

An abstract painting featuring a dark, triangular figure in the center, set against a background of vibrant blue and purple brushstrokes. The composition is framed by vertical bands of light and dark colors, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall mood is mysterious and contemplative.

ON THE EDGE

BY IRINA VYSOTSKAYA

ON THE EDGE

IRINA VYSOTSKAYA

Copyright © 2021 Irina Vysotskaya

All rights reserved.

CHAPTER ONE



In the darkness of the world stood a grand castle with a divine purpose. Before that castle, two guards stood as always.

Light rose from the ground like a blossom of mist clouding the air. It revealed everything it touched, starting with the ground, cobbled with flat, pressed stone which made up the grand castle's front court. Then the articulated walls that grew tall and lofty.

The ornature of every column and every pillar was vibrant, showing stone-carved vines that mingled with the solidly built exterior, uniting the craftsmanship of the work with the presence of nature frozen in time and cast over in grey.

The two guards were also illuminated at their posts on either side of the large door with a steep pointed archway. On the door were reliefs of plants and various creatures: elementals, animals, angels and big cats.

The first guard, the elder of the two, took in a deep breath, and as he did so the light filled him and gave him a lively color. He was middle aged and stocky and wore a well groomed beard of solid oak-brown. His partner, a protege of sorts and younger in

age, had bright vivid eyes and was as handsome as a nobleman, but with visible naivety.

“And then it was said,” the senior guard spoke, “let there be light....”

“You see?” the other one spoke up. “Darkness came before light. Light could only appear out of the darkness.”

The first guard shook his head confidently. “No. Darkness came after light, because it had nothing to compare itself to in order to even be defined as ‘darkness’.”

The second guard took the position and pondered on it. He cupped his chin with his metal gloved hand and nodded gently. “Maybe there is no ‘before’ or ‘after’. Or maybe it’s the other way around. Darkness was meant to serve only as a backdrop so that we could see light.”

The first guard nodded in appreciation, but not agreement, of the boy’s philosophy. “One thing is for sure - we define all by comparison. If there’s nothing to compare something to, the very thing we describe would not exist.”

Light continued to rise, illuminating more of the castle. As it grew higher the details of the architecture became more incredible. Flying buttresses supported the lofty towers with ramparts and battlements overlooking the lands beyond the thorny walls to the deep inner cloisters and courts of the castle’s immense grounds.

The structure stretched out into one central building with three wings and a large courtyard deep in the center. The castle behind the guards was not visible, but the interiors were just as grand and elegant as the exteriors. The whole castle was plunged in darkness with dim lighting and the walls bore traces of battles and centuries of aging.

“What a boring night,” the younger guard said. “No one goes in. No one comes out.”

“Alright,” the senior began. “I’ll tell you a story about light and darkness. It was told in my hometown for generations.” The younger lad leaned on, intent to listen, and took in the story from its beginning.

The whole castle lit up and transformed into a brighter version of itself, making a quantum leap into a parallel dimension. In the central courtyard a mighty tree took up the most central spot. The tree was lifeless but gigantic, with gnarled boughs reaching upward like the clutching limbs of a great spider on its back. All around it, on the windows and doors, were the reliefs of creatures with large, smooth heads and deep, black eyes in robes with celestial patterns holding their arms up gently towards it.

“There is a tree,” the senior guard precluded, “that contains the secrets of all Creation, of all existence. The tree looks dead, but the legend says that it’s not. Its roots look drained, but its size is still quite amazing. Its fruit is said to give eternal life. The Federation of Light was asked to bring it back to life so it could blossom and bear its fruit again...”

The tree in the courtyard shifted in the wind. Just as if it was listening to the story as well, it leaned its highest, thinnest branches up toward the apex of the castle's halls where the guards were talking, behind so many layers of risen stone and thick glass.

CHAPTER TWO



It happened a long time ago. There was this Bright Castle, marble white. The reliefs of roses and divine planted ivy etched and carved up along the great pillars of the castle walls were covered with living plants, long rosey vines that bloomed with glorious crimson petals.

The mighty tree in the surrounded courtyard looked dead, though massive, and its branches were supported by braces and scaffolds to keep them from bending to the ground or breaking in the wind. At that time the representatives of the galaxy called for a meeting in their ongoing attempts to resurrect the tree.

The Federation of Light was composed of wise beings who acknowledged the power of Light and united through it across the known cosmos. They hailed from different worlds and they were beings altogether vastly different from the regular angelic hosts of the native world where the great tree grew. All kinds were present, from all calls of life.

The Tallmen were true to their name, standing over seven feet high with elongated features, including tall skulls and narrow, inexpressive features. Their smiles and frowns were all made at very sharp angles, and in the course of the event, they were smiling graciously. They mostly held contact with the Devas. Their skin was blue and their bodies were hairless. Their heads

were bigger than a man's on average, and they wore tight bands of glowing metal to dress them up. Their eyes were wide and vivid and they wore gallant white gowns and dress suits.

The Greys were as described, grey skinned. Their heads were the largest in proportion to their bodies. They were once in opposition with the Devas and dressed in dark, skintight contrast to the flowing regality of their cosmic neighbors.

All were gathered together under the same charge of resurrecting the great tree. Conversation was polite across the hall. Many races stuck to interacting with their own kind, but mingled when approached or requested by others. Three more curious ones held their position in a table in the center of the hall. They were the shortest and most frequently passed over in terms of Galactic importance.

One was a Dwarf, a hearty race of stocky humanoids whose fanciful dress and fashion was centered exclusively on their beards, which often grew as long and as wide as their own bodies. The Dwarf attending the gathering had many silver and gold bands throughout the braids of his beard to hold it in place. His hair was finely pressed and ran down his rock-solid head like a mantle of silk.

His friend was a Rabbit, a very curious and persnickety kin from a land of many elementals that had gained the wisdom of cosmic sentience. The Rabbit was the size of a Dwarf, still much shorter than the other races around them but almost tall enough to be human. He stood on his hind legs and dressed in a tailcoat and

top hat for the occasion. His nerves caused him to anxiously look around the room.

Sitting on the table, the smallest, yet one of the wisest of all those gathered, was a Cat. It was an ordinary cat by appearance, with yellow fur and orange stripes, and rested as a Cat would in a crowd of people. The only feature separating it from a pet, aside from its words, was the collar it wore which held a gem that shimmered with the lights of many stars.

The Dwarf glanced around the room and glowered with discomfort when his eyes ran across one of the phantoms.

“I don’t feel comfortable around those ghosts,” the Dwarf said to the Rabbit. He pointed around and the Rabbit careened his head to follow the Dwarf’s thick finger. There he saw a Grey conversing with what looked like a shimmer in the air, a distortion in space that was vaguely shaped like a person.

“They are no ghosts, you silly” the Rabbit said. He adjusted a monocle over his eye and politely cleared his throat. “They are Thooks. You forget about any encounter with them as soon as you break eye contact.”

“Not very handy for establishing a dialogue,” the Dwarf said.

“That’s exactly what they are about to avoid,” the Rabbit noted.

The Thooks were ethereal beings, shapes with thought that passed through things and talked in curious whispers. Their eyes were shining lights that hung in the air. Those with high potency in the magic of the cosmos, such as the Greys, could see

them as they truly were. But as soon as the eye contact broke, all memory of the encounter would be erased. It was an atavism the Thooks couldn't do anything about, as it was their inherent protection mechanism from hostile races they used to encounter in the past.

The Dwarf looked up and leaned against the table with a creak. His finger pointed there too, at a much more vivid ethereal spectacle. Figures snaked and slithered around, freely flying between the sloped pillars that held the ceiling up like branches. They were like flying robes with hoods that covered the whole face in elegant designs and colors, yet they were also faded and ethereal, not unlike the far more phantasmal Thooks.

“What about those ones?” the Dwarf asked. “At the ceiling?”

“Wraiths,” the Rabbit said. “Pure spirit. It’s different. You’ll never forget if you talk to one.” The Dwarf nodded, certain he’d learned the difference for the last time.

The gathering was in a decent swing when the master of ceremonies and mediator between man and nature arrived through the doors to the outer court. Cernunnos, a Feyman, was related to the Rabbit’s kind but much nobler. He was tall with the torso of a man, but the legs of a deer and many sweeping, halo-like antlers. He entered with a wooden cane and looked around the room, as there were still some who failed to recognize his presence.

The Dwarf exhibited the volume of his lungs and strength within his sunken neck with a loud call. "Silence! An announcement is about to be made!"

The large hall fell quiet. Those who could speak stopped. Those that spoke without voices also ceased and turned to the presence of the esteemed being. Everything went quiet except for the clack of the Feyman's staff onto the hewn stone floor and the yawning of the Cat as he stretched himself out on the table. The Dwarf turned an accusing eye at the Cat, but the Cat simply rested back down without a care.

Cernunnos was given room to approach as the crowd gathered around him. Once all were listening, he turned to face as many as he could at once. Even the Wraiths descended and held their place in the air respectfully near the ground, like a falling of drapes that settled over a series of rounded pillars.

"Dear friends," Cernunnos proclaimed in a booming voice. "A balance in nature has to be restored. I summoned you to meditate on how we might accomplish that. It doesn't concern just our beautiful planet. We all know this planet is connected to the entire network of the Universe, with its endless civilizations and life forms. Anyone who can breathe life into this tree will bring balance to nature and bring us the fruit of eternal life."

Cernunnos looked at the crowd. All their words were held back in anticipation. Those who could breathe stifled themselves lest their sighs and heaves of wind distract the lord of nature from speaking. He acknowledged their reverence and continued.

“We've made several attempts, but nothing worked. And we've come to the conclusion that the being who can do it has to come from other dimensions or other worlds.”

One of the winged beings stepped forward, a glorious angelic being. He had long, bright gold hair and brilliant wings, with black tips but downy soft white interiors. Behind his head was a field of light that formed a halo, but it did not leave his face in the shadows. The angel was beautiful and his name was Liream.

“What is required?” he asked.

Cernunnos turned to him and then to the rest of the room to address them all with his answer. “Love. That’s all. Down to the very essence of it. Only unconditional love is known to be of such purity.”

“I see,” Liream said. “I’d be honoured to take part in this adventure.”

Motivated by the angel’s curiosity, the rest of the gathered members of the council exited to the main courtyard. In the middle of the open air was the tree in question. Its long branches were bare and darkened by an eternity of age without growth. The most valued tree in all the Universe had the appearance of one that was neglected and deprived, yet it was surrounded with fineries. The courtyard was vibrant with decorations, fine silks in bright spring colors hung and wafted in the breeze from every awning and over every window.

Liream approached the tree first, out of the promenade, along with a female angel named Alia. She was every bit as beautiful and regal as he was, and her feminine charm was apparent. Where Liream shone with a handsome, regal masculinity, she had a softer glow of chilly blue that covered her body. He nodded to her way as he ushered himself over toward the tree. She responded in a gentle manner and followed him forward.

They approached the tree and kept it between them, then reached out and met each other's hands on either side of the trunk. Once their hands met, a glorious beam of light rose like a pillar and encompassed the tree from the base up to every branch. Suddenly the tree's shape changed. The light around it showed a solid vision as believable as if it were real of the tree returning to life. It had bright green leaves, beautiful pink flower buds, a host of chirping birds and fluttering butterflies.

Everyone beheld the sight of beauty in hypnotic awe. To see the tree so alive filled them with hope and wonder. The only one who did not join the spectacle was Cernunnos, as he knew the truth behind the illusion. Liream and Alia watched it more closely than anyone else and, despite being the source of the spectacle, were just as enamoured with it as the rest. They parted their hands and stepped away. As they did, the pillar of light dropped and faded, as did the appearance of the tree in full bloom. It returned to its cold, lifeless state, leaving the feeling of hope the crowd experienced to slowly fizzle out.

“It’s not about your powers, Liream and Alia,” Cernunnos announced. “It’s about the nature of the frequency that has to awaken the tree.”

The Rabbit stepped forward. “Passing through pure spirit is the key to any transformation.”

Then a Wraith descended just over the Rabbit’s shoulder. “Are you referring to me?” The Rabbit didn’t answer. He shyly turned his eyes away to the ground. “Alright,” the Wraith continued, “but we cannot do it in the way you need it do. We only act on pure spirit. Acting in duality isn’t of our domain. You’ll have to deal with it in your dimension.”

Liream stepped forward and turned to the master of nature. “If the frequency doesn’t match, does that mean we’ll have to address the darkness? Is that what you are saying, Cernunnos?”

“I’m not sure,” Cernunnos replied. “The dark creatures of this planet couldn’t care less about revitalizing the tree of life and wisdom.”

Just then, a Thook passed over the crowd and landed. Its semi-permeable form materialized more clearly. Everyone was shocked to see it doing so, despite many of those present having seen the event many times before. They had simply forgotten, as it was in the nature of the Thooks, to always erase the memory of any interaction with them. The Thooks’ head was large and lumpy, as if the skin of its head was wrapped directly over the folds of a huge brain, complete with a clean line down the middle which divided the two halves.

“Maybe not from this planet, then,” the Thook said. It looked around and allowed the surprise to die down. Everyone would forget him once he removed himself from sight and senses. However, they would not forget what they were told, or what they saw him do. It would be like a shared vision or a dream, and once the Thook disappeared that would be all they have. “We know of one civilization that is willing to participate.”

The Thook brought his narrow, claw-like hands together and expanded them out. Just as the angels did before, a beam of light rose up and filled with colors. It was a projection of a planet laid in the vastness of space, orbiting the star Rigel in the constellation of Orion. Then it showed an alien world full of strange creatures unlike any that were in attendance. They were strong looking, almost brutal, and covered in scaly skin like lizards. These Reptilians lived in expansive cities that were organized and well made. They had clothes, food and culture. The crowd observed this passing as the image drew outward towards space. Their planet was stable and fully settled with cities all over. They had industry and farming and survived against harsh elements across the planet’s surface.

The Thook closed his eyes, and with that, severed his link with tangibility. He returned to his ghastly form and the image he displayed left with him. None remembered that he came or went, but the image was still fresh in their minds. Each being recovered from the event through a daze, with some waking more harshly than others. The Rabbit stumbled in place as if he

had actually dozed off for a second, then perked his head up with a stoic revelation.

“The dark creatures of this planet couldn't care less about revitalizing the tree of life and wisdom,” Rabbit said.

One of the blue skinned Devas spoke up with curiosity. “There are creatures in the outskirts of Orion. I remember seeing them. Like in a dream. But I know they are willing to help.”

“I guess we saw the same dream,” the Rabbit said, smoothing back his ears.

A Grey spoke out as well. “We could activate the portal. We can relate to the Orion frequency.”

“Let's do it,” the Rabbit said conclusively.

“Bad idea,” said the Cat, who rested nearly forgotten at the feet of the Dwarf. The Rabbit looked down, nearly surprised to see the Cat had even bothered to wander out all that way and to speak at all.

“Do you have a better one?” the Rabbit asked.

“I always do,” the Cat said with a yawn. “But I'm not supposed to tell.”

“Shall we do it or not?” the Dwarf said with an impatient wave of his hand. The Grey stepped forward out of the crowd towards the motley trio. Its thin arms and fingers waved through the air. It closed its dark eyes and drifted, half in a trance, and made sweeping steps across the yard. It was guided by its arms, the

rest of its body being tugged along as if a greater force was holding its hands and guiding it from above.

Then it reached out to the Dwarf. He offered his square, meaty hand to the Grey's thin fingers. He felt strung along the same way as the Grey took him over to Cernunnos. The guardian gracefully took the hand offered. Then the Rabbit took the Dwarf's hand, and Cernunnos took Liream's hand, who's hand joined with the Rabbit's near the center of the courtyard.

Once the circle was complete, a movement of energy began. The Wraiths circled overhead to mediate the spiritual bridge as a beam of light began to glow between the joined bodies. The rest of the crowd drew in to observe. The light grew brighter and began to solidify into an image. Before the gathering, one of the Reptilian folk appeared, wearing long sashes assembled like robes, not unlike how the Angels were dressed. He opened his slitted eyes and looked around to behold those who summoned him.

