

# DESERT CASTLE

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ZAK LETTERCAST



# The Castle



**THE LETTER**

*Dearest Roz,*

*Living here is like living aboard a ship, except the boat is a centuries-old castle, and the waves are shifting sand dunes. With its intimate rooms and towering halls, the bordello is something of a haven in the vast sea of hot, sparkling sand. It's a cool place to catch your breath, safe from the billowing heat and the blue diamond sky. Travelers from all over used to come here to rest, relax, restore their spirits before moving on to the next town along the trade route. The key phrase here is "used to."*

*This place is old, its stone walls long-since smoothed by the dry, hot wind. This land is older, slowly reclaiming the castle's carapace, one sand grain at a time. The mountains that frame our glittering little home loom like monoliths on the horizon, like teeth for a hungry mouth, like a crown on a monarch's head. They dominate the land and shelter us from the rest of the world. Or maybe, they shelter the rest of the world from us. The paths that weave between our dunes are not yet forgotten, but I know someday soon, they'll be swallowed by gold sand. Few people travel great distances by walking anymore. These days, travel-savvy passengers favor the blimps that hang in the air above us,*

*or the trains whose whistles blow long and hard as they race against the horizon, to traveling by caravan. Now, it seems, only ghosts and shells travel the trails between cities, neither of which make for good company at a brothel.*

*Still, the spirits who do find their way here are often as enamored with the violently beautiful landscape as I. There is something about the way the wind sings through the valley each evening that makes our tall palace seem even more lonesome and desolate than the desert landscape around. There's something deceptively romantic about that, I think. The simple matter is that this is not a lonesome place at all. Even when it is long forgotten by the sands of time, and dust motes dance in the crooked moonlight shining through cracks in the boarded up windows, our castle among the dunes will still be brimming with company. A long-forgotten tune will waft through the stale air, voices and footsteps will echo behind rotting, locked doors, and the fragrance of spirits, cigars, and sex, will entice wayward travelers to cross our threshold in search of adventure.*

*Sometimes I wonder if that time has already come and gone. Maybe we are the ghosts, we courtesans and patrons alike. Maybe a thousand years have passed since anyone has walked through our great halls, but we can't see the cobwebs and the dust because we're trapped here, in the memories of this place. Maybe we are the memories of this place. It's easy to feel that way during the slower times, while we rest and wait for the next party to begin, wait for the next deposit to be made, wait for the next prince, or politician, or celebrity to breeze in through those doors and raise us from our crypt for an endless night of debauchery. Guests like those are few and far between these days, but rumor has it our luck is about to change.*

*I have heard tales that time is linear in the Seen Realm. How could any of us know such a thing? Still, if it is true, then time passes differently here; it's not linear, not predictable. For some,*

*that freedom lifts their cares. For others, like myself, we somehow feel the weight of time dragging heavily on our souls. This year has been the longest yet, and it feels as though my flesh is a prison, bound tightly by the chains of some ticking clock. I feel as though midnight may strike soon for me.*

*I hope to be blessed by your company at the celebration.*

*Sincerely,*

*Caerulean*

## THE ROUTINE

“The Sun,” Sarabella announces, flipping over the final card in an elaborate tarot spread. “Tonight’s going to be good, I just know it.”

Keeler and Boston pat powder onto their delicate noses in tandem at the vanity mirror behind her. I consider my outfit choices from what hangs in the armoire, and Brian sponges off in the clawfoot tub. The Samhain masquerade ball is in three days, and we are expecting wealthy clients the realm over to pour into our ballroom every night leading up to the full moon, the grand event culminating in the party of the century on the eve of the new pagan year. It’s the busiest we’ve been in decades, even in the weeks leading up to the official start of the event, which is tonight.

“Roz agreed to join me this year,” I say, absentmindedly. “She won’t make it for the main event, but just I’m happy to finally see her in person. After two years of letters she feels more like a friend than a client.”

“Careful, Caerulean,” Keeler warns, half-joking. “Don’t let your feelings get in the way of our win.”

The Madame divided the house into four teams to prepare for the Samhain celebration. Competition, as primitive as it is, is seen by management as a good incentive for us to make money. It’s not necessary, really. We all have our own reasons for this work, and we wouldn’t be at the best house in the realm if we weren’t heavy hitters in the arena of the sex-cash exchange. Still, a little friendly competition adds a unique flavor to the job. This week, I’m not just fucking for money. I’m fucking for prestige. I’m fucking to dance on the graves of my competitors.

We’ve been preparing for this for almost a full year. Airships have carried banners advertising the event across the realm for months now. The appointment deposits alone were enough to add a new expansion onto the house to make room for an extra team of courtesans to help handle the influx of hopeful patrons. The halls have been increasingly buzzing with activity day and night, just like the old days, since mid-year.

Madame O’Keefe said our teams are not divided up by earnings or skill, but one could argue against such a statement. Even the themes make some kind of sense when you think of who’s in them. Keeler, Boston, Sarabella, Brian, and myself are the Bloodsuckers. There are also the Fair-Folk, the Spell-Casters, and the recently-added Reapers.

Even with every group operating at full capacity, there are definitely not enough of us to see all of the patrons who will show up for the ball in three days. In the end, what matters is how much money a group makes, not how many patrons they see. If I only see one patron for the entire duration of our little event, but that patron pays my full rate for the entire time, I’ll be a top contender for earnings. And the top earning team gets a prize.

Sarabella carefully replaces her tarot deck in their box and locks it. “Brian, are you done in there yet? The sun’s going down and I need to get clean.”

“You have your own bathtub, you know.” Brian steps out from behind the privacy screen, suds running down his bare chest and legs.

“Yours is better.” Sarabella pads across the creaking hardwood, regally arched soles barely making a sound. With a smirk, she throws a towel at Brian and lets her robe drop to the floor before stepping into the lukewarm bath. I catch a glimmer of something, like a tear in the fabric around her, as she settles into the waning suds. My imagination runs away with me too often these days. It’s probably a sign of burnout, I’ve been here too long.

The soft fabric in my fingers draws my attention back to the task at hand. I decide on a nearly-sheer red and black caftan, a gold belly chain, and crimson red pteruge as Keeler and Boston finish up their faces. My turn at the mirror. Powder, eyeliner, smudge the eyelids, rouge the lips, brighten the cheeks. Apply fangs. Sparkles in the hair. Fragrant oils on the skin. All is in order, my intentions are clear. It’s time to slay.

I want to seem just perfect enough that the ones who can afford me will know I’m within their grasp, and the ones who can’t won’t waste my time. There’s a delicacy to it, and it’s up to our discretion to decide how we present ourselves. We can be as naked or as clothed as we like. The one rule? Only patrons can wear white. In fact, they *must* wear white until they’ve been claimed by one of us. We have our own colors used to lay claim on a patron who’s been deemed worthy of our attention. If a patron’s clothes are stained crimson red, they’re mine. No other courtesan can approach

them without my approval. I tuck the leather pouch of red dust into my sleeve and give the vanity up for the next courtesan.

Half-clothed, Brian lights the candles and lanterns in all our rooms, and returns to finish his own preparations. The girls and Boston tighten their bustiers and preen themselves in the standing mirror in the hallway by Brian’s bedroom door. I lean against the wall and watch through big bay windows as daylight sinks low behind the mountains. The courtyard shadows grow mournful and jagged. Sarabella joins me a few moments later, powder fresh and light on her nose. Like clockwork, without so much as a word, we all make our pilgrimage outside.

Every night, we visit the shrine to ask our gods and spirits for protection and good fortune. The background noise to our ceremony is the clatter of wickpoles and footsteps as servants finish lighting the lanterns and candles out back, and the gentle *whoosh* of evening wind. There’s always this moment when it’s just dark enough you can’t quite see beyond the glow of the brazier there. It’s serene, magical, like we are in a bubble of enchantment, familial warmth, imminent success.

To start, we form a circle around the stone slab remnants of the original bordello structure, which was burned down almost two thousand years ago by religious zealots – the very same who erected the structure that took its place. Each courtesan takes their turn leaving our offerings at the brazier in the center. Everyone is there, no matter how new or old. It’s expected. Every night, we are always a united house as we leave our offerings and make our prayers.

A silk scarf, spirit money, a sprig of dried rosemary, a silver pendant, a note inscribed with some secret incanta-

tion. We hold hands as the smoke of all these things and more mixes with the dusty dusk, and is carried south by the breeze. For a moment, the blaze burns brighter, and the gods are there, standing between us. The last rays of sun caress my cheek, the earth heaves an eager sigh, and darkness descends.

### THE REWARD

When we disperse, there is the noise of guests out front. They stand in long lines, waiting to enter our middle-of-nowhere abode. As they eagerly pour in, their names announced to the growing crowd that bustles in the great hall, a procession of food-bearing-servants stream in to serve them. This is just a warm-up. Once the patron's palettes are teased, they'll be moved to the dance hall. There, we will be introduced, and the night will really begin.

Until then, we stalk them from the catwalk framing the great hall, watching from above like the birds of prey we are. They can see us, too. It's titillating for them, knowing we're there, just out of their reach, high above them, hidden by a thin veil of white gossamer fabric. We can see it in the blush of their throats, in the sweat that glistens on their collarbones. Most of them have masks, but we all know who they are. The upper class elite are a rare few these days, each discernable by their unique fashion sense, hair style, body shape, inclinations. We all know our marks, possibly more

intimately than they know themselves. Tonight, I'm on the prowl for Count Harland Draven.

Harland is a bear. He always wears a long, triangular, ivory mask. He's courted me all month by sending gifts and wreaths and gold-sealed love letters to pique my interest. Tonight, I will take him and his final offering into my room and mark his soul. He won't have to say a word. I already know what he needs from me, and he'll certainly receive it once I get what I need from him. If the fantasy matches his expectations, he'll return with an even bigger bounty the night of the ball.

Sarabella leans on the railing beside me, nursing a flute full of something sparkly. "I hear Madame O'Keefe is offering a special reward for the individual top earner at the ball, not just the winning team."

"Oh?" Rewards used to be common for high earners when the house made a lot of money, but even then they were rarely worth much outside the house. Nowadays, rewards are sparse, and the ones that are given out are rarely worth the struggle of out-competing the others.

"It's a train ticket."

She says it, and my blood runs cold. "A train ticket?" Train tickets are almost impossible to get.

"Yep. Two-way."

A two-way train ticket! If this is real, everything can change in a heartbeat. Leaving The Sandlands is a pipe dream for most of us, practically unattainable by anyone other than the supremely wealthy. I don't know anyone outside of the elite who has ever made it out and back in a single trip. "Where to?"

"I was eavesdropping, so, grain of salt, but it sounded like you can use it to go anywhere." She sips from her flute, pink lips and rouge cheeks hint at a smile.

"I would be able to see my brother again..." The words cross my lips, unbidden. A weird energy descends over us and I feel something in me freeze up. Sarabella's eyes glint with something I can't describe. And there it is again, that shimmer around her face, down the line of her shoulder, and gone again before I can fully comprehend it.

Suddenly, Brian's hand is on my shoulder. Large, warm. "We all have something to fight for. Let's make sure we're not fighting each other. We're a team."

"Right," I say, resolutely. "Eyes on the prize." I'm shocked I didn't hear him coming. How long was I staring at Sarabella? I lean over the railing, pretending to be interested in the bout of ostentatious laughter that seems to have suddenly gripped the crowd below. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Brian and Sarabella lock eyes for a moment, before she downs the rest of her drink and trots off to grab more.

Below us, the party is taking off better than expected. Many of the guests are already buzzed on our selection of aged wine and exotic beer. The rowdy scent of liquor and expensive perfume sends up an intoxicating aroma to our balcony. I feel a drunk rush from the fumes and pheromones alone. In an instant, blood rushes and I can feel my arousal grow beneath the pteruge. It is time.

With a great creaking groan, the tall double doors beneath the grand arch in the wall below our balcony swing open. Eager guests pace themselves, gliding elegantly in sets of two or three through the passageway. Wings, extra limbs, floating eyes, and biomechanical augmentations pass by below us in a spectacular parade of unique indicators of class and fashion sense.

The doorway can easily fit twenty of them shoulder-to-shoulder, but these civilized folk would never be so disor-



derly as to rush each other. I watch as powder-white skirts, shoes, wigs, drift across that threshold like dandelion seeds in the wind. The flush of their throats betrays their calm demeanor. They are excited.

I observe the guests for a few lingering moments until I catch a glimpse of Draven. He is dressed as expected, and carrying a bouquet of vibrant, merlot flowers. He shifts uncomfortably, glancing around as though he can feel my eyes on him. Poor little field mouse. He catches on to my position at the balcony just in time to see me turn on my heel and proceed down the service hallway to my mark. It's time to formally meet our honored guests.

The caftan billows behind me as I stride through the thin, dimly lit corridor to the secret entrance near the top of the dance hall stairs. It's house policy that our guests never get even the slightest glimpse of what it looks like beyond the grandeur of the great halls and intricately decorated bedrooms. It's a winding mess of a maze behind the scenes, and anyone unfamiliar with the labyrinth of secret hallways and hidden doors would likely become hopelessly lost in mere moments. We take precautions to keep them out, but sometimes it's not enough.

The temptation to explore the deepest guts of an ancient castle is, understandably, great. It is not unheard of for a particularly curious, or intoxicated, guest to follow that urge and become so horribly lost that they aren't found for weeks or even months. After the most recent corpse was uncovered in an entirely unused part of the castle, we began requiring key cards to access any parts of the bordello that aren't intended explicitly for guest enjoyment.

Which is why, as I round one of the many corners between the observation balcony and the dance hall, I am shocked to see Madame O'Keefe leading an average-look-

ing, but evidently wealthy, man, dressed head to toe in pure white attire, deeper into the labyrinth of tunnels.

Assuming she is turned around, as many of us often are in this part of the castle, I speak up. "Madame, I think the dance hall is this way." I point in the direction I am already headed.

