

Preface

The Companion

In the beginning was the void, a never-ending space filled with floating particles infinitely distant from each other.

God was the only entity in an open continuum of matter. It was silent, dark, peaceful...boring. Being able to get bored is arguably the first trait we inherited from the Heavenly Father.

God's desire was the force of cohesion that made things move toward each other, a primordial, cosmic love.

Sparks began to light the void to salute the just-born universe. The process became self-sustained, and matter obediently gave shape to God's every thought. It was a cornucopia of wonders the Creator wanted to share with a companion—not a perfect puppet but a superior being validated by its choices.

The dislike for solitude was another trait destined to be passed onto us.

The angels were the first draft, forged from fire and so powerful that one-third of them rebelled to follow proud Lucifer, the morning star, the first to have been created and the most beautiful among them. As a consequence, they were precipitated from the heavens, their long fall ended by Earth, a

tiny green planet among the myriads below. Like a meteorite shower, they hit the surface and made it open into craters, as if the ground had been repulsed by their touch.

The planet went into shock but fought back by hibernating into the ice age. Such reaction to the fallen angels made God choose Earth as the place to create a worthier companion.

Too much power, combined with excessive pride, turned the angels into an abandoned draft. This time starting from dirt—the substance the planet was made of—the Creator molded humanity, more humble creatures favored to the point of being given *The Garden of Eden*, a terrestrial paradise, a place of joy, innocence, and eternal life.

Lucifer and his followers became humanity's archenemies, their rage fed by both having been replaced in God's favor and having to share Earth with another spiritual being.

Using humans' insatiable appetite for knowledge, a fault induced by the lesser element they were made from, Lucifer deceived them into committing *The Original Sin*, an act of disobedience to the only condition posed by the Lord: not to eat fruit from *The Tree of Knowledge*.

Humans came to discover shame for their nakedness and were condemned to leave The Garden of Eden to return to the ground after a life

of struggles. God imposed a lock on their minds, to prevent them from having access to more than a small fraction of their faculties, the price for having chosen knowledge over every other gift.

The punishment was terrible, but unlike with the fallen angels, the Creator found in the nature of humanity's original making the reason not to give up on them and still awaits the one who will finally prove worthy of being *The Companion*.

Chapter 1

The Leader of the Gregorians

Thunder shook the night while white flashes randomly contended with the otherwise total darkness in Gaia's sober room.

She sat on the bed and managed to hug her knees. It was her thirty-fourth birthday, but she was alone. Even in Rome, finding friends had proven difficult for a former nun with no social skills. The sky roaring outside her window wasn't enough to make her feel less numb and detached. All she still cared for was the boy inside her, the fruit of another stormy night.

She would call him Jesus.

A whispering wind had just silenced the sky when she heard somebody knocking at her door. Life had wounded her, yet she had no fear as she faced the smallest of dwarves looking up at her, rain dripping from his drenched hood.

"My name is Cort. I need shelter for the night."

In spite of the alarming aspect and the many scars on his hands and face, he didn't need to say more. His voice was nasal, and he could have been well over one hundred years old, but the spark in his eyes and the scanning motion of his enormous head revealed a still vibrant energy.

Gaia lit up the fireplace. All she could offer was bread, cheese, and some wine, just enough to bring them some comfort.

They ate together silently, like comrades in a trench.

Hoping for some conversation, she brought two blankets and sat next to the fireplace, but the dwarf cuddled in front of the crackling logs and immediately fell asleep. Gaia smiled while she covered her exhausted guest. Soon the soothing buzz of Cort's snoring, and the yellow lights dancing on the walls, made Gaia's mind drift away.

They woke up at first light. The fire had died and the room was cold, but they were both mysteriously at ease. Gaia's back was hurting. Medical testing had failed to reveal any anomaly, but even as a child, she had been in pain. Expecting a baby had made it worse.

"When are you due?"

"In four months," she replied, overcoming her surprise. Her belly wasn't that big yet.

"I'll help you," offered Cort.

Gaia was puzzled and found it increasingly difficult not to stare at the many ridges on the dwarf's skin.

"My wounds were never as deep as yours, and they are perfectly healed," he reassured, "just like yours will be by the end of the day."

A sudden discomfort insinuated in Gaia's mind. She had always favored logic over riddles and needed to know why a perfect stranger was talking to her like the closest of friends.

"I was your best friend in a time you can't remember," continued Cort, as if he had just read her mind. "We have fought side by side, but I have never been as good as you."

Gaia froze, waiting for a comfort her logical mind could not provide. Cort's next statement didn't help.

"Yes, I can read your thoughts. You will soon remember how to read mine."

She wanted to talk but remained silent. Many questions were competing to come out first, but there was no winner.

"Please say something," encouraged Cort. "Your appearance is quite different, but your voice sounds just as I remembered it."

Gaia thought fast. She had found the dwarf's performance quite impressive. For a moment, she even believed he had read her mind. She concluded he was just trying to buy some time.

"I don't have much to offer, but you can take some bread and cheese on your way out."

The dwarf shook his head and then locked on her with his piercing gray eyes. “I don’t want to sound rude, but I am not going anywhere. I am here to make sure you and the boy will be OK!”

Gaia stood up and towered over her guest, already tired of what looked like a well-thought-out practical joke. She got hold of Cort’s arm and led him out.

“I am sorry,” she whispered while closing her door.

She was still pressing her back against it, eyes shut, when somebody coughed discreetly from inside the room. Cort was leaning against the fireplace’s mount, his expression rather amused.

“We need to talk!” he said, thunder growling again in the distance.

A bigger storm was closing in.