**Chapter Twenty-Two: The Warden**

**Dorothy Blackthorn**

They say that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. I don’t know about hell, but I know that my own path was paved with glittering tiles of righteousness and thoughts of the greater good. I have always believed that I made the right choices and decisions throughout my tumultuous life, but it still somehow led to a dark and twisted place. In my weaker moments, I constantly wonder what I could have done to change what happened, constantly fantasizing about what could have been.

Of course such thoughts were unbecoming of someone who is one of the leaders of the Order of Wardens, but I guess it was to be expected since, unlike most members of the Order who were powerful Archangels, my origin wasn’t very grand or noble. You see, I was born a normal human. My father was a simple Englishman who had to flee from his country in fear for his life because of mounting gambling debts and increasingly insistent loan sharks. My mother was a foolish little Polish girl who fell for the mysterious stranger from a foreign land who suddenly appeared at her little town and occasionally worked as a hired hand at her father’s farm; it wasn’t long before she was pregnant and my grandfather forced the two of them to get married. Surprisingly, my father matured considerably after getting married and settled down after he and my mother took over the farm. He always half-jokingly called himself a “gentleman farmer”, but he was hard working and the farm did well because of his effort. This meant that I was born into a relatively prosperous and happy family. I had no brothers or sisters, but I had loving parents and that insured that I would grow up content.

Alas, my life of familial bliss wasn’t fated to last very long. The flames of war that started raging all over Europe made sure of that. With the assassination Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria acting as the fuse, the volatile situation in continental Europe exploded like a barrel of gunpowder, sucking in all the countries in the area and culminating in the first World War in history. Even though Poland wasn’t even an independent nation at the time, it was positioned smack dab in the middle of the warzone. Fortunately, my home town was in a secluded and hard to reach area, so it had somehow managed to escape unnoticed by the encroaching armies. Unfortunately, even though we managed to escape the marauding armies, we landed in the crosshairs of something much worse.

Because of the chaos and anarchy caused by war, there was no organized police force left to keep the peace. Law and order broke down to a point where places that were not under some form of military rule became fertile breeding grounds for certain groups that couldn’t operate during normal times, groups that could only thrive during chaos. One of those groups was a cult of Satan worshipping mad-men who roved the countryside performing their unholy sacrificial rituals to please their evil god. With no one to stop them, these psychopaths continued their rampage until one day, they chose our unprotected little town as their next target. Overnight, they took our peaceful town and made it into their own nightmarish playground. Except for the few who managed to escape when they first attacked, the rest of us were rounded up like cattle and imprisoned in the warehouses where we had originally stored our grain. Every night they would pick a couple of people to take out from the warehouse; these people were never heard from again. Deep inside we knew that we would never see them again and everyone was terrified that they would be the ones to be chosen next.

One fateful night, instead of picking a few people, the Satanists forced everyone that was left out of the warehouse including me and my parents. They made us all gather in the town square where they started to pick out young girls to separate them from the main group. Their parents and loved ones tried to resist the Satanists, but they eventually relented under the threats and violent beatings. Finally, it was my turn and the Satanists tried to take me, but my parents held onto me and wouldn’t let go no matter how much they were beaten or threatened. The merciless Satanists repeatedly struck them with the butt of their guns, using them as clubs to violently beat them until they became a bloody and broken mess on the floor. I couldn’t bear to see what was happening and tried to escape their grasp, but even with their broken hands, they still managed to hold on to my legs. Eventually, the commotion that we were causing attracted the attention of the man who appeared to be the leader of the Satanists. He was a shriveled old man with wispy white hair who looked like he could be a hundred years old. He was dressed in a traditional black priest’s cassock. He sat on an ornate golden chair while being flanked by ten heavily armed men who respectfully stood behind him. He had been lounging lazily when he noticed what was going on. With a gesture from his hand and a few muttered German words, the goons who were assaulting my parents retreated and the armed escorts behind him raised carried his golden chair towards us with him still sitting on it with a relaxed smile on his wrinkled face. He looked down at us from his high vantage point and spoke to us with broken and barely understandable Polish.

“Your parents are brave. This I admire. It is bad that we must have you. You should rejoice. You are chosen as bride. Soon you shall fulfill a great purpose,” he then turned to the people rounding up the girls and continued to speak in Polish, even though he was obviously not accustomed to it, as if he was trying to be considerate to us, “Friedrich, Hermann, no need to take the other girls. This is the one we need. Put the other girls back. Bring this girl to the center. Bring her parents too. Tell the slaves that it is time for them to play their parts.”

His goons dragged me and my barely conscious parents to the center of the square where the Satanists were keeping the rest of the town at least 10 steps away from us. Two women came out from the darkness somewhere beyond the lights of the burning torches that the cultists were holding. They stripped me of all my clothes right there in front of everyone and started washing my body. It took me a while to recognize them but I finally realized the two of them where the baker’s wife and a nun from our church. They were almost unrecognizable with their mouths sewn shut and their eyes glassy and empty like that of a fish. They ignored my desperate pleas as they took off my dirty clothes which had gotten filthy after days of captivity and methodically washed my entire body until I was completely clean. When they were finished, they disappeared back into the darkness as quietly as they appeared. The old man scrutinized my naked form without a single ounce of lust, unlike his followers whose eyes all glimmered with hunger. He nodded his head in approval and spoke some more German words. When he was done, all of the cultists started howling madly and took out sharp edged weapons like machetes and large butcher knives. They moved into the crowd of town’s people like wolves into a flock of sheep and started slaughtering them until the whole square was bathed in red. Blood started to form little streams on the cobble stone ground before flowing into freshly dug troughs I hadn’t noticed before. The blood filled the troughs and formed a giant pentagram that spanned the entire area of the town square.