O'Keefe turns beet red and looks up at the gentleman, who is also flushing beneath his pasty face-paint. "Ah, yes. Thank you, Caerulean. Mr. Janguine and I are just stepping out to speak about something in private," she says, a little too hastily for my liking. After ages of doing this job, I've learned how to read people fairly well. Well enough, in fact, it's saved my life a few times. I know by the jittery feeling in my stomach that O'Keefe is lying about something, but I can't think of any reason she'd take one of our guests to the back-of-house -- unless she's taking him back for her own enjoyment, which, in the end, is really none of my business.

"I see..." I want to say more, but the muffled sound of trumpets echoes from the dance hall. If I wait any longer, I'll miss my big introduction, and Draven will think I've neglected him for another suitor. Which wouldn't be altogether too terrible, since he's the type to command more attention by spending more money, but I don't want to risk it. I decide to let slide whatever shady business is about to go down. With a gentle bow, I turn on my heel and race through the bustling hallway toward the sound of the trumpets.

## THE LONG WALK

I make it to the line just in time to hear my name announced on the loudspeaker. With a quick twirl that makes my caftan billow behind me in the most elegant fashion, I glide to the edge of the landing and look out over the sea of seated guests. I let a shy smile pass over my face, give a soft, sweeping wave, and glide down the stairs to make room for the next courtesan. With each step, I go over my plan for the night. Draven is seated to the right of the last step, shakily holding his bouquet of flowers. The crowd claps and coos as I swoop over to him and accept them, with an over-animated show of gratitude.

“Harland,” I say, warmly.

“Caerulean, my feisty coyote.” His baritone voice is easily heard above the crowd.

“You’ll make me blush in front of all these guests!” I throw a hand to my chest. He reaches up and grabs it with both of his. Clammy, but heartfelt.

“You handsome devil, I should be so lucky to make a lusty creature like you blush.”

I take my seat beside him and lean in conspiratorially,

my voice just above a whisper. “Did you bring all that I asked?”

“All of that, and more, my desert flower.” He pats the side of his chest, indicating the credit card hidden in the interior breast pocket there.

“Wonderful.” I can feel the instinctual response of aroused warmth in between my legs. “You really know your foreplay, Harland.”

“Speaking of, shall we?” He offers me his hand. It is time to dance.

“Yes, but first...” I stand and wave my hand over him like a queer fairy-god-creature, and the crimson red powder stains his pristine attire. “You are mine.”

“As you command, Master Caerulean.” I quiver inside with excitement at the prospect of dominating this man. I thrive off the emotional energy that seeps from encounters like the one we will share tonight. But I remind myself that the lead up is as important as the finish, and my eagerness will have to bite its harness for the time being while I let him court me. The rest of the night goes smoothly. After some hours of dancing and drinking and other ballroom festivities, I bring the enraptured Draven back to my room.

My room. It’s a fantastic place I’ve spent ages perfecting. My room was originally given to me as a temporary spot to set up shop while the rest of the castle was being renovated, so it’s in one of the more secluded sections of the castle. When I moved in, our attendance was low, so the money we did bring in went straight to other things, like paying the servants and patching the main parts of the building. By the time business picked up again, which was only over the course of the past year, I had lived in my room for so long, and renovated it so far on my own, that I could barely remember how it looked when I first moved in. I know it

was run down, cobwebby, with a harsh draft and lots of rubble. I also know that I took that space and made it work. And now? It's a damned masterpiece, and it suits every need I might possibly have on the job.

The only downside? It's far removed from the rest of the castle, and my guests have to brave the journey there from the dance hall or parlor. It's a pretty long walk, and not all of them are suited to it. Sometimes, I can let them in through the stables out back, but that walk is also long, and most would rather enter the castle through our grand double doors and wait on plush couches in the parlor for me to come escort them through the less utilitarian parts of the property.

I try to fill the walk with historical information about the place, half of which is completely made up by myself, and the other half of which is entirely embedded in legend and embellished with elaborate rumors. None of us really know the true story of this place, it's just too old. But the long walk can be a creepy one if I don't keep up the chatter. The closer to my room we get, the more the gaiety and pure celebratory mood of the dance hall fades to mysterious, haunting echoes, which all but disappear well before we reach my doorway. It's hard not to be spooked, if you're not used to the atmosphere. And once we cross my threshold? Pure, blissful, eerie silence. Immediate intimacy.

The walk from the dance hall to my heavy wooden door takes us all the way from the north wing, down through the center courtyard via vaulted colonnade, and into the south wing. We pass by all the other bedrooms on the way there, then walk through a long gallery full of old, faded paintings and cracked, but polished, busts. The long gallery leads past the throne room and chapel, which are beautiful if not somewhat haunting sights when empty. Behind the gallery

walls are more hidden rooms and servant labyrinths, most of which are widely unused, some of which I've used my freetime to explore. My door is at the end of that gallery, which leads us to the final leg of the journey: a wide flight of shallow stairs.

## THE MAIN EVENT

My room and the adjoining sections of the castle are underground. Above those underground parts is what used to be a training field for war horses and soldiers. At least, that's what I tell my guests. I think it's fair speculation. Regardless, I love that my space is underground. No matter how hot it gets in the desert world outside, the sub-level rooms are always cool. Every time I descend those stairs, there's a skin-prickling rush of chilly air that caresses me and ruffles my guests' skirts. This time is no different. Upon entering, we're greeted by the dancing fire of torches in wall sconces, the bed canopy tapestries billowing gently in the cycling currents of warm and cool air, and silver shafts of moonlight slanting through the clerestory windows on the towering south and southwest walls.

"Is this where you wrote all those beautiful poems?" Draven gestures to the writing desk to the left of the stairs we just descended.

"Indeed it is." I gently grab his hand as it strays to pick up a piece of paper with a half-finished stanza on it, and pull him further into the hexagonal room. I have no use for

this part of the room when a guest like Draven is here. He'll be much more at home a little further in. Just past the desk is a veil of curtains that disguises the northeast side of my room from other guests who might be put off by it. As we pass through the dark red and pitch black fabric, Draven lets out an awestruck gasp.

"It's perfect." His voice trembles with excitement. My heartbeat raises, senses attuned to the earthy fragrance of hormones that give away his arousal.

"I thought you'd like it in here." I swallow hard, holding back my hunger. The pure need to taste his passion, to drink in his cries, to milk him, is almost too much. *Restraint*, I remind myself, grounding my ego with bare feet on the stone floor.

This portion of the room is equal to the size of the side with my bed and writing desk, and it's tastefully decorated with unique devices and furniture designed to extract as much pain and pleasure from my guests in as many ways as possible. The east wall is dominated by an intimidating arch of clear glass, which provides an excellent view of the east mountains. The window is framed by sand, which was dug out of the field above to give this part of the dungeon tower an excellent view of the sunrise. I elected to place my Saint Andrew's cross in front of that gorgeous window when I first moved in.

My many instruments of pleasure and pain decorate the walls. In the north corner is a cupboard with all manner of instruments and clothing. On the northeast wall, beside another heavy wood door, is a table with even more tools. Shackles hang from the walls all the way up, accessible only by the thin scaffolding that hugs the stone turret all the way up to the top. Through the door on the northeast wall is more dungeon space, complete with jail cells and ancient

torture devices. Beyond that are labyrinthian tunnels even I haven't completely explored in the ages I've spent here. For some reason, no one wanted to room in this part of the castle. Because of this, I have the whole underground section to myself, along with my magnificent dungeon tower.

"Shall we begin?" I ask, reaching to remove Draven's mask.

"Yes, let's."

By the time sunrise threatens to rear its golden head over the eastern horizon, Draven's wildest fantasies have come true. His bank account has been emptied, along with his knackers. Both, he promises, will be full again by Samhain night. He still hangs, sated and suspended, on my cross. His reddened pale skin glistens with happy sweat, like dew in the delicate gray-blue of sunrise. Streaks of iron decorate my stone floor like an abstract painting. My arms and back are tired, and my own lust is sated for now. I definitely will sleep well this day.

Carefully, I help him down to the floor and escort him to the bed, where I bring him a robe and some refreshments, which were dropped on my doorstep at a set time by my request.

"That was magical," he coos, still a little breathless. He lays on his stomach so as not to taint my bedclothes. "You, Caerulean, are magical." I watch with tired fascination as dashes of red seep through the robe.

"What can I say?" I respond, feigning modesty. "I only do the things I enjoy, and *that* was certainly enjoyable."

"I'll be back at the ball with much more for you." He wipes the crumbs of a dense cake from his chin.

"I promise I'll have enough planned to match whatever you bring," I say, then pop a grape into my mouth. It's one of

the last of the season. Soon it will only be canned and dried foods for us. Last night's workout has me ravenous. I think longingly about breakfast. The kitchen must have something hot cooking by now.

He looks at me, eyebrow cocked, "Challenge accepted." He's being funny, but there's some seriousness there, too.

"I didn't know you were that kind of sub," I joke, feeling out just how serious he is.

"Are you saying you don't think I'm the type to follow through?" His joking tone should make me laugh, but my patience for company is wearing thin after a night of performing. I wish he'd just tell me if he's seriously offering me more money than he thinks I can live up to, or if he's just playing a game at the tail end of our liaison to prolong the fun.

"I'm saying you better not insult my talents." I'm joking, too, but there's a hint of a serious threat in there. He shrinks in that way that tells me he's both turned on and terrified. I grin, toothy and sly. It's intentional. "Good boy. Only make promises you can uphold. I have high expectations for the ball, and you had better not disappoint me. Now, let's get you home to rest."

Normally, I would spend at least an hour or two taking care of my guest after a night like the one we just had, but Draven's letters to me specifically requested no aftercare until after the ball, citing something about making the high points seem even higher. During our correspondence I warned him of the potential dangers in that practice, but he claimed to be well versed in these kinds of things. Judging by our scene last night, I think he knows himself well enough to sense his needs and limits. So I tell him to pack up and get going, to let me rest up for our next adventure, to

have his servants care for his love-wounds so he's in good shape for the ball.

I take him out through the stable, where his carriage is waiting, and bid him a friendly farewell, before making a hasty retreat toward the kitchen through the secret passages on the northeast side of the garden. I am almost to the secret door across the hall from Madame O'Keefe's room, and the fragrant smell of hot breakfast cakes, eggs, and sausages beckons me forward. But just as my fingertips graze the hidden lever there, I hear what sounds like hushed tones and barefoot scurrying down one of the decommissioned passageways behind me.

## THE SCREAM AND THE SILENCE

"Hello?" I call, annoyed that my breakfast will be further delayed by some wayward guest. My mind flashes back to the average-looking man O'Keefe took with her last night and I roll my eyes. This wouldn't be the first time one of her special friends wandered off drunk and naked in the wee hours of the morning.

"Sir," I holler into the dark, "You really can't be back here." There are no more sounds now, but I swear I can almost feel a presence looming in the dark there. So I venture forward a few steps, in the direction of a tunnel I haven't explored since gods-know-when, and start trying to reason with whatever is causing that darker shadow against the unlit gray wall where the hallway takes a hairpin turn, about three meters away from me.

"You know, the last person who tried to hide away in the closed-off service tunnels died of starvation. We only found them because of the stench of their rotting corpse. Even then, it took weeks." Still, nothing. I can hear the sounds of breakfast beginning to end, the clatter of dishes being

picked up, salt scrubbing utensils. I grunt annoyance and step closer.

Finally, the shadow moves. It does more than just move, it splits into two shadows, and the shorter one begins speaking to the other, so quiet I can barely make out what they're saying.

"We should just tell him... come on, please? I really don't want to miss breakfast. Please?" The shorter one bounces petulantly as they speak. It's a familiar behavior, though I can't quite place it. The taller of the two shadows replies with a defeated sigh, putting a hand to their face. Both shadows walk toward me now, grayscale forms coming into view.

"Oh." The word is flat as it passes my lips. I want to be surprised when I see Sarabella and Brian emerge from the darkness, but it's not like everyone didn't see this coming. I'm relieved it's not a drunk guest, or worse, some kind of ghoul lurking in the bowels of our home. Sarabella brushes a strand of messy hair behind her ear and Brian's face shines beet red, practically glowing like a neon sign, even in the dim lighting of the service corridor.

"Sorry, Caerulean. We know better than to be messing around in there," Sarabella's easy voice seems rehearsed. Of course, who wouldn't practice what they were going to say if they ever got caught breaking a rule. It's an unspoken regulation, but as a hard social rule, courtesans aren't supposed to have intimate relationships. It can complicate things. I make eye contact with Brian for a moment longer than I probably should before turning on my heel.

"It's not my business," I say, pulling the lever to open the hidden door. "Come on, we're late for breakfast." I can see the sheer relief mixed with slight concern on Brian's face from the corner of my eye as we walk in awkward silence to

the kitchen. Something about the whole thing still doesn't sit right with me, but I chock it up to just how hungry I really am. I decide to eat what's left on the breakfast table until the anxious feeling goes away. But even as I'm slipping into a food coma in the comfort of my own bed an hour later, I still can't shake the feeling that something unusual is afoot.

When I awake, my room is dark. The long shadows of evening darken my windows, so I get dressed by torchlight and head to the courtyard for our evening ritual. I finger my offering, the previously unfinished poem that Harland Draven had tried to pick up last night, which I completed after breakfast this morning.

I am the first to arrive, the rest of the courtesans following in short order, all seeming spent despite resting for most of the day. Last night was a long one, and we still have two more to go. Our house will need all the Otherworldly support our aides can supply if we're to make it through Samhain with our sanity intact.

Keeler and Boston arrive together, their normally perfect makeup just a tad underwhelming. Brian and Sarabella arrive almost simultaneously from different parts of the house and stand apart from each other. I am keenly aware of the suspicious glances that pass between them and one of the other courtesans, Aravan of the Fair-Folk. I don't know what to make of that. The rest of the courtesans pour in from their respective housing wings, dazzling in their attire, each faction dressed to match with their assigned team name.

Madame O'Keefe is late, citing an incident with her makeup, hence the haphazard smattering of rouge all over her hands and the chest of her blouse. It's a realistic excuse, but I assume she's been up to no good with one of the

patrons, probably the man she brought back last night. No one else seems to mind.

