

Before The Cult

A Glimpse Inside A Depressive's Mind

By Sandy Masia

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Dedications

For Saya Heather Pierce-Jones for always being an inspiration.

Ritah Mafokwane, for staying up with me all those nights.

Lauren Pillay, for always being around.

Scarleton Series

Scarleton Series is partially chronological although events that happen in one book usually intertwine with other books and bring light on some issues expressed in other instalments. It is more of a thematic series; events on one book might be occurring at the same time, before or after the events in another book. They might influence each other or feed off one another. Each book takes centred look on one of the characters. Each book can be enjoyed on its own, but will be enjoyed even better within the context of others. All books are based in the fictional town Scarleton. Before the Cult is where it all begins and you are about to read about one of the most influential and pivotal characters to the series. Enjoy!

Prologue

She lay on the mattress free bed, tied to the bedframe. Her breasts severed and cauterized. Hair seared off and ears cut off. Her body covered with bruises, scabs, festering burns and wounds. Coagulated blood staining parts of her body. Too sore to move and dispirited she was. Her breathing wheezy and irregular. She had no idea how long she had been there, or where she was, but it was long enough to drain all the hope she had. The scars that were inflicted within her were oceanic. Her ear shattering screams were of no avail.

The man in the long dark trench coat came back into the torture chamber. He took a seat beside the bedframe. A dark silhouette in the dark room, his back turned on the grimy small window that ushered the only natural light into the damp place. He watched her naked body for a while, allowing the unsettling quiet to take over. When she began shivering and panting he spoke, "Remember what we asked you when we first brought you here?" A modest voice came from the shadow, coaxing in nature.

She couldn't say anything to him, she had learned how futile it was the hard way. All she could do was listening. Besides her thoughts, he was the only voice she heard in a day.

"We asked you 'What price is your life worth?'" He always spoke in plurals like that. He sat back into the chair and audibly exhaled. "You said you're priceless."

She waited for him to carry on, he always lingered in silences like that. "After a few modifications to your body you don't wanna live anymore? Do you see how absurd that is? You have diminished the value of your life to the loss of a few parts." He sighed. "Each time you convince us of how worthless your lives truly are. It's why we don't think twice before using

your lives to buy in into a home.” He shifted in the creaking chair. “Isn’t belonging the only thing invaluable after all?”

With that, he unwrapped something in his hand. "Your wish is granted."

He began sprinkling some liquid on her. Gasoline, she smelled it. “No. no, no. Not like this please!” she wept, wriggling on the bedframe. “Haven’t you hurt me enough? Just make it quick and simple, please.”

He snorted, stood to his feet. “Consider the pain payment. Put your death to good use, you should be happy knowing that your death helped someone out.” A camera light fell on her face from the tripod. She squinted trying to make him out behind the light. He heard him unbuckle his pants and letting them fall on the floor. He began heaving. Then he flicked the lighter on. When she looked down at his groin she could see him touching himself. Before she could even make sense of it all flames engulfed her.

“Fuck, yes!” he snarled with pleasure.

Chapter 1

1

“Would you shut the hell up?” I snapped.

Macfearson shrugged. “It’s just strange what you guys are doing here. Who listens to music like that? I’m tiptoeing around this place afraid to make a sound like you have your freaking heads buried in a book before an exam. Afraid because I might, “he added air quotes, “distract you.”

“I think you can’t stand being alone,” said Macxermillio.

“I think you missing the point. I can’t stand being in a room with fucking zombies staring at a screen watching every little move I make. No, I can’t stand the silence oozing from the undead. It is just awkward.” He began approaching with a coyly careless gait. Leaned over from behind us to take a look at the screen. "Oh my dead dog, you guys are just staring at nothing? I thought you were looking at visualizations or something. You just staring at the player?”

Macxermillio shook his head. “You wouldn’t understand, music is not just meant to be heard but experienced and be enveloped in it. That requires your undivided attention and the moment you realize how beautiful and magical the experience is maybe you would burn yourself a bit less. Nothing strange here.”