"Thank you for the opportunity to connect with you," the Reptilian spoke in graceful, deep tones.

"Izmaan!" Liream called. The reptile-man turned and smiled through his scaly lips. Liream was smiling joyfully. "We are grateful for the opportunity to connect with you again, brother."

"Brother?" the Rabbit said. He looked up and saw the Reptilian change shape. His scales were replaced by fair skin, the frill on his head transformed into flowing dark hair. Two black wings spread gracefully from his back. His visage was the same as

Liream's, but his hair was dark with a halo crown behind him that radiated with less light, but more glory.

“Yes,” Izmaan said, half turning to face the Rabbit. With one last wink, his lizard eye transformed into the glowing jewel-like eye of an Angel, leaving the Rabbit feeling humbled as he turned to face Liream. “I still carry our light. You thought I left to join the dark side. I am the transformation, brother. And true transformation can not be achieved without becoming what is to be transmuted.”

Liream carefully parted the hands of the circle and approached Izmaan with intensity. He threw his arms out and embraced him in deep, brotherly love. Izmaan was stunned for a moment. Liream settled his eyes into Izmaan’s shoulder, but it was clear that there was deep compassion in his action.

Izmaan tapped Liream’s shoulder, not returning the hug with the same power, but instead moved to part from it as quickly as he could. “You’ll still fight me if you have to,” he said as he stepped back from Liream’s dropping hold.

“And so will you,” Liream said proudly.

“Well,” Izmaan said, fighting off a smile, “back to your issue, then. I guess you have something to ask of me. What is it about?” He turned around until someone stood to answer him. Cernunnos spoke up first.

“An energy issue,” Cernunnos said. He nodded his head toward the tree.

Izmaan turned around and saw the desiccated thing. He looked at it up and down, unamused.

“I see. And you think I can fix it?” He sighed as he looked back to the gathered crowd. “You know too well there has to be an energy flow into it. Opposite charges, but with a common root.”

“This is the key then,” Cernunnos concluded.

The Cat yawned contented. “This is the key.”

Izmaan turned to Liream invitingly. Liream read his intentions and nodded. They went forward with Izmaan as they both approached the tree. Izmaan put his hands upon it first and began whispering secret words of enchanting power. Nothing happened, and the tree did not respond. Then Liream went to the other side and held Izmaan’s hands as he did with Alia. The same phenomena occurred, but much faster. The tree exploded into bright, vibrant life once more and filled the courtyard with euphoric joy.

They stayed that way for a short time, marveling in the spiritual wholeness of the tree’s full beauty. Slowly they parted hands and the tree gradually returned to its deadened state like before, but the hope of its true visage lingered much longer. It took love of a kind most didn’t expect to bring the tree fully back to life, even just for a moment. But it could only last as long as those two willed it, and not a moment more. Once they separated, the spell broke, and left the tree in the same state ever since...

CHAPTER THREE



“What happened next?” the young guard asked. The senior guard snapped out of the trance of his narration and looked to his fledgling cohort with a smirk.

“No one knows,” he said. “The legend stops there. I just know that that was the closest they got to revitalizing the tree. People say it was amazing.”

The young guard shifted in his place and turned to his friend with a skeptical glance. “Look,” he began. But something stopped him. A silhouette of a dark, Angelic beauty appeared from the light and caught their attention.

It was Melinda, a lady of the castle and an aide to its current keeper. She had long, black hair that matched her midnight coat, like a shadow that clung tight to her body. She floated past them, merely entertaining the thought of touching the ground. She saw the young guard’s stare and met it with a wry smirk. The young guard was captivated by her so suddenly that he couldn’t get back to his formal posture. The elder guard was quick to turn to “attention” and gave the lady a wide passage as she flew up over the great gate to the nearest tower.

The young guard looked down as if he’d been snapped out of a wonderful dream. “Do you know her?”

“Not personally,” his elder said. He shrugged his shoulders back to let go of the tension. “Luckily. I don’t mess with Karma Angels. She is the Punishment Angel.”

The young guard took a moment to process that information, hoping it didn’t quite mean what it seemed. “Is she really that dangerous?” He turned around and looked up at the flying shadow that Melinda cast along the sky.

“Just trust me on this,” the senior guard said. “Don’t do it, if you want to live.” He turned up briefly to see Melinda on her way. She was nearly out of sight and into the tower beyond their station when he caught her looking down their way. He turned back to avoid her glance while glaring his subordinate down to do the same. The younger guard complied and turned back to face the field before the castle grounds.

“All Creation is love,” the young guard sighed.

The elder guard mulled the thought over for a moment, and replied “Love is about transcending light and darkness.”

“So,” the younger guard began, “should there be darkness in the experience of love?” He sounded hopeful, as if to justify the danger over approaching Melinda that he still held onto as a passing fancy.

“*Divine* love,” the elder guard said, “is about light and darkness creating a union, becoming one. That cancels out polarities and separation. It seems impossible at first. A cat chasing their own

tail." He looked over and saw that his metaphor struck a nerve with the younger guard. "But they say it's fun."

"Fun?" the young guard said, taking offense to the word. "To make up a dark side just for that sake?"

The elder guard shrugged. "It's a dirty job, but someone has to do it. Without darkness, there's no experience. Without shades there's no painting. Can you imagine a beautiful painting called "White square on white background?"

The younger guard thought about it for a bit, perhaps too long, and finally looked up at the sky with a defeated sense of longing. "Some might like that."

The elder shook his head. A profound silence fell between them. The wind that brought lady Melinda in had died down and didn't even leave its sound to comfort them.

"What a boring night," the elder guard sighed. They went back to guarding against the endless nothing while all the life and importance happened behind their backs, through stone walls and gilded archways.

CHAPTER FOUR



It was much later in the evening when Melinda returned to her quarters in the East Wing. The room matched her practical personality. She had nothing that she did not need on a daily basis. Overtime she had taken more things out than she had brought in, leaving only what was attached to the walls or floor. Everything else was considered unnecessary.

She stood in front of a decorated mirror covered by a huge velvet curtain and lifted up the veil to take a look at herself. She was pleased to see that she was still herself. With her confidence boosted she went out into the corridor and walked through the fallen evening shadows to the room of the castle's other important tenant.

She could tell important work was underway before she fully opened the door. Holographic lights danced around over the central dais of Leander's study. Her wizened old mentor, with a long straight beard that was salted with grey hairs around the corners of his mouth, looked across the display as the many parts and pieces floated by in rotating patterns. It was a dancing star chart of various planets that were connected together by beams of light. Some were dark and left adrift, but they moved with their own purposeful charting.

He wasn't aware that she had entered, but spoke up regardless, to materialize his inner thoughts in speech. "Free will," he began. He already had to pause and smirk, as if he was setting up the punchline to a long joke. "There shouldn't be any free will for humans. Their very ability to choose leads to their own destruction. Amazing ! They have the simplest original mechanism: love, and you shall be loved; give, and you shall receive. But they are bored with it. The slightest obstacle, a shadow of temptation..." He wound his hands together through the warping lights until they formed a brightly colored box in his hand. "And they will abandon everything for getting," he blew into the holograph and it shattered into faded smoke, "nothing in exchange."

He laughed as he clapped his hands, dismissing the smoke from his surroundings. His laughter rose even prouder while Melinda watched from the bannister at the top of the recessed study. "Isn't it the absolute proof that I'm the master of this world?"

Melinda smirked. "Of course, My Lord," she said. Leander froze in place. He was surprised to hear her voice, not knowing when or how she entered. He lowered his lofty hands and straightened out his robe before he turned to greet his protege with a smile.

"Melinda," he said. "You always walk in so silently."

"My apologies, My Lord," she said courteously.

He tilted his head to the side, unapologetic for being heard. "Well, after all, it's just a game. And in every game, someone has to lose." He wagged his finger as his thoughts caught up to him

in a hurry. "By the way, soon we are going to meet an interesting playing partner."

"How may I serve you, My Lord?" Melinda asked.

"The angel of Eliel will pay us a visit," Leander instructed. "He will probably stay for a while. I would suggest caution, much caution in this game." Again his finger went wagging with a rhythm of warning at Melinda.

"When?"

"Tomorrow," he said. "And there's only one gate into our world. If we are lucky, death will visit the angel first. Past the gate, death won't be a possibility. That's the contract."

"And if the angel passes," Melinda asked, "what do you want me to do?"

"You have carte blanche to rid us of this nuisance," Leander said. He rose a hand of curling fingers at her. His lithe digits cupped one of the floating words in the hologram and he crushed it in his grip, leaving a frothy mist of broken dust and star-stuff that spread out like ink in water. Melinda bowed dutifully and left the room.

Melinda returned to her room and prepared for the event to take place. There was one portal into the castle, the very mirror embedded into her wall. She had to make arrangements to watch the event unfold, as well as a place for her master to be comfortable while they watched the doomed race fight for a

chance of salvation. She took the finest armchairs from the castle, and sent her personal butler Robert to get them while she rested.

When morning came she rose to Robert cleaning and preparing her room. Robert was an effective, emotionless humanoid assistant. He greatly resembled a common human, aside from his inability to change his flat but kind face. He had short blond hair and was dressed to match the gothic elegance of the castle in darker colors. He was strong and also somewhat beautiful, though not to Melinda's standards. Any human would mistake him for one of their own until he was forced to show emotion, at which time he would always fail.

"Milady," Robert spoke up as he made final adjustments to the grand arm chair placed in front of the mirror, "can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," Melinda said.

"I love you," he abruptly said. Melinda drew a long, uninterested drag from her smoking stick and arched an eyebrow as Robert continued confessing his feelings with the same tone of voice he had when he was describing her breakfast menu. "I have been conceived to have free will and to love. I chose to love you. Unconditionally, fully, beautifully. Like any human. Better than any human. More than any human. More genuinely, generously, blissfully."

"You've become old, Robert," Melinda interrupted. "First of all, that's not a question, that's a statement. And secondly - so what?"

“Do you feel you could possibly ever love me?” he asked.

“Only if you believed I could,” she said, “and created that reality. But you were not programmed to do that, Robert. You see?”

Robert paused for a moment and shifted into a more apologetic, subservient tone. “Please allow me some time to integrate this new information. Maybe I am getting old after all, just as you say.” He took a long pause as his eyes adjusted back and forth between a deep inner gestation of information and blurred close-up vision of the dust particles in the air. “By the way,” he continued, “I always wondered, why don't you get old, Melinda?”

She took a seat in the armchair and smiled at the mirror. It was veiled in velvet and her reflection did not show, but she kept looking as if she could see herself smiling back. “One only gets old when one believes that we have to. It's a side effect, just like time itself.”

“What a strange formula,” Robert said. “And if I believed anything is possible, would I become like you?”

“In a sense,” she said. “Except that you still wouldn't choose to destroy yourself. That's a human privilege.” Melinda turned to Robert with a smile, then waved her hand at him. “Leave me alone now.”

“This is a day of strange formulas,” Robert said with a nod. As he left, Leander entered. Robert greeted him with a deep bow which Leander ignored as he carried in a bottle and glasses all

clutched in one hand. Melinda saw him entering and stood to bow respectfully to him.

“Please take a seat,” she offered. Leander moved past the mirror and yanked the veil down in a single motion. The velvet tumbled to the floor and created a softened carpet over the altered surface. It was no longer a mirror that showed reflection. It had become the portal itself, expanding deep into a dark corridor not unlike the castle’s own halls, where the shadows moved and mingled together as if they were alive.

Leander sat down in the other armchair, while Melinda was still sitting in hers, with her smoking stick still in hand. Leander, meanwhile, took up his bottle of champagne and a finely crafted goblet, made entirely of expertly blown glass hewn and shaped with divine precision into a regal frame, which he filled with golden liquid, which he set on the side table by Melinda, then he filled the other goblet for himself. They sat back and watched the portal mirror as witnesses to its events.

CHAPTER FIVE



The deep hall beyond the looking glass began to stir. Visions of light started to dance inside of it, far away. The flickering lights became clearer as they neared the midway point. There, the shadows stirred more harshly like dust in the wind. They took form little by little, driven by the light and the divine wind that preceded them. Those lights were Angels of brilliant white with blazing bright wings and glowing auras. Their immense light pushed the shadows into the shape of demons, all taut and strong with long blades in their hands to counter the Angels' advance.

Each Angel came and was stopped. One by one they braved the hall of Demons only to be surrounded and cut down from all sides. The Demons peeled off the walls in mid-attack and swung their very real swords through the backs and the blind sides of Angels as they pushed their way through the cavernous gothic hall. All the while, Melinda and Leander observed, enjoying the slaughter like a show.

Each Angel that died turned into light while the Demons retreated back into the thick, cloudy air of battle to hide and lay in wait for another chance to strike. The lights diminished and were sent back to the start each time. The hallway was becoming dim as the Angels were defeated and driven back. However,

some continued advancing. Their pace was slower than the rest but far more certain as no Demon seemed capable of standing in their way.

One Angel was a bright, cheerful girl, a simple white pleated dress and a face that seemed to know only kindness without fear. She gingerly evaded the slow, heavy swings of the Demons and pulled them toward her one at a time, avoiding any ambushes that happened from rushing too far ahead. The Demons were strong, but their movements were predictable and straight forward. Only in numbers did they have a real advantage.

Then came her own power. She didn't wield a fiery saber or a holy lance like the others. All she did was touch the demons and they would change color until they were completely encapsulated into a prismatic state, like stained glass statues. She left a shimmering trail of such gem-like glass in her wake as she proceeded forward undaunted.

A Demon stepped out snarling at her. She poked its fearsome jaw and waited for its body to harden. Then she flittered her wings and hovered up to kiss it on the forehead. The touch of her lips softened the demon's body and spread a shining white glow across its surface. The Demon dropped its ax and burst from its prismatic shell as a being of pure light - an Angel - which then sank back into the cavern far away where she had come from.

The brave young Angel became so bright that she was unapproachable. All of the shadows in the hall were driven

away as she drew closer and closer to the tunnel's end. The Demons stayed away from her. They were afraid of her, and she was unafraid of them. Their power both collectively and individually was not enough. What she had was something greater that they couldn't handle. She was unfazed by their negativity, too pure for them to properly corrupt.

The Angel came to the final obstacle, the other side of the mirror. While she stood in plain view of her observers, all she saw was a foggy glassy wall. What lied beyond it was a mystery to her. She leaned forward, trying to power her vision through the mirror's fog.

Melinda's amusement lapsed the whole time from regular mild humor at the failures of the previous Angels to a swayed mystification over this one's success. Leander too was fascinated but also grimly perplexed. He was expecting something worse to happen to her all along.

Melinda set down her smoking stick and approached the mirror, amazed. She'd seen her own reflection in that mirror many times before and was very accustomed to the way she looked. This brave Angel had blond hair and lacked the more pale complexion, but otherwise she seemed to bear a striking resemblance to Melinda. The biggest difference in their faces was that Melinda's was often held in a half-frozen state of cold indignation, while the Angel's was softer and more used to smiling.

“I expected the guardian Angel of Eliel to be a man,” Melinda said.

“So did I,” Leander replied, as if talking to himself, still transfixed.

Melinda smirked sarcastically and half-expected to see her grin reflected in the Angel’s, but hers was a face that only sincerity could settle in. The event was coming to an end. The Angel was at the precipice, but her battle wasn’t over. A Demon emerged from the gathered mist with a dagger drawn and made a silent leap to her back. It was almost over. The one who came closest would soon be sent reeling back.

Melinda reached through the mirror as if it wasn’t there. She grabbed the Angel by the hand and yanked her past the glassy barrier into the room. The Demon’s swing missed, just barely scraping the flowing robes that were left hanging by the force Melinda pulled her with. The Angel succeeded where none other could and no Demon could touch her but out of her own naivety.