The energy in the house is strange tonight, and my heavy breakfast sits like a stone in my gut as we make our way through the ritual. There is a peculiar scent on the night breeze, which picks up before we make our offerings in the dark. As we collectively give our thanks and prepare to break for the great hall, I swear I can feel unfamiliar eyes watching us from beyond the perimeter of our circle.

Like starving wolves, or mendicant friars, waiting to take something vital from us, something they feel we owe them. That sensation of being watched never really leaves me, and I find that it hangs over the entire evening, even as we observe our incoming guests from the balcony, twirl in the bright lights of the dance hall, meander down corridors to private rooms where we can indulge in the deepest, darkest of fantasies.

## THE DAMSEL

Tonight, my mark is Lady Rozarie Vanderlescent. In our correspondence, she insisted I call her Roz. In a repeat of last night's grand entrance, I swoop down the stairs and greet Roz with the same sincerity and gentle potency I used on Harland, but with some added spunk. Harland wanted a Master, Roz wants a friend. I take my seat beside her as the rest of the company files down the stairs with dramatic flair, into the arms of their awaiting patrons.

"Your clothes leave much to the imagination," she remarks, indicating my red and gold suit with a dainty wave of her gloved hand. Metal parts whirl and click as she moves. Her gears are painted a delicate white to match her outfit, but the slightest hint of brass shines through from the more intricate parts of the workings, which couldn't be painted without compromising functionality.

"Are you disappointed?" I ask. It is one of my more modest pieces.

"No, so long as you promise I will get to see you in your full glory before the end of the night!" The lust in her eyes is



subtle, but intense. She hides it with a childish cackle, that bounces her curvaceous chest.

I chuckle. "I'll tell you what, beat me in a game of cards and I'll give you the full monty."

"Oh, I like the sound of that," she said, feigning an evil grin. "And if you win?"

"If I win..." I pause for dramatic effect, finger on my chin as I pretend to come up with an idea. "If I win, you give me your virtue." The truth in all of this is that I don't want her virtue. But she wants to give it to me, and she wants to feel like a lady while doing it. Frankly, I'd much rather her company in a quiet bar – she is an intelligent person, and her conversation abilities are unparalleled by any of my other clients. In truth, I admire her mind and heart in a way that borders on unprofessional. But my job is to provide a uniquely crafted experience, and I'm certain I can give her exactly what she's looking for.

She blushes. I've hit the nail right on the head, in just the right fashion. She reaches into her pocketbook and produces the credit card. "Oh, my poor Caerulean, you have no idea what you're in for."

The rest of our evening goes exactly as planned, and once again I am thankful for the seclusion provided by my room in the far corner of the castle. Her needs are minimalist, but deflowering anyone takes some special care. The privacy adds an extra balm for any anxieties on her soul.

The sun is hours from rising as I escort her out through the stables to her carriage. Horse hooves echo against the noises of the brewing storm against our fortress. Flashes of lightning whitewash the sky, and I can hear the rain making its way over the mountains. There will be flash floods tonight.

"Do you have a safe place to stay?" I ask, over the howling wind. The horses shift uneasily in their harnesses.

"I'll be fine, if we leave now we can beat the storm to the west woods." As she bids me farewell, Roz kisses my cheek and deposits a rather hefty coin purse in my hand. "If you ever decide to leave this life, there is room for you among my concubines. You could teach them a thing or two."

"And your husband?"

"We're to be wed the next full moon, and the king promised me a cohort filled with concubines of my choice."

"I'll think about it." I say this, though I already know that I am not suited to the life of a kept man, though it is a flattering offer. Concubine cohorts are unfathomably strict. They demand secrecy, boundless obedience, and, in some cases, celibacy until selected by their patron,

"No you won't," she says, climbing into her carriage. There's a bittersweet smile on her face as droplets of rain fall like bullets in the sand. She and I both know this will be our last meeting. The coachman closes her door and mounts his seat, pulling his collar up against the wind and steadily increasing rain. With a crack of the whip, they're kicking up clay mud.

## THE BLUE RASPS

I pensively weigh the pouch in my hands as I make my way back to my room. My mind flashes with images of what it must be like living in a cohort owned by royalty in the golden lands to the west. I do seriously consider it, as I said I would. I'd never see my brother again, but I would definitely never want for anything else, so long as the monarchy allowed it. Of course, if I was in poor favor with the court, I would be treated like a slave.

As I round the corner, I hear the sounds of a mop cleaning polished stone floors. The sight that greets me, however, is completely unexpected. Madame O'Keefe is in the middle of the hallway, looking quite disheveled as she frantically swipes the mop back and forth over the floor. She's muttering to herself.

"It's what you have to do. Break out of this damn hellscape and--"

Only after I register the deep red hue of the spill she was cleaning, do I notice the slumped over figure laying, folded over with arms outstretched, their face resting on their legs, in the corner.

"Madame?" I ask, my breath catching in my throat. I mustn't have said it loud enough, because she does not stop the jagged back and forth of the mop. Her frantic attempt at cleaning is only spreading the mess further, wicking the red fluid in spattering droplets across the hall and onto the lower half of the walls. Her skirt is stained with it, too. I approach and place a hand on her shoulder, and she jumps.

"Caerulean! Thank heavens!" She thrusts the mop handle at me. When I don't take it, she frowns and mutters, "Can't seem to get any kind of good help these days," before returning to her chore, wiping the mop in wider strokes now, arms stretching out to their full wingspan as she unscrupulously splashes the thickening maroon stuff even further across the walkway.

*I must be dreaming*, I think. *Too much wine*. But I know I haven't had any more than a sip every hour or so to encourage my guest to indulge herself and relax. I shuffle past the Madame and hop over the growing stain on the floor, wary of getting any of it on my feet or clothes.

The figure against the wall doesn't move, but I think I might hear raspy breathing. I glance at the person, who is most definitely a party-goer stained with Sarabella's blue pigment. I mouth a silent *thank you* for the simple knowledge that it's none of my co-workers dying in the hallway. Despite the growing sound of rasping breath, the person doesn't seem to be alive, but even *if* they are breathing now, they won't be for much longer. I touch a hand to one of theirs. Cold, but not corpse-cold.

"Your journey is almost over," I whisper. No use in calling for help, the lake of blood that has emptied from them seems to be more than enough to be fatal. I stand to ask O'Keefe what happened, and there is a bone-chilling

scream from further on down the hallway. But O'Keefe hasn't stopped mopping. Am I going insane?

"Did you hear that?" I ask, but she seems not to hear me.

A shorter, even sharper cry comes from the same direction as before. My head spins as I run toward it. I think I recognize the tone, and I curse myself for being happy that the dead person I just encountered isn't someone I know, for caring less about the soon-to-be corpse in the hallway than the possibly-imaginary cries coming from... from where? The rasping sound grows louder as I pass by the chapel and cross into the courtyard.

## THE SILVER COURTYARD

When I burst through the door to the outside, I am met with the desert night silence. There is no rain, only cold, stubborn silence. Waning Gibbous and her celestial gallery all watch me from above as I carefully stalk the edges of the courtyard. Silver light spills between archways and pillars, painting me in monochrome.

The chilly air is dead and still, amplifying the echoes of my foot pads on the stone floor. The firelight in the brazier shrinks against the beaming pregnant moon. The trickle of water in the pond mutes itself against the suffocating hush. Even the merry sounds of the party-goers seem too warped and distant to be coming from this dimension. The feel... darker. More ravenous.

I am out there until the colors of dawn begin to arch up against the roof of the place. It feels like a blink and a lifetime all at once. Some powerful magick bid me stay there, leaning on the railing of the colonnade like a ghoul in the freezing darkness, the smell of ichor and wet dust hanging heavy around me. I tell myself I should be looking for the source of the scream, which I become increasingly less

certain I actually heard. Eventually, though, Keeler joins me with a cup of tea for each of us. I sip with her, silently remarking on the waking nightmare I had last night, and wondering what tonight holds.

As though she read my mind, Keeler speaks up and says, "One more night til Samhain."

She sounds as tired as I feel. I nurse my drink, basking in the warmth of the golden light that spills into the courtyard. "I'm exhausted." I exhale as I say it.

"Me too."

For a moment, I wonder if she saw the same thing I did last night. I shake my head. Impossible that we'd have shared the same night terror. Still, the same haunted look is baked into her features as the sun makes its journey across the sky and we both avoid returning to our rooms. I'll be exhausted tonight, and also I can't bear the thought of finding out how much of my waking nightmare was real just yet.

"Has anyone been back by the chapel today?" I ask.

She looks at me, shadows tugging at the hollow beneath her eyes. "I passed by there on my way out here. I was actually looking for you. When you weren't in your room I figured you came out here. Why?"

My heart does a triple beat and I take a deep breath. Do I bring it up, or do I draw it out of her? "Did you happen to notice anything... different?" I hesitate at the word *different*. It's a tremendous understatement.

"You mean like how they rolled the runner up for the floor polishers for the first time in years?"

So she didn't see what I saw. "Ah, is that what that was? All scrunched up against the hallway wall?" I could have sworn it was a body. *It was a body last night... right?*

"I'm pretty sure they're done cleaning that part by now,

so we can probably put the runner back if it's bothering you," Keeler says, grabbing the empty mugs and making to leave. "I can help, if you want to go do it now."

*Maybe having someone with me will help me keep my sanity when I walk through there again.* "Sure." I'm not sure if I'm hoping for another witness to the horrors, or a second pair of eyes to confirm I've officially lost my mind.

We step inside the cool palace and the tunnel vision sets in. The churchlike quiet indicates the earliness of the hour. It's sometime before noon, and I had gone outside before sunrise. It's been hours, yet I feel as though I'm stepping into the very same darkness that dominated last night. My memory sketches in the echoes of rain on stone between our hushed footsteps. There is no raspy breathing, nor periodic screaming, nor puddle of blood, nor harried Madame, yet fear surges in my chest like a rogue wave across a primordial ocean, all mixed up and deadly.

We approach the spot where my nightmare occurred -- and yes, that's what I'll call it now, a nightmare -- I see the runner rolled up where I would have sworn the crumpled corpse of a guest had laid, bleeding out. As for the blood, there is no trace of it. No spatters of red on the walls, no pool of maroon soaking into the stone floor, no remnant of the swipes of the mop as it spread the mess further and further across the corridor.

"There it is," Keeler's voice shatters the silence like a knife into the glass of my mind.

"You know, I'm not sure I'm feeling quite well," I say, cutting her off.

"You do look pretty pale," she says as she turns to me.

"I haven't slept yet, and I really should get some rest before tonight."

"Alright then. Do you want to move this first, or...?"

The room starts to spin. "I'm pretty sure the polishers will get it." I'm stumbling to my room now, not sure if I'm making any kind of sense, and quite frankly not caring.

Keeler calls from behind me, "I hope you feel better, Caerulean!"

## THE CRITIC

I don't remember making it to my bed, but I wake up just as the sun's light disappears behind the castle. Without preparing, I race out to the courtyard just in time to meet the others at the brazier. Sarabella and Brian part just wide enough for me to slink in and make my offerings, and as the ritual proceeds, I hear Brian whisper in my direction.

"You okay, Caer?"

"Just overslept. Long night," I reply under my breath.

"I hope tonight is half as long and twice as profitable," he responds. It's a common platitude among the courtesans. I nod passively and leave it at that, my mind turning to contemplate my outfit for this night's festivities.

My wardrobe sits next to a door that leads to the old dungeon holding cells. Sometimes I use the walkway between the dank, drab, cells as a catwalk while I try out different outfits, imagining sex-starved prisoners reaching out for me through the bars, begging me to let them out so they can ravage me. Instead, I choose one and bind them tightly to the Saint Andrew's cross, and pull out my whip. I

act out my make-believe to assess just how sexy an outfit makes me feel, as well as its usefulness for my unique work.

Today, I've selected a tight maroon bodysuit. It hugs my waist and hips and buttocks just tight enough to suggest it might be painted on. Bright red platform boots reach up to just below my knees. I complete the look with a magnificent emerald necklace with a gold chain, the stone bigger than my eye, and just as captivating. I can't look too closely at myself in the mirror without thinking of the horrific scene from my nightmare last night, but I feel powerful in this outfit, so I roll with it.

I'm almost late for my third-night debut, but once again I make it to the doorway just in time to hear my name called. I strut down the stairs, scanning the crowd for my next mark, Avaris LeDonios. Avaris is a tall, slender individual. They're famous for their heartbreaking poetry and scathing reviews of all kinds of establishments across the realm. Avaris is rich enough to afford train tickets to anywhere and back, and they chose *me* as the representative for our dusty little castle in the sand wastes. Tonight, all eyes will be on me.

"Caerulean, darling," Avaris coos, standing to greet me. They tower over me in a beautiful and menacing sort of way, wings folded behind their back in a glorious display of restraint and perfection.

"Avaris, it's a pleasure to meet you at last." I take their offered hand and kiss the knuckles where a ring would be. Avaris tastes lightly of metal and steam beneath a thick layer of lavender, rose, and frankincense. Of all my clients this week, Avaris corresponded with me the least, and seems the most impassive. I wish I had slept more, immediately feeling the weight of the challenges this night will present.

"Are you nervous?" They ask me, leading me with their

third arm to the dance floor while the other fix a button on their blazer.

"Are you?" I ask, mirroring their cool temperament.

Avaris thinks for a moment while we swirl and sway amongst the others. "I believe I am, as a matter of fact."

I wasn't expecting an honest answer. Avaris is a poet, after all, so perhaps blatant truthfulness is their default. "A famous writer like you should have nothing to fear," I say, stroking their ego.

"And yet I find my knees trembling at the thought of bedding you," they say.

*Very honest.* I smile, letting a blush color my cheeks. "Could you be mistaking excitement for fear?"

"Ever the optimist, just like in our letters."

We had only exchanged a total of four correspondences, but apparently this was enough for Avaris to get a good read on me. "It's true, I see the bright side in everything." It wasn't true, and for a moment I feel the drop in my stomach that comes with uttering an unconvincing lie to a truth-seeker.