With a shrug, Macfearson sat on the bed behind us situated at the corner. He rolled up his left sleeve, grabbed a lighter from his pocket and held his arm over the flame, searing his skin. He groaned, “Oh yeah. That does it.” He leered at us then slumped on his back over the bed. “You can freakin’

carry on now. I'm gonna take a nap. I like the whole keeping the room dark thing but what you guys are doing is strange."

"Every time you speak you just distract us and we have to start all over again. This is an *album* not a random collection of songs like a pop record. We need the silence!" I said.

Macfearsonn sighed heavily. "Why can't you start where you left off? It's like a fuckin' movie on pause, right?"

"Some experiences beg to be experienced without a pause or an interruption. It's not the same, it's a thing of its own kind," Macxermillio answered. "Do we have your cooperation?"

"Can I snore and have a freakin' ciggy?"

Macxermillio chuckled. "You can't fuckin' snore."

"Alright." He stuck a cigarette between his lips and let it dangle on the corner of his mouth for a little while. "Okay, I'm ready. You can hit it?"

With a gentle tap on the laptop's keyboard the album started and the room filled with a modest stream of sound. Soaked us in it. Soon our minds were drowning within the affect world of music and the spells of the experience. The external world submerged into a darkness, so deep and out of sight that the furniture reverted to its lonely creaky nature. The tree out the window and its shuffling leaves miniature, the bird songs mixed in the background fog of student voices, cars, motorcycles, trucks and dog barks. Such abstraction from the university's morning stir. The music spawned webs the size of the universe and we swam in the volume like whales.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

Aggressive and disruptive, tugging us from the depths of the music. With a grimace on his face, Macxermillio muttered under his breath, "Who the fuck is that?"

"No, fucking clue," I said.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK !

“Fuck,” I cursed under my breath as I got up, exasperated. “On my way! Cool off.”

“I wanna see who this dopey is.” Macfearson got up and waited.

I opened the door. “Jay! How are you?”

He ignored my greeting and went straight to his point. “I can smell the smoke in the hallway,” he said. “I told you to stop smoking in your room. I can't give you hours for this, but the sub-wardens will. It's just fuckin' annoying, man. Please be considerate to all the people living in the res.” He paused. When he did I realized he was coming from the shower, his towel wrapped around his waist. He was still wet and for the first time I could see how far his belly hung out and how flabby his biceps were. I also found myself not hearing half of the stuff he snarled, increasingly apathetic. He lived three doors down from me and my neighbours never complained about the smoke, but occasionally the music. “Please, will you stop? It's a fire hazard.”

I sighed. “Okay, I will, Jay.”

He studied me closely for a while, incredulous. “I am serious.”

I shook my head. “I see that now.”

“Next time I'm telling the one of the sub-wardens.” With that, he stepped out of the doorway and went down the hallway.

I watched as he disappeared into his room, turned and shut the door behind me. Macfearson harboured a grin on his face, eyes sparkling with an idea. “When the flowers grow too high and too close to the window, enough to block your view. You clip them off,” he said. “Deathlings, I think we have our next sample. We have let it grow too high and wide.” He paused. “His blocking our view.” He pointed. “Fellas, that is the true distraction.”

He planted another cigarette between his lips.

“Are you gonna smoke again?” said Macxermillio.

Macfearson stared at Macxermillio for a while. Removed his lighter from his pocket and flipped it on. "If it all goes well," he lit the cigarette shut the lighter and placed it back his pocket, "I am breaking his nose in a few minutes." His jaws jerked and his breathing grew heavy. "A fucking *lifeling* can't tell us what to do. Fuck him!"

"He is probably not coming out in his room for the next fifteen minutes or so. The guy just took a shower," Macxermillio said.

"It is enough. Cigarette smoke is not easily cleared."

"I would love to watch it all go down but I gotta go to the philosophy lecture pretty soon," I said.

Macfearson nodded. "You going, Macx?"

"No, I think I will continue listening right up until the encounter."

"Guys please don't mess my room. Don't get me in too much trouble. I am responsible for you guys since you don't stay in this res or are even students here," I said.

