.

"What happened? Are you okay?"

They can hear haphazard wheezing and scratching coming from outside. The girl does not answer. Ash needs to move. They need to get up, but it feels like they're chained to the bench. Like their body is not their own. They try to reach out for the door, but it's like they're pushing against something invisible. The harder they push, the harder it is to get through.

"I- I'm coming!" Ash's voice is high and strained. They hear what sounds like choked sobs from outside, undercut with loud. Wet. Coughs. Like she's trying to cough up her lungs, but they keep getting caught in her throat, so she swallows them back down only to repeat the process a few seconds later.

They're almost there. The door knob only a hair away. If they push just a little more, then- Ash grabs the knob and stares. They did it. They got the door. Now they just need to turn it, but they hesitate.

They can't hear her anymore.

What if it's too late? They think, and tighten their grip on the door. *It's all your fault.*

It is deathly quiet outside.

If you had just moved faster, Ash turns the knob. *Then maybe she might still be-*

Ash throws the door open and falls out of the booth. They scramble to check the other side, and stop in their tracks. They wave their flashlight over the scene, searching for the girl, but find nothing. What they do instead makes their stomach lurch and they cover their mouth.

This is your fault.

There's... blood just outside the confessional. It's smeared all over the floor, soaking into the wooden floor. A piece of torn curtain has smudged and bloody handprints all over it. Scratch marks are etched into the floor. Ash's flashlight shines on broken pieces of nail.

*This is **your** fault.*

Ash kneels in front of the booth, picking up the blood-soaked fabric. It stains their hands. They feel ~~anger terror panic~~ guilt.

You let this happen.

Ash gathers up the fabric in their hands, and squeezes. It gushes, staining their hands. They swallow back the lump growing in their throat. "I... I did this. I..."

They trace the scratch marks with their hand, and feel the deep grooves left chipped in wood. How panicked would one need to be to leave such marks? They look at the blood, then up at the ripped curtain, then at the confessional door. "She must have been so scared to be alone, and I was just..."

Coward.

"I'm sorry." Ash holds the fabric close, staining their once white shirt. They clasp their hands together, grasping the fabric tightly. They bow their head and shut their eyes. "Forgive me."

They feel a hand rest on the top of their head. A deep, gruff voice. "For what, my child?"

Ash shutters, but doesn't move. "My inaction. I need her to know-"

"Who?" It asks.

"The girl. The one who-" Ash bites their tongue. They can't bring themselves to say it.

"Who was in *there*."

"Tell me, how did she die? How was it your fault?" The voice is calm, soft. It doesn't blame Ash.

"I just sat there!" Ash all but yells. Tears stream down their face. "She needed my help and I just sat there!"

"I see." The voice is quiet, and it removes its hand from Ash's head. "Inaction in such a situation is a large sin."

"I'll do anything to repent." Ash bows until their head touches the floor. "Please, please forgive me, father."

"I forgive you, Ash." The voice morphs and it's hers. "You were scared too."

Ash's head snaps up. They smile through the tears. She's okay? She's here? She forgives- Ash's hands tremble as they stare at the intact curtain in front of them. They grip the fabric in their hands tightly, only to find their nails digging into their flesh. The fabric is gone.

"What is this...?" Their voice warbles, and they slowly stand. They take a step back, scanning the floor, to find it clean and unbroken. They laugh. "What- what is this...?!"

They let out a wet croak, and look around, looking for some response. Any response.

The church is quiet.

They can't help but laugh. Laugh at the absurdity. The tears burn in their eyes, but Ash holds them back. They remember the words on the note they were given. *It will do anything to keep you here.* Ash is tired. They take a deep breath, filling their lungs, and let out a scream. Something primal and raw. A pure release of everything they've felt up to this point. When they're done, they feel empty. Like everything they had to give was released.

Clunk!

They turn their head toward the sound, and walk over. On the stairs that lead further into the church, lies a sledge hammer. They look at it, and give it a kick. It's solid, but they know that doesn't matter. The ripped curtain was solid too. They put the flashlight in their armpit, and pick up the sledge hammer. They aim and smash it into the wall. It never connects. They aren't holding anything.

"What's the point...?" They roll the flashlight in their hand. Is it even worth doing anything anymore? Should they keep looking for the heart? What will they do if they can even find it? They still are no closer to knowing what it even is.

Creeeeaaakkk...!

Ash shines the flashlight down the hall, and a door slowly creaks open. They walk deeper in, climbing the short flight of stairs, and enter the room. Inside is a side office, entirely covered in dust and cobwebs. The adjacent walls are bookshelves full of books. The far wall has a desk with a stained glass window above it. The stained glass is in the shape of an eye. Ash avoids looking at it, turning their attention to the bookshelves.

Might as well... They think, and approach the bookshelves. In addition to all the books, water-stained boxes and a decaying wooden chest littered the shelves. They half-heartedly pick

through the boxes first, only to find them filled with more books. All the books are leather-bound and have numbers embossed on the cover. The pages are soft. Not made from paper. Maybe cloth? They flip through a book at random. It seems to be an autobiography of a priest. They put it back, thinking nothing of it.