The bright Angel looked around in confusion. Her wings were gone and her shining aura slowly reduced. She had a look of innocence that caused Leander to scowl. As she scanned the room her eyes finally met with Melinda’s, whose shoulders she was bracing to maintain her balance.

“You should be more careful,” Melinda said. Their eyes met as the Angel let go of Melinda's shoulder. The new girl’s mouth dropped open and shivered into a timid smile. She was as

stunned as Melinda. "Maybe you want to introduce yourself?" Melinda said, slightly taunting the Angel's disarray.

The Angel girl had no intent to hide neither her confusion nor her bewilderment to Melinda. She spoke in a voice much like Melinda's but airier, lighter, and far more innocent. "Alice."

CHAPTER SIX



Alice was left in Melinda's room while the two castle tenants went to the other end of the adjoining corridor to discuss what would happen next. They went all the way to the next door that separated her hallway from the rest of the castle. Leander dragged his hand through the air and by his command the door slammed itself shut showing all of his frustration. He continued to walk at a steady pace to his study while Melinda followed him.

"What do you think you are doing?" he demanded.

Melinda had a flat expression and spoke respectfully. "I heard I had carte blanche. You suggested an interesting game. Let me have some fun."

Leander stopped and turned with a wagging, nagging finger at her. She stopped just before it would seem fit to impale her.

"This one is very different from any of the toys you are used to playing with," he warned.

She rolled her left shoulder defiantly. "Which makes it more interesting."

Leander swung his finger down. He was intrigued. "As long as you succeed."

Melinda's eyebrows hiked slightly at a tone of distrust in her master's voice. The matter was squarely in her hands. Still, she couldn't fully explain her own actions, even to herself, but the intrigue of it all entertained her. Leander left. When he was out of the annex, she turned and thought where she would go next. There was no need to rush things. She decided to head for her own working chambers for the day and let the new bright one mull over her circumstances alone for a while.

But Alice had a different idea. Once she was left alone, she explored every part of Melinda's room with awe. There was not much to explore, given Melinda's propensity to default to only the most basic of things, but Alice could tell there was far more to see than just that one room of one person. She left it and began wandering the dark corridors bravely. Her aura had greatly reduced compared to what it was before. It lit up the ground around her feet but not much else.

As she wandered the halls she glanced out of the windows to the foggy darkness that covered them from the outside. She could barely make out the shapes of the castle's walls, the sloping buttresses and archways that linked the grand architecture together but it did nothing to give her any bearings on where in the world she was. Or which world she was in.

Over the course of the afternoon, Alice wandered most of the East Wing, knowing the synchronicity will take her to the right place to pursue her journey in the world she was about to discover. The world that seemed intriguingly inoffensive

compared to her expectations leaving her wondering what she was supposed to do now. She walked without intruding into any room with a closed door, but she stopped in front of one of them, her intuition telling her that's where she was supposed to proceed.

She cracked the door open and looked inside the room. The walls were stacked high with books and the space was decorated with glorious golden scales. Some were balanced and others weren't, some had three platforms, others had four. Scales of all kinds were left out as decorations, and some were being used. In the middle of it all was Melinda. She was more aware than her master and immediately noticed the stray Angel's presence in her space.

"What are you doing here?" Melinda demanded.

Alice entered the room, carefully closing the door behind her. "I wanted to thank you."

"Thank me?" Melinda said lordly. "Do you know who I am?"

Alice's face lit up. "You are the Karma Angel, one of the reincarnations of -."

"Enough," Melinda interrupted. She waited for Alice's glowing expectation to dim a little. The girl was so eager to please she almost said something unwanted. Melinda gave a half sarcastic grin to her. "I see you did your homework." Alice nodded eagerly. Her intense stare was met by Melinda's cold, calculating eyes but didn't diminish. A scale creaked as its weight shifted

from the imbalance in the room. Melinda turned away and focused on her work again.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” she said.

Alice stepped further into the room. “Why?” she asked.

“You don’t belong here,” Melinda said.

Alice looked around. “In this room?”

“In this world,” Melinda clarified. “You should seriously consider leaving.” Melinda got up from her station and went over to one of the many shelves. She lifted off the ground slightly to retrieve a book. When she landed she saw Alice had already come to the center of the room and took over her work. She was situated before the kaleidoscopic hologram of a planet full of Humans with many different cultures and ways of life occupying the same space. Just a stray glance in any one direction turned the focus onto a different person, one out of nearly eight billion, across the globe’s six occupied continents. It was a planet known as Earth.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Melinda demanded, taking offense at the fact that someone else was at her station.

Alice looked over piteously. “Do you like what you’re doing?” she asked.

“Why shouldn’t I?” Melinda coldly retorted.

Alice looked back at the hologram, then at her with a pained expression. “Because you make people suffer.”

A scale tipped once more. Melinda looked shocked. She composed herself while Alice stepped away.

“Please,” Melinda said with a flip of her bangs. “It’s called Karma, honey. Justice.” She gave Alice a taunting smile.

“Love is the only justice that exists,” Alice said. “Don’t you believe that?”

Melinda gave her a sarcastic look. “I think you miss the point. There’s nothing special about being good. It’s all about staying good. Give me your hand.”

Alice offered her hand up immediately and without hesitation. Melinda took the soft, gentle hand into her palm and held it in place. Alice’s skin felt warm to the touch and pleasant, like warm velvet. Melinda quickly took a dagger from inside her robes and drew a quick, shallow cut across it. Alice threw herself back and took her hand with a shriek.

“It hurts!”

“You bet,” Melinda said. She flipped the dagger over holding it by the tip of the blade, and extended the handle out for Alice to take. Alice was wary to let go of her own suffering hand, but she took the dagger and held it like it was a wretched thing covered in slime.

“Don’t you want to do the same to me?” Melinda asked.

Alice immediately tossed the dagger on the floor.

“No!” she exclaimed. “I’ll never hurt you. I’ll never kill.” She looked back at her hand. The bleeding was minor but the wound stood out as bright and exuberantly red against her pure, pale skin. Melinda took out a handkerchief from her robes and Alice held her hand up so she could wrap it. “Don’t worry, it’ll heal soon.” She said it as if to placate Melinda’s own worries, assuming that she had any at all. “Why did you save me, by the way?”

“You didn’t have any weapon,” Melinda said. “I don’t like stupid accidents.”

“Love is the greatest weapon,” Alice said. “Greater than this.” She held up her hand as the deep red seeped into the whiteness of the cloth over her cut. “It conquers all without any effort.”

Melinda grabbed her hand and tightened the binding up while Alice stood still obediently and waited for her to finish.

“It’s slightly more complicated than that,” Melinda insisted.

“No, it’s not,” Alice confidently chided back. Alice pushed forward once the bandaging was done until there was nothing Melinda could see but the pure angel’s face. Alice’s smile was warm and inviting. It had an energy of love so pure and good that Melinda couldn’t help but be drawn to it. She could feel a sense of love overwhelming her, as if the very light from Alice’s body was the feeling leaking out and filling the room.

Melinda’s voice lowered, just enough to cover the shrunken distance between them. “Love has never been of great value here,

unless I missed something lately. Fear, sex, money, power, pleasure, comfort. Those are much more powerful. They motivate people." She looked up at Alice, whose face was still undeterred, and tried to match the intense impassioned gaze with something colder and more certain. "Not love."

"But one can't trust those things," Alice said.

"You don't seriously suggest one can trust love, do you?"

Alice's smile dropped for a moment. She stepped back and released Melinda from her untouched embrace. She took a thoughtful moment to peer inside of herself and smiled resolutely. "Yes, I do."

Melinda huffed a few times, not quite laughter but nearing the point where any more absurdity would surely send her into a cackling fit. "Well, this could be interesting..."

"What do you mean?" Alice asked.

"Why not give it a try?" Melinda offered. She turned to the hologram at the table. "Let's say you chose a man -"

"Capable of love," Alice interjected.

"Anyone," Melinda said rolling her eyes. She stepped toward the station and Alice came forward as well. Melinda waved her hand through the hologram. The image split open into many pieces. The image of the world from its largest view to the smallest perspective over a single human all blended together in a way only her eyes could truly perceive. Alice stared into the light with awe at the simple existence of it. "He'll be offered a

slight possibility to destroy everything dear to him. If he accepts, he will die and you'll lose. If he stands his ground, I'll spare any human who has ever loved like him. It's a pretty good deal. If you really trusted love, you'd accept."

"I accept," Alice said without a second thought. Melinda smirked, thinking she'd already won. Alice looked through the images and sorted with flicks of her eyes across the light from one life to another. She went to a businessman proposing to a lady at a restaurant to a rodeo rider doing his best to impress a watching girl, and then an athlete opening the door to a Ferrari for his girlfriend.

Alice stopped when they reached a certain man. His name was Luciano, as displayed in the combined multi-dimensional hologram. He was 31, had blond hair, physically fit from routine workouts, had a positive attitude. Every bit of his mortal information was displayed, down to the number of cells in his body at that exact moment, which was constantly shifting many digits at a time. There was far less information about the makeup of his person at a spiritual level, his capacity for love or his dreams and deep beliefs.

They both watched him as he handed a basket of white roses to a girl who looked extremely grateful. She took them in one hand and arched her arm around his neck to kiss his cheek. He kissed her on the forehead.

"Is she his girlfriend?" Alice asked.

“His cousin,” Melinda said. She drew a line between them which generated a new list of information, one being the family tree which tied them close together. “Her boyfriend left yesterday. Those are her consolation flowers.”

Alice pressed into the hologram on Luciano to keep the focus on him. She watched him walk through the streets of his city with his chest up and head high in an unbroken, confident gait. He passed by some boys kicking a ball around. He watched them up until their ball went astray and hit a woman sitting on a bench holding up a sign.

As Alice focused onto the image, her mind was drawn to the mysterious beggar woman. A prompt appeared which Alice accepted, instinctively knowing how to use and control the karmic power. A moment later she was there, on Earth, as Luciano approached her.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Luciano lifted the ball with the tip of his shoe and juggled it off his foot, onto his knee and gave the football a good kick to send it back to the kids. The streets of Paris were safe from runaway balls for one more day. Once the kids retrieved the ball they went away and took their game somewhere less harmful.

“Are you alright?” he asked. The beggar turned around. She was dressed well enough but her hair was frizzy and dried. The glorious golden blond locks she had were frayed at the ends like straw. Her eyes were sunken with days worth of tears but they still glimmered with an angelic hope. Though she was in a mortal body, Alice looked up at him with her usual radiant smile.

“I guess so,” she responded.

“Can I help you with anything?” he asked, looking her over.

“No, it’s alright,” she insisted, showing that she was unhurt. She dropped her sign over her basket full of change and reached down to pick it up again. Luciano took out his wallet and left a 10 Euro bill into her basket before her eyes.

“No, I would like to help,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said.

Luciano crouched down next to her. "Why are you doing this? You're a pretty woman. You could find a job."

Alice smiled at the compliment and brushed the stray hairs away from her face. "Well, it's not always that easy."

He nodded. "I see." He looked at her curiously. They were both speaking French, but her pronunciation was almost too perfect. She certainly wasn't Parisian. "You're not from here. Are you a foreigner?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"Right," he said, clapping his hands together. He pointed at her as he stood back up. "Maybe I can help you. I could use an assistant. I'm an accounting manager and I might need help with some simple tasks - if you can learn fast. Here is my number. Call me tomorrow. Let's give it a try. - What do you say?" He handed her a business card from his wallet and waited for her to take it.

"Okay," she said. She gently took the card and slipped it into her pocket. "Thank you." Luciano smiled and walked away. Alice watched him go with glistening, love-filled eyes. She could see beyond just his mortal frame, and as she did, she was pulled back into the great castle a dimension above the physical world to her Angelic body once more. She stepped back and gasped for air as she returned to her full senses. Melinda leaned back and watched her recover with a smug look.

"So, what's your decision?" she asked.

“I choose him,” Alice said, pointing to the hologram. “Luciano.”

“So be it,” Melinda said. “Though, I wouldn’t choose him if I were you.”

“He has so much love,” Alice said dreamily. Melinda smirked once more.

“Love, self-esteem, opportunism, passion, jealousy, hate, desire; so many words for the same thing.”

“I guess we have different perspectives on feelings,” Alice said.

“Yes,” Melinda agreed, “but feelings don’t change because we have different perspectives on them.”

“Why do you like hurting people?” Alice asked brazenly.

“Because,” Melinda answered hotly, “people need to be hurt to move on.”

Alice shook her head. “People need to be loved to move on.”

Melinda cracked an eerie smile. “Isn’t that the same thing?”

“Not where I come from,” Alice said, turning her head up.

“By the way,” Melinda began, “what’s your greatest passion in your world?”

“To make people fall in love,” Alice said. “rediscover themselves, make them grow. Unconditionally. What about your passion?”

Melinda met Alice’s gaze for the first time with matching energy.

“Exactly the same.” The two held eyes on one another for a time.

They were only interrupted by the study door slamming shut.

Alice jumped at the sound and looked over as Stella, a dark skinned girl with long, wide curls in her hair, entered the room in a fast-footed rush.

“Melinda,” she said, glancing back at Alice, “can I have your attention for a second?”

“Yes,” Melinda answered.

“Lester, Andrew and Mellan are here to see you,” Stella announced.

Melinda smirked. “Let them in.”

At her request, Stella went to the door and waved out into the hall. Then three men came in, each just as handsome and regal as the others. Alice stood to the side as they came in to be out of the way and out of their attention.

The first was Lester, a tall brunet with short hair and a lithe build. He had fair skin and bright blue eyes that darted around the room the instant he entered. He moved with a certain flow that made it seem like his chest was guiding him forward. He immediately went down the stairs into the main study towards Melinda while the other two entered.

The second to enter was Andrew. He had darker hair cut in a close shave and stubble on his strong jaw. He was tall and broad shouldered with muscles on full display. When he saw Lester tending to Melinda he immediately scowled with jealousy and made a quicker descent over the bannister and past the desks full of books in a single bound.

The last to enter was Mellan, who stood back with a cocky grin. He had longer hair that was dark in color with a certain indigo tint to it. He observed carefully and took a more graceful, intellectual place in the group, and was not one to rush into asking for favors when he knew he could get what he wanted so much more easily by using his wits.

“Melinda!” Lester called. He reached Melinda first and nearly dove at her with how much he leaned forward. “Are you alright, dear? I’ve heard you hurt yourself. I couldn’t believe it.”

Andrew came in next and loomed over them both, asserting himself and pushing Lester away without so much as raising an arm. He puffed out his chest and reached down to scoop Melinda up in his arms. “Maybe you should take a rest. Let me carry you to the couch.” He hoisted her up as if she was weightless. She bounced in his arms with absentminded pleasure, accepting the grand act of courtesy without a care. Then she noticed Mellan, who was not noticing her, over in the corner.

“Why do you stand there, Mellan?” she asked.

Mellan pointed a finger at the other girl in the room. “What happened here?” He was analyzing Alice with suspicion.

Melinda met his suspicion with an eye roll. “Nothing,” she said, flippantly. “And I’m quite alright as you can see. Why such sad faces? Let’s have some fun! Are you joining me for a party?”

“Yeah, sure,” Mellan said with a cool, quiet shrug of his shoulder.

“Wonderful!” Lester cheered.

“Why not,” Andrew said, trying to stay strong without being too excited.

“Shall we take Stella with us?” Melinda asked. Stella bowed in reverence at the suggestion.

All three men agreed, “Of course!” They cheered on and started making a ruckus together. It was then that Alice slipped out, past Mellan and into the corridor. Melinda saw her go and lifted herself to catch up. While the men cheered and laughed at the beginning of their revelry, Alice walked down the hall with a rapid gait. She nearly got out of sight of the room when Melinda finally caught up. Alice shivered to Melinda’s gentle touch from behind, which made Melinda smile with a mischievous grin.

“Let’s go for a ride on a boat,” she suggested. “Just us.”

“What?” Alice said. “What about your party? Your boyfriends?” She waved her hand over her shoulder. “They don’t mind.”

