

His Waxen Wings

Chapter One

*How should he but in desperate lunacy?
Fond wordling, now his heart-blood dries with grief;
His conscience kills it, and his laboring brain
Begets a world of idle fantasies
To overreach the devil: but all in vain,
His store of pleasures must be sauc'd with pain.
-Faust*

It was just another Shift for the man in the black coat. New town, new time, same old story. Wynn rubbed his pocket just to hear the paper inside it crinkle. Still there. He glanced behind him for a moment, but there were no faces he recognized. He turned back around and moved faster.

Wynn had the strange feeling that he was walking on the wrong side of the sidewalk. A mass of well-dressed citizens rushed past him, some busy holding their hats on their heads while thumbing out last minute texts, and others pulling their children behind them on their way to church. From the brief report Legion had given him of this small town, Wynn figured that people here knew each other well enough to love or hate their neighbor. He wondered how close the church was and shuddered, taking comfort in the fact that he was walking away from it.

It was raining lightly.

He looked up at the sky, searching for the sun. It was always hidden from him, behind a spire, covered by a flag flapping in a curious change of wind, or sometimes he'd just stumble and

his eyes would fall to the ground. Never a home, never a sun—never a friend, never anyone. Only the memory of a mass of swaying purple flowers by a crimson lake, all surrounded by orange, endless dunes ringing with the sound of godless laughter.

Soon. Not yet. The angel snare has been laid, he thought.

A small child stumbled on her way past the musing man. Force of habit acted on him like a spring inside a jack-in-the-box; he caught her with one hand and straightened her with the other. Gently, as if she were a little bird. Even after she thanked him, he didn't let go. He couldn't bring himself to. Wynn bounced one of her curls between trembling fingers, imagining that her bunny-soft hair was the color of sun on honey. Their eyes met for just a moment before her mother, with politely-hidden angst, detached her daughter from him and walked off, but it was enough. He stayed where he was, people pooling around him, their warmth passing unfelt. It was her small body, her curled fingers, her unreadable eyes that had spit on the angels' curse. For just a moment, he imagined it was her body floating in the crimson lake, her eyes looking at him in exactly the same way Lyra's had. Her blood glazing the flowers.

Lyra. Of all the things he'd been cursed to never feel, lest he forget that he was dead, there was one impulse too strong for the angels to strip from his soul. The feel of her hair still slid like human satin over his fingerprints. Even a single strand of hair could resist the angels' best efforts when he was reminded of her. They told him it wasn't love, making Lyra his idol.

But sometimes, remembering her made him more powerful than God.

Wynn gave his head a quick shake. Anyone watching would have thought he was cracking the bones in his neck. But only the particularly observant would have noticed that there were no raindrops shaken out of his hair at the quick movement. And then perhaps they would have noticed that his face was not the slightest bit wet.

Wynn's jacket was long enough to cover his hands, so he clenched his fists freely. The church-goers around him couldn't see his hands, or read his thoughts. If they could have, they would have started walking faster to their holy grounds.

Wynn found the antique shop and walked in. *Gorban's* it said outside. The owner was a man who had no place for God, but hoarded everything he could find on God's earth for selling. Wynn cringed at the sound of the beeping sensor. He turned sideways to squeeze past the furniture for sale squeezed beside bookshelves also for sale. He had to be careful not to knock into any of the latter, because they were crammed full of tiny, breakable trinkets precariously stationed. Perhaps to be broken. Perhaps it was the only way to be bought.

He scanned the store. No one was at the register. There were plenty of things to look at, but most of them looked like junk. The few items that caught his eyes were the ones he could feel emanating subtle power—and upon further inspection, he found the talismans and amulets embedded in a teapot lid, bejeweling the grandfather clock's pendulum, or nestled in the brooch on the fancy lady's hat. Emblems hidden so carefully that only those who knew them could find them. He cast his eyes throughout the room, piercing through the junk. The item he needed to find was not in sight.

But he could sense it. It was near. It was his.

As he walked further into the store, his elbow brushed a shelf of china dolls a little too roughly. One of the blonde ones fell onto its back, blue eyes rolling up at him. This one blinked

when rattled; her eyelids fluttering like buoys out at sea before settling back inside the doll's head, backwards. Her white, vacant stare made Wynn grit his teeth and turn away.