Macfearson sighed. "Yeah, we won't. It's cool."

"Guys, don't cause too much trouble, we can't afford to draw much attention to ourselves now." I shook my head. "I guess a simple intimidation would do. Look he is a bully he can't go tell on me because that is freakin' weak according to the standards he set himself."

Macfearson groaned. "C'mon, let me break his nose. It won't cause any commotion or take long. No one will notice, not even himself until the deed is done."

Reluctantly I replied, "Okay, but only if he comes here. Don't overdo it."

Macfearson chuckled. "Alright!" He pulled on his cigarette and grinned.

"Okay. Macx, I'm trusting you, okay?"

"Okay." He nodded.

With what felt like a speck of assurance I grabbed my bag which rested against the bookshelf, opened the door behind me and disappeared into the hallway.

2

Stepped out the main door to find the Scarleton's morning sun yellow and hot. Cruel and intolerant. Across the lawn where the cobbled-stone walk lead, students walked to their morning lectures in various conglomerations of groups and the lone. The girls in short pants, sundresses, tight-skin denim skirts rendering the day bit more bearable with their pleasurable distractions. The bashful conventional ones brought with them an atmosphere of order, direction and purpose. Considerate and mindful they were, the conventional ones, but never boring unlike the conservative ones. Unlike popular opinion, I found the conservative intriguing. Like any other minority in that they inspired a great deal of curiosity, mystery and open-mindedness in their quest not to conform. As for boys, they were boys. Like every male first year, excited over the freedom from parental supervision, they basked in the seven deadly sins. Nevertheless, intolerance never ceased to pour from their mouths and spill from their swagger. A masking scent that my nose was way too sensitive to.

The lecture theatre was no more than five minutes away at a brisk walk. I was already five minutes late but on my standards that was on time. At my arrival, the lecturer would be recapitulating yesterday's lecture and dealing with some general confusion expressed by the students before he gets into the day's lecture. As he finishes with the recap, I would be barging in through the door on the right side of the lecture theatre and take a seat on

the first row of the right column on the second seat from the aisle. Up front and where the early birds are easy to ignore. Without fail on the left column, past the middle column, first row on the second seat from the aisle, sitting alone like me, would be Courtney. Her frazzled black hair tied into a pony-tail and a black or grey over-sized shawl on over her shoulder. In a black, white or grey embroidered dress she would be taking notes on her notepad. As I take my seat she would raise her head, brush away a strand of stray hair with her pen hand, look right at me with a smile upon her face and greet me with a nod, a wave or mouth a 'hello'. That would not be the beginning and the end of our silent exchange, it would go on throughout the lecture in non-distractive intervals at specific cues as if we shared the same frame of mind and sixth sense. Never have I spoken to her other than those times or with the use of my voice. That was just enough, that was fitting for us. I knew we were similar in many ways because although I was never one to raise my hand in class and be vocal about my views and problems she would do it for me, often she was vocal and when she articulated her views it felt like she was an external mouthpiece for my inner thoughts. Elegant, pure and mystifying. It looked as if she could sense it too.

Five minutes later I walked in and resumed my seat. Instinctively, I glanced over where she would be and as if on cue she raised her head, smiled and gave me a firm nod. Infected by her warm spirit, I smiled and mouthed a greeting. As expected she had a grey over-sized shawl over her shoulders and wore a white embroidered dress. I noticed she also wore a beat necklace bearing an orphic symbol that was star-like. Something that lent her an almost occult aura and poise. Upon seeing it, I decided that that would be the day I speak to her for the first time, because unlike the other dumb *lifelings* in that lecture theatre she had proven herself time and time again to be something truly unique. I could feel my thoughts and deepest yearnings start to salivate at the anticipation of the encounter.

