

Excerpt

Inside, a colossal chandelier barely illuminated the decaying interior—for all its bulbs, its light was dim. The lobby was dominated by a monolithic reception desk, seemingly carved from a single slab of marble. There was no one behind it. There was no one anywhere. The room smelled like the weeping roses that patterned the rotting carpet, spoiled perfume that clung to the velvet curtains sagging from their rods.

Anya took a step towards the reception desk, only to realize that her first impression of the room was wrong. The desk wasn't marble; it was pale, splintered wood and a stained Plexiglass shield. It was not a chandelier lighting the room, but a bare bulb flickering as it hung from a frayed wire, casting sickening shadows across the brick walls. Metal beams interrupted the ceiling like exposed ribs. The air smelled scorched, electric. Behind the desk, an old CRT monitor only showed static.

"Shit," Anya muttered, shaking her head as the memory of the room she'd walked into dissipated. Why had she thought there was a chandelier? She didn't feel feverish, but things were taking on a vague affect, like nothing looked right because nothing was right.

When she approached the reception desk it all changed again; a grand piano slumped in one corner, a velvet rope cordoning off a doorway to nowhere. The floor was black-and-white checkerboard tile; the desk was black lacquer with sleek, modern lamps in silver and white. She reached for the concierge bell, surprisingly polished.

Instead of ringing, it sighed.

Anya put two fingers to her temple, wondering if this was what it felt like to lose her mind. But she was thinking clearly; she was seeing what she was seeing. She was just getting a migraine, probably. She'd had them before, and while *this* had never happened, surely it was possible. The space wasn't changing, she was just having trouble seeing it, her vision blurring while her brain filled in the blanks.

She was wondering if she should just return to the car and sleep there until morning when a figure emerged from behind a velvet curtain and slid behind the desk.

The thing was, perhaps, human; at least, it had been, once. Now it wore the semblance of a man, like a uniform stretched over bones. Its face was disfigured, any symmetry it may have had long since corrupted. One eye was clouded and milky, staring into nothing, while the other twitched erratically, darting in every direction but forward. The cheeks were sunken, and the jaw hung in a crooked, frozen half-smile, as if gripped by a paralysis too old to name.

Yet, somehow, it *was* a smile— wide, deliberate, too fixed. Not warm. Not even mocking. But present. Anya shuddered, the gaunt face before her reminding her of something she tried to forget. Her mother had not looked this bad, but there was a hint of familiarity in its drawn, hopeless expression.

Sparse, dry strands of black hair clung to its scalp and draped down to its collar like rotting silk threads. Its skin was thin and papery, like filthy gauze stretched over splintered wood, taut in some places and sagging in others, revealing the bones beneath.

It was dressed in a maroon concierge's uniform, tailored and clean — eerily pristine compared to the ruin of the body beneath. A dull brass name tag clung to the lapel, but the engraving had been violently scratched out, leaving only deep gouges where letters should have been.

A wave of revulsion washed over Anya as the creature shuffled closer. Bile rose in her throat, but she swallowed it down and, fighting back her horror, managed to speak. Below the desk, out of the thing's sight, she used her thumbs to make each knuckle pop.