Mr. Gorban, sitting in an antique wooden rocker in the backroom of his store, heard the front door beep and was startled out of his nap. He shook his grizzled head and gave a few coughs. His tea had grown cold, but he picked the cup up with an arthritic hand and took a gulp. When he thought he could unstick his mouth well enough to speak, he called out to the front of the store with a tremulous voice.

“Hello?” He hated how weak he sounded.

There was no response, and Mr. Gorban felt the unpleasant dread of coming out to see the whole front of his store emptied, robbed blind by a hoodlum who didn't even appreciate the value of his items! And what of the secret wares—

Mr. Gorban got himself up as hastily as he could and hobbled out of the backroom, holding his glasses in one hand. When he saw the stranger standing silently in the front of the store, he put his glasses on, looping first one ear piece and then the other around his face, one-handed. His other hand clutched the small register key. Mr. Gorban stared at the stranger for a while, waiting for the image to clear. He'd been refusing to get a new prescription for about a decade.

The stranger accommodated by standing completely still.

“No sales today. But some things are cheap,” Mr. Gorban said, looking the stranger over. He shuffled slowly closer, keeping his eyes on the man, trying to see him clearly.

The stranger said nothing. Nor did he move. Mr. Gorban could tell the man was one of Them—the ones who knew the things he carried, hidden amongst the antiques. Some meddlers travelled from different states to get what they needed from him, to dabble here and there with forbidden things. Believing in secret power. Fools, mainly. But They were the ones twisted enough to figure out the rules of darkness. This stranger was most definitely one of Them.

“Something I can help you find?” the old man asked, trying to use his smiling voice. He walked slowly nearer, shuffling his old feet. His wife told him he always sounded like he was dragging something behind him.

The stranger hid his hands in his pockets. Mr. Gorban was close enough now to make out more of the man’s face. The first thing he noticed was how pale the stranger was. The second thing he noticed, with a shiver of fear, was how darkly the man could stare at him with such light eyes. A striking, long face. Morose lips. White-blond hair.

“What’s in your pocket?” Mr. Gorban asked.

The stranger looked annoyed, but pulled out a piece of paper and held it out. Mr. Gorban pulled the paper out from between the stranger’s fingers. Dirty fingers. The strip of paper pulled away with a smudge of dirt, or ink, or something else.

Mr. Gorban stared down at the image drawn on the paper—a monster. The jaws of the black beast sneered up at him, its eyes menacing. A figurine he knew all too well. Mr. Gorban’s heart stopped.

“This what you’re looking for?” he asked, breathless. The stranger nodded once. Mr. Gorban realized that the paper was folded over, and started to pull the layers back, thinking there was more. His fingers trembled.

But the stranger snatched the image back wordlessly. And then he proceeded to fix his icy stare on Mr. Gorban, hostility emanating from his expression, his stance, his aura.

Mr. Gorban felt himself begin to panic, but tried to stay calm. Of the small group of people who knew about the figurine, they would only be here for one of two reasons.

Mr. Gorban was certain this man was here to kill him.

“Look, it isn’t mine. I’m holding it for someone else.” Mr. Gorban regretted very much that all of his salesman experience was likely going to be no help in bartering for his life. He shuffled backwards as quickly as he could, wondering for the first time why he had so much damn stuff crammed into his tiny store.

“Whoever you are, whichever side you work for, I’m only holding it temporarily. I swear. I’d never use it—the dead belong where they are.” Mr. Gorban kept babbling as he backed away. Angel or Demon, it made no difference—the stranger, who now looked angrier than before, was here to punish. A demon would have killed him instantly, without remorse, Mr. Gorban supposed. But that didn’t make him feel any better. He had heard stories about God’s Hunters, tasked with complete obedience in the afterlife for a small chance at redemption. Sinners, the worst of them, given a second chance. Dead men who were not afraid of anything except failing their Father again.

But the stranger made no move. He just watched Mr. Gorban retreat with those angry eyes—eyes that seemed to offer every kind of threat known to mankind.

Mr. Gorban rushed into the back room and all but swatted his office phone out of its cradle. He punched the numbers but misdialed several times because his arthritic hands were shaking so badly.

His son picked up on the fourth ring.

“Hello?”

“David! You have to leave town *now*,” Mr. Gorban whispered. There was only a moment of silence.

“I’m coming over there,” David said.

“No, you can’t! There’s a man here—”

Mr. Gorban heard the phone blip and then buzz in his ear. He swiveled to find the stranger standing just behind him. A long, pale finger pressed down on the phone cradle. Mr. Gorban blinked, and then swung at him with the phone in his hand.

