

Renewed Faith

Renewed Faith

D. Moonfire

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Chapter 1

Renewed Faith

The origins of the Lutian Church are mired in history, but it is well-documented that it originated from the worship of the Divine Couple.

—*The Bitter Divorce of the Holy Father*

Brother Lutier managed to keep himself awake by propping his head up on his right wrist. His sagging cheek against his sticky palm prevented his jaw from slipping off and striking the table. He yawned, but managed to keep his pen smoothly writing along the neat line that bisected the page.

Above his fountain pen, there was a solid block of text copied from memory; below, cream-colored space ready to fill in. Even though there were no letters on it, he knew exactly where the letters would go and where he needed to leave space for the illustrations. He imagined the images in great detail, drawing them with his mental pen even as he finished the line with a small flourish and moved to the next.

“Lut. Lutier.” It was Father Jartim, the head priest at the abbey. The older man’s voice was a low rumble that spoke

of annoyance. Lutier had heard the tone many times in the decades and it never bode well for him.

Lutier looked up without moving his head from his hand.

Jartim was past his seventies with short, close-cropped hair. He wore the traditional cassock. The deep red color was almost black in the basement room, but Lutier knew the shade by heart. "Posture," said the older man.

Blinking slowly, Lutier glanced back down at the page. He was still writing and the line of text remained as straight as if he was watching his work. He blinked again and looked back up.

Jartim sighed and pulled out a stool from an empty desk and sat down heavily on it. The seat creaked from his movement. "Lut, please. I need to talk about some things."

Lutier groaned and levered himself up, his hand still writing neatly as he did.

"Please stop writing."

Reluctantly, Lutier, picked up the pen and held it over the small dish used to catch drippings. He wiped it twice against a sponge to clean the tip and then carefully pulled it apart, making sure every piece was in its place. The fountain pen was expensive and Lutier's only possession besides his clothes.

Jartim remained quiet as Lutier finished. As soon as Lutier stopped, he cleared his throat. "There have been problems with your copies."

Lutier tensed. "There is nothing wrong. My lettering is perfect."

"Yes, your lettering is without equal and most of your illustrations are flawless as well."

Lutier sat up straighter. "Most? I made no mistakes."

Jartim leaned over and picked up the top of a stack of leather-bound books.

Lutier hadn't notice the pile before, but he suspected they were the copies he had been making for the last few months. After he finished his stack of pages, they would be bound by the other brothers in the abbey.

The older man thumbed along the top where there were dozens of pieces of paper sticking out. Finding one, he cracked open the book, rotated it, and set it against the edge of Lutier's desk.

Lutier glanced at the page, his eyes looking for flaws in the text.

"The illustration," came the prompt.

There were many illustrations on the page. Like most of the holy books, it had drawings covering every inch that didn't have a letter: there were tiny figures sitting in the line of text to indicate paragraphs, larger ones in the margins, and even a large spot in the bottom of the page for a more detailed scene.

Lutier didn't remember the drawings, he had copied thousands over the days, but he spotted nothing wrong with any of them. They were perfect. He looked up and said so.

Jartim gestured to the desk. "Where is the original?"

It took Lutier a moment to remember where he put it. He had memorized the entire book years ago and drew from memory. It gave him more room to rest his elbow while he worked. With a groan, he picked up the stack of loose pages he had been illustrating and set them aside. Then, he reached under his desk and pulled out the dusty original. He had forgotten how heavy it was and almost dropped it on the ground.

With a grunt, he started to set it down, but then realized his pen was in the way.

Jartim moved the pen case out of the way so Lutier could set it down.

With a dramatic sigh, Lutier flipped through the book until the two were at the same page. He compared the two using one finger above each one as he inspected the tiny images and margin notes for differences.

“At the bottom. The big one.”

Lutier glared briefly at him and focused his attention on the large illustration on the bottom. It took him a moment to realize there was something missing.

Like most illustrations of the Divine Couple, a man and a woman dominated the picture. The page focused on events before the marriage, so neither of them wore a marriage bracelet. The couple were running away from a pack of wolf-like creatures with too-large teeth and massive paws.

On Lutier’s copy, he had drawn the man perfectly but skipped the woman entirely. In her place was a couple of birds and nothing else. He had even continued the ground, effectively erasing the woman entirely. To his surprise, he had matched the style of the illustration perfectly.