"Then perhaps you can help me with a little problem I'm having. May we go somewhere private?" Their hand slips into a hidden pocket and produces a credit card before I have the chance to ask. "The contents of this card are all yours, regardless of how the night ends up."

I smile, reaching for my pouch of red pigment. "Of course, Avaris."

## THE TRAGEDY

Avaris sits across from me on the far corner of the bed, legs crossed, jacket and waistcoat hanging in my wardrobe. They reach up and loosen their tie, a thin line of sweat dripping from their forehead. Avaris does not laugh at any of my jokes on the long walk back to my room and seems to grow more and more serious the further in we got. Now they are nearly trembling as their shoulder-length brown hair falls messily to frame their face.

Concerned, I reach out and touch their shoulder. They flinch before my hand makes contact. I stopped, pull back, and stand. "You have to tell me what's wrong." No beating around the bush. I demand truthfulness, hands on my hips. Despite my concern, I fight back a yawn.

"I'm nervous," they say, seeming for a moment like that should be a good enough excuse to be quite literally afraid of my touch.

"I don't think that's all," I say, softening a little. I want to hug them. I keep my distance though, knowing this is not the time to initiate physical contact. I also want to sleep. I lean against the bedpost.

"You're not wrong..." they hesitate. There is more. They can't voice it. It's an unnerving experience, watching a renowned poet struggle for words.

"You don't have to give details, but I need to know what you expect of me tonight. I need to know your boundaries. I need to know what you like, what you hate."

"I want what everyone else has," they say, emotion like gravel in their throat.

"I don't know what that means, Avaris."

"I want to know the secret!" Their angry voice rises up against the tears in their eyes.

"What secret?" I have many secrets, but few of them are my own to share. We're on the cusp of something here. If I had had any amount of decent sleep, I would have probably made the connection by now, but I feel like we're having two different conversations.

"I want to know *why!* I want to know how to... you know... *enjoy* all of this? Fix me, please..." They sound frantic now, bouncing between despair and rage. Their face morphs as they speak, shifting through all these emotions at lightning speed. "Show me how to enjoy it, and I will write you a review that will garner more visitors than you can see in a lifetime! And even if you can't make me like it, please just tell me why I can't enjoy it..."

Ah. There it is. Avaris wants something they can't have. They want to enjoy something they hate. "Avaris," I begin, "there isn't really a fix for that--"

Before I can continue, the regal, renowned writer throws themselves onto the bed in a flailing fit of tears. "You were... supposed to... fix me!" They say, between sobs.

I approach and sit next to them, careful not to get smacked by their arms as they pound their fists into the mattress and pillows. "Avaris."

"If you can't fix me—"

"Avaris!"

"What!" They look up at me, angry face mere inches from mine. I don't flinch.

Instead, I look deeply into their eyes and say, quietly, calmly, lovingly, "Avaris. I can't fix you, because you're not broken." I still don't touch them, but I reach out with my soul, wrapping them in the metaphorical warm hug of acceptance and platonic love I have come to share with many clients and colleagues alike.

What I said is a true statement. It's possibly the most honest thing I've said all night. And it does not have the effect I hope it will. Avaris shuts down. Their face goes flat, eyes drooping in annoyance, brow furrowing in frustration.

"Then there is nothing for me here." They stand up to leave, grabbing their outerwear and marching for the door.

"Wait, are you leaving?"

"Why would I stay when you will not deliver what I came here for?"

"I think we can still have a good time, Avaris."

"I want to leave."

"Okay, you can absolutely leave. Unfortunately, I do have to escort you out."

"I can see myself out," Avaris says, swinging the door open and stepping out into the hallway.

"It's policy that I come with you. For your safety!" I call after them, wrapping myself in a shawl as I run out the door behind them. They don't reply. "Avaris, wait!" I see them round a corner – the wrong corner – and make a mad dash. Their legs are so long, they're almost impossible to keep up with.

My heels echo on the stone as I chase after them,

muddling their own noises so they're hard to track by sound. By the time I reach the corner they rounded only seconds before, they're out of sight and earshot.

"Avaris!" I yell, frustrated to the point of tears. "Fuck!" I scream, kicking the wall with my boot. "Fuck."



## THE VOYEUR

“And they just ran off into the chapel?” Madame O’Keefe, who seems much more normal than she did last night, asks me. Everyone who could be spared has been searching for Avaris since I reported them missing several hours ago.

“Yes,” I nod. “And I can’t find them *anywhere*.” I even went into the labyrinths that lead to the rectory and they’re nowhere to be seen.”

“Did you follow the halls all the way to the dead end? Did you go into the rectory itself?” Brian asks, glancing around at the rest of the courtesans, who have gathered after hours of searching by torchlight.

I nod, nursing another cup of hot tea. It’s my fourth tonight. The sun is almost up again. Another sleepless night, though I’m past the point of yawning. I can feel the shadows below my eyes pressing in against my sockets. My head feels like a magnet, pulling me forward and down. My body, however, feels light and surreal, like only the weight of the tea and bread in my stomach is holding my feet to the ground.

“Maybe they found their way out,” Sarabella says, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder.

“I hope so.” I think about all the clients we’ve lost in the hidden hallways between the walls. I think about all the ones we haven’t found. Unbidden, my mind flashes to Avaris’ credit card, which sits in a secret compartment in the sole of my shoe. If the madame finds out I have a loaded card that once belonged to a guest who *vanished into thin air*, she’ll take it and hold it in the safe room until the guest is found. I’m not willing to take that chance.

Keeler makes eye contact with me from across the hall, then steps out into the courtyard. I decide to follow. “I’ll talk to you later, everyone. Thanks for helping. I need some fresh air.” I don’t wait for their responses before getting up and making my way into the cool night.

It’s drizzling outside. Keeler is sitting on a marble bench by the pool, soaking in the rain. I join her, covering my cup to keep the tea hot and strong. Before I have a chance to speak, Keeler begins talking.

“I know where Avaris is.”

“Yeah, lost in the labyrinth,” I say, sipping again.

“They’re dead.”

“They sure will be if we don’t find them soon.” I think about the awful stench that led us to the corpses of other guests who lost their way in our home. My stomach sinks.

There’s a long pause. The light *drip, drip, drip* of the rain seems synced up with my tired heartbeat. Keeler takes a shaky breath. “I watched them kill your client.”

I stop, cup halfway to my mouth. Why do I believe her? I shake my head. I must have misheard. I chug the rest of the tea and turn to face her. “Keeler, I haven’t slept in days. I think I’m hallucinating.” I can’t keep the grin from my face. I should be horrified. Instead, I’m giggling.

"You heard right, Caerulean. I watched them kill Avaris. They didn't know I was there, and I saw it happen."

"Maybe you need more sleep," I say, feeling myself sober up quickly. "That sounds—"

"I did *not* imagine it," she says, so quiet I almost can't hear her above the sound of water droplets hitting tile and stone. I let her words soak in for a moment, like the dampness seeping its way through my clothes. She believes in what she saw. What exactly did she see?

"Alright, let's say you've not completely lost your mind. Who killed Avaris, then? When? How?"

"Tonight is going to be a bloodbath," Keeler says, ominously.

I turn to her, not making any effort to hide the exhausted frustration on my face. "Keeler, there's no time for wallowing. If you really think someone killed Avaris, we have to tell Madame O'Keefe. It will only be a bloodbath if the killer is still at large! So, stop burying the lead. Who. Killed. Avaris?"

I catch myself, tears burning in the corners of my eyes, throat tight. I'm on the precipice of something. A memory I can't quite grasp tickles the underside of my brain. I can feel the edges of it, a fuzzy outline beckoning me closer, but I'm pulled back into the courtyard by the sound of Keeler's pitiful whimper.

I blink, registering what's in front of me. Her eyes are squeezed shut, head turned away. My hands are on her shoulders, gripping just this side of too tight. I want to shake the answers out of her. Instead, I force myself to let go. She stands, fists clenched, and wipes a tear from her face before staring at me, all fear and rage, like an injured animal, cornered and desperate.

"We can't tell them about it! You can't tell *anyone*. We are not safe here. They'll kill us, too, if they know we know."

"I can't know who not to tell if you don't tell me who did it, Keeler."

Exasperation paints her face. Eyes wide, jaw clenched, I can feel the scream she was holding back about to rupture from my own chest. "They killed the writer. They killed others, too. You better keep your mouth shut, or we're both next."

I sigh again. She must be in shock. I know Keeler... there's no way she would intentionally keep such important information to herself under any other circumstances. Still, the tedious circularity of this conversation is getting old. Fingernails dug into my palms, I look into her eyes with as much patience as I can muster. "I need to know who did it." It comes out as level as I hope it will.

She shakes her head and turns in a huff to leave. I do nothing, just watch her go. She swipes at her eyes, like the tears don't blend in with the morning rain that has soaked us both to the bone. Behind me, I hear the sound of Madame O'Keefe's short gait in the walkway that connects the courtyard to the other parts of the castle.

"You should get some sleep, Caerulean. It's going to be another long night," O'Keefe says as she speed-walks in the direction of the rectory, a mop slung over her shoulder.

## THE CONSPIRATOR

Rest does not come easy. Even with exhaustion pulling my eyelids shut, I find sleeping to be more of a chore than a benefit. I wake up before sundown with plenty of time to get ready. It ends up being too much time. I'm ready before most of the house has even woken up, so I wander the halls anxiously until I see the others gathering for the evening ritual.

Today's outfit is a tight latex number that hugs my body in the most sensual of ways. I wear a tiara with demon horns and my shoes resemble cloven hooves, custom made specifically for tonight. My mask is goatlike, and my lips are rouged cadmium red. Everyone else around the fire is wearing similarly elaborate get ups, all in preparation for the busiest night we've seen in decades, possibly centuries, at our brothel here in the castle.

Keeler is here with the rest of us, but her face is unreadable behind her corvidae mask. I think I see her shudder once or twice, but it could simply be the heat of the brazier causing a mirage. I try not to look at her, but her haunted eyes are practically trained on me during the entire ritual.

Even as she approaches the fire to leave her offering and mutter an invocation, she stares straight into my soul. I hope no one notices, but of course, someone does.

As we watch guests from the balcony and sip our preliminary cocktails, Sarabella saunters her way over to me. I finish my drink, turning away from her to grab another in the hopes of avoiding conversation, but she calls my name before I'm out of earshot.

"Hey, Caerulean!"

An involuntary flinch throws my shoulders up as I grab another flute from the serving tray in front of me. "Sarabella, how are you?" I ask, doing my best to make the smile genuine.

"I think the real question is how are *you*? Some night you had, a client disappearing and all..." She pauses, clearly waiting for me to say something. I shrug and sip my drink, looking back over the balcony. I don't want to talk about it. She changes the subject. "Yeah, I guess there isn't much to say about it. But what's up between you and Keeler?"

There it is. Nosy, but much more direct than the courtyard conversation with Keeler this morning. "I'm not sure what you mean." I sip again.

"Surely something's amiss between you two. She stared at you the entire time we were all outside. I heard your conversation in the courtyard this morning got quite intense! So come on, spill!"

I hate the way she uses that sickly sweet tone to mine for information. What could she possibly get out of hearing what Keeler and I argued about this morning? For all she knows, it could have been an argument about our wardrobes being too similar, or some other trivial thing. "I don't really know." It isn't a lie, really. Keeler's raving had been winding and hard to follow.

“Hmm...” Sarabella says, humming into her champagne flute. There is enough dead air after that I assume she’s going to leave, but then she turns to me with a vicious grin and says. “I’m going to level with you, Caerulean. I think Keeler knows a secret about this place, and I want in.”

“An ancient place like this is like to have a few secrets, sure,” I say, avoiding her implied question.

“I think Keeler knows something about the train tickets, did she mention anything about that?” Sarabella presses, leaning in conspiratorily.

“Keeler did not mention anything about the ticket, no,” I say, adding a scoff for effect. I finish my drink, again, and stand up straight. “Okay, so she and I had a small spat. We’re still working it out, but it’s not about anything as big as the train ticket.”

“*Tickets*,” Sarabella corrects, lingering on the ‘s.’ “Plural.”

“Right,” this is news to me. I thought there was only one ticket. “Nothing about train tickets, singular or plural.”

Sarabella stares at me for a second too long, eyes like a lion’s just before it swipes its massive paw at a wounded antelope. Then, with a blink, she’s back to her chipper self. Nothing icy in her stare, nothing sardonic at the fringes of her tone. “Well, if you hear anything, I’d love to know about it!”

“Me too,” I say pensively as she moves away from me.

Below us, the giant doors rumble open. The ball is about to begin, and it’s going to be one hell of a night

## THE BALL

Harland is easy to spot, proudly sporting a new, stylized version of his usual mask. This one looks almost birdlike, the tip curved under like a condor’s bill. We embrace, and he hands me two cards. I know it’s silly to think I can feel the weight of the bank accounts attached to them, but I swear these ones are heavier than any card I’ve ever been handed. I open my bag of pigment, and he dips his beak into it. A puff of red billows into the air and he swirls in it. I throw more on him, and he whisks me away onto the dance floor.

I can see my colleagues, bright pops of color weaving in and out of the sea of white hues. The music, a mixture of swing and electronic, accompanied by live jazz musicians, plays vibrant jams loud enough to vibrate the castle walls. I muse that our party can be heard by the towns on the outer edges of our dust-bowl valley as the tunes bounce off mountain and canyon walls. We dance for hours, laughter and alcohol and sweat and moans accenting the wild frivolity of the event. As the middle of the evening approaches,

Madame O'Keefe comes out onto the balcony and the band wraps up their song. She stands, smiling, as the crowd begins to settle, and a servant places an old condenser microphone in front of her. There is some static as it turns on, then she addresses the party-goers.

"How is everyone doing tonight?" A loud, drunken cheer roars through the crowd, who are standing nearly shoulder to shoulder across the entire room, the excess spilling out the doors to the dance hall and filling the great hall all near the castle entrance. I get caught up in the cheer, which lasts a little longer than it maybe should have. It feels good to let out a yell after the past two days I've had.