For her I carried less anxiety, I assumed. The possibility that a soul like hers could be judgmental, impatient and unwelcoming was minor. She appeared to be one who faces even the strangest of circumstances and people with a healthy dose of ease and thoughtfulness. Rashness and pride were absent in her demeanour and approach in class. She was brave and cautious. She stood out to me because she was odd in the sense that she did not possess the usual traits that one expects from her kind, the frivolous die young spirit and the idea that they are the pinnacle of all civilisations and the pervasive belief that they are invincible and entitled. They swear by open-mindedness but what they mean by that is selective openness, if an idea appears archaic and exotic they cringe and cower to the depths of rejection.

"Now utilitarianism does not believe that an action is intrinsically wrong and right. The only determinant of whether an action is right or wrong is whether or not it maximizes overall happiness," the lecturer continued.

"What is meant by intrinsically wrong or right is the idea that some actions are just wrong or right regardless of their consequences. For an example, acts like murder and rape are just wrong even if it means committing them would save fifty people from burning. This is precisely what utilitarianism rejects. Does anyone see a problem with this?"

No one responded. I glanced over at Courtney who was frantically taking down notes and evaluating them, a frown of concern on her face.

"Courtney?" the lecturer called.

She hesitantly shook her head and mumbled something. Then replied, "No."

"Okay. I guess everyone gets it." the lecturer giggled. He walked over to the pulpit, gazed over his notes and said, "Well, imagine this. You are walking past a dam and you see a child drowning and you are in such a position that you can save the child. You are not particularly in a hurry or

anything, you just happened to take a walk and this happens. What do you think would be the right thing to do?"

"To help," a couple of students blurted.

"Why?"

The classroom was silent for a second then a student from the back raised her hand.

The lecturer pointed. "You."

"Um...because you are saving a child's life?" she said.

The lecturer nodded his eyes on the floor. "Yeah, because saving person's life leads to more happiness. The utilitarian would give a reason like that while people who believe in intrinsically wrong and bad actions might just say because to help someone is a good thing. Do you see the difference in those two reasons? Helping someone is only good to the utilitarian because it brings about more happiness while on the other view the act is good because it is a *good* act no matter what happens as a result."

Does that mean if the act was murder the utilitarian would deem it fine as long as it increases happiness? I thought.

Courtney raised her hand.

"Courtney."

Her raspy voice yanked me from the valleys of my mind and into the moment. "So what this means is that you can substitute the action in this example with any repulsive action and it would still be deemed correct because of the results?"

The lecturer nodded. "Yes, that is what it means. You're right."

And the mental affair between our two souls began, alive and enrapturing as ever.

They had been waiting for me, set aside a chair for me completing the triangle formation. Having just walked in I was not in the mood for a little conclave. I conveyed my unwillingness by shuffling over to my designated chair and dropped my bag on the wooden floor. Took every opportunity to show my enervated state in my actions, breathing, posture and facial expression. Macxermillio was not discouraged a bit by my display of unwillingness.

“Look, guys,” I suspired, “I’m a bit doped. Can we –“

“What the fuck happened?” Macfearson interrupted.

I sighed, clearly reluctant to explain, slightly because of the difficulty I sensed would come with putting some words together.

“Do you find yourself troubled by the philosophy lesson today? I know it can be a tight noose,” Macxermillio said.

“It’s not that.” I glanced at Macfearson. “Fearson did you kick Jay’s ass?”

He shook his head. “Nah, that’s part of the reason we should have this meeting now. We think enough time has passed since the last sampling to take on the next one.”

Macxermillio added. “The town has quieted. Does not seem to have gathered a lot of information regarding the disappearances. The whole thing has spun into senseless sensationalism that nobody cares about from some student newspaper and nothing major. The one that everybody always makes fun off?”

“You mean The Active?”

“Yeah, that one. Nobody is taking it seriously and everybody is circulating memes on the internet about The Active’s speculative article about the missing students which was not even close to the number we have nabbed. This means we have been extremely careful, having devised a new

technique I think it is time for our next sample. Maybe our last before all of this catches fire.” Macxermillio paused. And later added, “This time it must work.”

“You know I have been thinking about this a lot,” Macfearson said, wagging his index finger. “I mean the reason for these experiments is to avoid going to heaven or hell or staying in this *calling* haunted world. It is so that we end up at *the crop* where we truly belong.” He paused.