“Notice anything missing, Lut?”

An icy cold ran through Lutier’s body. He stared at the two pages, identical except for one omission. He knew the man he had drawn on the page, the details were perfect in shape, form, and detail.

He knew the missing woman didn’t belong there. In the story, she was the one who disturbed the pack. If it wasn’t for her, then the Divine Father would have made friends with the creatures. Lutier knew the stories by heart after writing them for so many years, but he never thought he would have missed anything as critical in the illustration.

Without a word, he flipped to the next bookmarked page. This one was of the Holy Husband in a pit. The original had the Wife reaching down for him; it was the Husband’s time to make the mistake and the story showed how the Wife had turned around to rescue him. In Lutier’s image, there

were roots and vines that snaked down, handholds for the Husband. At the top was one of the wolf creatures.

He flipped to the next bookmarked page and then to the one after that. Each illustration continued a different story than the text, one where the Husband made friends with the various creatures.

Lutier also noticed that he had been replacing the female figures between the paragraphs and in the margins. It was a subtle change, but there were many of them once it was pointed out to him.

Slowly, Lutier looked up. "How long?"

"About a year, but we aren't sure. We had a copy of one of your books from the beginning of last winter. There were no mistakes. But we spotted a change in the one you finished a few weeks later. You are fast and capable scribe, so we think about forty books need to be retrieved and re-rewritten."

Lutier tensed but said nothing.

"The earlier ones had only a few changes, mostly in the paragraph marks, but that one," Jartim gestured to the one on the desk, "has the most alterations."

Lutier sighed and closed both books. He didn't look up, he could already picture the quiet fury in the old man's face. Jartim didn't turn purple with rage but the muscles in his neck tightened and his lips pressed into a thin line.

"This is unacceptable, Lut. We can't have a *cesnunspe jdacku* that doesn't have the Holy Wife in it. Can we?"

Lutier shook his head. "No, sir."

Jartim sighed. "This isn't good, Lut. We have to recall every book you've made to inspect them. Do you know how that will make this abbey look? The strike against our reputation could take decades to recover from."

"Sorry, sir." Lutier struggled to figure out if he was really sorry. The images on the page felt right. He knew the sto-

ries and tales. The Holy Husband would be far better without the Wife.

The door to the basement slammed open and the sound of stomping feet filled the air. Both Lutier and Jartim rolled their eyes and gave each other uneasy smiles as the approaching person burst into the room. It was the high priestess, Marion. She was a short woman with a scowl etched into her wrinkled face. Her bright yellow cassock was frayed on the edge and the hem by her right hand was stained from breakfast.

“Damn it, Lutier!” she started before she finished entering the room. “What is wrong with you! There are two damn...”

Her voice trailed off as she glared at Jartim through a pair of thick-rimmed glasses. “You said you’d wait.”

Jartim shrugged. “I wanted a quiet word first before you started screaming.”

“I’m screaming because he blasphemed!”

Lutier flinched.

“He made a mistake, my wife.” Like all high priests and priestesses, Marion and Jartim were married. It was a tense relationship, picked by a council instead of founded with love, but they had fulfilled their duties to the church and abbey for many years.

“Don’t give me that crap, Jartim! He desecrated the *jdacku* and you know it. Our reputation as scribes will never recover.” Marion stepped forward, face red and hands balled into fists.

Jartim stood up. He was a foot taller than his wife. “It will recover. We’ll just get—”

“You are too damn tolerant over his mistakes. He should be kicked out! Now!”

“The Holy Husband made many mistakes himself.”

“Don’t you dare use that!”

“Why not?” Jartim gestured to the books. “We know that both the Husband and the Wife are flawed. They made mistakes, they came back. Forgiveness is one of the five virtues, my dear.”

Marion’s face darkened even more. She glared at Lutier who flinched at the fury in her expression.

Lutier knew he was wrong, though he didn’t remember consciously changing the drawings. The quiet part in his head wasn’t ashamed for it either. The stories were in his head, the images that he drew came from his heart, not from malice or hatred. He bowed his head and waited.

She grumbled in the back of her throat, a grunting noise that Lutier always hated. “Will you accept my petition to have Brother Lutier removed?”

