

opening extract from

heretic

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published by simon and schuster

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Awakening

Pale November light gleamed through wet, black branches. Fallen leaves lay in a sodden cloak on the floor of the forest. Among the dark stripes of tree trunks, the last autumn leaves were glimmers of gold. The rain had passed, but the forest dripped.

Curled in the empty stomach of an elderly oak, the child was half awake, half asleep.

The tree was like a long, hollow cup, open at the top, the child lying like the dregs of a drink, at the bottom.

The forest poked cold fingers into the child's dreams – the sound of birds in the treetops, the perfume of damp wood and rotting leaves.

At last the child turned in its sleep. It hadn't moved for a very long time – so long that strands of ivy had grown down into the long cup of the hollow trunk and right over the child's body. Now the child tugged at the tough cords with its hands, but the ivy was tight, leaving thin red marks on its skin.

The child was still dreaming of the other place – the shadow land with its circles of stones and bright fires, and the

crowds of tall people dressed in green and gold and black. They spoke in deep, cold voices and wore thick bracelets above long, white hands. Jewels burned on necklaces and rings. The child didn't belong to them, the crow people, but didn't want them to leave either. They had taken something that didn't properly belong to them and the child wanted it back. They weren't always kind, the other people. Now they drew away, taking the shadow land with them, like a sea tide sinking away, leaving the child high and dry – stranded in the forest.

If someone had peered into the tree trunk, while the child was in the shadow land, what would they have seen? A heap of dried leaves, perhaps shaped like a figure, and underneath, a dry bone or two – the link holding the child to the ordinary world. Now the child had left the shadow land behind, and its body had emerged and formed itself again around the bones and dust of its earthly remains.

The child turned, scratching at the ivy. A crow landed on the oak tree. The wind ruffled its feathers. Spotting the creature inside the trunk, perhaps the bird was surprised. It hopped from one lip of the tree cup to the other. The bird considered, head tipped to one side. Then it flapped silk black wings and gave one rough call. The sound echoed in the hollow of the tree and the child opened its eyes.

Nothing made any sense at first. The round of light above was broken up by the shape of the bird. The child struggled out of the ivy ropes and sat up. It straightened its fingers, and then rubbed its hands over its face. It was hard to gather fragments of self together, after so long in the shadow land. The body moved of its own accord, but memories were

scattered. Who am I? Where? How? It was frightening not to know these things, like standing at the edge of a cliff with nothing to hold on to.

Don't be afraid, the child reassured itself. Wait a while. You'll remember.

There was nobody else to lend a hand. The child tugged away the last strands of ivy and stood up. A litter of leaves fell away, strays that had fallen into the tree. The bird, alarmed by developments, flew off.

Although the child could not remember who it was, the method of climbing out of the tree was not a problem. The inside of the oak was rough and woody knobs provided convenient steps. The child's feet were bare and excellently flexible. It reached the top and climbed out, to see the forest from a viewpoint some twelve feet up. Trees spread away, in every direction. The sky, through a gauze of bare twigs, was dull grey. A huge fungus, like a toad, clung to the broken bark by the child's right hand.

What to do now? The child clambered down the tree to the ground and sniffed the air. At first the child found it difficult to walk upright. Perhaps the muscles and ligaments of its legs had shortened. With a stoop it half walked, half ran, using hands to help itself along.

The forest hadn't changed, except in the detail. The generality of trees and undergrowth, the familiar outfit of the autumn season, were just as before. But many of the individual trees had altered. New grown, or gone, or split in storms.

Not far from the oak tree, the child halted and tried to stand up straight. Then it hurried on, clambering over fallen

branches, ignoring the scratches of brambles. Ahead stood a tumbled hermitage – its soft brown walls standing among the trees. The child remembered this. It was a holy place, a spring and a tiny stone hut where an old man had lived. How inviting and welcoming it looked. The child hurried, out of breath now, loping like an animal on all fours.

Then it skidded to a halt. The hut was a ruin. The door on the hermit's cell was ripped away. The child hesitated, afraid to look any further. A picture rose in its mind – an archway where a statue stood, above a pool of water and the bubbling spring. Now the statue was gone and the arch was broken up. Chunks of stone lay half buried by leaves, all around the little clearing.

The child began to shiver. Panic rose, like a flock of dark birds flapping about in its head.

Who am I?

The child scurried into the ruined cell, a bare room with one window. Not a scrap of furniture remained. No ash in the fireplace. The child ran around the room, like a trapped animal. Then it stopped and banged its head on the wall, once, twice, trying to force a memory, wanting to remember. But it hurt very much. The pain stopped the birds flapping in the child's head, but blood trickled down its forehead. In a daze it stumbled out of the hermit's cell to the spring. It dipped fingers into the chilly pool and dabbed the water onto the wound. The sun broke through the cloud and spilled light into the clearing. The child leaned over the pool, startled by the reflection in the pool.

What did it see? Long, long hair fell over its shoulders. Skin was stained green and brown, from the long years of

fallen leaves, ivy, moss. A child? Not really like a child any more. Something else.

It searched its face, looking for clues. Who was it? Where did it belong? It strained to remember, gritting its teeth. The child beat at its head with the palms of its hands. It threw itself on the ground and thrashed its arms and legs in a desperate blind panic. The inside of its head seemed to burn up in a storm of black and red, and the outside world disappeared altogether.

Then – the sound of a snap.

Someone had trodden on a twig, close by. The child froze. It lay still on the ground, in a sudden terror. Who was coming? Often the child had to hide. The hermit had been the only one to be trusted. So the child lay still, listening intently. A minute passed, and another. Perhaps it was safe. The child's heart beat fast. It waited another minute, in the cold bed of leaves. All was quiet. Like an animal, the child lifted its head, looking for the intruder. It crept to its feet, snuffed the air. It turned back to the spring in the broken shrine, and looked directly into the eyes of another human being.