The calling, an unfathomable being like time, everybody had an idea of what it was, but they were never quite sure what it entailed. Not of this world but interacting with this world. No telling if it was merely a deep feeling of loss and homelessness inside us or the cause of that feeling, whether it was an entity with the best of our interests at heart or a force of this world designated to choke and drive us to self-annihilation eventually cleansing this world of lunatics like us. For most of our time, we had known rejection and the unflinching arms of acceptance and love the calling embraced us with where suitably a subject of such doubt and scepticism. The calling had one promise: Do as I say and all will be alright. Just a string of words which never correlated to nothing tangible this far. Trust is earned or promises are subjected to tests like any hypotheses.

“Yes, that is the reason we study their eyes when they transition,” Macxermillio said.

Transition was just another euphuism for dying.

“What if there is nothing wrong with how they transition. That we are missing an element. I propose this element is not control over their state of mind but control on the state of their soul,” Macfearson said.

“This means what?”

Macfearson hesitated. “I was thinking we lack an occult element. A ritual or a sacrifice of sorts. Something to manipulate the transition process. Then if it works we could use it on ourselves.”

Macxermillio shook his head. "No, we can't mess with the unruly forces and spirits and shit. Don't wanna find myself in a situation I can't get myself out of. The occult is extremely dangerous it might require us to even add a stranger to our team, someone we can trust. Who even knows if *deathling* blood is very precious and on crazy demand for those occult *lifelings*? Let's keep things within our vicinity where we can control it and remain safe and discreet. I hear you can't even read an occult writing without inviting some spirits. We already have enough on our plate with the weight of the calling on our backs. That is as much as we can handle now." Macxermillio paused and shifted in his seat. "It's too much of a risk. Too demanding and not dependable."

Macfearson grimaced. "You have thought of doing this before?"

Macxermillio looked away a degree. "Someone I knew tried. Let's just say that."

"What happened to him?" I asked.

He sighed. "Men came in the middle of the night where he slept. They dragged him out to the graveyard. Whipped him, flayed him and drained his body of blood. They took his soul too. Only these things weren't men, but spirits summoned upon him by studying the occult arts."

"Was he one of us?"

"I was too young to tell."

Macfearson nodded.

"Now, as I was saying we are ready for our next sample. This time, I think we should strike close by. Three doors down from here and end the reign of Jay. His been a jerk to you and everybody else. People would be relieved his gone and we will be happy we got to break him. And when alarms start going off that students have been disappearing hopefully we will have our hands off." Macxermillio turned my way with command and control, "We

need you to have your lunch on the same table as him and his cronies. Find out what they have planned for the weekend.”

I sighed. "You mean I should watch him until he goes to the dining hall and then go to eat," I complained. "I'm already starving, Mac. What if he goes there after an hour and a half because he has a lecture or something? Can't we do it tomorrow? It's only Thursday tomorrow."

Macfearson intercepted. "We need time to prepare and gather resources." "Why are you so cranky though?"

I kept quiet for a moment, rubbing my neck. "It's Courtney, Mac."

"Courtney?" He leaned forward. "What happened? You finally spoke to her?"

"I tried. My words died in my mouth. I felt like such a fool."

Macfearson laughed.

I continued. "She waited on me to say something but I was stuttering like I never had before. Then that pretentious class rep bitch interrupted us and ruined the whole thing. She chatted to Courtney and basically blocked me."

"At least she gave you the chance to escape," mocked Macfearson.

"Why now, though?" asked Macxermillio.

"It just felt like the right moment to talk to her. She had remained an enigma for far too long. It felt right."

"Next time I guess."

"How will I face her tomorrow? I feel so embarrassed now. She knows I'm that weirdo guy who tried to talk to her. I don't know what to do." I jumped up and threw myself onto the bed burying my face into the pillow.

"I don't wanna deal with anything right now I feel like such a loser."

"What?" they asked, having heard nothing but muffled ramblings.

I shifted my head to the side. "I feel like such a loser. I feel quite sick actually. Hope I haven't ruined the little thing we had by being such a freak."

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