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THE PRAYERS OF GARGOYLES

REIMS CATHEDRAL: THE FORGOTTEN WALL OF GARGOYLE HEADS

Before the war, our devout legion of pouting grotesques grimaced on its hundred-headed wall. Heretics fell headfirst from rooftops. On our stone-browed stares and still lips rested the lost prayers of the Cathars, led to the pyres. Marble mongrels barked hellfire from belfry and broach spire. Until artillery shattered stained glass in the transept of consecrated kings. Now we've prayed through explosions, with parts of our faces and noses missing. With granite eyes terrified. We helped repel Beelzebub. Who else held Devil's doors closed in Dresden? Our silent prayers spared crippled orphans during blitzkriegs. When the Germans firebombed Reims, molten lead from the roof shouted from our waterspout mouths. We were Mayakovsky's choir on fire, flame-consecrated, fighting for breath. We've stayed silent as saints for eight centuries because the hymns we sing might frighten you to death.

AMIENS CATHEDRAL: THE ARCHANGEL WHO WEIGHS SOULS

Fallen angels cling to buckled flying buttresses and spires set afire during lightning strikes, but here, as in Heaven, the seraphs guard the threshold, keep secrets deeper than the relics, like John the Baptist's skull. As the tympanum at Amiens portrays, I, Michael, the archangel who weighs souls on Judgment Day, decide salvation on a cosmic scale, and the damned, small nudes mercy has abandoned, crawl to the cauldron of hell by the millions through crocodile jaws. Our prayers warned of what happens when Leviathan swallows God's laws. We're sentinels who supervise every crevice where the devil salivates over the naïve. Evil will never lead the spirit to ascend through vaulted ceilings, so we keep faithful and faithless uncomfortable with aspic and basilisk. With tarasques' last gasps. The illiterate masses understand visions of dragons vomiting tormented men. At the Noyen Ruins,

two demons grasp the arms of a soul no prayer can help, who won't escape:
mouth open, hair blown back by hellish winds

LOUVIERS CATHEDRAL: GARGOYLE OF THE NORTH WIND

Hear the north wind's prayers, storms that tell the shrillest tale: a glacial fiend with serpent legs, I abduct my wife, a mountain gale. Born from towering clouds, splintered from iceberg and purgatory's fjords, I, Boreas, bringer of winter and shipwreck, lost god with heathen beard spiked by ice, and eyebrows of destroying frost. As a wind-formed stallion, I and Zephyros sired the fabulous horses of King Laomedon. Fury and hurricane, my only adorations. Turned to a lacework of stone by the Medusa church that burned witches, that shuns sins and superstitions to restore solitude wrested from the orchestra of discord, for if my stillness fills believers, they one day may save what matters. But I belong to no one and live in gust and shiver. Shatterer of stained glass, toppler of spires in my frigid deathgrip. Arctic fingers reaching for your skin. Trumpet of apocalypse.

CHARTRES CATHEDRAL: DEVIL CARRYING AWAY FEMALE SINNER

No one cares to hear forsaken prayers as I carry souls away. Such treachery and weakness pervade your world, the tomb of ruin's open trade, 24 hours a day. But I must drag the unsaved to oblivion on heavy-hooved feet, as their prayers echo like flamboyant window tracery, as desolation glissades the ogee gables, scales openwork balustrades. Far too tired for my nightly flight of deceit, I might respite as a grinning goblin that glances over my shoulder with pride, without regret, as I appear at Chartres. But I and my bedevilements are not to blame. These scoundrels told their loved ones the biggest whoppers known to humankind. They sold themselves, their lives, and vanquished sanctity. They'll vanish fast and won't be missed. When eternity's at stake, I'm not shy. I won't trifle with maledictions in demon tongues. I'll swallow gamblers with cards still in hand, abduct blacked-out addicts from sweet, blissful sleep. Consider the adulteress who hangs from my back like the strix, long hair dragging the ground. My stupefied prizes, soon forgotten like the tall, slender spire blown away by the storm of 1705. I am the arsonist at Chartres, trusted to lock the church doors, igniting my cathedral fire near sunrise.

NOTRE DAME DE PARIS: THE GALLERY OF THE CHIMERAS

We were spirits who whispered in our sculptors' ears, *monsters born from your gutters will adorn your cathedrals*. When stone finally speaks, we'll no longer conjure spiral staircases with chimerical smiles. The gargouilles will be released from beneath priest's feet. We will be the choir. The congregation of lost souls praying. The angels will triumphantly stick out their tongues. We will pray with words that wander the earth without faith or language like burned children risen from tophets. Our prayers will free sorcery from its witch trial prison tower. When our mouths open, we will have spoken for years in inconsolable echoes. We will have spoken the consolamentum from ruined Cathar castles atop mountains. We will pray the prayers of witches and saints burned at the stake. We will release the holy ghost from stained glass stranglehold. The tourists will find torches in their hands and have visions. Our church service will revive every dead victim of the inquisition.