Ash grabs the chest and tries opening it, only to find it to be locked. They give it a shake, and hear something thumping around inside. Without hesitating, they lift it above their head and slam it to the ground. They're surprised when the lid pops open, and a book with the number 2758 spills onto the floor. They glance back at the window, and it stares intently at them. Ash picks up the book, and traces the numbers. Instead of just embossing, this one has the numbers in thick brass. The leather feels newer, nicer. It feels important. They flip it open and read the first page.

"Oh..." They fall to the ground with a croak "That's... That's not..."

The book is autobiographical, and written in incredible detail. It's *their* book. It had everything- including the childhood memories they suppressed. There's blank pages between their childhood experience and their current one. All the written pages only include details that involve the church. Their breathing turns shallow and they only have one thought: *Is the ending already written?* With trembling hands, they flip to the end of the book.

I think I gave up my only chance of leaving. Partially due to the pain, partially for her, but mostly... I sat down in the pew, listening to the organ play. I closed my eyes, listening to the sound. When I open them, I'm surrounded by others. People. Not ghostly apparitions. Real people. I feel myself smile, and take the hands of those standing next to me.

I found peace.

Ash's mouth twitches. That's... That's it? They re-read the last few pages. They can't accept this as fact. Why does the church get to choose what they think? Manipulate how they feel? Ash has felt everything *but* peace since entering this place. This is-

"*Bullshit!*" They screech, and without another thought, rip the page out. They feel a spasm in their lower back, but ignore it. They glare at the window, and it glares back. The church grumbles and groans, and the "eye" rolls back, the window turning static. Ash smirks in smug satisfaction as they stare down at the blank page. Their book is no longer finished.

It's a short-lived feeling.

Ink stains the page, and the words reappear. *I found peace*. They rip out the page again. They feel a dull ache, this time, in their shoulder. Again the ink reappears. They scream in frustration as they rip the pages out over and over. A new part of their body gains new pain, with it growing sharper and greater each time. The ink reappears without fail, and Ash rips and rips and rips the pages until there's only one left. Their entire body burns in discomfort, like the day after a heavy workout.

They rip out the last page, but don't feel anything this time. "What now, huh? What...?"

Ash's skin tingles, quickly turning into a searing pain. They scream and drop their book, clawing at their arms and face, trying to make it stop. Anything to make it stop. They stare down at their hands to see angry red lines etched in their skin. They roll up their shirt and see the same thing.

Ash's skin bubbles and oozes as these lines change their shape to form words. Words they have read over and over again. *I found peace. I found peace. I found peace. I found peace.*

"No, stop. Stop!" They swat at words. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry! I won't do it again!"

Their plea falls on deaf ears as they can only watch the words engrave themselves in their skin. They drop to the floor, and curl into the fetal position. Tears leak from their eyes, a soothing and cool as they roll over bleeding skin.

"I won't do it again." Ash whimpers. "I was wrong. I'm- I accept it!"

The branding stops at their words. The pain quickly dwindles, though every part of their skin prickles. Slowly, slowly, they sit up. Their bloody clothing peels off the wooden floor. The branding is already healed over, but the *pain*. The pain lingers in their mind. They don't think they'll ever forget that pain. They trace the words that live in their skin. *I found peace.*

Cautiously, they pick up their book off the floor and dust off the cover. The numbers are no longer shining brass, but dull embossing. The leather now feels more worn, just like the rest. They gingerly put the book back on the shelf. *I found peace.*

The words bounce around in their head. They feel numb, if they can feel anything at all. How can anyone find peace after that? Still, they repeat the words over and over in their head. *I found peace. I found peace. I found peace.* Maybe if they say it enough, it would erase their branding. *I found peace. I found peace.*

Disoriented, they leave the room, and wander dazed back into the main body of the church. They take in the space. It's cozier than they remember.

I found peace.

They find themselves back by the front door. It creaks open, showing off the moonlit sidewalk of the outside world. The cool air blowing in stings.

I found peace.

They reach out a hand- But the church looks at them again, bathing them in the wonderfully comfortable red light. The door stays open. They feel like ~~repenting laughing screaming praying crying~~ they're home.

They're hysterical. Their whole body is heavy and tingling. They take a heavy step toward the door. *Is this really what you want?* The outside is only one more step away. *To leave?* Their legs are glued to the spot on the floor. They trace the words carved into their skin. *Are you sure?* Ash hesitates.

"You're leaving me?" It's the little girl. The one from the confessional. She's crying.
"You're leaving me all alone? Again?"

They clench their fists, and feel something in their hand. They look down. It's the piece of ripped curtain. And that's all it takes. The tears come flooding out, and they fall to their knees, bowing their head, holding the fabric to their face. Guilt, shame, remorse bubble up inside them.

"No." Ash croaks. How could they leave her again? After all she's been through? "Not this time."

"Thank goodness." she says, and they feel someone hug them from behind. Something warm. Something real. Ash turns to hug her back. They feel nothing but air. No one is there. Of course. The warmth they felt lingers on their back. They know she has to be here somewhere.

The front door closes, and Ash drifts deeper into the church. Organ music begins to play. They end up in the pews. Ash sits down, and closes their eyes, taking in the church music. When they open them, the pews are filled with people, all turned towards Ash. Smiling at Ash. Welcoming Ash. And then they see *her*, hands outstretched for Ash to take. The music flows through Ash, and they feel a smile come to their face. The book was right.

I found peace.