“How on Earth?”

“They will be exploring a new... inspiration,” Melinda said. Alice heard a shrill, happy cry from the room down the hall. While she was distracted, Melinda immediately turned to the wall and pressed a quick sequence of three stones, which made a fourth pop out of place. Once she pressed that in, a portal opened. The space between the bricks separated and distorted, pushing and squishing them all out of the way as it spread open. The portal let out into the somewhat familiar streets of Paris,

France on Earth where Alice visited not long ago. Melinda stepped through and held the portal open, one ankle in her own world while her body crossed over into the singular, physical dimension.

Alice followed bravely as they mingled into the mortal realm as lovely ladies in summer dresses.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Melinda and Alice boarded a Seine river tour boat. As by magic, no tourists took the boat that day and Melinda and Alice were alone. Melinda picked a spot on the deck.

The boat took off, a traditional Parisian song about love and romance reflected off of the purity and splendor of the Seine. Alice looked out across the water. Despite being from a place that saw greater splendor and more beautiful scenery, she took it in with awe and gratitude. Melinda looked past the beauty of the view.

“Aren’t you in love with any of your boyfriends?” Alice asked.

Melinda shrugged. “Is it really important?”

“Are you friends then?”

“Friends?” Melinda scoffed. “Don’t tell me you seriously think I can be friends with a man.” The very notion of the word seemed like a bad joke to her that she wasn’t happy repeating.

“Why not?” Alice asked.

“Because the sexual desire will take over,” Melinda said.

“You are being cruel to say so,” Alice said.

“Cruel?” Melinda retorted. “Please. Compared to Cleo, I have excellent behaviour.”

“Cleo?” Alice repeated.

Melinda held up a red apple, deep red like a cherry that reflected the sun on its polished skin. She held it up close to her lips and whispered into it, one syllable at a time, “Cle-o-pa-tra.”

“You mean Queen Cleopatra was one of your incarnations?” Alice asked. Melinda handed off the apple to Alice, but she politely refused it. “Was it true you’d spend a night with any man if he’d agree to be killed in the morning?”

Melinda stared at Alice with defiance. “Well, not any man. They had to be between 20 and 30, good looking and in good health.”

Alice blushed a little at the topic. Despite broaching it, actually talking about bedroom preferences made her a bit antsy. “Well, that’s not what I meant. Didn’t all these men look for your love at the cost of their lives?”

“More like a fuck at the cost of their lives,” Melinda said. Alice turned away at the word. Melinda leaned forward to catch her retreating eyes with a smile. “Fun!”

“Was there no one who just wanted to be with you,” Alice asked, “without having sex?”

“No,” Melinda answered. “I think they saw no point in giving their lives for just staring at me.” Melinda tilted her wrist and tossed the apple into the river, over the boat bannister. It bounced into the water with a deep thud.

“Wasn’t that heartbreaking?” Alice asked.

Melinda rolled her tongue around behind her lips, stretching them out a little from behind in a hidden fidgeting act of annoyance. “I don’t have a nasty habit of judging things that I once desired. I was bored, and small pleasures can be quite distracting.”

“If I were there,” Alice said, “I’d just stay and watch you.”

“Right,” Melinda said sarcastically. “Your beautiful love stories are the ones you don’t live, the ones that stay in your imagination. You were not there. And if you were, how long would it take before you wouldn’t be able to handle your desire for me?”

“Love doesn’t necessarily mean desire,” Alice politely informed.

“Well, I’m sorry to tell you, but it often does,” Melinda retorted.

“Either we control our desires,” Alice said, “or they control us.”

Melinda leaned in close. “Feelings are not reasonable,” Melinda whispered. “If you claim to control them, you must be in denial.”

“I’m not in denial,” Alice said. She retorted, but mostly she was convincing herself that she was right. Melinda had shaken her conviction a bit. She was so utterly certain and confident in what she said that Alice felt inclined to believe her, even if it was just a cruel lie. There was sincerity in what Melinda said, as she spoke from her experience about all the wicked things related to love.

Melinda leaned back on the banister and watched Alice mull over her new inner turmoil with a smug sense of victory. She felt good to waver the pure angel's trust in her own beliefs, but felt a small pang of frustration as it happened. Like she didn't enjoy it completely, and some part of her tugged at a guilty nerve that was almost too numb to feel.

After the boat ride, they wandered the streets until Melinda brought them to an outdoor cafe. The sun was starting to set. Time meant nothing to them as beings from another plane of reality, but as the passage of day changed, so did the observable cultures at play in the human world. Shops would close for the night while others opened, and the vistas would change scenery as the light decreased and was replaced by the glaring artificial lights of the multitude of bulbs across the cityscape.

Melinda caught a glance at one of the patrons of the cafe and her lips curled into a mischievous, scheming smirk. She tapped Alice on the shoulder and pointed down the crowd of people at one man in particular with blonde hair and a fantastic figure. "Oh, here he is," she said. "Would you have a drink with me and meet our friend, Luciano?"

Alice was shocked to see him, exactly as he was before, if not more stunning as the early evening light gave him a different kind of glow to his skin. Alice was bashful and looked away while Melinda snaked her arm around her shoulder to keep her from leaving. "I'm not sure I quite want to do it today."

“Why not?” Melinda insisted. “Well, then just wait here for a while or come in later if you wish.”

Melinda slipped her arm off of Alice’s shoulder and sauntered into the cafe. Alice stayed outside and stood on the sidewalk like an abandoned puppy, peering in soulfully to keep her eyes on Melinda. Melinda caught her looking and smirked deviously as she moved in on her prey. She saw Luciano go for a seat with his drink with another man. He sat across from Paul, a man nearly the same age with mussy brown hair and a chic sense of fashion. Luciano looked less than pleased with him as Paul avoided his gaze. Melinda sat at a nearby table with an order of early-evening champagne and took out a book to maintain her cover. She honed her sense of hearing to pick up on their conversation.

“Well, look,” Paul said, desperately avoiding looking at Luciano’s hard stare, “one can be attracted to a woman in many ways: sexual, emotional, intellectual. I don't know - divine! Anyone is capable of all these different kinds of love. And not necessarily for just one person, you understand?” He dared to look at Luciano for confirmation. All he got was cold, hard guilt. Paul dipped his head down in a sense of self defeat as he rubbed his hands through his hair. “I can’t keep up with Frida. I can't promise she’d be the only woman in my life.”

“Look, she’s my cousin,” Luciano said.

“I know,” Paul said, interrupting him. “She asked you to talk to me.”

“No,” Luciano insisted. “No. She just called and told me what happened. Gosh, you’ve been together for seven years now. You were planning to have kids.”

“I can’t really afford to have kids,” Paul confessed quietly. “We’ve talked about that.”

Luciano threw his head back and reeled for a moment while Paul fiddled with his fingers in plain sight. “If you love her,” Luciano said, “you’ll find the money. Look how your father managed it, and life used to be much harder then.”

“Look,” Paul began, plainly, “I just don’t know where I stand. I want an easy divorce. She’ll get her share and that’s it. I just have to be honest with her and with myself. I still love Frida, but I also love another woman. And to say no to love is to say no to life.”

Luciano sighed. “Well, I guess sometimes one has to say no. If you love all the wonderful women you meet, you still won’t be able to manage 200 relationships all at once. That means you have to make choices and stick to your commitment.”

Luciano’s hand went in a wide arc and knocked a flower off of the neighboring table. Melinda saw it coming from a mile away and moved her seat to the side to avoid it. Luciano stood up quickly and picked the ornament up before it clattered any further over the edge.

“Sorry about that,” he said.

“Please, no worries,” she said with a shrug.

He set the flower back up and fixed the stem that bent from his sudden snap of the wrist. He looked at Melinda as he was seized with an irresistible desire to find an excuse to strike up a conversation with her. "Would you agree with that?" he asked.

"With what?" Melinda said.

He tilted his head back to his table where Paul was still sulking. "That love means one has to make choices and stick to one's commitment."

"Oh," Melinda said. She understood the purpose of his question, to get her attention with a beautiful promise of marital fidelity, and held back a wry smirk as she prepared to subtly betray him. "I think love doesn't necessarily mean commitment. True love or unconditional love should go beyond any obligations, as it's free, per definition. Otherwise, it's not love. Or is it?"

Luciano turned back to his table. Paul tilted his head to nod in agreement. Luciano turned back to her and gave a pensive nod. "Thank you," he said with restraint.

Melinda smiled and went back to her book. While she did, she glazed past the men to the street outside. She saw Alice was still standing there, waiting and watching through the glass with her hands clasped and folded down at her hips. She looked concerned and curious to know what was happening. She most likely could hear them anyway. Both Alice and Melinda could still function beyond regular human limits.

Luciano and Paul ended their conversation and walked to the entrance of the cafe. Paul was leading the way, essentially retreating while pleading the last of his case, and Luciano grew more disappointed as he continued to step beyond the threshold. Luciano nearly left with him, but went back immediately. Melinda could see that he left a scarf hanging over the chair.

“Hi again,” he said as he passed her.

“Welcome back,” she said.

“I forgot my scarf,” he said as he whipped it up over his shoulder.

“Really?” she asked, coyly.

He smiled. “No, I wanted to see you,” he said, trying to match her own coyness.

“Why?” she asked innocently. She tipped her glass up to her dark cherry lips, tempting him to sit down, playing on his most basic desire. He sat across from her with a sigh and held up his hand for a waiter to come by.

“A glass of red wine, please,” he said.

“Right away, sir,” the waiter replied. “Which one?”

“A Bordeaux would be fine, thank you,” he instructed. The waiter nodded and turned on his heel to go off to the wine room in the back. Luciano sighed once more, unable to contain his muted frustrations or move away from his apparent defeat in a battle of romantic philosophy.

"It's about what you said," he began. "Have you ever been in a situation where you are committed to someone, but you feel trapped?"

"Any commitment needs proof," she replied.

"What do you mean?" he asked. He leaned forward, engaging her more intensely, as if he was demanding an answer with his body language alone.

"You always have to prove you're in love," Melinda answered. "There is no presumption of innocence. You are guilty unless you prove otherwise. And once you start chasing an alibi, you never get to the real thing."

"What real thing?" he asked.

"Your freedom," she replied.

"What do you mean?" he asked again, seeking wisdom from her.

"Start with not feeling guilty for being free," she said, "and you'll see for yourself."

"That's dangerous advice," he said, making a nervous grin.

"I didn't say it was risk free," she said. He nodded and scoffed slightly.

"I never met anyone like you before," he said. "I feel so good with you." He stretched his hand across the table to reach for hers and tried to take it. Melinda immediately pulled away, shut her book and stood up.

"I have to go," she said.

“Can I find you here again?” Luciano asked. “Or anywhere?” He stood up and noticed the check for her table was face down. He scooped it up without a thought, or a look. “Please let me get it.” Melinda turned and looked at it as she reached for her pocketbook. He took a glance at the total. 2,000 Euros for one glass of the house’s finest Champagne. He smirked at the total regardless, hiding his discomfort. “It’s just one glass of champagne, right?”

“Please, don’t bother,” she said. She took out the requisite amount from her pocket and laid it on the table. As she did so she closed in with an elegant sway of her hips. “You shouldn’t attempt to buy what’s not for sale,” she whispered. She tauntingly moved her shoulders to put her coat on with her back to Luciano.

Luciano took the hint and walked away, putting her check in his pocket absent-mindedly. “I really want to see you again,” Luciano said with a quick turn over his shoulder. She shook her head without looking back his way. He left with his head hung low acknowledging her dismissal, but his chest remained out and broad as he retained a deeper pride to not give up at all.

On his way out of the cafe he blindly bumped into someone. He looked down apologetically at Alice, who looked up at him with a bit of a stunned expression. She waited for him to suddenly realize that he’d seen her before, through an avatar but one with her own face and aura all the same. He just nodded and quickly left, a passing of strangers in a busy street and nothing more. He

didn't recognize her at all. She could tell from just a glance into his eyes that he was only thinking of Melinda.

Alice wandered into the cafe and went up to Melinda's table as she hoisted her coat up onto her shoulders at last. She turned and looked at Alice with a mock of surprise. "Oh, hi!" she said. "I must confess I was getting bored without your company."

"Leave him alone," Alice politely demanded.

Melinda pursed her lips. "Are you afraid?" she taunted. "I thought we had a deal and that you trusted him."

"You are manipulating his feelings," Alice contended.

"I'm breathing some life into his feelings," Melinda said passionately. "And you can't admit that this *love* of yours is just an artificial concept." Her words became hot and biting. She was furious at Alice's steadfast belief and leaned in with a sneer at Alice's unflinching sternness.

Luciano, meanwhile, made a loop around the cafe just to peek into the window where he saw Melinda. She could see the desire in his eyes even across the space of tables and through the window. She pretended not to see him as Alice was so focused on their confrontation she kept her back to the window and stayed blind to his presence.

"You talk so much about love," Melinda said, moving her shoulders to emphasize her words, "but did you even ever make love?"

“What?” Alice asked. She was taken aback at the ease with which Melinda asked the question.

“Just curiosity,” she said. “So, did you?”

Alice looked away. “It’s different where I come from.”

“How different?”

“Love is everywhere,” Alice explained. “It is not associated with any person in particular.”

Melinda leaned in close. Alice started to turn away, just as Melinda wanted, in the direction of the window, but her eyes stayed fixed on her dark double. “That’s a pity,” Melinda whispered as she closed in on Alice’s ear. “So you don’t even know what it’s like.” She took a strand of Alice’s hair and twirled it in her finger. Then she flicked it away. When Alice turned to see what she was up to, she saw Luciano staring on through the window with his curiosity building into intrigue.

“I see,” Alice said, holding back a quivering voice of embarrassment. “Bravo for the performance.”

Melinda smiled sarcastically and gave a one-sided bow with her hip. “And one more thing,” she said. “You are the only daughter of Kristofer Kammerstein, the financial magnate who died last month.”

“What on Earth is that supposed to mean?” Alice asked sincerely.

“Well, he left everything to you,” Melinda said. “That’s what it’s supposed to mean.” Alice shrugged in confusion over the

deception she was being played into, not noticing that once more, at her back, Luciano was re-entering the cafe. He saw the two talking but didn't hear about what, only then realizing that they were friends. He approached with his eyes locked on Melinda.

"How nice," she said, turning her attention and Alice's to Luciano. "You came back! I wanted to introduce you to my childhood friend, Alice."

"Enchante," Luciano said. He reached to kiss Alice's hand, and she accepted the kiss with some shyness. "Did you grow up together?"

"Sort of," Melinda said. "Our fathers used to work together." Alice tried to interject with a pleasantry or a greeting, but all she made was a sigh. Melinda could tell she wasn't ready to engage in her end of the contest, so she quickly departed to leave Alice to a self-made demise. "But I'll have to leave you now. Have fun." Melinda waved as she quickly sauntered out of the cafe, and Alice and Luciano were left to test the strength of their beliefs in a promising duet.

CHAPTER NINE



Music was playing just outside the cafe - a traditional sounding variations of French songs in a Parisian way. It added a romantic energy to an already romantic scenery, providing a special kind of mood for Alice and Luciano, who sat together to settle in Melinda's wake.

"Do you see her often?" he asked.

Alice shrugged her shoulders one at a time, being evasive. She wasn't used to deception. "Sometimes," she said, convincing herself that unspoken half-truths were just as good as acted lies.

"You are so different from her," Luciano said, his voice still full of desire. "You have so much kindness. So much light."

"So do you," Alice said.

"The best thing there is," Luciano said, spinning his half-full glass of Bordeaux, "is to share light, to be kind to each other. To co-create happiness. I wish people could understand and explore that more."

"So do I," Alice said, leaning forward a bit. "What's your favorite way to help people?"

"There's help," he said, "and then there's the task of bringing more awareness. That's the best help there is."

“Exactly,” Alice nodded in agreement.

“That’s what I’ve been doing all my life,” Luciano said. He took a brief sip and set his glass down. He leaned forward with a bit of excitement. “I’m writing a book.”