“Not from this abbey and not from this religion. Baring this one mistake—”

“A mistake made repeated over a year!”

“—he has been one of this abbey’s greatest assets.”

Silence plunged into the room. Lutier didn’t dare look up as he waited.

“Fine,” Marion broke it with a snap, “will you accept that he should be punished.”

“Of course, my wife.”

“No more scribing for ten years.”

Lutier’s breath caught in his throat. He clutched his short table for balance as tears swam in his eyes.

“Half a year after all of the books are accounted for is more than sufficient.” Jartim’s voice never wavered.

“One year.”

“One year.”

Lutier held on the table and nodded. “Yes, father.”

Marion growled.

He quickly amended himself. “... and mother.”

D. Moonfire

Chapter 2

Renewed Faith

While Lutier was the man who led to the creation of a religion without the mother, there were others who quietly enabled him from the shadows.

—*The Bitter Divorce of the Holy Father*

Lutier slammed the door of his cell and threw himself on his cot. The wooden frame creaked with his weight. He rolled over on his back and tried to calm his rapidly beating heart and the fury that pulsed his thoughts.

It was the third fight in less than a week. This one had started as a debate over one of the scriptures that Lutier didn't care for. It detailed some of the events of the Holy Wife in her aspect as the Guiding Mother. He avoided the Wife's scriptures whenever possible, but it was either the overly hot summer air or the hours hauling garbage that caused him to join in.

Tempers and voices had risen rapidly until Marion and Jartim broke it up.

Lutier sighed and draped one arm over his face to block out the light streaming in from the window, bringing with it the sweltering heat of summer. He was already hot from

hauling and the increased temperature only made each passing second worse.

A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts.

Sitting up, he pulled his sweaty tunic from his chest. “Enter.”

The door creaked open and Jartim slipped in. He closed the door behind him. “Lut.”

“Father.”

“Hard day?”

Lutier nodded and then gestured for Jartim to take the stool by a narrow table near the door.

Jartim sat down. “That’s been happening a while now, you know.”

“I’m sorry, father. I just... I don’t know why. I try to avoid those.”

“How long has it been since you wrote?”

Lutier jerked at the question. He glanced at a wooden calendar hanging on the wall but didn’t need to read it to know the answer. “Four months, seven days.”

A sad smile. “How long before you get to start again?”

Lutier’s thoughts darkened. “Still waiting for two more books to be retrieved. Both are in private collections, one by Tiosuf dea Forilid and the other anonymously by someone in Gepaul.”

“I’m sorry, my son. There are times when our tenant of waiting for resolution before the punishment can be frustrating, but this is but the Couple’s will. I know this is hard but you must be patient.”

Lutier clutched his blankets. He wanted to write, ached to have the pen in his hand. He tried to promise that he would copy everything exactly, but Marion refused. It didn’t matter if it was a *jdacku*, a scripture, or even a verse, he wasn’t allowed to write anything.

“But, the greatest faith comes from struggles. You know that one, right?”

“Yes, father.”

“Oh, don’t give me that sullen tone, Lut.”

Lutier nodded. “I’m sorry. I’ve just been on edge lately. For most of my life, I’ve been here at the abbey, scribing books and writing. It was my first job and had been for sixteen years. And then... I don’t know what happened, but I made a mistake. It doesn’t make it any easier to accept my punishment.”

“Like when the Husband came to the Wife and begged for forgiveness?”

Lutier pulled a face. “I don’t like that one.”

“No, no, you wouldn’t.” Jartim chuckled. “But, it is applicable, isn’t it?”

“Mother Marion wouldn’t accept my forgiveness.”

“Maybe she would accept mine instead?”

Lutier looked up, confused.

Jartim stood up and opened the door long enough to pick up a bag and drag it into the room. He hefted it and handed it over to Lutier.

When Lutier took it, he knew exactly what it was: a tome. He opened the bag to find a red-leather bound book with a blessed paper stripped around it. It was an empty jdacku, blessed by the priests and ready to take the words of the Divine Couple. Normally, the jdacku were orange, to represent the blending of the red masculine and the yellow feminine, but this one matched the red of the Holy Husband.