"It sounds like the party is still going strong! I just wanted to take a moment to thank everyone who made this night possible. From the staff, to the courtesans, to the band, and especially our wonderful clients and sponsors, most of whom are here tonight. The band will be taking a short rest, but we have decided to open up a new part of the castle to you all, a place that hasn't seen a party in centuries."

A murmur of excitement ripples through the throng. Even I am caught off guard, having heard nothing about opening up a new part of the castle to guests. I glance around, looking for Keeler, or Sarabella, or Brian, or anyone else who might have some inkling of knowledge into what exactly O'Keefe is talking about. But before I can find anyone to lock eyes and attempt telepathic communication with, a long black curtain opens, catty-cornered to the circular band stage, revealing a wooden door almost equal in size to the ones that separate the great hall from the dance hall. The madame snaps her fingers and the door swings open, revealing what used to be part of the service wing, now set up as a banquet hall.

The crowd cheers, but I feel uneasy. It's one of the many places we found a lost patron, about three weeks too late, and it's connected to the most complicated, puzzling network of service corridors in the castle. So complicated, in fact, that not even servants are actually allowed to use them. The convoluted labyrinth goes so far and deep into that wing of the castle, the majority of the space isn't even mapped out. There was a rumor several years ago that we had sent someone in to chart the place, but they went in and never returned. There was another rumor that a monster lived back there, feasting on all the rodents, roaches, cats, and racoons that get trapped in that hungry, dark place.

"How exciting!" Draven shouts above the noise of the crowd. I can smell the liquor through his mask. "How ever did you keep something like this a secret?"

I shrug, emoting hard to combat the opaque lace of my own mask. "I figured you would like a surprise!"

"You figured right!" He kneels down with his back to me, gestures for me to hop up. I climb onto his shoulders and he carries me above the crowd to the doors.

The room is expansive. It is impossible to see the farthest wall, which is swallowed up by the darkness so that the only indicator that there even is another wall, is the wavering pinpricks of light emanating from the torches mounted on it. The floor has been sanded down, but there are clear marks where other walls had once stood, marking the polished stone floor in remembrance of the winding hallways so many of us respected and feared.

A servant hands us candles as we enter. I hold Harland's and my own, balancing myself against his firm grip on my thighs. From my vantage point, it is easy to find our seats. Every client who has an appointment, every sponsor who

donated to our renovations fund, every courtesan has a spot toward the front of the room. Servants are already setting up more tables in the dance hall for the rest. Harland follows my directions to our seats, then lets me off and pulls out my chair.

## THE DINNER

We take our seats and I hand him his candle, and Madame O'Keefe begins to speak as the rest of the room settles into their places.

"Yes, yes, be seated. Tonight we have a magnificent feast available to you all, followed by some very fun games and activities! But first we want to propose a toast."

Drinks change hands from the far side of the room and soon enough we all have a flute of something green and fizzling in hand. I glance around and see Keeler to my left. She's just staring through the mask, eyes as intense as they were earlier in the evening. She locks eyes with me and it feels like she's trying to tell me something.

"Well this is sublime!" Draven roars after sipping his drink. "Try some, dear!" He says loudly into my ear.

"I want to wait until the toast," I purr, running my fingers gently across the exposed part of his neck, just below his mask. His flush deepens. "Soon," I say to him, softly. He nods his head and we both look ahead again to Madame O'Keefe.

She stands with her arms outstretched, manic smile

splitting her face, glass raised as high as her short arms can reach. “To surprises. May tonight be full of them!”

“Hear, hear!” The crowd cheers. There is a pause as everyone takes a long pull of their drink. I raise the glass to my lips, then look over at Keeler, who shakes her head vigorously. The liquid tickles my lips, but I don’t open them to receive it, instead opting to hide my drink on the floor beneath the table. I watch as Draven lifts his mask over his lips and drains the glass.

“And now,” O’Keefe shouts, lips and tongue tinted an uncanny green against the brash red of her face, “we feast!”

There is a loud *Pop! Bang! Smack!* As some sort of small firework goes off at the corners of the room and servants emerge from the smoke with entire roast pigs and plates upon plates piled high with heavenly food. The masses cheer wildly as the food arrives at the long tables, and soon they descend upon the food ravenously. I am surprised as even Draven, who normally prefers to wait to eat until after our sessions, devours the delicacies placed before us with unnatural ferocity.

“You’ve barely eaten,” Draven comments between bites.

“I suppose I’m just excited for our time together tonight... do you want to start heading back?”

“Soon, my darling. But for now, let’s enjoy the festivities!” He scoops some pastries onto my plate and pushes it toward me. “This food is simply *divine!* Please, try some.”

“If you insist,” I say meekly. My fingers graze the delicate, flaky crust of the fruit and cheese pastry. Slowly, I bring it to my lips and – suddenly, Keeler’s hand is on my shoulder. The pastry is gone, I’m seeing stars, and my stomach feels like a bottomless pit.

“Stop,” Keeler says, “I need to speak with you.”

“Wh–” Confused, I glance over at Draven, who is so

enraptured in his food, he has yet to notice the elegant creature, Keeler, who has joined our table. O’Keefe is no longer at the front of the room, and the servants are nowhere to be seen.

“Get up, follow me.” Keeler’s voice seems to rise above the obnoxious noise of chewing and swallowing, pulling me out of whatever dreamy state I’d been sucked into. A few seats down, Eloquex, a member of the Reapers team, swallows oysters and laughing with their two clients. Their pupils nearly swallow their irises, and their normally pale cheeks are bright, feverish red.

As we pass them, I reach out and touch their shoulder, but Keeler pulls me along. “Should we stop them?”

“No time,” She says, not looking back, “I have to see what’s going on in there...” she trails off.

“Where are we going? How long was I... like Eloquex?”

“Not too long. You didn’t swallow the drink, so the food did not have as strong of an effect.”

“What was in that stuff? I don’t remember – I mean, the pastry was in my hand and then–”

“Dark magick,” Keeler says, the words almost imperceptible among the growing noises of feasting.

“Will they ever stop?” I still feel dazed. I still feel hungry. I feel her grip tighten on my wrist as she pulls me forward.

“I hope so,” she says.

Eventually we make our way out of the giant repurposed room and into the vacant dance hall. “Why is this happening?” My voice, though quiet, echoes off the stone.

“I told you, we’re not safe here. I pretended to be entranced like the rest of the guests and I overheard O’Keefe calling them all ‘tickets to salvation.’ Real creepy shit.”

I stop and yank my hand from hers. “No! Stop being cryptic,” I almost shout it, but my own voice rattles my

eyeballs and the edges of my vision dim. I grab my head and groan. I sense Keeler reaching for me and I step back. "Stop. Keeler, you're my friend. Just *tell me*."

She's silent for so long I wonder if I've blacked out again and been left alone to my fate. Finally, though, she speaks. "I'm trying! I'm trying to show you. You want answers? Me too. So come on, let's go."

She doesn't reach for me again. When my vision clears, she's rounding the corner toward a secret entrance to the servant passageways – one we were told never to enter. Before she vanishes, I decide, against my better judgment, to follow.

## THE RITE

"Keeler, wait up!" My head is beginning to clear, and soon the empty chasm in my stomach begins to feel more like a stone. The labyrinthine passages are growing thinner and more winding, and the echoes of her feet on the stone floor are disorienting and misleading. It's almost impossible to keep up. Suddenly, silence.

"Keeler?" I call, shakily into the darkness. Though I can barely see, I know my hands are shaking. I know we've gone down below the ground, because of how wet and cold it is here. My breath comes out in puffs, warm and cloying against my face.

"Over here," her whisper bounces off the multidirectional walls, confusing itself against my ears.

"I... I don't know where you are..." I reach my hand out in front of me, grasping for something, anything, other than stone walls and darkness, beginning to more deeply regret my choice to follow her blindly into such a dangerous place. Disoriented and confused, I am overwhelmed with dizziness and fear. My stomach turns, and suddenly the pastry finds itself tossed from my gullet onto



the floor with a wet *splat!* The world goes hazy, and I lean my side against the cool stone while I try to find my bearings.

Finally, as I catch my breath, the fog in my mind begins to clear. The dark isn't as dark, as cloying, as sinister as it was before. I can hear the echoes of Keeler's steps... approaching? Definitely approaching. Finally, her voice, a whisper, but I know where it's coming from now. The echoes seem distant and don't confuse the source nearly as much.

"Caerulean? Are you alright?"

I press away from the wall, half expecting the world to spin. But it doesn't. I feel sturdy, planted. I clear my throat, spit, and call back, matching her whisper. "I'm better now, I think. Where are you taking me?"

She rounds the corner and looks me over. "At least it's out of your system now. Don't tell anyone, but I've been learning the passages down here..."

"Keeler, that's so dangerous!"

"I haven't died yet, have I?"

"I guess not... but it's not safe in here. They don't even let the staff back here!"

"That's what they want you to think, but one day I saw O'Keefe and a few others in one of the clearings."

"What?"

"I know it sounds ridiculous, but I'm telling you, they're up to something, and it's connected with tonight."

I don't want to believe her. But the events of the past few days, and maybe the lack of sleep, have made me paranoid. "Fuck."

"I think I know where they are, but I don't want to go by myself. Please, Caerulean, come with me to check it out. I just need answers."

She knows me too well, there is no way I would turn

down her request for company on a potentially dangerous mission like this. "Okay."

"Alright then, follow me."

"What will we do when – *if* – we find them?"

"... Actually, I don't know."

"Confront them?"

"Maybe... I guess it depends on what they're doing."

Suddenly, as though we just walked through an invisible barrier, the labyrinth is filled with the noises and echoes of fervent conversation. I hear O'Keefe's voice among the few that are speaking.

*Grab that one! Move them over here.*

*Hurry up, we only have so much time before the window closes.*

Keeler slows, and I match her pace. We step quietly around some of the twisting passages and then, like sunrise spilling over the horizon, I catch a glimpse of the orange glow of a fire. We are just at the edges of the light and shadow cast by the flame. Keeler pauses and looks at me. I duck down, walking as low as I can, and Keeler follows. I want to tell her to lead; she's the one who knows this place, not me. But I don't.

After a few moments, I begin to wonder if maybe I've adopted some instinctual understanding of how this underground maze-like system of walkways works. Inside of me there grows a deep sense of direction – I know for a *fact* I'm not doubling back on myself, not leading us in circles. I might even be able to lead us all the way out of here, if we need to run. Still, as we edge closer and closer to the clearing where O'Keefe and the others are, I feel an even more primal instinct urging me to run far, far away from here.

Slowly, we inch our way around the labyrinthian corri-

dors until we can see the circle of people around the bonfire in the small clearing. The heat from the flames makes me sweat, but the light seems cold. It's bright, too bright even, but the flames seem like ice. Around them stand O'Keefe, some of the staff, and, to my bewilderment, Brian and Sara-bella. Their hands are all linked, and they are swaying left and right around the flames, I almost walk toward them, but Keeler pulls me back behind a wall and presses a finger to her lips. Then, she points. I look, and my heart sinks.

A pile of rubble shifts and groans, and I realize that it is, in fact, not a pile of rubble, but a person, possibly a partygoer, crumpled on the ground. There are others just like them, all around the fire. I count fifteen... eighteen... there are probably more, but I can't see them. Brian drags another from the shadows and lays them in the fire's glow. Thick fluid drains from the ill-fated partygoers down the sloped floor and into the center of the clearing. Like Keeler and myself, the stuff winds its way through maze-like engraved concentric circles, ending at the bonfire. In the wavering shadow, I see what looks like Avaris' coat, spattered with ichor.

The flames take on a greenish hue as the pooling blood slowly feeds into the fire. O'Keefe begins a moaning chant, and the others follow suit. I feel something pulling inside of me, beckoning me toward them – and in my gut, the urge swells to *run* far, far away. Their voices grow louder and louder, enveloping my mind in another kind of haze. I feel Keeler tugging on my arm, pulling me away, but I can't help the urge to go join them, to submit myself to whatever arcane ritual is taking place right here, under the desert surrounding the castle.

Suddenly, a sharp white light splits my vision, and I hear a familiar voice calling to me.

*Fight it, Caerulean.*

It's almost as though the voice is my own. It comes from within me, but I know it is not actually me. It's deeper, more rich, thick and gravel-worn, ancient and timeless. Hungry. Wanton, but chained down. Deprived. I know its owner intimately, though we have not spoken in centuries. I am beginning to *remember*.

I snap into wakefulness and realize I've wandered into the clearing. The group is looking at me expectantly. Keeler is watching, cowered behind a half-wall.

"Join us," O'Keefe says to me.

"No," I say, keenly aware of what seems like a life-ending danger with its sights set on me.

"You must," she started. "If we don't bind you then—"

A voice, *the voice*, booms in my head, trampling over Madame O'Keefe's attempts to reason with me. *Don't listen to them. If they bind us, we will suffer another thousand years of this same torment, of forgetfulness, of mindless purgatory, of isolation.*

"This has to end," I say. I'm shaking now, angry, and I get the sense that something – power? – is beginning to swell in my chest. The earth around us shakes. I feel something, like the breaking of chains. I feel the blurry edges of recognition, of understanding, of awareness. I can almost taste the answer to the question I did not know I had until now. I can almost see the hazy visions of my past. I can almost smell the truth of my stunted existence. "I won't do this anymore."

"You must remember the oath you swore," Brian says, "to protect all of us, to maintain the existence of our home. To keep us from eternal night."

"You had so much power, once," I say, remembering the fantastical, horrendous form that inhabits Brian's body. Its visage in my mind grows like a glowing shadow, eyes glisten-

ing, teeth sharp in a wide ear-to-ear grin. “You let your wings be broken, and now you beg me – you beg *him* – to do the same. To castrate himself like you have. To abandon his true purpose.” It’s Abaddon speaking, through me.

“Caerulean, you were made to be a vessel, that is your true purpose” Sarabella pleads.