“What’s the story?” she asked, intent to listen.

Luciano smiled as he readied himself to go off about his passion project. “A guy falling crazy in love with his dream girl. Then, progressively, he takes for granted her attention and beauty and all the happiness he receives. At the end, he's letting her down because of his own pride and deficient self-esteem. She's rich and famous, and he's going to sneak into her life and then walk away with all of her fortune. She'll be devastated, but he won't care less.”

“And then?” Alice nodded along.

“It's so self-destructive that he won't survive his own choices. You know, karma always catches up with us. I thought that would be a nice lesson of awareness. How could anyone destroy the dearest thing he has? It has always amazed me.”

“Exactly,” Alice said. She winced at the mention of karma, but otherwise, showed as much investment as she could in his briefing. He looked pleased getting it all off his chest, like she was the first person to not just listen but to really understand what he was getting at.

Alice noticed a man entering the cafe and heading to their table. She recognized him with inherent knowledge, imbued to her

through the same divine fiat that granted her the capacity to download any information that was relevant in that situation. He was her personal assistant working on her newly acquired father's money, a slender man with a sense of restrictive politeness. He was polite enough to be kind but not so much that he wouldn't interrupt Alice's time with a friend if more important matters were emerging.

He came up to the table, drawing Luciano's attention at the last second just before he spoke. "I'm afraid Madam could be late for her dinner at Lindberg's," he reported.

"Thank you, ..." she said, pausing to look at Luciano guiltily and trying to remember assistant's name.

"It's Frederick, Madam" he said.

"Thank you, Frederick, but I don't really feel like going."

He leaned in close to her and spoke in a low tone, both discreet and foreboding. "Might I remind Madam of the importance of Lindberg's plans for Kammerstein Corporation. May I suggest we leave in 15 minutes, so Madam has enough time to comfortably change for her dinner?"

"All right, Frederick," she said, swayed by his insistent tone. "I'll be ready in five minutes." He nodded and quickly retreated just outside the cafe to wait. Luciano saw him go and turned to Alice regretfully. She could see the emotions forming in him already, the guilt of holding her back from something more important, thinking that he wasn't worth her time anymore. She clapped

her hands to break the tension and put on a smile. "Could you come with me?" she asked. "I won't be at ease alone there."

Luciano smiled, surprised. "Of course, it would be my pleasure."

From there, they exited the cafe and were escorted by Frederick to a waiting car. He silently accepted Luciano's presence but remained judgmental, watching him with a side-eye as he boarded the rear cab of the car. Their drive took them out of the city of Paris and into the grand estates that overlooked it on the other side of the Seine.

They pulled up to the long driveway and roundabout style parking of a grand late-century Parisian mansion, a renovated model from the 1800s passed down, inherited and straight-up bought by some of the richest people in Europe. Luciano exited the car first and rounded the back to get the door for Alice. Frederick stood by, able to do so but willing to let the guest do the gentleman's work. Alice stepped out and took a glance at the estate.

"Wait for me here," she said. "I won't take long." Luciano nodded and turned to Frederick who gave him a polite, stoic look. Alice scanned over the property to take it all in. She saw through everything, not unlike the hologram in Melinda's study. She had partial understanding of where everything was and how to get there imbued to her through her knowledge from another dimension. She had both feet on Earth, but she was still capable of pulling essential knowledge and skills from her place of origin.

She didn't need any powers to see the beauty and splendor of Earthly delights, though. The mansion had a sprawling garden that surrounded the drive-up road. Tall shrubs were expertly trimmed into cones. Flowers grew in color-coordinated batches out of the carefully landscaped grass. It was beautiful, yet a bit wasteful.

The mansion interior didn't disappoint. It showed that the last major renovation was done sometime in the last century, in a groovier era of pastel colors and minimalist design for ornamentation.

Alice went up the wood paneled stairs and turned through the halls naturally to reach her bedroom. It matched her own personality well. There were arrangements of flowers displayed prominently as the main decoration. All of them natural, too, picked from some farm or garden and prepped for her to enjoy a bouquet of pleasant smells as soon as she walked in. The walls white with muted-blue trim in a pastel shade.

Connected to the bedroom was a walk in closet as a dressing room. She had many dresses, some inherited and handed down, others were one-time uses that hung as display pieces and reminders of those occasions. Each dress had some kind of false memory attached to it that implanted into her mind as her eyes glanced over them. Only one looked fitting to wear out to the soiree she was expected at. She threw it on and felt great. It was short without being revealing, stylish and simple.

Once she was made up and ready she returned to Frederick outside who was doing his best to straighten up Luciano's button-down shirt. Luciano was speechless as Alice exited her home to meet him in the driveway. She did a quick turn with a coy, confident grin. She felt beautiful just from the way he looked at her, and they rode on with that same shared confidence to the Lindberg estate down the road.

CHAPTER TEN



The Lindberg Home was a much more standard Haussmann-style mansion, more preserved than renovated like Alice's home was. It was darker in most ways. The wood was classically varnished, so much so that one could smell the out of date toxins that went into it from decades of polishing without paying mind to modern advances in home keeping applications. Most of the floors were bare to show the flawless carpentry of the wood base but rugs were laid out, all fine and custom made, to give softer footing.

Alice decided that it was beautiful in a classical way, one which required intense and constant lighting to be properly seen, as the dining room was set up to be. It had a classic chandelier light hanging above on a draw-chain that could lower it to the floor so each individual set of candles could be lit. The modern variant had bright LED lighting but they mimicked the natural flames of candle wicks down to the occasional flickering effect. The dining table was dark oak brown, as were the high-backed chairs with intricate floral relief designs.

Alice sat with Luciano, who had a place arranged for him at the last minute as they arrived, across from Alfred Lindberg and his politely silent wife. They were both in their 50s and kept a calm and professional air throughout the dinner. Talk was kept

between topics of business and the common sights and sounds of the Paris countryside, as well as some preliminary banter. Luciano kept feeling awkward, being the only one in the house, assistants included, wearing street clothes.

The meal was served in courses with local ingredients and traditional methods. It was a mix between Italian and French with small portions but many different plates that changed out during bouts of conversation. Alice inherently understood everything she had to about etiquette. She saw it as an extension of love for eating, treating everything from the food to the utensils with a sense of gratuity and belonging. Luciano struggled a bit and his uncertainty over which forks were for what was noticed by Alfred more than once. Alice went slow so that he could follow her lead and correct himself before it was too late, and he adapted cleanly into the mood of the setting.

Once the main dishes were set aside, the dinner was declared a success. All the utensils were down and in their proper places and everyone was satisfied both with the talks and the food.

“It was delicious,” Alice said, “thank you.”

“You are very welcome, my dear,” Alfred said. His wife bowed her head respectfully as well, being the one behind it all, but it was the man’s duty to host. “So, think about the offer. It’s a lot of money. And I’m being generous, as I owe a lot to your father.”

“I will think about it,” Alice said conclusively. Even if her role on Earth was meant to be temporary, the lives and goals of those around her were real and she had to respect them. Alfred could

tell that she was taking it as seriously as she could without giving an immediate answer.

“Luciano,” Alfred offered, “what would you say about a good old cigar?”

“Delighted to,” Luciano replied. The men got up and went to another room while the ladies sat behind in relative silence. Alice did her best to have a pleasant aura so the silence wasn’t too distracting or awkward.

Eventually, Mrs. Lindberg broke the silence with pleasantries. “So, where are you going to spend your summer, dear? Alfred wants to go to our castle in Tuscany, but I prefer the one in Provence. I love ‘le chant des cigales’. Where is your summer estate located?”

Alice drew a blank. She only knew things through divine fiat that she saw. She couldn’t bridge information from one thing to another if it wasn’t in sight. “I can’t remember,” she said uncertainly.

“Oh, you should, you should...” the lady said with an understanding tone. She figured out that the endless estate empire of Mr. Kammerstein made Alice forget where her summer home was.

The conversation was cut short, to Alice’s mercy, with the entrance of another young woman. Agatha Lindberg came, as always, like a storm. She was not dressed for the occasion. She looked like she was ready to go out into the city for a night of

dark-room clubbing instead. She was in her late 20s but carried herself with a younger, more teen-like energy. She had short hair, a blatant violation against her higher status, and wore minimal makeup, giving her an androgynous appearance. Despite that she had the beauty of her mother and the benefits of age, being slim and having a very projective energy.

“Agatha,” Mrs. Lindberg called out, “have a seat with us.” Agatha walked over with her eyes fixed on Alice the whole time. She remained guarded and analytical.

“And who are you?” she asked, foregoing the usual formalities of introductions. Alice failed to speak up in adequate time, so Mrs. Lindberg filled her in.

“Oh, it’s Miss Kammerstein, don’t you remember her father?”

“Oh, yes indeed,” Agatha said with a passive-aggressive politeness. She quickly intercepted Alice’s gaze, almost too kind to reveal that their guest was looking for an escape, and headed toward one of the exits into the deeper mansion.

“I can’t stay,” she said. “I was on my way to the library. Need to look something up.” She turned back to Alice, decisively. “Would you like to join me? There are some rare masterpieces. I could show you around.”

Alice took the offer with grace. “I’d love to,” she said with a smile. She followed Agatha through the manor which she vaguely recalled and into the library. There were books along all the walls, many antiquated collector’s items as well as volumes

worth of encyclopedias and economic journals related to Alfred's business ventures.

Agatha took a seat on the oak wood table with a light jump, picked a book from a table and absent-mindedly flipped through it while Alice stood by.

"You were bored in there, weren't you?" Agatha asked insightfully.

"Well," Alice began, "it's not about your mother. It's me. I don't feel like I quite belong in this world."

"That makes two of us," Agatha said. She could feel a strange sense of bonding with the girl. Alice decided to look for a book. Her hand wandered close to one with a thick spine and heavy binding that she began reading somewhere close to the start.

"You have an eye for detail," Agatha pointed out. "That's the oldest book in the library. And my favorite."

Alice sped through the pages, absorbing them instantaneously through her heightened senses. Of course, as she did, all the information from each separate sentence entered her at the same time, giving her a swift mix of emotions as she flipped the pages. She ended up holding the book back and looked at Agatha in shock.

"Well, that's interesting," she said. "Why would they suggest that Lilith was evil?"

"That's how the story goes," Agatha said, "in this world."

Agatha slid off the table and sauntered over to Alice. Alice backed up to the table, laying the book on it. Agatha took Alice's hand in hers and guided it down to the table edge. Then she used her other hand to caress Alice's hip slowly and hiked her dress up an inch at a time as she did. Alice was confused. Agatha smiled gently as she lowered herself to her knees and pushed Alice back just a bit so she was resting against the table edge. Alice moved her hand over Agatha's to stop.

"That was not the story I was told," Alice said, breathlessly. Suddenly her mouth hung open from pleasure shock. There was some confusion going through her mind as to what was going on. Now she knew what it was, as she *felt* it happening. It was so sudden, and Agatha's hands and tongue so expert, that it came on like being thrown into an ocean. She closed her eyes looking for a good reason to stop what was going on, but the pleasure was so intense she couldn't manage to hold on to the thought for much longer. She reached for Agatha's hair with her left hand and ran her fingers through it gently as a feather, as her right hand continued squeezing the table edge. Alice let herself slip into this ocean of yet unknown waters. She felt lighter than air. Her feet unconsciously left the ground.

"Heavens," Alice released a prayerful whisper for mercy at a newly discovered sensation.

She could feel it coming on. Alice put both her hands on the edge of the table while quivering in pleasure as Agatha continued.

Agatha's hands found their way up to keep Alice's locked in place. Alice seized up again from pleasure, accidentally making the book fall on the floor, as they heard a sound of distant footsteps.

Alice acted as if she didn't hear them at all. She was between worlds and lacked awareness to her immediate surroundings.

Agatha stopped quickly, although staying quite calm. She pulled Alice's dress back down to where it should have been. Then she assumed a guiltless position on the further edge of the table.

Alice returned to the reality around her entering a recovery phase. She quickly picked up the book from the floor.

"Well," said Agatha resuming their unfinished discussion, as the footsteps were still closing in, "I guess designing Lilith as evil was the most 'convenient' version for the collective consciousness, at the time, so to speak - in order to manipulate humans. In this new story, Life became Death, Knowledge a Curse, and Woman became Sin. Pleasure and rightness were beaten back on themselves, to eat away at the soul, as a cancer... Sweet, innocent sex was forbidden, yet coyly acknowledged as irresistible"

She checked on Alice's condition. The girl was listening but she was still all shaken up from before. Agatha continued, knowing who was about to approach the room. She didn't have much time left before they got company while the timing was also perfect for what she had to say.

“And when Man inevitably succumbed, he was shamed, and Woman was damned for being seductive and beautiful. Curiosity and the thirst for knowledge were savagely punished, and Humanity was severed from the Divine, to live lives of pain and longing. The infinite colors of the world were reduced to black and white, which were then set at war.”

The door opened, as Alfred led Luciano in on his guided tour. The smell of fine tobacco entered the room soon after them.

“What are you girls talking about?” Alfred asked. Alice, out of confusion, pretended she was reading something in a book, and that the arrival of Alfred and Luciano made her close it and lay it down on the table. Agatha maintained her composure enough to talk her father down.

“I was saying,” she began, “that this Earth, this holy and precious Paradise we all inhabit, was given to Men to rule over in tyranny, to devour and consume, until all is exhausted and extinguished. While Women, who carry the seed of life and renewal, are reduced to slaves. She who created life and guards wisdom has a long memory; do not think She will forget.”

Alfred sighed and turned to Luciano. “In her rebel mood, as usual.” He turned to the girls just as Alice was sorting herself out with the book, looking at it as if it was a living organism. “I don't mean to intrude, but won't you girls like to join us for a nice dessert?”

Agatha lifted herself off the table and spoke while striding out of the room. “It takes some REAL courage to be honest with

oneself. And some honesty is always required to break out of any outdated paradigm." She gave a limp wave as she passed them. "I'm going out, dad. See ya, guys."

Alfred sighed as she left, as if in response. Luciano noticed that Alice was still star-struck and bewildered, like she suddenly woke up there and had no idea what was going on. He decided to cover for her as repayment for how she covered for him all dinner long. "Would you prefer to go for a little walk outside?" he asked. Alice nodded to him and gave a polite greeting to Alfred as they went out into his garden.

The Lindberg estate's garden was very nice and far different from her own manor's decor. It was much more orderly and trim, with hedges forming green walls that led down stone-laid paths. Antique stonework furniture rested on the ground. It was a mild garden with its own kind of beauty to it, but Alice's mind was too distracted to take it in.

"What are you thinking about, darling?" Luciano asked, boldly. "I don't like the idea of myself lacking courage or honesty," she replied.

Luciano looked surprised. "What are you talking about? You - lacking honesty? Who told you that?"

"No one," Alice said, averting the question. Agatha's half - accusations thrown into the void made her think over her own premises. She didn't feel proud of somehow being tricked into the feeling of guilt with regards to what happened between

Agatha and herself. That went hardly hand in hand with her inherent habit to keep an honest interior monologue.

It was also clear to her that the whole ploy with Melinda was a bid against Alice's integrity more than Luciano's dedication to the pursuit of a true form of love. It was as much her *game* to fail as his. "This world feels really upside-down to me. I can't breathe here. Take me home."

Luciano was taken aback for a second. He agreed outright but was left wondering why. He took her back to the car and had Frederick drive them home. Once there, he helped her up the stairs and into the manor.

"You're shivering, my dear," Luciano said.

"I can't stand up," she moaned. She wavered and fell into Luciano's arms. He held her tight until she could regain her balance.

"You should lie down, my love," Luciano whispered. Hearing those words made her weaker for a different reason. He picked her up in his strong arms and carried her all the way to her bedroom. He laid her on the soft mattress and drew the covers over her while she sank deep into the fabric.

"Shall I leave you alone?" he asked.

"No," Alice said. She reached out, eyes wide and glistening. "Please stay." Luciano nodded and joined her in bed.