When Wynn walked out of the store a few minutes later, clutching a small dragon head figurine, the drizzle had turned into a light shower, the dark clouds overhead threatening a summer torrent. But he felt nothing—not the rain, not the pressure of the wind. Not even the door closing behind him could make the air hug his body.

Wynn walked down the now-deserted street, feeling satisfied. He took a look around, but didn’t see anyone watching him. He rolled the statue within the depths of his pocket. He could see the poetry in that.

There were two little girls walking on the other side of the street. They crossed over and began walking right in front of him. The younger held the elder’s loose hand, a smile on her little face. The elder was babbling on in princess language.

“But I won’t associate with Adam *Borington*.”

“Bowling-tin!” the little girl shrieked.

“I hope someday someone brave crushes his foot until he cries.”

“Cwush ‘is foot!”

“Maybe then he’ll learn to step after his betters.”

“Afta be’ uhs!”

Wynn’s foot brushed against a bottle cap on the ground. He kicked it right between the younger girl’s legs. The elder girl swiveled around and glared at him with impressive grace. He’d only ever seen little girls pull that off. Or maybe he just saw Lyra’s expressions in all of them. The elder girl pulled the younger one along faster and whispered, “He’s probably a bad man.”

He slowed his pace, so as not to alarm them. But they rushed off, far and away from him. He saw them run through a beam of sunlight. It was gone by the time he traced their steps. He watched them go without slowing his pace, but his heart ached.

By now, the sight of two girls scurrying away from a dark, ominous follower was getting some attention by the few running late to church. Wynn met no eyes, he just continued on his way.

Maybe it was time for a new jacket.

Miles and years away, a woman, completely unaware of an impending collision with the cursed man known as Wynn, walked out of a convenience store. Dianne zipped up her backpack and walked away with perfected casualness. Her smile was comfortable, forgettable. Well-ironed on the pale sheet of her face. No one so much as looked at her. Dianne felt the buzz of adrenaline

begin to slow in her heart. The food in her bag didn't even feel heavy. She'd snatched the lightest stuff in the store—some bread, Crystal Light packets, trail-mix.

Nothing she even liked.

Dianne checked her watch—the thin strip of chewed leather was too big for her dainty wrist—she spun it so that its face ticked up at her. George would be home soon. Knowing that she had gone far enough to be home-free with the goods, Dianne gripped the straps of her backpack and imagined her increase of speed to be the equivalent of charging through the streets to get back home.

George was waiting for her.

She walked for a long time, trailing fog out of her mouth until she reached the grungy apartment George called home. The lawn was a patchwork of tufts and desert, the front steps dipping in every downward direction, and each outdoor panel was textured with mold as if delicately sponged with paint to look that way. Camouflage, George called it whenever her nose crinkled at it. This was the temporary concealing place of a great mind. When George talked about his bright future, complete with a rags to riches autobiography, Dianne bought every word. Perhaps even better than he did. Head held high, Dianne walked past her neighbor's kids playing in the dirt. She didn't nod at the parents, who looked almost as filthy as their children.

The door to the apartment was locked. She pulled out some dead guy's credit card that George gave her when he took the keys, and went to work on the lock. She was careful to shield her jimmies so the neighbors didn't get any bright ideas.

She went inside. But George wasn't home.

She locked the door behind her, per George's instructions. She relaxed. Looking around the apartment, she smiled, and walked around. It was still new to her, having a home. With

George. The smell of a man's clothing in the bedroom closet. His shoes on the stained front mat, his handprints on the cracked glass table. She walked through the living room, thinking about his hair mixed in with the carpet, his body's imprint on the sofa cushions where he sat watching television late at night.

George was here she wanted to shout. But instead, she smiled at the mess.

When she walked past the bathroom, she peered inside. It still amused her when the toilet seat was left upright. Upright. *George was here*, she wanted to say again, shaking her head and feeling flirty.

When she got to the kitchen, she noticed the small note, in his handwriting, posted on the fridge.

Pills was all it said.

Dianne's eyes widened, and her smile lost its crispness. Her hand reached back to pat her backpack while blood rushed to her head. She'd forgotten all about the pills. The one thing he'd stressed to her over and over again that morning. Feeling stupid, and desperate to fix her mistake before he found out about it, she rushed to the front door, and was outside in a split second—but not so fast that she didn't make sure the door locked behind her.