He felt a surge of joy welling inside him. With trembling hands, he ran his fingers over the plain cover and along the paper that sealed it. It already had paper loosely set inside the covers; when it was finished, it would be bound together and blessed once again.

“Write, Lut. In here, in your room.”

Lutier looked up, tears threatening his eyes. “What do I copy?”

Jartim shook his head and smiled. “You have stories in your head. I see them in the images you made, when your mind is wandering. Write those.”

“But, Marion says they were blasphemy.”

“You honor the Divine Couple with your skills regardless of the topic. Write what is in your heart and get them on paper. We can look at it when the book is done and figure out if your heart is still with us.” Jartim stood up. “Put everything on the page, my son, your heart and your faith. Your words will tell the story when you are done.”

Lutier clutched the book to his chest. “T-Thank you, father.”

Jartim stood up and came over to Lutier with his arms open.

Lutier stood up, not willing to let go of the book, but Jartim hugged both of them.

“Have faith, Lut. I believe in you.”

Jartim left Lutier alone, closing the door behind him with one last warning. “Lock the door when you write, hide the book until you are ready.”

Lutier locked the door and set down the book on his table. He let out a long gasp as he caressed the book and then broke the blessed seal. A few minutes later, he was on the first page with his fountain pen ready.

He wasn't sure what to write. He had spent his entire life being told to copy something exactly. He didn't know if he had any stories in him, but then he remembered that he had drawn something. He just needed to write.

The pen set down on the page, a splatter of ink.

Lutier started with a story that started like the scripture did but he already knew how it was going to change.

It was the third day of Dobmahin when Jartim died at the age of seventy-eight. Lutier was one of the three men who dug the grave, breaking the frozen earth with fire magic and a pair of shovels. The back-breaking work left him aching from shoulder to heels, but it was the last gift he could give a man who gave him his life back.

Now, they stood at the end of the day as Marion spoke the last of her prayers over Jartim's body. It was a cold and windy day. The sharp edge of wind buffeted past his cassock and his teeth chattered. Only the promise of hot coffee inside kept most of the priests and priestesses standing place as the ritual droned on.

Lutier retreated into his thoughts, knowing the prayer by heart. He regretted not working faster on the book Jartim gave him six years ago. He was almost done, only thirty or so more pages before it was completely filled. Thousands of illustrations, hundreds of hours drawing and writing. It was Lutier's proudest work and only one other man had known it existed.

The book had renewed hope for Lutier and he found a renewed faith in the Holy Husband in it. When he wasn't forced to include the Wife in every scene, illustration, and page, he found it nestled deep in his heart. The Wife was still there, she had to be for his version of the tales, but his book was only about the Husband. When he wrote, joy filled him as more of the ideas flowed out. He loved filling each page with neat writing and detailed drawings.

One more week and he would have been done. He had just finished binding the pages into the book, working late in the night with needle, thread, and glue. If Jartim survived only a little longer, he would have seen it completed.

A tear froze against Lutier's cheek. Why couldn't Jartim held on for a little longer?

Marion finished her prayer. It would be one of the last ones as a high priestess of the abbey. Only married couples were allowed to run every church and abbey, a couple because no man or woman was able to do it on their own. She bowed her head as tears splashed down; Jartim had been her husband for more years than Lutier had lived.

One by one, the brothers and sisters of the abbey walked to her, got a quick blessing from Marion, and then headed into the abbey to warm up.

Lutier was near the end and he hesitated when it was his turn. His shoes crunched in the snow as he walked up to her and held out his hands to grasp hers.

Marion look at him and the ever-present anger remained in her gaze. She didn't take his hand. Instead, she leaned closer and whispered, her breath fogging against his face. "If it is the last thing I do as the mother of this abbey, I will see you removed if not executed for blasphemy."

One sentence and then she turned away from him.

Lutier looked down at his hands, stained with ink from his nightly scribing. He knew that she was just lashing out in grief, they had scriptures about it, but it didn't make the pain any less. He loved Jartim as his father, maybe as much as she loved him as her husband.

He bowed his head. "Thank you, mother."

She jerked at his words.

Lutier turned and headed to the door. Instead of going inside, he picked up the shovel and waited for the others to go inside. He had one more thing to do for his father.