A girl. Yes, a girl. The child held its breath.

They stared at each other, wide-eyed, hypnotised – face to face, just a few feet apart. The girl's mouth dropped open.

The wind rose in the trees. The moments passed. Feelings churned. The impulse to run wrestled with the desire to ask for help. What to do? The child ground its teeth.

How long would they stay like this, just looking at each other, neither knowing what to do?

The child moved first. Fear was winning out. It shrank back, preparing to flee, bunching fists. But the girl dropped her basket and held out her hand.

'No, wait,' she said. 'Don't go. Wait. I won't hurt you.'

The child turned again, considering the girl. It knew it should run away and hide but the sound of the girl's voice was sweet. It was so long since the child had heard a truly human voice.

'Wait,' the girl repeated.

The child trembled, torn between hunger for companionship and a fear for its life. It hopped from one foot to another, in an agony of indecision.

The girl reached into her basket and took out a loaf of brown bread wrapped in a piece of cloth, and an apple. She took a step forward.

'Are you hungry?' she said, stretching out her hand.

The child could smell the bread, and its mouth watered. Still it was suspicious. Was this a trick? There had been tricks before. No-one could be trusted, except for the hermit. The girl sank to her knees, making herself less threatening. She waggled the bread in her outstretched hand. The child took a small step forward.

'Take it,' the girl said. Her voice lured as much as the perfume of the fresh bread. The child's keen nose also registered the scent of the girl herself, a mixture of wood and tallow smoke and baking. The child took another step forward. It could see the girl's pale, clean skin, her blue eyes and a few stray strands of blonde hair escaping from the rim of her white cap. The girl's hands were pink from the cold and her knuckles were raw, from work. The child snatched

the bread and darted away again. The girl didn't move. She just nodded and smiled reassuringly.

'That's it,' she said. 'Eat it. I've got some more.'

Keeping its eyes fixed on the girl, the child tore into the bread. How hungry it was. Perhaps its belly was packed with bark and moss and acorns. The bread tasted good. The small loaf disappeared in a minute or two. Then the child regretted its greed, for right away its stomach began to ache. After so long in the shadow land, perhaps it should have eaten more cautiously.

The girl held out the apple next and the child took that too, though it didn't eat it.

'Are you living here?' the girl asked. 'My mother sent me out to the shrine, to tidy it up. We're not supposed to, of course. I haven't been here for ages. And I don't know what I can do, because they took the statue of the Virgin away and broke it up. But I'll do what I can.'

She stood up and walked to the spring beneath the broken arch. The child followed her, hanging back. The girl picked up half a dozen birch twigs from the ground to make a simple brush and she swept away the fallen leaves from the low wall around the pool and the ledge beneath the arch where the statue used to stand.

Then she turned to the hermit's cell, sweeping out the leaves. She poked around in the empty fireplace, clearing the dust. The child slunk in behind her, to watch. The girl talked a lot. She chatted away as she worked, explaining what she was doing. Although she seemed relaxed, the child was aware the girl was still wary, keeping a watch. Then something else caught her attention.

'Oh!' she said, squatting in front of the hearth. 'Oh! Look what I've found.'

She tugged at a loose brick at the back of the fireplace. Her efforts dislodged a fat lump of soot, which fell into the hearth in a puff of fine black dust which settled on the girl's face and apron.

'Oh!' she exclaimed again, wiping the soot from her eyes. She pulled out the brick and thrust her hand into the hole behind. She took out a small pewter cup on a piece of broken chain and showed it to the child.

'This is for the spring,' she said. 'It used to be fastened in the wall, so people could drink. There's something else though, further in.'

She put the cup on the hearth and again reached into the hole at the back. She drew out a large bundle of very ancient parchment, haphazardly folded and rolled. The papers cracked as she pulled them open. The parchment was damp and mouldy, brown-stained. Still the black ink marks were clear to see. The girl glanced at the words of the pages, turning from one to another.

'Latin,' she said. 'Prayers.'

The child hopped from one foot to the other, peering over the girl's shoulder. The parchment smelled unpleasant, except for the faintest familiar aroma of the hermit, once the child's friend. The girl, however, did not seem impressed. She stuffed the parchment back into the fireplace and replaced the brick.

'It'll be safer here,' she said. 'There are papers everywhere. We have to be careful.'

The child didn't understand what she was talking about

but it squatted beside the girl. They were very close to each other now and the girl wrinkled her nose. The child realised its own smell must be very strong.

'Where are you from?' the girl asked. 'Have you lived here a long time? Are you an orphan?'

The child stared into the girl's small, oval face, studying her features. She had very fair lashes and shapely, pale pink lips. Her teeth were clean and white. The girl stared back with equal curiosity.

'Can you speak?' she said softly. 'Do you understand me?'

They stared at each other. The child frowned. Then it nodded. Yes, it understood perfectly. Could it speak? Once, before this last long, long sojourn in the shadow land, yes it could. The child was beginning to remember. Memories of the ordinary world were coming back. But it had to be patient, not to grab, not to want it all at once.

It opened its mouth.

'Yes,' it said. The sound was like a croak. It was hard to speak after so long. Its voice sounded very odd.

'Yes,' it repeated. 'I can speak.'

The words came out slowly, as though the child had to find each word.

Wide-eyed, the girl smiled. Her eyes were shining.

'My name's Elizabeth,' she said. 'What's yours?'

This was the question the child dreaded. A name. It wrinkled its face, knowing not to try to force the remembering, but to let it happen of its own accord. It closed its eyes. Elizabeth waited patiently.

The child dropped its face forward and cleared its thoughts, and at last a doorway seemed to open in its mind.