The next morning, Alice was awakened by the slight stirrings of Luciano and the buzzing of his phone. They slept through the

night and that was it. They didn't even change out of their clothes, they were in such a hurry to rest. In Luciano's case, he couldn't bear to wake her once he joined her under the covers.

He noticed her waking as he started to rise out of bed and smiled at her. "I have to go," he said.

"Already?" she asked.

"It's 8 AM, my love," he said, flashing the screen on his phone as he stood and turned. "It's a pity I can't stay. I have an interview for a new job - have to be there at 9:30, and I need to go to my apartment and change."

"What job?" she asked.

"Accounting manager," he replied. "I've been looking for a job for the past three months."

Alice was confused. She recalled him handing her a business card when they first met through her projected avatar in the street. He even offered her a job if she came by. "I see."

"What is it?" he asked.

"I think I saw you once in a park," she said, obfuscating the more complex truth behind her statement. "You offered a beggar woman to be your assistant."

"Oh yes!" he said. He recalled the event but was surprised that it had to come up. Almost like he was unprepared to explain it. "Funny you saw me there. Well, that's one more reason to hurry with my job search."

“Why not work for Kammerstein Corporation?” she offered.

“No, it’s too generous of you,” he said guiltily. “I can’t accept that.”

“Why not?” she asked. “I need someone I can trust. I’m quite new to this, you know. You are just perfect.” She waited as her words sunk in. Luciano was thinking it over but was still distracted by his buzzing phone. “I need your help.”

Luciano settled on something in his mind. He nodded to himself, then turned to her with a satisfied expression. “Right,” he said. “Then, of course I’ll be there for you. And well... thank you!” Luciano bent forward and gave Alice a kiss which she gleefully accepted. Once he left she returned to her bed and looked up at the ceiling. Her play in the *game* would take time, but she could tell it was going somewhere. There was love being fostered, steadily and surely, the way it should be in her eyes.

And yet the events of the party still swam in her mind and bothered her. Was that love too? Or was it something else? She couldn’t tell. The ways of Earth were different. The love on Earth was not the kind of love she was used to, either.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



The Paris branch of Kammerstein Corporation existed outside of the historic city center in the more business oriented district of La Defense. It was a relatively new addition to the ever increasing block of high-scale major business related real estate and a testament to the industrious drive of mankind to constantly build up from their past. It loomed in the distance, making the Eiffel Tower far off look like a toy from the upper stories.

Luciano entered in a slick business casual ensemble. He had a brand new tie. A gift from his lovely Alice. It had been some time since he took her offer and made for his arranged interview at her father's corporation. Their relationship was progressing steadily forward, but never too far or fast for him to handle. She had an innocence and unapproachable sort of purity that he felt unworthy to encroach on. Being with her was like basking in a light too distant to touch.

As soon as he got into the office he caught eyes with one of his colleagues in the accounting department and marched over to catch up with him before starting his own set of work. All the while, he fought off the peering eyes of two lady colleagues who were taking a break in the shared lounge.

Amanda Roth, 25, was an up and comer within the agency who dared to be feminine in the fast paced business world of men. She let her hair lay long in dark strands that draped unevenly on her left shoulder and accented her business outfits with red instead of sticking to the same stilted monotonous as everyone else. She leaned with her sharp chin rested on the back of her hand and brazenly stared at Luciano.

Her friend Claire Lavoisiere, 26, was in the same department as Luciano. She had more refined, conservative clothing in standard slate grey which complimented her tanned skin, but she was also daring enough to leave the top buttons of her shirt undone to show off her ample bosom as a sign of pride.

"He's kind of cute," Amanda said, nodding over to Luciano. "Our new boss."

"Sure," Claire said with a curl of her lip, "but he's not my type."

"So, who is your type?" Amanda probed.

"I don't know," Claire said. "As far as I am concerned, all men are incapable of sharing, or even experiencing love that's not based on looks."

Amanda jerked her head to tilt the other direction. Her hair flittered in response. "Do you hold a degree in philosophy?"

"No," Claire said. "Only living out my passions."

"Well, this one is taken, anyway," Amanda said as she turned to her iced drink.

“What do you know about him?” Claire asked.

Amanda finished her sip and smacked her lips to chase the flavor down. “What everyone knows. Only you missed out on it, taking your New York break for six months.”

“Oh, come on,” Claire said, rolling her head. “What’s going on?”

“Miss Kammerstein’s wonder boy,” Amanda said in a hushed tone. “Started off as accounting manager three months ago, and now he’s managing the whole European division.”

“Oh, I see,” Claire said suspiciously. While their eyes were locked on one another they left Luciano out of focus long enough for him to nearly sneak up on them.

“Hello Amanda,” he greeted. She looked up and gave him a wide smile, trying hard not to be overly flirty. “Who is this?”

“Claire Lavoisère,” Claire replied.

“She’s part of our permanent staff,” Amanda said, “just back from her New York assignment.”

“I see,” he said. He reached out to her. “Luciano Alessi. Nice to meet you.” They shook hands like good colleagues should. The sensation in Claire’s palm lasted all afternoon, up to the moment she ended up at his office. He had a corner room, three times as big as most of the offices. There was plenty of open space, enough to host a small get together of privileged employees, but every chair and coffee table was occupied by folders, forms, newspapers, magazines and other necessary official debris.

She went in just as Luciano was buried in an intense typing job. "Here's the report," she declared, handing it over. Luciano reached for it with a tired smile but the phone rang before his hand got halfway. He answered without wasting a single second. The person on the other end talked first with an extremely quiet voice.

"Of course, my love," he replied. Claire stood by and turned her head away like she wasn't listening, but the more obvious she made her evasion the more keenly she was able to hear the other end. "Sure, it's a wonderful idea. I'll join you there. You know I'll do anything to please you." Another, shorter pause, with a predictable reply. "I'll be there at 8. Bye." He hung up and let a bundled up sigh escape as he turned back to Claire.

"Sorry," he said.

"It's so nice," she said, handing over the document. "I've never seen a man as devoted as you are."

"Yes," Luciano said with a glance back to the phone. "Alice is a very nice woman."

"Nicer than anyone you've met?" she asked.

"I'm not comparing her to anyone," he said. "But yes, she's the best thing that's happened to me so far."

"That's interesting," Claire said.

"What's interesting?"

"So far," she said.

Luciano smiled confidently and began to run his hands through his hair. "Don't get me wrong," he said. He pushed hard enough to bring his eyebrows up from a resting position and let them snap back down as his hands left his scalp. He leaned over his desk and hiked himself up in his seat before he got back to work.

"If you're tired," she offered, "maybe we can have a drink while discussing the report. You'll feel more relaxed."

"What?" he replied.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I thought you had time till 7 or 7:30. Sorry, maybe I got it wrong."

Claire put the report on the table and started to shyly leave the office, feeling as if she finally overstepped her bounds, when Luciano stood up and disheveled a paper that was hanging precariously over the edge of his desk onto the floor. "No, no, it's..." he reconsidered. "Sure, we can have a drink across the street." Claire turned and smiled courteously. Luciano met her at the plaza entrance and went across the street to a busy day bar.

The La City Bar was a home away from home for the American commerce men working out of Paris. It was almost like a theme bar with the amount of paraphernalia on the walls, but it still had a sultry sort of Parisian charm from the lighting and the smell of local wine. Claire and Luciano had drinks at a table while he went over the papers in the available space on his side.

“So,” he began, “ that’s why we have to be so precise with these reports. Otherwise, we’ll have to go all the way back again if anything goes wrong, basically tripling the costs.”

“Can I ask you a personal question?” Claire asked, interrupting his debrief. He looked at the papers, realized the topic was done with, and turned to her. She had been staring at him the whole time, unbroken, trying to peer through him and into the deeper parts of his soul that made him desirable enough to try so hard for.

“Go ahead,” he said, as professionally as he could.

“How do you feel as a man,” she asked, “to be with a woman who’s richer than you?”

“What?”

“Doesn’t it feel awkward,” she asked more brashly, “to live with a woman who’s more powerful than you?”

“Well,” Luciano began. He had to pause to think it over, but came out of his self-reflection with a smile. “I guess we don't have any issues with that. I have my own fortune, so I don't really depend on Alice's money.”

“And what about this job?” she asked.

“Look,” Luciano said, getting slightly offended by her obvious line of questioning, one he’d put up with time and time again already. “I’m not lacking in career opportunities. I only accepted this job to help Alice, at least for the time of transition.”

“Amazing,” she muttered.

“Why?”

Claire gave him a sincere look that dropped his guard. “You turned my world upside down. I’ve never met a man like you. You could have any girl or job you want, but you’re so attached to the woman you really love.”

“Sounds like a nice compliment,” he replied with an assured grin. “If I’m supposed to feel flattered, then I am. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she replied. “Though I already regret having asked.”

“Why?”

“Did a girl fall in love with you without knowing you were rich?”

Luciano looked to the side and nodded along, as if it was the first time he really took a moment to pause and think about the question. “I guess so.”

Claire smirked at him and tried to stare into his eyes to search for more meaning in his words. “Wasn’t that charming?”

“Yes, it was,” he agreed. “She asked me to be best man at her wedding.”

“Ah!” she gasped. He smiled back, silently sharing her laughter.

“And did you accept?”

“Yes, I did.”

“You’re even more interesting than I thought.”

“And what did you think?”

Claire prepared to answer, then looked at her watch. She looked up at him in surprise. “I guess you’re getting late.”

He glanced down at his watch as well and was so surprised he half-stood from his seat out of reflex. “Yes, I am.” He forced his suit jacket on one arm at a time in a rush.

“Have a nice evening,” Claire said, gently lowering her lips to the rim of her glass.

“Thank you,” he said. He got his jacket on while Claire looked to the side and started searching through her purse. Luciano reached into his wallet and put 100 Euros in mixed bills on the table. “No, please, leave it to me,” he said.

She looked at the amount with a bit of shock. “That’s way too much for two drinks.”

“I’m not paying for the drinks,” he said slyly as he fitted his jacket tight to his broad shoulders. “I’m just grateful for the pleasure of our conversation.”

Claire was speechless, but she couldn’t close her mouth. She had to curl her lips into a tight smile just to bring her teeth back together.

“See you tomorrow,” he said with a quick wave.

“See you,” she said. She watched him go. A sense of jealousy grew within her, but not a bitter one. She was watching a man who was everything she never knew she wanted, and would

love with all the might in her life if she could, hurry off with excitement and panic in his gait to see a woman that was dear to him. From Claire's perspective, though she didn't know much about the relationship she intruded on, she swore to herself that she was watching a man in love...

CHAPTER TWELVE



Luciano's trip from the bar brought him into what seemed like an entirely different world. He went from a sporty theme bar that captured the casual crassness of an American eatery to one of the finest Paris lineage restaurants with a pedigree of over 100 years of constant service. It was named after the family, *Borgo's*, the descendants of whom continued to control its daily operations despite their different given names.

It was a stately dinner where national matters were decided by its leaders, its patrons and other important figures. The atmosphere was extremely refined. Luciano felt like he was barely crossing the threshold for dress code with his nicest suit - one Alice helped him pick out as part of a hiring bonus. The restaurant was incredibly exclusive, with a waiting list that required even high-class executives to make reservations several weeks in advance in order to dine there. Alice reserved their spot only mere hours ahead of time, and was guaranteed the finest table regardless.

He was led in by the maitre 'd to a candle-lit table in a secluded spot near the back of the room. It was just out of the way enough to be private, but still prominent enough to be noticed and envied by the rest of the seated and well-to-do clientele. Luciano

kept himself on his best, most gentlemanly behavior. It felt like he had been warped back to the Second French Empire. Anything short of the pinnacle of carefulness would be appalling to his date.

Once he was led to the table side he was given way by the high-class waiter and saw Alice sitting nobly in her chair. She wore a fine, slim dress that seemed to shimmer like silver moonlight on her body. It was downright ethereal. It cropped just at the tip of her chest where her breasts came together in the most modest cleavage, scandalous 200 years ago but modest and refined for the present. Her hair was just lightly teased in tiny brassy curls that draped down over her bare shoulders.

Luciano was breathless. He spent a good minute staring at her, unaware of how awkward he looked. He finally broke out of his trance and stepped forward to greet her properly. "Thank you for thinking about this. It's so...." He looked around to find a word that was better than his first reaction. The candle light, strewn flower petals, fine wood seating and a table cloth with a higher thread count than any bedsheet he'd known before; there was only one word for it and Alice said it first.

"Romantic?"

"Yes," he agreed with a thankful smile. "Romantic." Keeping it simple was best with her when it came to words. Although she was not shy about being extravagant in the way of romantic displays she was still modestly spoken and humble for her position, things that swayed his soul. He took her hand and

kissed it on the softest spot of the back of her hand, then he took his own seat across from her.

"I have a nice idea," he started. "Shall we go to the Caribbean next weekend? Take a helicopter to do some island hopping. Or buy a yacht? It would be fun!" He kept his voice down out of politeness but couldn't help raising his excitement into a loud sort of whisper. Once he realized what his voice was doing he carefully repositioned his chair to be next to her rather than a whole table length away. "There are a lot of nice estates. If you like it there, it's a nice location for a second home. What do you think?"

Alice nodded gleefully. "That's a great idea. I'd love that. Spend some time away from the city. Cuddling and swimming."

Luciano reached out and ran one of her curls through his fingers. "And making love."

She looked at his hand. The joy dropped from her face, replaced by a more placid reaction. She reached out and gently touched his hand to guide it away from her hair so she could rest it on the table between them and hold him around his fingers. "What about your book?" she said. "You planned to write on the weekends."

Luciano looked at her fingers playing idly with his hand. She looked much more pleased than before just doing that. "Right," he said. "Well, it can certainly wait a week. I prefer to spend time with you."

Alice smiled. Her smile was pure and innocent, obviously thinking only of thoughts of love which left Luciano's mind slightly torn between the two places he wanted his thoughts to reside. They spent their evening in relative quiet, enjoying one another's company without too many words or very much touching.

Alice had a divine salad of fresh grown snipped herbs covered with a gentle frothing of grated black truffle and fresh baked bread that was served with an in-house specialty butter made with black garlic. Luciano had a filet mignon medallion cut with fondant potatoes served with a side of very pungent but savory cheese and a garnishing of sea salt that was cracked in front of him off of a fist-sized crystal.

Once their meal concluded and they freshened themselves up with napkin pat-downs around their lips and shallow glasses of locally sourced wine, Alice gave him a tender, loving look. "Should we go home?" she asked.

"I guess so," Luciano agreed. He got up to pull out her chair, it was the gentlemanly thing to do, when he noticed that her hands were still glistening just slightly with a film of savory vinaigrette salad dressing. He reached for her hand and kissed the tangy liquid off. His quick pecks turned into licks as he teased her fingers in and out of his mouth.

She pulled her hand away and dabbed it off on the napkin again, made sure her fingers were totally dry and without any further shameful stains, then reached up and stroked his hair in thanks.

It was a very friendly gesture which Luciano responded with the friendly courtesy of pulling out her chair and then allowing her to lead the way. It was, overall, a very romantic evening. Not sensual or particularly exciting. Just romantic.

Just romance. That thought persisted in Luciano's head long past the night and went into the next morning. It made him forget the taste and smell of his extremely high class meal entirely as he was sent back into the constant flow of endless work at the Kammerstein office. He was behind his computer screen, eyes flitting from one window to another but never focusing on any one point.

Claire knocked on the door. He glanced up and noticed her wavy figure through the translucent glass, but knew it was her because no one else would knock if they needed him. The only other people who took time to talk with him in his office were the people above him who would let themselves in without so much as a kind warning.

"Please, come in," he said.

Claire followed through and entered with a folder in her hand. "Here's today's report. I verified it personally. Totally accurate." She placed it at the corner of his desk. He dragged it across the stainless veneer top and leafed through it absentmindedly.