“I was made to be a warrior,” I correct her, “and your *cause* turned me into a vessel. This ends tonight. I break free, tonight.”

Scenes from my history with them flood the front of my mind, and the past centuries at the castle seem almost meaningless in comparison to the millenia we’d spent together, fighting for... for what? Something obscured our original purpose in my mind. But I do know that they lured me here, to the castle, to continue my contract. I know that I do not want it anymore, this task of being a vessel. I want to be a person again, to live my life, to see my family. My heart does a triple beat. My family. Are they even alive anymore?

*They can’t bind us if you don’t consent*, the voice says in my mind pushing itself to the front of my thoughts.

“Caerulean, please... it’s clouding your mind. Remember your promise. Remember *our* promise...”

Brian. I loved him once. I get the sense that, in some way, I never stopped. Our bond was more than this promise we made to The Circle; there is some deep, intimate closeness between us that seemingly still remains. It pulls on my heart, and for a moment, I almost give in.

But then I am reminded, perhaps by Abaddon but this time I am not sure. If I agree to this, I can’t have him. We can’t have each other. We’re doomed to be alone for eternity, trapped with these beasts inside us until the next sealing ceremony. And that cycle will continue. Forever.

“I will not keep doing this. I’m done. Come find me,

Brian, when your time is up.” I turn and run, and Keeler trails behind me. I’m relieved to realize that I have no lingering memories of her comparably muted aura from before my time at the castle.

Behind us, O’Keefe’s voice echoes in chastisement, “No! Brian, don’t leave the circle–” and then a clattering of metal and stone.

## THE ESCAPE

Abaddon's ancient voice leads me to the exit. *Abaddon*. His name echoes in my mind as recognition sizzles in the front of my brain. He sounds stronger now, like he's waking up after a long winter's sleep. We pass through the banquet hall, where our guests have eaten themselves into a coma. A staff member drags one from their seat and down toward the labyrinth. We race through the halls toward my room, trailed by Boston who runs beside Keeler and asks what's going on. We end in my room, and I find myself frantically packing my things.

"What happened back there, Caerulean?"

*You can trust her.* Abaddon's voice assures me. I am skeptical.

"It's a lot to explain but... the point is, I need to get out of here, fast."

"Can we have *some* details?" Boston asks, bringing my writing implements from my desk in an effort to help me pack. Their aura is subdued like Keeler's.

"I'm still sorting the details out myself, but after tonight I can be a free man," I pull Avaris' card out of its hiding place

and scan it into my personal account using the data slate I keep hidden beneath my mattress. After the funds populate, I transfer all of my credits to a separate account I keep for emergencies only, under the name of another deceased client who gave me the information as a part of their will. In total, it's enough to give me a quiet life on the edges of civilization – exactly what I want.

A heavy silence descends and Boston glances at Keeler. "We were going to try and take him anyway," they reason.

Keeler nods and turns to me, "I maybe have a way to help you," she says, hesitantly.

"I don't think you want to help me, Keeler. I'm making some pretty big enemies with my choice to leave."

"We agreed to work for Roz if she took us out of here tonight and paid competitive wages," Boston says. "She should be arriving in a few moments—"

"If she's not here already," Keeler finishes. "There's no way you could call in a transport and escape in time."

"I can start on foot," I say, tossing on my old traveling gear.

"That's a terrible idea," Boston chides as I strap my rucksack to my back.

"You'll die out there, Caerulean," Keeler says, stopping me with a hand on my chest. "Please, let us help you. Roz will protect us from whatever enemies you make."

"It's true, she's got the resources. And she wants you. Desperately," Boston adds.

They can't possibly know the danger they're up against – but then again, my mind is still foggy, so neither can I. Abaddon's voice is silent. "Fine," I concede.

"Quickly, then," Keeler says, motioning to her counterpart. "Boston and I will change clothes and meet you at the back gate by the stables."

I do what I can to absorb my last moments in the castle, but there's not time to linger. The place is suspiciously quiet, as the guests and courtesans who drank and ate rest deeply in the banquet hall. I walk past the hallway where the chapel and throne room are and cross through the corridor that skirts the edges of the courtyard.

The courtyard is still. Even the fish in the pond and the gourds growing on the ground seem to be in some kind of premature torpor. The night is windless, but there is a biting chill on the desert night air. The brazier is cold, flames from our evening ritual long gone. I run down the steps that lead into the garden and back up another set of steps into the stable.

I step quickly and quietly through their gated enclosure and out the main gates of the livestock housing. The cloudless desert sky reveals stars like scattered diamonds glittering above the still dunes. A coach approaches to my right, and I recognize it as belonging to Roz. It stops, and the door swings open.

Roz is not inside – in fact, the coach itself is empty – but a sweet, warmth wafts from the large cabin. I climb in, and am joined by Boston and Keeler mere moments later. The coach jostles as they load up, and takes off in a rush as soon as they take their seats.

The castle fades in the distance, and I find myself dozing off, feeling peaceful for the first time in close to one thousand years. I sleep dreamlessly, roused some hours later by the rising sun. I stare out the window for a while, head still resting against the wall of the carriage. Steam fogs the windows, giving the world outside an ethereal glow.

"No one followed us," Keeler says when she notices my eyes open. "Did you sleep well?"

I nod. I'm thirsty. "How much longer?"

Boston snores from their place beside Keeler. They're curled up against her, head rested in her lap, bare feet dangling off the bench. Boston and Keeler are both dressed in sand-brown garb, quite similar to mine. I pull my hood up over my head, the cabin is warmer than outside, but a draft wafts up from the floorboards.

"A few hours still. The driver sent down hot tea about ten minutes ago. Would you like some?"

"That sounds amazing."

Fragrant Oolong fills my senses as I pour myself a cup from the forest green and polished brass set placed on the stabilized table at the center of the carriage. The water has cooled just enough for me to drink it right away. I place it to my lips and take a long, slow sip and hum my approval.

"Roz promised us tea from every place imaginable," Keeler says, stroking Boston's hair absently.

"I won't be able to stay," I remind her.

"You aren't bound to her like we are. You're a guest. But you may find you would rather not leave. The delights of the Vanderlescent Wing are impeccable."

"She's a rich woman, marrying a rich monarch, but that wealth comes with a price," I caution my friend.

"Maybe it's worth it," she says quietly, gazing out into the golden morning. After a pause, she looks at me and asks, "So are you going to tell me what happened last night?"

I sigh. "To be honest, I'm still piecing it together myself."

We ride in silence the rest of the way to Roz's home by the sea.

## THE OCEAN

The sun continues to rise and I notice that the desert has given way to a different kind of sand. Sparse trees dot the path around us, accompanied by thorny shrubs and succulents. A gray haze soon caps the horizon, and the beautiful gray of marine layer lingers in the morning sky. The air feels damp now, a wet kind of cool seeps in from the drafty areas of the carriage. I find myself smiling as, when I look out the rear window, I can no longer see the dunes that separate the castle from the rest of the world. The mountain range that holds the dunes looms tall in the distance, but it is just that – *distant*. We're nearing the end of our journey, and the electric scent of salt and ozone dances quietly on the air.

Guards welcome us through the glittering, golden gates and our carriage is directed toward the rear of the palace where the concubine cohort resides. We stop near a cliff and step out of the carriage to the hypnotic sound of crashing waves. A bird cries in the distance, and the footman hands us our rucksacks. Before I have the chance to notice her, Roz speaks.

"So, they *did* manage to get you to come along."

"Roz, it's so good to see you." It's the truth.

"Good work Boston, Keeler," Roz says, pulling the pair into a strong hug. "How was your journey?"

"Smooth, we got some rest," Keeler says, rubbing Boston's arm gently.

"Good. The staff will help you get set up in your suites in the Cliff House," Roz says with a gentle smile.

"I won't be staying long," I say as two maids lead Keeler and Boston away.

Roz steps closer and smiles, "I understand. Your brother, right?"

My heart stutters for a moment. I don't even know if he's still alive. "Right."

"Is there anything I can do?" she asks.

I shake my head. "You've already done so much. I just need to rest a few hours and figure out what I'm going to do next." She and I walk side by side for a while, following a path that leads down the edge of the cliff to a beach.

"So what happened?"

"So much... so much." I catch her up on the night's events, on my realization that I've got a whole history that had been wiped from my memory. That I have a demon using my flesh for a house. She listens patiently and doesn't say much.

"You should take off your shoes," she tells me as we reach the threshold between stone and sand, "This is unlike any sand you've ever set foot on." She slides off her slippers and steps toward the sea. "It's soft and cool."

I want to ask her what she thinks about all the things I just told her. But I know how her mind works; she's absorbing the information, thinking it all through, parsing it. She'll ask questions when she's ready.

I am pleasantly surprised by the texture that meets my

newly bare feet. "Wow. You're right," I say to her, but by the time I look up, she's halfway to the water. The waves are much louder down here, and I wonder if she can even hear me from so far down the beach. Quietly, soaking in the beautiful seaside air, I follow her to the sea.

She stops at the edge and turns to me. "Have you ever seen the ocean before?"

"I think I have," I say, "But it's been so long."

She smiles and pulls her wispy white dress off over her head. Her skin prickles in the cool air. "Join me," she says, not looking back as she wades into the rising and falling waves.

*Take her*, Abaddon's voice reminds me that I'm not alone in my own mind anymore. He growls softly inside of me, and I feel a longing take hold in my chest, lust pulling at my loins.

I remove my travel gear with some effort. I am eager to wash off the events of the past few days. My first few steps into the ocean are rewarded with a chill that travels up my spine. It's cool, but not cold. A few more steps in, and the water begins to feel almost warm against the cool morning breeze. I pause for a moment in the waist-high water, watching the waves crash some way out. The water rises, and the seafoam splashes up my sides to my chest. I take a deep breath and submerge myself, lingering long enough to feel the gentle sway and pull of salt and sand against my skin.

## THE CHOICE

When I surface, Roz is before me, wet platinum hair loose but slicked back, soft curve of her breasts sitting just above the waterline. "When I left you there at the castle, I thought I was leaving you for good."

"I know," I say.

"Can I kiss you?"

"Roz, you know I'm not staying."

"I know. I... I want to kiss you as equals. As two people who just... want each other."

*Your lust for her is undeniable*, Abaddon chastises me for my restraint. *Give in*.

"I want so much more of you than just your lips—" I confess.

Before I can finish, she leans in and cups my face, pulling me toward her. Our warm bodies press together in the cool water, and her lips press, quivering, into mine. For a moment, I am lost in the sensations. Lips part, tongues dance. Erect nipples graze bare skin. Hands reach and wander. Bodies strain against each other as though we can't get close enough.

My fingers bring her higher, higher, to the peak of ecstasy. She closes around me, moans and sighs feeding my lust. She spirals down from her climax, and our bodies pull tightly together again, tongues speaking wordlessly to each other in our passion. After some time, we pull away to catch our breath.

“–I want your friendship,” I finish, looking into her eyes.

Her cheeks are flushed a ruddy rose pink. “Is that all you want?”

The water swirls around us, teasing me with its touch. I steel myself against my own arousal and run my thumb over Roz’s pink lips. “There are so many things I want, Roz, but I can’t even remember half of them. I have to figure out my life before I can commit to anything like–”

“Like a lifetime as my first and favorite?” She finishes for me, somewhat coldly. She looks away from me, toward the horizon. When she looks back, her eyes search mine, but I don’t know what she’s looking for. “What if I let you go, free to come and go as you please?”

“I would hate to agree to something like that before I know myself. There are still so many parts of me just... missing. Besides, how would that be fair to you? What if I’m gone for decades?”

She thinks for a moment, accepting my words. “You want my friendship.”

“Among other things, yes.”

“Do you kiss your friends?”

“As you can attest, I do much more than that with my friends.”

She nods, her face settling into something resembling resolve. Her eyes meet mine, and the corners of her lips tug into the suggestion of a smile. “I want to show you something. Follow me.”

So I follow her as she strides purposefully, beautifully, out of the ocean and picks up her dress. There is no time for the effort of donning my clothes again. We both arrive naked but dry, at the top of the cliff, greeted by the staff with robes. I wonder how often she takes visitors and concubines down to the shore.

She leads me wordlessly through the center of the Cliff House. The building has three floors, with something of an enclosed courtyard at the center, lined with bedrooms and shoji windows that let in the cool sea breeze. The top is domed with an elegantly painted fresco, and the floor is decorated with verdant plants, exotic foods, and pillowed seating in all manner of pleasant colors. The concubines mill about, some chattering amongst themselves, others sipping tea or working on crafts, all cheerful and carefree. For a moment, I am tempted to accept Roz’s offer.

We exit into an open courtyard and cross through a set of doors into the main palace. We pass by servants and officials on our route through the hallway with vaulted arches for a ceiling. It’s almost overwhelming. The castle was never this busy, even at its busiest, and it was not nearly so well kept as this one. The floors and walls of this palace practically shine, and every curtain and rug is clean and placed *just so*.

She leads me through a set of green double doors and into a large but cozy library, which has almost the same layout as the Cliff House and is overfull with books and parchment. At the center of the place is a dark oak desk with a matching book stand. A golden beam of sunlight shines on the ornate pages of the book splayed out on the stand. The illuminated designs shimmer almost imperceptibly.

“It’s beautiful,” I say as we approach the book. The letters in it call to me. My eyes trace over the familiar



figures, and I get the sense that I can read them and know their meaning, though the language itself seems foreign.

"It's special," she says, taking my hand. "This book has special powers, Caerulean. I want to use it to help you."

"Oh?" I ask, caution beating in my chest. I can practically feel Abaddon listening in.

"As you know, I have a passion for... well, for many things, but chief among those is *knowledge*," Roz begins. I nod, and she continues. "As you recounted the events of the past evening, I could not help but be reminded of all the things I've read about demonology. You say that you declined the binding ceremony, but Abaddon is still inside of you. Is that right?"

"Yes. He speaks to me, sometimes."

"I see. Our bodies are not meant to hold such immense power on their own. However, demons who have been bound must be freed in order to leave the vessel they reside in."

*It's true*, Abaddon says.

