

## Sin for Sin

*Inspired by the story of Jesus, dying for the sins of his followers.*

“It’s happening every day now, more vividly, longer,” I say, disgruntled. I hastily shove my coat, a pair of socks, and a small canteen into my backpack.

“There’s a reason this is happening to you and not the rest of us. The rest of us only get a Vision once a year. Maybe you’ve been ‘chosen’ or something,” Thomas smirks while checking outside my door for any sign of our parents. My brother has never known when to shut up. Once he gestures that the coast is clear, I take one last look in the mirror, remembering what I see around me. My room since childhood, my only sibling, my doll made of poorly sewn fabric and wool hair. I think for a moment to take her with me, but it’s only one more thing I’ll end up losing.

Every day it’s like I’m wandering through my own head, pulling plugs and flipping switches. Whatever room I’m in or scenery around me fades slowly, pooling into nothing below me—and without fail I look up to see a girl with blonde hair and blue orbs where normal eyes should be. A white dress, a little dirtied but intact nonetheless; I somehow knew her name without asking her. Gretchen. She couldn’t be more than nine or ten years old. She’s sitting in the middle of an empty dirt road, green trees line her path and cloudless skies cover us. It’s just me. We’re staring at each other and when I speak I hear nothing; she doesn’t move. In front of me I see her and the beautiful picture painted around her but when I look to my side or behind me it’s just black. The dirt road in front of me is too far of a step away. When she gets up and turns to walk away, I come to.

My brother is the only person who knows that it’s happening to me everyday. We were mid-conversation six months ago when we realized I was different. I had already had my Vision months before, of my younger self throwing a rock at a boy while he was feeding his pet pig, Sadie. I’ve gotten a different one every year, once a year, since I was 16. But Thomas says that now once a day I freeze in my skin, completely catatonic for minutes at a time.

The Visions occur once a year. One relives a moment of cruelty, anger, jealousy, bitterness, or shame they inflicted in their past. It’s supposed to serve as a reminder of the evils

that reside within us, in hopes of driving us towards being better people. But things changed in my room with Thomas that night. Not only was I seeing this Vision every day, but it was not a moment from my past. I don't know who this girl is or what my Visions mean, but I know I must seek the Council because it can't be good.

"Are you sure I shouldn't tell Mom and Dad where I'm going? Or at least say goodbye?" I huddle with Thomas at the top of the stairs, waiting to hear their car leave for work.

"No, it's better if you didn't. You'll corner yourself into explaining why we're going, and they need to be able to deny that they know. I shouldn't even know, and now I'm risking my life for you," he rolls his eyes, "the Council hates disorder, and they probably won't give you a very warm welcome, Alex."

"If they know why this is happening, then it might be worth it. I can't keep living like this." I see my parent's car pull out of the driveway in front and head off towards work. I run down the stairs to catch another glimpse of their old, green station wagon, praying it's not the last time. If the Council sees me as a threat, they could kill me and wipe me from my family's memories.



The train lets us off at Headquarters, a grand and somewhat sad-looking grey building just shy of the Canadian border in Washington. Massive pillars made of stone line the front of the building. Washington state has been "cleansed of its industrial impurity;" in other words, the Council wiped out everything that once existed here and relocated its residents. There is nothing but land and a single train track for hundreds of miles.

A small and angry looking man with glasses too big for his face greets us inside the building.

"I.D please," he says while hardly glimpsing above the record book on his desk. I place my I.D beside him, and he quickly compares my face to my picture with wide eyes. "I had a feeling we'd be expecting you, but not so soon." He hands my I.D back.

"What do you mean, sir? Why were you expecting me?" I inquire.

“The Council will see you now. Up the stairs, and to the left. You can’t miss it.” He dismisses us with his hand and has clearly no interest in answering my questions.

“Why didn’t he ask for my I.D? Am I invisible or something?” Thomas stalks behind me, but I can’t hear his words over the suspicion growing inside me and ringing in my ears. Why was that man expecting me? Why didn’t he ask why I was here? My thoughts are cut short by the large double doors in front of us, with the words *Council Room* etched into the gold plates on them.

“Are you sure this is a good idea? The Council is shady, everyone knows that. Why did that man act like he was suspecting you? Alex, are you listening to me?” He grunts as I push open the heavy door without answering him. He follows behind me as we enter the strangest room I’ve ever seen. There are six men in long coats, or robes but I can’t tell, standing somewhat lazily around the room but more or less around a large round podium. A few of them are taken by conversation, but our presence is made known when a tall one with grey hair and a long beard turns to face us. When all eyes are on us, I awkwardly look around the room as Thomas grabs my hand.

The ground is made of grey marble tile with large columns scattered around to match. There’s a long white desk with a few chairs around it, like a conference room, but the room is so large that the desk seems insignificant. The black podium in the center of the room is half the height of me, with a large bowl shape at the top. Whether it’s a fountain of some kind is unclear. The stone walls make the room feel eerie, but two large sun-facing windows take away from the effect.

“Ah, Alex, how wonderful to see you. And Thomas, are you well?” The grey-bearded one looks upon us both with curiosity.

“I’m s-sorry sir, but how do you know our names?” Thomas looks around to each of the men nervously. I just stare, waiting for the mood of the room to be decided.

“Well, we know everybody’s names! But more importantly, my name is Ward,” he smiles, finally. “So, what brings you here, hm?” He gestures us towards the podium.

“Um, well, I’m having a, uhm, well a problem, and I was hoping you might be able to help me solve it,” he nods for me to go on, “well. For about six months now, I’ve been having the same recurring Vision, every day,” I stop and look up to Ward. He seems lost in thought.

“Well, that’s surely impossible, but go on. What is your Vision?”

“It’s strange. It’s not of me, necessarily, but of a young girl. A blonde girl, in a white dress. And I’m there, but I’m not. We can’t speak, and we don’t move. I’m woken back up only when she gets up to leave,” I rush my words. I stop when I see the empty expression on Ward’s face, matched by the others in the room. I look worriedly at Thomas.

“What’s the problem? Do you know how to fix it?”

“Oh, child, you should have lived a long and happy life before you came here.”

“Why? Why can’t you fix me? Can you please just, just explain what you know!”

“That girl, she is evil. She is the devil and you have unleashed her by coming here. Don’t you see? Your Visions may not have been evil, but she has been torturing you and she will torture the rest of us now that you have made her known. We’ve kept her hidden for generations, but we knew there would be one to discover her again,” he turns to another black haired man, “and this time we cannot let her free.”

I look around frantically, panicked, and grab a hold of Thomas to head for the door.

“Alex, stop right where you are. I don’t mean to scare you, but you have been put in a horrid position. There is one way to fix this, but it will only help everyone around you. It will not help you.” Ward towers over me, and holds a hand out to walk me back to the podium. I’m confused, scared, and wishing I had never stepped foot here.

“The girl, Gretchen. She is quite literally the Devil incarnate. The last person to have your Visions of her was a founding member of the Council; she was able to tame the girl by harming another, unprovoked. In doing this, the girl disappeared, but that is when the Visions began. We haven’t heard another word about Gretchen in over 200 years, until now.

“The only way to truly save us from her terror is for you, the beholder of the Vision, to kill her. But in doing so, taking her life would serve as a sacrifice for the rest of us. Meaning you, Alex, would be the one to bear each and every one of our Visions. Every year, until your death.”