"Thank you," he said. He started flipping through the papers and made his eyes move over the contents but took nothing from them. He wasn't reading. All he saw were scattered words here and there that formed no proper sentences.

“Sorry,” Claire said, standing by, “is anything wrong? Did anything go wrong at your dinner last night?”

“No, it was perfect,” Luciano said. He put the folder down and relented with a sigh, finally forced to face his distracting thoughts from Claire’s unintended focusing statement. “Too perfect.”

“Too perfect?” she repeated. “Does that exist?”

“Now I know it does,” he said, unable to hide his own disappointment.

“Want to talk about it after work?” she asked.

Luciano finally leaned back and took a moment to let his thoughts catch up to him in a relaxed state. He looked at Claire and nodded. “I guess there wouldn't be anything wrong with that.”

Claire smiled back. He felt a slight connection with her, something that felt unfortunately lacking from his date with Alice. It was more friendly and casual, not so forced or hard to keep up. He didn’t have to stiffen his back and shoulders to match her rhythm. It was easier to talk to her, and be heard by her as well. But it was just drinks, he thought. Drinks with a friend. A co-worker. Someone to unload his stress onto and share the burden of the same work together.

They met up in the same place, the La City Bar, and had the same round of shallow, easy to process drinks. Nothing extreme or complicated, nothing hard, just light drinks for light

conversation. Luciano treated his first glass like it was water in a desert, or like drinking it faster would somehow dull his feelings just as fast.

"You seemed a bit annoyed all day," Claire pointed out.

"I can't describe my feelings just yet," he admitted. "It's complicated."

"How complicated?" she asked.

Luciano looked up at the ceiling as he tried to sort out his memories and the conditions his mind was under. There were plenty of ways to start, but he took his time to find one that was the easiest to discuss without adding any dead weight to his words.

"I'm confused," he began, finding a satisfying path to follow. "And it's not Alice's fault. She's stellar. It's something within me. As if what I have to offer her isn't enough."

"Are you happy with her intimately?" Claire asked, trying to remain a little coy as if she was herself against the question.

"I can't comment on that," Luciani bluntly said.

"Come on," Claire insisted, leaving a silence for him to fill.

"Well," Luciano began, wondering how to broach the subject. "I don't know. Something is definitely strange. It's as if she isn't from this world. Her instincts are wired differently. I'm trying to match them, but I can't. You know what I mean?"

“Well,” she replied, “the only thing I know is that I can't see how a girl wouldn't be sexually connected to you.”

Luciano smirked while Claire took a drink of her own tall glass. “Thank you for the compliment.” He was nearly laughing it off as a joke when she held up her hand and waved at him while she took a moment to properly swallow.

“I mean it,” she said. “Maybe you should consult someone on that.”

“No, that would be ridiculous,” he said. “And everything seems fine, I just can't feel that...” He tossed his hands up like he was looming loose thread when Claire stepped in to try and finish his sentence, bluntly and directly.

“That you fully own her?”

“Yes!” he exclaimed. He was more happy than she was about reaching that revelation. “My best guess is that there's something with her chakras.”

Claire raised an eyebrow and drew a distorted, cloudy shape in the air around her head. “Like, you mean,” she said, still drawing as she spoke, “you have to connect on the 7th floor in order to match.”

“Something like that,” he said. He swirled his finger and pointed it straight up. “More like 128th floor.”

They shared a laugh together, not one sided or pitied and awkward. Claire was obviously enjoying their discussion regardless of the topic and Luciano felt genuinely better to

relieve himself of the tension of leaving such a sensitive matter unspoken for so long.

Claire stopped herself first and Luciano trailed off quietly soon after her. "Can't you think of anything," she said, "you can do to fix it?"

"No," he said, shaking his head as he returned to the grounded, sobering matter at hand. "I guess I should leave it alone."

Claire traced her finger around the rim of her glass. "An open relationship could be nice to try. Do you think she'd be open for that?"

"I never thought of it," he said, looking up thoughtfully. He started nodding to himself as he pieced what he knew of Alice together through a slight haze that was generated by his developing friendship with Claire. "But she might consider it. She has a great heart. She's an angel, really. Maybe I'm just not worthy of her. Sometimes that's what I feel."

"Of course you are," Claire said as she slid her seat closer to him. "You're worthy of any woman."

Luciano nodded humbly as she leaned forward and tried to kiss him on the cheek. When he saw her doing it, he leaned toward her as well. Their crossed paths met at the lips instead of either cheek. They pulled back at the same time and were ready to smile and laugh it off as an accident, but first they checked how the other responded. Claire was left waiting for more. Luciano

felt her passion overtake him. He also wanted it, but he didn't want to wait.

Neither of them could tell who started the kissing but it escalated quickly into a full, deep and passionate act. It lasted a few seconds but felt like a hot and steamy forever. That forever was broken up when Luciano opened his eyes to make sure he was still awake. Across the bar, at a lonesome table surrounded by the darkness of a dimmed light fixture, was a dark figure, a seductive mistress with lips so red he could see their glossy shimmer from across the busy bar. The woman he knew as Melinda was sitting and watching, intently.

He pulled away quick and left Claire nearly tonguing the air. He wiped his lips and stood up quickly. "Sorry. I have to go." He got up and turned to her just before he fully left their table. He glanced aside to try and think of something, anything, that could recover the mood that was so eagerly replaced just seconds before. "Looking forward to seeing you tomorrow."

"Me too," Claire said. She tried to shake it off too and started laughing to herself. She left the bar first, as she hated watching him run off and being left there sitting alone. As Claire left, Luciano made a straight march not for the door, but for Melinda. She was waiting for him.

"You won't tell Alice," he demanded. She gave him a wry look of surprise, slightly shocked that he was taking a tone with her at all. He felt unsettled, like her very silence was a boastful brag to the contrary, and he knew that she was still in power more

than he wanted her to be. "Well, if you do, I'll tell her you tried to seduce me - that I refused to give in and you're taking revenge."

Melinda gave a single, dark laugh. "I *tried* to seduce you? That's not believable, even for a naïve girl like Alice. Anyway, don't worry. I won't tell her. She'll discover everything by herself. That's more fun, isn't it?"

"She'll never discover anything," he said. "It won't happen again."

"Hmm," she moaned. "My experience rather tells me that what happened once can happen twice."

"Then you'll be surprised," he said. She smiled at him sarcastically, sloughing off any threat in his voice. He could almost hear her laughing as he retreated into the loud, busy evening street. It was either her or the mocking rhythmic sound of distant car horns or EMS sirens that echoed through the streets at night.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Luciano returned to Alice's home, his own temporary home away from home, to the sound of a grand piano through multiple walls. He knew the layout well already and meandered his way through the halls to get to the artsy, wide open opera room that was converted into more of a pastel-colored open space lounge. The only thing that clashed as far as color went was the centerpiece, the grand piano, which was heavenly white and stood out like a glowing, sacred object among the splashes of spring-like colors across the walls.

Alice was playing a lilting tune, something original without any strict composition that felt like a calmer Beethoven. Her fingers glided across the keyboard with ease, plucking out each key as needed, combining them all into a beautiful melody. Once she noticed Luciano approaching she slowly slowed down the melody into a natural ending.

"How was your day?" she asked, just a few gentle notes away from finishing. She played the last tone and held it, quietly, as she turned on her bench. He straddled the cushioned seat next to her and slumped his shoulders forward.

"A lot of stress," he said. "I can't understand how your father didn't go insane managing all this."

"Well, eventually he did have a heart attack," she mentioned.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m sorry.” The initial guilt that was burdening him only felt multiplied when he looked up and saw no offense taken and no remorse shared on Alice’s face. She was at peace in such a way that made him feel off-put, like she had accepted such a tragedy without a second thought and was truly glad for it. Glad in a spiritual sense, like she already knew her father’s ultimate fate would be a better one in the end. Or she was just more glad to hear his sympathy for her than she was saddened by the memory. A wholly positive person that Luciano felt pained to look at.

He turned away and swiped his hand over his face to freshen himself up. “Look, I thought, instead of going to the Caribbean, why don’t we spend a month on a great journey? Say, Bali. Sounds romantic, ah?”

“Yes, that sounds nice,” Alice agreed.

Luciano tapped on the top of the piano and slowly stood up. “Okay, I’m going to change now. What’s for dinner?”

“I have no idea,” Alice said with a calm shrug.

“I’ll ask the kitchen staff,” he nodded. He left the room without going straight to the door, like if he was getting lost. Alice turned around to look at the room that was once a lot more empty and felt the loneliness that she had to live with. It didn’t last long. As soon as she turned she noticed a shadow had grown all the way into a solid person that sat on her armchair and was drinking her tea.

Melinda seemingly manifested out of nowhere, possibly on purpose, in an armchair across the room. Alice stood up in shock at first, then politely wandered over to sit across from her in one of the other artisanal armchairs that was preserved through the ages. The whole opera room lounge was set up like a practical museum of different kinds of chairs, some from the 1960s and some as old as the 1860s pushed around to create a number of open air but private spaces for parties and mixers of all kinds.

Alice took the tea from the table next to Melinda and carried the tray over to a table next to hers where she poured herself a cup, as if guided by her dark counterpart's influence.

"Miss me?" Melinda asked.

"No," Alice politely declined.

"You've made progress," Melinda began. "You've learned to lie." Alice recognized the same feeling she had after her encounter with Agatha, - that she was failing to be completely honest with herself. In fact, she was longing to see Melinda all along since they parted. She kept her eyes down on her tea as she half filled her dainty cup.

"So, how is your new home?" Melinda continued. Alice sat up and gently sipped her tea to begin their conversation with a pronounced silence. "Pretty nice, thank you," she said. "All my favorite colors."

Melinda looked around at the walls and flooring, the mish-mash of everything spring-toned and bright that could possibly blend

together. Even the ceiling couldn't escape the psychedelic charms with swirls of color like the cross-section of a complicated ice cream swirl. "I did my best."

"Although," Alice began, "I didn't realize I would personally be a part of the experiment."

"Isn't it the best way to put it all to your advantage? For the sake of the purity of the experiment, of course. Now, you guys have the best chance to win."

"I understand. But I'd prefer to do it without this... glamour, this money."

Melinda smirked playing intrigued. "Does it make any difference for the one who is truly in love? On the contrary, it just eliminates all inconveniences. That's how *you* like it - omnipresent love. No suffering, no obstacles. Or did I misinterpret?"

Alice was guided deeper into her own soul and feelings with each word Melinda said.

Melinda looked past Alice and saw Luciano, dressed down in a home tee and lounge trousers, enter from behind. Luciano spotted her as well.

"I was about to leave," Melinda said. She stood and replaced her tea cup with a single smooth motion and started leaving the way Luciano came in, to force Alice to spot him last. "Have a nice evening," she said in a suggestive voice. Luciano watched her go like she was a lioness stalking him in the distance, he kept his front facing her so she couldn't pounce at his back.

“What did she want?” Luciano asked, suspiciously.

“Nothing,” Alice said. “We just had a chat.”

“A chat?” he replied, accusingly. Alice nodded, unsure of why he was so aggressive all of a sudden. He could tell that his tone surprised her and looked apologetic. He went over to the tea Melinda left and drank it. “Good tea,” he said.

Alice got up and moved to the nearest window of the grand hall and pushed the spring-locked panes open to take in a rush of fresh evening air. The wind carried the scent of her garden that surrounded the manor and the view of Paris in the distance, a twinkling pond of artificial starlight in the darkening night horizon, beamed in a vision of romance.

Alice realized that Melinda's reaction only enhanced her own doubts, as she caught herself trying to figure out how to break free from the trap of the easiness of the luxury Luciano and herself were bathing in. The whole bet with Melinda was about a journey of the soul, about choice, but what she had now looked more like skipping the whole adventure of walking down the yellow brick road. It seemed too artificial, too well arranged, as if Melinda made sure to protect her from being hurt, which seemed implausible anyways. Alice felt again that some part of her relationship with Luciano was lacking honesty. She could surely change that, but that required her to be brave.

Right beside her was a table that had flowers, freshly picked and waiting to wilt, which bustled briefly in the breeze from outside. Just a part of her garden that was brought inside to have shelter

without being obscured by darkness. She gently brushed her finger through the petals, leaving no bruises or creases in them as she went, and turned to Luciano who was nervously glancing around the room.

“Look,” Alice began, “I’ve been thinking. Maybe it’s not such a good idea to go to Bali. Let’s stay home.” She smiled sweetly, hoping to win him over with her earnestness.

Luciano smiled gently and made his way over to her. “Sometimes we need new inspiration,” he explained. “To take a fresh breath.” He took in a deep breath just as he neared the window. It started with him smelling the scent of the cool evening air mixed with the drifting scent of flowers, but he quickly took Alice in his arms and turned his nose down to smell her instead. “And it’s quite sexy too, don’t you think so?”

“You find things aren’t sexy enough as they are?” Alice asked.

“That’s not what I meant,” Luciano whispered. He made a move to reel her in for a kiss. She pulled away and pushed his hand off of her side with a timid little pawing motion.

“Would you still love me,” Alice asked, “if I were ugly, old, poor or just a person you met on the street?” She looked at him intensely, ready to judge his answer. He felt a mount of pressure from her gaze. The look of an heiress, not only flush with conglomerate power, but radiant in a suffocating sense of purity that Luciano couldn’t match.

“Of course,” he answered as truthfully as he could. “If I met you in any random circumstances, I'd remember you forever. Why do you ask?”

Alice kept up her stare for just a moment as she reflected on his words. She couldn't help recalling their first meeting when she was a beggar woman, and how he didn't even recognize her when they crossed each other at the cafe entrance. And even if she knew Luciano was answering her with all sincerity, she felt somehow hurt all the same. She finally saw just how much their visions of romance and being together clashed. Looking into Luciano's eyes made her feel like she may have already lost her bet with Melinda, even if she was still far from figuring out how it will all play out. She couldn't stop questioning what would their relationship be like if she had no money. Would he even notice her in the first place? Anyways she saw no point in maintaining the artificial comfort zone they were enjoying any longer. It all seemed a big lie she had to end in order for the bet to be an honest one.

“You know,” she began, “I thought about something. When Kammerstein Corporation is sold, I'll give the money to the poor.”

Luciano paused. “You mean, like, how much?” He made a circling motion with his wrists at her, as if he wanted an exact number.

“Everything.”

“Everything?” he repeated, quietly.

“Yes,” she said confidently, “everything.”

Luciano looked blindsided. “But how will we live? Where?”

“We’ll find work and rent an apartment.” she said casually. She looked around at the massive room, full of antique and refurbished one of a kind furniture, the grand piano and the halls that connected to equally opulent, expensive rooms throughout the mansion. “Honestly, why do we need all this luxury to be happy? We just need each other, don’t we?”

Luciano was speechless. He tried to look in the same direction and see what she was seeing but it all went past him. He rubbed the back of his neck and rolled his head around to stretch it out. “Look,” he began, “I think you’re tired. Have some rest. Let’s talk about it tomorrow.” He went over with his hand up, prepared to set it onto her shoulder, but she moved away at the last second with a look of concern.

“It’s not just about us, dear,” she attested. “Think about all the kids who are dying of famine. That money could really change lives. Thousands of lives.”

“No one should give away everything,” he contested. “You should think about us, too.”

“I am,” she said.

“Alice,” Luciano explained, “you talk like that because, in your entire life, you’ve never had to work for money. You don’t know what it’s like.” He took a moment to see how his words were being reflected in her thoughts. She looked defensive and

worried. Both of them had a point to make that neither wanted to accept. "Come on, come here," he offered with his arm open. "Let's talk about this tomorrow. Let's not make any crazy moves now. Come here."

Alice stepped away, refusing his offer. "I love you, but I can't tonight."

"Why not?" he insisted. She turned and went out of the room toward the stairs. He heard her ascending and turned his head down. "Damn it!" he muffled into his hand. He started pacing around the room and wound up at the chair he saw Melinda in. There was something thin wedged between the old leathery cushion and backing.