"If you don't expel this demon, he will remain inside of you. But without the protective magick of the binding ceremony, he will rot your body and mind away until you die a gruesome, sickly, morbid death."

*This is also true*, Apology tinges the edge of his words.

I think on it for a moment. To be free of the burden of housing an all-powerful being? To be free of what would likely be a constant pursuit by O'Keefe and her goons? "Are you offering this to me?"

Roz nods. "To you, and to Abaddon."

*What are her terms?* He seems cautious.

"Abaddon wants to know what the terms are. I'd say I do, too."

"For you, Caerulean, none. You are my friend, and I can see how this is weighing on you."

"And for Abaddon?"

"He would be bound to me."

"Are you sure you want that?"

"I know a way to do it where I retain my memories – and Abaddon would regain his power. All you need to do, Caerulean, is accept my offer."

## THE CHANGE

The atmosphere in the library is thick this time. Is it suspense? Is it fear? Is it the weight of the choice I'm making? Roz takes her time carefully setting up the ritual space. We're still in our robes, apparently it's better that way.

She places an array of esoteric artifacts in concentric circles. Obsidian stones, charred herbs, runes inked on parchment, all find their place between the tall, wide, white pillar candles. I can smell something ancient and fresh in the air as she uses her hand to sprinkle water from the crystal bowl at the center of the space. She pauses at me, taking a moment to anoint my forehead and chest with the scented water.

When she's complete, she takes my hand and leads me to the center of the innermost circle.

"Lie down with your head there and your feet here," she instructs. I lay down, but she must sense my hesitation. "It will only work if you truly want it," she says. Her voice is melodic, soothing, without even a hint of admonishment. I settle in.

She begins to chant, waving her fingers over me, stirring

the spirits and the air around me. At her command, a breeze begins to ruffle the papers in the room. Her voice grows louder, mixing in with its own echoes to form word within words within words. The air pulls downward, sinking into a damp chill as mist begins to form around us.

Images, some familiar, some far removed from me, begin to flicker in my mind's eye, crescendoing in a clash of vibrant and confusing colors. Pain suddenly sears my chest and head where Roz marked me with the water. It's burning now, but not just my skin. I feel the burn descend deep into me, like a white-hot ripping sensation, like an anchor descending through impossibly dark depths. I can't breathe!

Roz's chanting grows more fervent, and suddenly I surface. The pain is replaced by euphoric, orgasmic sensations that wrack my body. I sense him here and there, Abaddon, lingering in the room, pulling his tendrils from my soul and reaching for a foothold within Roz. I gasp for air, thrown fully into ecstasy now as Abaddon's fullness leaves me entirely. My back arches, and Roz's voice raises in some mix of pleasure and horror; she's weeping, but she does not stop her chanting. With one final, screaming incantation, Abaddon's essence is drawn into Roz. She inhales sharply, and then, the room falls into utter silence.

Panting and sweating from the encounter, I roll onto my side and lean my forehead on Roz's knee. I am sore, but lighter now. After a moment, I open my eyes. Roz stands above me, irises wide and deep abysses. Abaddon is with her now. I feel like I could know it, even if I had not been in the room when he entered her. She's different. Slowly, she rises and offers me a hand up. I take it, shaking as I struggle to my feet.

"How do you feel?" She asks.

I shake my head. "I'm... I'm not sure."

She nods her head. "It may take a few days to sort out your normal self," she concedes. "I have to try one more time. Please, take my offer. I can build you a place here, in the palace."

"I appreciate the offer, Roz, but I..."

"Your brother. I know. You never were one for rest and recuperation," she chuckles. Somehow, I know Abaddon is speaking through her this time. His familiarity with me is unsettling. "Here," they say. I do not know who is speaking now. They reach into their pocket and produce a train ticket. "This will take you where you need to go."

Stunned, I reach for it. "This is too much," I begin, but trail off as my fingers touch the delicate fabric of the ticket.

"It's the least we could do, after everything."

I take it, staring at its shimmering glory. "And this will take me to—"

"The Seen Realm. Your brother is more likely to be there than here." It's Abaddon this time; only he could have such knowledge. "Once you pass the veil," he continues, "you will not be able to return. Not until your spirit is released from your spoiled and rotting flesh. You will be bound to the rules of the Seen Realm. That place, with all its perils and sterility, is your best chance at finding him."

I turn the ticket over in my hands, feeling the weight of this decision. The Otherworld is all I have known. The Seen Realm is a deadzone, a magickless place trapped in linear time. I shake my head. "I need to find him. Even if he's there."

Roz reaches out and touches my arm. "You will forget me. You will forget this place. I will miss you tremendously." She wraps me in a warm embrace. I can feel Abaddon there, too, holding me. I marvel at the harmonious balance of power and sweetness in them.

"Roz," I say, pulling away to wipe a stray tear from my cheek, "what the two of you have done for me today is more than I could ever repay. But I have to ask one more favor. Will you tell Keeler and Boston for me? I don't think I have the heart for any more goodbyes."

They nod and offer a gentle, if wavering, smile. "Of course. May the winds of the Otherworld guide you safely in the Seen Realm. Let's get you on that train."

## THE DAMNED

There are many modes of travel between the castle and the rest of the Otherworld. For those traveling with others, the most accessible option is airship. For those with the means to travel solo, it's by carriage along the timeless and well-maintained stone pathways that branch out from the place to the nearby cities. But for the most wealthy, especially those who do not wish to make a stop at the castle grounds, the best route is by train.

I have often watched the Gilded Train from afar. The view from the castle is limited, but the trains pass by often enough that castle-dwellers and visitors alike can watch them weave through the mountains for a few minutes around sunrise. The gold trim always glints in the dawn in such a way as to make the train appear to be moving by magick instead of steam.

Now, up close, the train's glamour seems almost subdued. There are dings and scuffs along the side panels, and the steam has stained some of it green. The inside is pleasant enough. The seating is plush, the din of travelers is far from overwhelming, it's not as stuffy as one might

imagine a train being. I feel somewhat out of place in my scraggly traveler's clothes – the other passengers are dressed to the nines in chains and waistcoats and jackets. But, only a few of them stare at me as I find my seat and settle in.

With a whistle and a lurch, the train rolls into motion. We move quickly along the tracks, and soon the city is far behind us. I can feel the rhythmic motion of the locomotive lulling me into something of a trance, and the serene atmosphere inside the compartment draws down my anxieties until I fall into a gentle sleep.

I do not know how long I've rested when a loud crashing sound startles me awake. Disoriented, at first I think the train has come to a stop. But one glance out the windows shakes me from my sleepy-haze. The train is hurtling forward as fast as ever. Turmoil unfolds in the towns we're passing through. Dark clouds form on the horizon, churning the sky into a maelstrom of despair. Jagged bolts of lightning reach out and strike trees and buildings, setting them alight with hungry green flames.

None of the passengers seem to care. They notice, they watch, they comment and whisper, but none thinks to call an end to it. None thinks to stop the train and help those people running toward us, begging us to take them away from the torment of the places they once called home. A sinking feeling gnaws at my gut, stinging sharply at my chest with guilt.

There is no voice inside of me now to remind me that I am doing the right thing; to remind me that Abaddon does not need to be bound; to remind me that my brother is waiting for me. My brother. I try to picture him. I try to call forth his name in my mind.

The train whistle blows, piercing through my thoughts. We are approaching the veil – the ethereal membrane that

separates the Otherworld from the Seen Realm. The landscape outside begins to blur, the calamities of the Otherworld melding into a cascade of colors and emotions. I take a deep breath and clutch the edge of my seat.

*It's not my problem, anymore.* I think.

And then, just the shapes of the Seen Realm begin to form themselves out of the chaotic blend of colors and noise, we see that the pandemonium has spilled from our world into theirs. People run frantically toward the train, through it even, as hot lava, ash, smoke, and rocks spew violently from a very close volcano. The air is suffocating and toxic. I can feel myself dying. The train screeches to a halt as lava and stones pepper the tracks.

After a short pause, I stand and begin to push my way out of the traincar alongside other terrified passengers. The air is noxious and boiling hot. Before I can reach the door, I'm thrown forward as the train begins moving in reverse, as if pulled by some tremendous force from behind. It lurches in a powerful heave-ho fashion until all of the cars, even the engine, are behind the veil. As I lay on the floor of the compartment amidst others like me, I feel my tissues reviving. I did not set foot on the surface of the Seen Realm; I have returned to the Otherworld.

But there is no time for rest, as the traincar is lifted into the air and we tumble out of the doors and windows, falling way too far, onto the grassy knoll beside the tracks. I hit the ground hard and gasp for air through burning lungs. I roll onto my back just in time to see them, emerging from the smoky haze. Twelve beings of ethereal, terrifying beauty came toward me, all masses of wings and faces and eyes and mists. Their presence fills the air with an electric charge.

They hover over me as the other passengers scatter, and

a booming voice like an eerie chorus of harmonies shakes the land, "You will not abandon your duties, Seraphiel."

The name is foreign, though I know that it is speaking to me. "You're too late!" I yell back, keenly aware of how small and weak I sound.

"You bound Abaddon into the body of a lesser vessel. Now he wreaks havoc on this land and all the others," another said, its countless eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"Roz asked to have him bound to her!" I respond. "She wants it; I don't!"

A third being, a massive swirling entity of flames and smoke, encircles me. Its mistlike touch is an unnerving mixture of searing heat and bone chill. "You poor creature. So tired. So burdened. Even still, you cannot make such a choice without bearing the consequences. It will *always* be your problem."

Before I can even parse its strange mixture of sarcasm and pity, or the fact that this thing seems to be able to see into my thoughts, I am ensnared in a cage of light and sound. The cacophony overwhelms me, blinding me with a searing blue-white light. I feel myself lifted from the ground, and when I can see again, the landscape below us is shrinking so rapidly. I hope that if they do decide to let me go, it will not be from up here.

## THE CIRCLE

I awake bound in chains that resonate restraint onto my soul as well as my body. Within mere moments of opening my eyes, I am enveloped by a disorienting whirl of colors. The world spins around me and in a moment of dizzying clarity, I find myself in a familiar setting – a vast, expansive library.

For a moment, I think that this is Roz's library, but it dawns on me almost immediately that this is the most resplendent library I have ever seen. Even one thousand of Roz's libraries combined could not compare to the magnificence of the millions upon millions of rows of ethereal books hanging delicately in the air around me, their pages whispering forgotten tales and arcane secrets.

It's oddly comforting to be back here. *Back* here? I try to jog my own memory by glancing around, taking as much in as I can. Everything is illuminated in a delicate blue-white light, including what I can see of myself. There is no ground or ceiling, no evident walls or doors. It's infinite. When have I visited such an impossible place?

In a blink, the assembly of angels appears around me. The twelve haunting beings that captured me and brought

me here now sit and stare at me expectantly. I can feel distinct pulses, like auras, resonating from them and touching my soul, much in the same way Abaddon had when he left me and moved into Roz's vessel. I understand these sensations exactly as I had Abaddon's – with recognition, with familiarity. Countless names come to me through them, as they have lived at least hundred lives each, but some stand out and pull at my attention.

The most powerful and undeniable pulse comes from a magnificent, ethereal figure. Its form is a radiant cascade of light and shadow, wings spanning out in an awe-inspiring display. With a painful jolt of grief and joy, the very core of my being recognizes this entity.

"B-Brian?" I stammer out.

Brian says nothing. He's waiting for me to take it all in.

Beside him stands O'Keefe, her form a swirling tempest of colors and emotions. Sarabella is to her left, a beautiful blend of sun and moon, her aura emanating warmth and mystery. Eloquex vibrates around them, a sentient vortex of knowledge and wisdom. And then, to my utter surprise, Avaris makes their presence known to me. Their aura is a dance of fire and ice.

"Avaris, I thought you were sacrificed... I thought you were –"

"In vessel, only," they hum. "For us, essence is eternal. I'm sorry you don't remember. I, too, forgot myself, but the others brought me back in full force."

The others present to me with vague familiarity, but we've not known each other in this lifetime. In *this* lifetime? Have I lived others?

"All your questions will be answered in due time," Brian's voice echoes, a symphony of harmonies. "Welcome to the Sanctum of the Celestials. Welcome home."

My cheeks are wet with tears, but I don't know why I am crying.

Eloquex shifts, and speaks in a voice like a thousand whispers. "The Seen Realm and the Otherworld are in peril because of your choices."

Fear grips my throat. "I'm so tired of fighting." My voice comes out choked. I don't know why I'm saying it. I haven't been fighting anything. "I just... my brother..."

"You have been deceived," Sarabella chimes, with her soft sun-moon glow and eyes full of compassion.

"We have brought you here to help you," adds O'Keefe, her tempestuous form calming for a moment.

Brian speaks gently, his radiant form now standing directly before me, "Intentions matter little when destiny is at play. Your journey, our journeys, are part of a grander design. You do not suffer without cause. You should not struggle alone."

I feel myself soften, and something nameless but full breaks through to my surface. "What must I do?"

Avaris approaches, their fiery-icy form reaching out to touch my chains. As they do, the chains cool and loosen slightly, still binding, but the pain has eased. "Let us help you remember."

## THE TRUTH

Brian approaches me, holding an intricate silver helmet, Its design is alien, an amalgamation of advanced technology and Otherworldly craft. Tiny gemstones glint in its surface, each pulsing with its own rhythm, connected by lines of pure energy. "This," Brian says, "is the Helm of Recollection. It will reveal all that Abaddon blocked from your mind."

I lock eyes with Brian. I know he senses the yearning question inside of me. *How much of it was real?*

"The ritual will leave behind only the whole truth," he assures me.

Brian places the helmet on my head and the gemstones light up, illuminating the angelic faces and the books surrounding us with a kaleidoscope of multicolored light. It's not painful, but it is certainly not pleasant, as constellations of memories begin to light up inside my mind. The figures around me watch intently as each pulse reveals fragments of obscured memories, lost emotions, red herrings, and hidden truths within me. But even as more is illuminated, I only get tastes and touches, whiffs and glances. By

the end of it, I feel closer to something – divinity, perhaps – but filled now with so many more questions.