Chapter 3

Renewed Faith

When asked why he decided to leave the Divine Couple, Lutier simply stated, “it was time.”

—*The Bitter Divorce of the Holy Father*

That night, close to midnight, Lutier staggered down the hall to his cell. He smelled of water and soap, the icy air plucking at the moisture that still clung to his skin. He was exhausted beyond reason and his eyes kept drooping with the desire for sleep.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered to himself, “no writing tonight.”

Even as he said it, he knew he would write. There was so much pain in his heart from losing Jartim that he had to put them down in words. It was the only way he could find peace to sleep.

As he walked, he could hear whispered prayers and snoring from the other cells. There were quiet gasps and moans from a few other’s rooms. Everyone dealt with grief in different ways, some did it alone and others sought company in their brothers and sisters in the cold night.

His cell door creaked as he entered it. Turning around, he closed and locked it before heading for his bed. With one aching hand, he picked up the corner of his mattress.

He reached for a book that wasn't there. His heart skipped a beat as he stared down at its place. His fountain pen had been moved also. Ink stained the boards underneath the mattress and the black splotch soaked into the sheets above it.

Lutier closed his eyes. Someone else knew about the book besides Jartim. He even knew who: Marion. He knew the words on the page would enrage her, it was the thing she hated the most about him.

He set down the mattress and tried to calm his rapidly beating heart. He had many options, but couldn't think of any. He knew that she would fulfill her promise if news of his book got out. He had written it as a *jdacku*, a holy book, but not one for the Divine Couple. For a priest of the Couple to scribe it, it was blasphemy, but one that gave Lutier his faith.

With a shuddering breath, he set down the mattress and left his cell. She would probably be reading it in her cell. He headed down the hall and knocked on her door. When she didn't answer, he knocked again.

A few minutes passed and Lutier turned away. Despair clawed at him as he tried to imagine where she would have taken the book. He headed toward the main hall, the one he avoided after the funeral.

Marion sat at the end of the table with her back to the fireplace. A fire burned brightly in it, lighting up the plain wooden tables. It glinted off the murals and decorations of the faith: the staff, the cup, and the chain.

His book was in front of her, splaying out and exposed. One hand was balled in a fist to hold the corner down as she used her other hand to flip through the pages. Even

from the opposite end of the table, he could see her eyes flashing as she scanned each page.

“Blasphemy,” Marion said in a low, cracked voice. It was the voice of grief and anger.

Lutier started toward her, walking along the bench that he had eaten at for almost his entire life.

“You have turned your back on the Holy Wife and written her out of your childish fantasy.”

He wanted to explain the joy he felt in writing it, the focus on the masculine, the perfection of the male form. The stories were the ones in his heart, burned clean by years of writing his ideas out. They were his faith, the one he believed in now.

Marion turned the page. As she read it, her fist tightened until her knuckles turned white. She shook as she reached the bottom of the page and shifted her gaze to the next one. “I knew about this, but I never thought you’d betray us so completely with this... this blasphemy. These vile words.”

Lutier stopped a few feet from her. “Jartim—”

Her head snapped up. “Jartim should have never given this to you!” Her shrill voice echoed against the walls. The anger and rage almost burned the air around her. “These are not the divine words!”

“These are my words.”

Marion jumped to her feet. The page in her hand was torn free and Lutier felt a bit of himself scream out in agony. Balling it up, she brandished it in front of him. “You are not worthy to write these cursed words! These are not the words of love, of faith!”

“They are,” Lutier insisted. He fought the urge to lash out, reminding himself of the very stories he wrote in the book.

“This is sacrilege!” With a snarl, she turned and threw the balled paper into the fire.

Lutier gasped and surged forward, trying to stop her.

Marion knocked his hand away and tore a handful of pages from the book. Shoving him aside, she threw them into the fire. The fluttering paper quickly caught aflame and danced in the ash. "I will not allow you to desecrate my church with your poisonous words!"

He grabbed at the book, but she knocked him aside.

With a scream, she turned and threw the entire tome into the fire.

Lutier didn't have time to think. He dove into the fire, ignoring the agony that burst along his skin. He clutched at the book. Embers seared at his skin and the stench of burning flesh filled his nostrils around the choking heat that tore at his lungs. He grabbed the book, shaking as he tried to pull it out.