After what feels like an eternity, the helmet finally dims, its task complete. An adjacent contraption, a silver machine with rotating arms and spheres, springs to life. It begins to extract and combine some mystical, ethereal substances, apparently guided in its alchemical processes by the information retrieved from the Helm of Recollection. Brian removes the thing from my head while the contraption does its work. He wipes the sweat from my brow and looks sweetly into my face. My heart pounds but I am less afraid now.

Steam rises from the machine, and a small glass vial emerges. Brian takes it and dips his fingers into the luminescent pink elixir. It pulses with light at his touch. With deliberate grace, he paints the potion onto his lips, each stroke accentuating their fullness and color. My heart races, and the room, the chains, and even the other beings there with us seem to melt away as Brian leans down, his gaze locked with mine.

With the gentlest of pressures, his lips brush mine. I know instantly that this is not just a kiss – it is an invocation, a bridge between past and present. A restoration of truth and beauty and honor. As our lips part, his voice, soft and haunting, whispers into my ear.

“Remember, my love.”

Images cascade in my mind. Seven Circles for seven demons, all bound to angels like me, all concealed in flesh prisons to protect the sacred balance between the realms. Abaddon’s treachery, his manipulation, the fateful moment when his powerful spell was cast, erasing my memories as he and I were both bound to the demi-mortal vessel of an innocent: the castle-bound courtesan. The protections The

Circle – *our* circle, *Seraphiel* – had put in place to stop it. My doubts about my role as the one to keep him contained. My fear that *Seraphiel* would not be a strong enough team to keep this up for all eternity.

The chains loose and I stand on the air, feeling the flesh vessel dissolve into the ether, piece by piece. With him goes the sense of duty I held to my – no, to *his* – brother, Ioan. A rush of emotions overflows from my soul – relief, love, anger, determination. My eyes land on Brian’s perfect form.

“What took you so long?” I ask.

He pulls me into his arms, his countenance a mix of relief and sorrow. “Abaddon’s spell was intricate. It could only be broken at the end of the 999 years – or else we risked losing you.”

I can feel this body breaking down, metamorphosing into something new and familiar. I double over, feeling my energy bow and break the back of the flesh vessel. It’s all sinew now, melting and stringing away from my aura. I feel a crunch of gravity pushing and pulling at a finite point inside of my essence, pushing and pulling, squeezing and expanding, faster and faster, heat rising, flushing me to the point of boiling, until –

Stars.

And galaxies.

Quasars.

Nebulae.

Pulsars.

Constellations sew themselves together in an intricate weave to comprise me, steady me, stabilize me into the ethereal harmony of *Seraphiel*.

“I am.” My voice sounds more real than it has in centuries. I rise up, expanding out in a long stretch that encompasses the group. It feels so good to be free of the



vessel. I pull myself together and take in the beauty of my team, my family. “The past is now clear to me, as is our purpose and plan. Abaddon’s treachery must be contained. Our mission must prevail. The seven demons must remain imprisoned and the warp beasts denied their insatiable hunger. We will protect the souls of the innocent. I accept this charge.”

## THE BATTLE

We leave the tranquil library behind and navigate at impossible speeds toward the center of the chaos and destruction: Roz’s palace. Our forms, harmoniously bound, become luminous tendrils that weave through dimensions, a tapestry of divine intent converging upon the damnation wrought by Abaddon.

The palace, once a symbol of sanctuary and power, is now an epicenter of malevolence and despair. As *Seraphiel* approach, we are met with a dark spectacle; Roz, consumed by the abyss of Abaddon, presides over a twisted reality where the veils between realms are being pulled and gnawed at, stretching dangerously thin, threatening to burst open and spill their contents between each other, disgorging nightmarish creatures between celestial divisions.

I see Keeler and Boston laying motionless at the gates, ensnared in a supernatural slumber that seems to permeate every stone, every wail of the wind. Their auras are dim and fragmented, tangled in the grim grip of a curse whose only source could be Abaddon himself. O’Keefe detaches from The Circle to attend to them. She emanates a soft, nurturing

glow, as her energies whisper through the spaces between molecules and penetrate the cursed shroud that envelops our friends. Murmurs of recognition flicker between their sleeping forms, and I see now that they too are part of a larger whole, as celestial beings whose lights had been stifled.

With solemn determination, O'Keefe absorbs Keeler and Boston into her capelike wings and transports them through the threads of reality to a hidden sanctuary. An image comes to mind of a hidden sanctuary, a facility nestled within a dimension as yet untouched by Abaddon's tendrils. There, healing energies, ancient and potent, will labor to cleanse and revive their diminished glories.

The rest of The Circle confront the tempest that is Roz, now barely discernible within the chaotic amalgamation that is Abaddon. The air is thick with desperation and malevolence as the multitudes of trapped souls wail within a vortex of eternal torment. They are bait for the warp beasts who gnaw at the edges of reality's fabric. Twisted spires and haunting screams replace the serene beauty that was Roz's oceanside palace. The waves come as tsunamis of blood now.

Yet, amidst the despair, we remain unbroken, our combined essence forming a bulwark against the tides of chaos. Avaris steps forward, the harbinger of justice and retribution. Their form radiates an aura of indomitable resolve. "Abaddon, your desecration of the realms ends now," they declare, their voice resounding through every molecule, every fragment of existence within the distorted reality.

Roz, or the entity that once was, turns, a maelstrom of anguish and death swirls within the void that consumes her. Her mouth opens, jaw cracking and uncannily agape, and

Abaddon's voice pours out like a dissonant symphony of shattered realities and extinguished stars. "You cannot halt the inevitable."

Sarabella reaches out, resonating a harmonizing frequency that seeks to weave a path through the dissonance and lead the vestiges of Roz out from the rubble. "Roz. You were once so full of love. Do not let oblivion be your legacy."

*Seraphiel*, bound in unity, channel our collective energies to form a tapestry of divine interventions, protections, and countering assaults, seeking to disentangle Roz from Abaddon's suffocating embrace. Amidst the turmoil enveloping the palace, three distinct luminosities begin to converge upon the heart of the maelstrom, where Abaddon seethes. I watch from outside myself as Brian, Eloquex, and I, move in steady harmony, our ethereal dance weaving intricate patterns amidst the discord.

Brian's light coalesces into a blade of pure brilliance. Each swing on Abaddon's tendrils is a call to Roz's true essence, a chance for her to find a foothold in the darkness. The sonorous vibrations channeled by Eloquex counteract, silence even, the cacophonous howls and shrieks emanating from the abyss, disrupting Abaddon's chaotic symphony and destabilizing the force that holds Roz in thrall. And I, galactic winds blown by invisible, infinite wings, blow ripples through the fabric of reality around them. I delve deep into the shared dreamscape, projecting visions of times past, laughter shared, bonds forged throughout Roz's life. I remind her of her *self*, who I had come to know so well through my vessel. It was as though each strike, each counter, each parry was a push and pull between our shared history and the corrosive influence of Abaddon.

Abaddon. He recognizes me and strikes an attack. I dodge his blow and fight back.

*We had a deal, Caerulean.* He is speaking only to me.

*You deceived me!* I yell back, psychically broadcasting his words and mine to the rest of *Seraphiel*.

Brian thrusts his blade into a violent surge of dark energy. Eloquex's chants grow more intense, more fervent. With every tonal shift, every clash of every entity, the walls of the palace shudder and the ground trembles and the sky quakes. At last, I hear her voice. Roz.

"Caerulean?"

"You remember me!" I say, so warmly to her.

"You were an angel? All this time?"

"I'm sorry I hurt you, Roz. It's time to come home."

Abaddon's form quivers, stutters, glitches in and out of existence for a moment.

Roz's voice again, wavering and weak this time, distorted and afraid, "I don't know if I can."

*Seraphiel*, together as one voice united in time with Eloquex's chants which make up the very air at this point, "I'll help you."

The culmination approaches as all of us draw upon our combined strength and unity to converge upon Abaddon in a final, concerted assault. Brian's blade sings as it carves through the maelstrom, Eloquex's voice deepens in a crescendo of harmonious defiance, and I feel myself taking Roz's hand and pulling her out from the abyss itself as the ocean's blood tide rises to cover the entire palace and all the land up to the mountains.

With a deafening roar, a blinding surge of energy emanates from the heart of the conflict. We are immersed in the thick iron of the maroon sea and the world trembles. I pull Roz to my chest and wrap myself around her as the

ocean swallows us deep into its depths. And then, silence. The waters recede, and our feet find land.

Roz is alive, though barely. With heavy breaths and weary eyes, she looks up at us, speechless. The battle for Roz's soul is over, but the war against Abaddon's influence is far from finished.

## THE BINDING

We come together once more as the remnants of Abaddon's energy writhe on the ground like sentient but wounded tentacles. Avaris and Sarabella entwine in a dance that produces a spectral web which rises into the sky and stretches across all horizons to ensnare Abaddon's pieces and parts. For each tendril of darkness that seeks to escape, there is an answering force of light drawing it back, binding it tighter to Avaris and Sarabella's net. O'Keefe returns to bring Roz to the healing place, where Keeler and Boston are recovering. Brian pulls me close.

"I can't believe I forgot my own power," I lament.

"I remembered for you," he says, pressing against me in a comforting way.

"What happens next?" I ask it, even though I know the answer.

"We do it all again. But, better this time."

The process of collecting Abaddon's pieces is arduous. No part of him can be left to fester in the Otherworld. Every now and then, a surge of dark energy lashes out, attempting to break the bonds around it. Abaddon, even in his weak-

ened state, is a formidable adversary. But *Seraphiel* is undeterred, and we do our job well. At the end of it all, Abaddon is ensnared and severely wounded, at least for the time being.

We bring him back to Roz's library, where he'd first left me and joined with her in that unholy union. I find myself staring at him, as he lies neutralized in the confinement we constructed for him. Avaris and Sarabella begin to inscribe sealing runes on the ground around him, and I stand just outside the circle.

"You will not break free again," I say. It's a threat.

He looks up at me, sniveling and impotent. "Try as you might, you can never destroy me, Caerulean. I am older, and wiser, and more powerful than you will ever be. Without me, you have no worth."

Avaris and Sarabella step back and clap three times. The runes take to glowing vibrantly and Abaddon is bound in white-hot bindings that burn him. He screams, and he doesn't stop to take a breath. Avaris casts a silence over him, and we all watch for a moment as his face forms a soundless, endless wail of torment.

Hesitation lingers in the air. We all know what comes next.

"We hold the line," I say, looking at all of them individually. "For every soul, for every realm, for every hope, we hold the line."

O'Keefe translates from the open book on Roz's desk. "Time itself, when corrupted, severs and binds in an eternal, morose dance. It's a binding of soul, the vessel becomes the prison, the jailer, and the jailed. For a millennium."

I look at her and nod. "I understand my purpose." I know the choice coming to me. This time, I will not hesitate.

Tears cascade down Sarabella's cheeks, mirroring the

quiet despair that echoes through each of us. Still, there is a silent understanding that this is the only way. It is *always* the only way. They are not bound to demons, but they are bound to me. Our trust strengthens us against Abaddon's treachery. At least this time, I am determined not to lose my memories.

The preparation for the binding is always a solemn task. Brian carves an intricate seal into the stone beneath our feet, using a dagger that gleams with supernatural brilliance. His essence intertwines with the ancient markings so that, alongside them, his soul adorns the library floor.

For a moment, I worry. "What if Roz comes back and—"

"It's single-use," he reminds me. "Fades when the ritual is done."

Eloquex leads me onto the seal and touches their fingers to my forehead and my chest. "You will remember. You will be." Light sings from those places and I feel a gentle warmth emanating from them to encompass my whole body.

Brian locks eyes with me as the rest of The Circle clasps hands around the seal. I extend my arms outward, palms up, as they begin to chant, revealing my vulnerability, the surrender and fullness with which I accept this fate. Energies swirl through the room, much in the way they had before when Roz did her ritual, but this time I feel at peace. I feel comforted and caressed by the currents of supernatural air here.

I sense myself becoming both the crucible and the catalyst, as a vortex of celestial power spirals up from the seal and encircles me. Abaddon, now a mere spectre of writhing darkness resists the pull of the vortex, but he is no match for *Seraphiel*. I feel him mixing with me now, as we are poured together into another, innocent vessel not unlike the castle-bound courtesan.

In the midst of it all, Brian steps forward. He disintegrates as he passes through the wall of the vortex, then coalesces in front of me. His gentle hand caresses my cheek and his forehead touches mine. For a moment, the maelstrom pauses, perhaps respecting the purity of the moment between us here in the eye of the storm.

"I am so endlessly proud of you. Of us," Brian whispers. "Caerulean, I am eternally yours, across time, space, and circumstance."

I nod, seeing the entirety of the celestial realms reflected in Brian's eyes. "This is not an end Bri. This is a promise. We will find each other again."

Brian nods, tears welling. He brings his lips to mine, not as a farewell, but as a seal of the promise we made amidst this, the birth and death of stars. I place a marker on this moment, to hold steady its place in my memory. His lips are supple, warm, damp. Our bodies are merged for a moment, galaxies lingering between atoms. And then our lips part and he steps back, his form once again dissolving into particles of light as he rejoins the rest of *Seraphiel*.

I can feel it now, Abaddon's fullness inside of me. His darkness, piece by piece, fragment by fragment is becoming absorbed into me like the sand in an hour glass. 999 years. The darkness is almost fully within me and I feel us leaving the seal to be joined with some other vessel as the vanguard of this most vile entity. It feels like going to sleep. Like drifting off to some far away imagined land in my mind.

Through half-closed eyes, I look toward the blur that I know to be my love, and murmur, "I'll see you soon, Bri."

"See you soon, my love." His voice is now a melody woven from the threads of a thousand intertwined souls.

The world fades to black and I can feel in my soul, between the tendrils of Abaddon's grip, the canvas upon

which our story, timeless and enduring, will be inscribed  
again and again, in the ripples across eons.

Proof