The heat and light made it hard and he slammed against the searing hot stone of the hearth. It took him two more tries before he staggered out of the fireplace, holding the still burning book to his chest. Flames licked at his cassock and he fought to remain conscious with agony coursing along his veins.

He beat the flames from the book first, flailing at Marion's arms when she tried to stop him.

His burning clothes continued to lick at his skin, blackening flesh and leaving him sick. He left his book long enough to grab a bucket of water and dumped it over his head. The icy liquid almost overwhelmed him as it poured down over his burns and across his ruined clothes.

Lutier shook his head to clear it and saw that Marion struggled to pick up his book. Desperate to save it, he lashed out with the only thing in his hand.

The bucket caught the side of Marion's head and threw her aside. She flew back a few feet before slamming against the hearthstone with a sickening crunch. Her eyes rolled

up in her head as she slid down, leaving a smear of blood against the rough stones.

Lutier shook as he stood there, staring at her body. He had to strain to focus past the tears in his eyes, but when he saw her chest rising and falling in labored breaths, he let out a sob of relief.

And then the realization of his situation struck him. If she lived, he would be excommunicated from the church. He knew the words were blasphemy but they were still his words, his faith.

Blood pooled underneath her, soaking into her yellow cassock.

He glanced at the book. It was a third gone, the edges blackened from the flames. Years of his writing destroyed in a matter of moments.

He took a breath and then another. He had written the stories. Stories of the Holy Father and how he took care of the Wife. Of the bravery and intelligence of the masculine over the feminine.

Lutier closed his eyes for a long moment and then opened them. Ignoring his book for a moment, he knelt down and pulled Marion from near the fire. Ripping his own cassock open and then into strips, he bound her head quickly.

Marion's eyes fluttered open and babble slipped out of her mouth. It was incomprehensible and tortured, filled with pain and sorrow.

"I'm sorry," he said and meant it.

As soon as he was sure she wouldn't die immediately, he grabbed the burnt book and rushed back to the cells. There was still a light under one of the doors and he pounded on it. "Open up!"

The sister inside opened it after only a few seconds, her shapeless tunic hanging off her shoulders. She took one look at Lutier and gasped. “You’re burned!”

“Mother Marion needs help!”

“You need—”

“Help the mother! She’s in the great hall. She hurt—” He froze for a heartbeat, unsure of what to say. Finally, he finished. “She is hurt badly and needs help. Please! Please help her!”

It was the right thing to do, to make sure Marion was safe. He wrote something in his book about the same thing.

But Lutier couldn’t stay. When Marion woke up or when they found the book, it was over for him. He had to run. He glanced down the hall at his cell. There were other brothers and sisters peeking out of their rooms. Some of them were already dressed. There was no way Lutier could get to his cell to change clothes without looking suspicious.

He had to run.

With a deep breath, he yelled out. “Mother Marion is hurt in the great hall!”

They came out of their rooms and rushed down the hall. He let them push him along, dragging him toward the great hall and away from his cell. As soon as he could, he slipped aside and headed straight for the front doors with his book pressed to his chest.

It was icy cold outside and he had nowhere to go. But he couldn’t stay there. If he had any faith at all, it would carry him to safety.

About D. Moonfire

D. Moonfire is the remarkable intersection of a computer nerd and a scientist. He inherited a desire for learning, endless curiosity, and a talent for being a polymath from both of his parents. Instead of focusing on a single genre, he writes stories and novels in many different settings ranging from fantasy to science fiction. He also throws in the occasional romance or forensics murder mystery to mix things up.

In addition to having a borderline unhealthy obsession with the written word, he is also a developer who loves to code as much as he loves writing.

He lives near Cedar Rapids, Iowa with his wife, numerous pet computers, and a pair of highly mobile things of the male variety.

You can see more work by D. Moonfire at his website at <https://d.moonfire.us/>. His fantasy world, Fedran, can be found at <https://fedran.com/>.

D. Moonfire

Fedran

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For centuries, the Crystal Age shaped society through the exploration of magic. Every creature had the ability to affect the world using talents and spells. The only limitation was imagination, will, and the inescapable rules of resonance. But as society grew more civilized, magic became less reliable and weaker.

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