"She forgot her notebook," he hummed to himself. He patted the hard cover of the thin book against his palm and set it up on a nearby end table. He went to pour a glass of whiskey for himself from the entertainment lounge at the other end of the piano hall, a stiff drink to take in the dark secrets that were at his disposal.

But he couldn't. As soon as he opened it his eyes strained to read the scribbles. It was pictographic, but also looked like limerick with odd words and phrases being repeated and lined up together. It was written more like a book of poetry than a book of self-confessed secrets. He could only tell that by the way the words were arranged but he couldn't read a single one.

He flipped through to find a single word written in the Latin alphabet and went all the way to the last available page. As soon as he opened it, the text on the page swirled, moved around on

the paper and suddenly the paper burst into a plume of fire that he held in his hands. He tried to retreat into the back of the chair, unable to drop it yet terrified of the flames. A hand descended and closed the book shut from above. Luciano released his hold on the hard leather while the stranger's hand lifted the thin tome up and away from him.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed.

"Thank you for finding that," Melinda said. Luciano twisted his neck back to see her looming over him like a curtain that fell off the wall. All the mystique and amazement of the fancy trick he saw was forgotten once she appeared. He stood up with immediacy and pointed an accusing finger her way.

"What did you tell her?" he demanded.

She gave him a playful look, up and down his figure. "You look upset."

"Did you tell her about Claire?" Luciano said with a rising threat to his voice. "Did you tell her to give all the money away?"

"Nothing was further from my mind," Melinda thoughtlessly confessed. "Does it bother you? It's not your money, after all."

Luciano kept his glare hard on her, unwilling to let her shift control of the conversation onto his own guilt. "You talk as if I was nothing here. Nobody. Just if none of this concerned me at all. I'm living with her, do you understand?"

"Oh, I understand," she said snidely. "You went through all these huge challenges to get her in the first place. And now

you're putting all your efforts into nourishing your beautiful relationship."

Luciano felt like he was being backed into a corner as she talked. "Look, it might seem ridiculous to you. But it's not to me, by far!" "Calm down," Melinda said, joylessly. "You have Alice in your possession. I just came to pick up my notebook." She waved it in front of him. Luciano reached out and snagged it, sharing his grip with hers.

"You must understand, I want all of her, her soul included."

"Do you really?" she snapped back. "So, what do you want from me?"

She stepped forward, pushing the book and her breasts up against his arm, but he didn't back away. He stared down at her intensely, their closeness she was playing with busted out in his helpless rage of conflicting feelings.

"Leave us alone," he warned.

"Do you always feel so threatened when Alice has a cup of tea with someone?" She leaned toward him closer as if she'd allow Luciano to kiss her, if he tried. He craned his head back a bit and looked down at her. Melinda's look was so taunting and the temptation so obvious that it could feel ineffective, but for a bizarre reason it all worked out. Every part of her exuded a controlled, purposeful sexiness that she was utilizing to her fullest ability, knowing her prey wouldn't be able to resist.

Then he spotted something protruding from her plunging neckline. A shining spot of metal caught his attention as it was perched between her two alabaster mounds. The pendant fascinated him so much that he unconsciously let go of the notebook to get his hands on the metal band that held it. The pendant itself was so intricately detailed that it seemed impossible to be so small. The lines of circles met at every vertex of a pentagram, merging triangles that connected each point with every other point in a spiral of lines that were not cluttered or clear at the same time.

Melinda smoothly pulled away with her book in hand and waved it at him while Luciano caught himself from falling forward after the pendant was taken from his grip.

“Good night,” she cooed. She left the room with him still semi-hypnotized and confused, but not unsure. The tension between them was building up, but hate was just the opposite side of love, both existed from the throes of passion, and Melinda’s game was far from over.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Luciano's thoughts have been clouding his mind since the previous evening. Even though he wasn't the driver of his own car anymore he still stared ahead at the road with antsy feet as the car was expertly driven for him by one of the Kammerstein chauffeurs. He ducked and weaved himself in turn with the shifting of the car through morning traffic on his way into the city.

His mind was interrupted when his phone started to ring. He took it out and checked the number. It was a very important call. He swiped to answer immediately.

"Yes," he replied, as soon as he heard the other voice call his name. He listened intently and replied as soon as he had a moment to do so. "Yes, Mr. Lindberg." Luciano leaned forward and put his hand on the back of the driver's seat, just under the head rest, to give his chauffeur a wordless notice about their potential change in route. "I have my next meeting at 3. I can be at your place in 30 minutes." The chauffeur nodded as Luciano retreated back to his seat. The route was reset in the old driver's mind and he immediately went away from the main roads to re-enter the stately hills a short distance away.

Within 30 minutes, no more or less, they arrived. Luciano hurried up the stairs of the lavish, traditionally affluent mansion

and was welcomed in by a butler who led him into the living room where Alfred was waiting. They greeted one another, the butler was dismissed and their private meeting began.

“Sorry for this last-minute meeting,” Alfred said. “But this is urgent and I didn’t want to delay it.”

“I must confess,” Luciano said, “the timing is not quite appropriate for any new business ideas.”

“I know,” Alfred said. He sat down and began working on his authentic oak wood pipe. Luciano took a seat across from him.

“What do you know?” Luciano asked.

Alfred took his time preparing his pipe, against the urgency of their meeting, and showed off his refined smoking habit. “This morning we got information from our source at Kammerstein that Alice wants to donate all the money from the transaction.”

Luciano dipped his head, too deep to be a single nod, more like a remedial gesture of penance. “She might reconsider.”

“You think you can make her change her mind in two days?”

“I think so,” Luciano affirmed. “I feel awkward discussing this with you. Why did you want to speak to me rather than to Alice?”

“Look,” Alfred said as he leaned forward and pointed with the mouthpiece of his pipe, “I worked with her father and I wish her all the best. But with all respect she is still a little girl who doesn’t know the value of this money. We worked very hard to earn it.

She just got it and now she acts like a child who doesn't like her new toy."

"I see," Luciano nodded.

"The deal is for 3 billion dollars," Alfred restated. "I set this price because I wanted to be generous. Now all this money given away doesn't make anyone happy."

Luciano shrugged. "Except for a couple of thousand African kids."

Alfred waved his pipe through the air and batted a line of smoke away. "Don't be ridiculous."

"What do you want from me?" Luciano asked.

"I wanted to give her another chance," Alfred explained. "I could contribute to a certain process that would result in a stock crash in the next 24 hours that would devalue Kammerstein stock by 95%. In this case I would pay only 150 million for the deal. Maybe such stress might be beneficial for Alice, you know. She might change her mind and be more careful. She'll keep over a hundred million dollars anyway."

"I still don't see why you are telling me all this," Luciano confessed with his hands clasped together.

"Because I'll need your help. Her advisors will alert her to the possibility of manipulation. You must persuade her to go on with the deal at the new price."

Luciano looked up with a bit of aggression. He saw Lindberg as a high ranking superior in the world of business, but the gross manipulation and old money tactics he spoke of crossed a line. A line where respect no longer held value. "And what makes you think I'll do anything like that?"

"Well as I said it will benefit everyone. What about 200 million?"

"200 million what?"

"Dollars," Alfred said, eagerly. "Transferred to your account right after the sale."

"You want me to betray the woman I love for 200 million bucks?" Luciano asked bluntly.

"Alright, 300 million," Alfred concluded. "Remember, this will be your money. No one will know. And who is talking about betrayal? This money is enough to guarantee your happiness with Alice in your present mansion if you wish. And I'll tell you more, it could be the only way to do so."

"I see," Luciano said. He felt defeated, that so much money could be promised so easily, he knew passion couldn't help him against such an immense conglomeration of raw moving power. Alfred could see that complacency taking root and treated it as a mark of pride. He reached out and patted Luciano on the shoulder.

"I'm counting on you," Alfred said. "This is her only chance. Let me know."

Luciano looked up. There was more passion in his eyes again, as well as a rebellious shrug that brushed Alfred's hand off his rugged young shoulder. If controlling money was necessary he at least wanted to get something that would prove his love for Alice wasn't met with such a sunken posture. "500 million. No less."

Alfred rolled his eyes. "Okay," he agreed. He sat back down and nursed his pipe. "But that's final. And remember - I'm doing this for her."

"No," Luciano said as he stood up, "*I'm* doing it for her."

Alfred smirked with the pipe in his mouth. "Of course you are."

Luciano left as politely as he could, but still in a business-oriented rush. On his way out he failed to notice Agatha who was just outside the hall and happened to hide just in time as he passed by. She had arrived just before he made up his mind to leave and only heard the price negotiation near the end of his conversation with Alfred. Her only context for what was happening had to do with money and doing something for *her*. She just happened to have an idea of who that *her* was. She waited until the next day when Luciano was certainly absent and her own presence would not raise suspicion.

Alice's mansion welcomed Agatha graciously. She was let into the reception hall and bid to wait while one of the house maids went upstairs to inform Alice that she had company. Alice came out in no time and hopped down the stairs to see her guest.

“Well, what a surprise!” she exclaimed.

“A pleasant one, I hope,” Agatha said suggestively. All at once the entire evening memory that Alice had subconsciously pushed away came back to her. Her pale face went red with blush and she avoided looking at Agatha on her way down to the ground floor.

“Of course,” Alice said, trying not to sound nervous. The skip in her step was somehow gone. She made her way to a nearby chair but saw Agatha inviting her to sit up on the edge of the end table. Alice hoisted herself up and half-sat on the edge of the table. Agatha took the opportunity and scooted toward her. Agatha offered her back to Alice, which Alice instinctively took into a friendly hug from behind, her arms wrapping around Agatha's chest. They were interlocked into a sudden cuddle. Alice rested her chin on Agatha's left shoulder, which she caressed gently from the other side with her right hand, immersed in the gratitude she was feeling for the love and blatant honesty Agatha exuded regardless of any circumstances the outer world had to offer.

“I came to make sure you're alright,” Agatha said. “Yesterday I overheard Dad and Luciano discuss some big bucks - like, half a billion. And today this stock market crash. Something strange is in the air. Some sinister stuff. I can feel it. Do you trust Luciano?”

Alice took no offense, but disengaged immediately at the accusation. Agatha took no insult to the gesture and turned to look Alice in the eyes as she answered. “Yes, I do.”

"I feel something is really out of place," Agatha said, failing to tune into Alice's thoughts. Alice was ready to face her own doubts but she didn't feel like sharing them with anyone, let alone with Agatha, whom she wanted to spare any trouble.

"Don't worry, dear," Alice said. "I'll be alright. I'm not interested in money. I'll just do my best to make the most of it for the charities. But it warms my heart that you care about me. I'll remember that."

Agatha was taken aback by Alice's confession. It was so sweet that she ended up smiling in a tender, heartfelt way she wasn't used to. Just then the front door opened, no attendant and no knock. Agatha sprang up in self-defense until she saw Luciano come into the door. They all spotted one another to mixed reactions. Luciano was surprised, Alice was glad but Agatha remained partially on guard.

"Nice to see you, Agatha," he said. "Any news from your father?"

"No," she said sweetly. "I just came to visit Alice. But I was about to leave." She turned to Alice and gave her a side-eye motion in Luciano's direction, almost like a warning. "See ya," she said happily.

"Thanks, again," Alice said. Agatha walked right past Luciano, leaving him there, confused. He couldn't shake the sense that she was definitely lying. When he turned to face Alice he could see from her concerned expression that something came to light he would have rather stayed hidden.

“We have to talk,” he said.

“I know,” she replied, expectantly. They retired to a corner of the receiving hall and made it clear they didn’t want to be disturbed by their huddled body language. “Look, I’m not sure I want to sell now.”

Luciano tensed his mouth. He had a task to stick to, even against her own emotional state. He just thought of his former mantra, he was doing it all for her. “Alice, listen. To me, the bottom line is this: Do you care about this money or not?”

“I care about the kids who are dying of famine,” she replied.

“But this game is over,” he said. “Over, you understand? There’s no way to get the stock back to its original value.”

“That’s not what my advisors say.”

“Why would they say anything else?” he said, coldly. “They know that’s the only way they keep their jobs – if you refuse to sell. 150 million is still a lot of money. We could live on this money. Or help anyone you want. We just need each other to be happy - you said that yourself.”

“You’re right,” Alice nodded. “I will sign the deal with Lindberg for 150 million if you agree we should give it away and start a new life together.”

Luciano looked at her with surprise. He adjusted his face to completely hide his thoughts and tried to be overwhelmed by her positivity. “Right,” he said. “I agree.” Alice seemed overjoyed to hear him say that and leaned in to hug him.

From there, everything happened in a blur. In Alice's mind, which was one realm removed from the regular world of mortals, she saw things from an enhanced perspective. She saw the happiness in people's faces that they worked hard to hide, along with the guilt of their misdeeds that they kept tensely tucked away behind every wrinkle and crease in their skin. Surprisingly, of all the old and wizened men at the contract signings to transfer the ownership of her former family's legacy, Luciano seemed to bear the most guilt of all, but also the most joy.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Once the transaction was completed, Alice felt the air of freedom filling her lungs. All the weight of the world of corporate finance was off her shoulders. She nearly danced her way out of the board room and down to the lobby with Luciano close by. He held himself back a bit, not wanting to step on her toes as she stepped lightly and gaily to the beat of her own silent song. He was in love with her, but considerably put off by her reaction to losing generations worth of a massive fortune. There wasn't a hint of malice in her for the tragedies that took place behind the scenes, not an ounce of suffering for the rogue deal that was carried out in the shadows. She was free, and that mattered more.

She made her way back to Luciano and tried to drag him away with her dainty strength. He took her hand and kissed it, then released her. "I'll see you at home in a couple of hours," he said. "Our new home," she pointed out. "The broker called me just before the meeting."

"Oh, I see," he said. He was glad to know that she wasn't that excited over being homeless. She still had some money and some understanding of what it meant. Surely she would be wise enough to live off of it and be charitable only within reason. Not that it would bother him.

“Where are you going now?” she asked.

He hiked his thumb toward the staircase. “I have to take care of a few things in the office. It won’t take long.” She nodded to him and escorted herself out. No more bodyguards or chauffeur. No more rich girl life. She skipped down the street and headed for the love nest she had prepared for the both of them while Luciano waited for her to be clearly out of sight of the office building. Once she was most certainly gone, either by cab or by foot, he left and went down the street the opposite way.

His first stop was the bank. The corporate holdings firms only trusted the esteemed and well established local banks to manage their long-term assets. That was where Luciano went to confirm the final transfer. As far as Mr. Lindenberg and the rest of the board knew, the entire operation hinged on his successful private negotiations with Alice to get her to accept her destitute fate with finesse and grace none of them could ever match. All for a cool reward of a small portion of their earnings.

He sat across from a private banker who was typing away at a terminal plugged into the floor. The old building had many high tech renovations and other technology which clashed with its otherwise well aged aesthetic.

“Yes,” he confirmed. “The wire has arrived safely.”

“And what’s the exact amount?” Luciano asked, quietly.

“The wire has been made in US Dollars. It’s 500 million. Would you wish to meet with our investment expert? I could book a

meeting for you right away.” His tone was very pleasant and serviceable.

“Maybe next week,” he said with bashful confirmation. “I’ll call you.”

“As you wish, sir,” he said. “Have a nice day.” With that chore done, he left with a spring in his step for a very different reason than Alice and made his way down the road to the La City Bar. He had an important appointment to keep, one last piece of office business that he didn’t want to leave undone.

Claire picked out a spot to meet, a familiar table where they both experienced a sudden sweep of passion just a few nights before. Luciano entered and worked his way past the staff to the table just as Claire reached a highlight of impatience. She saw him take a seat across from her just as she raised her wrist up to inspect her watch. When she lowered it she saw him smiling a smug, charmless grin.

“So what’s up?” she asked. “You told me to leave the office. But you’re not the MD, you know. I can lose my job.”

“Well,” he said with a dark, mysterious chuckle, “I have a surprise for you. And honestly, I won’t mind if you never go back to this office again.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

In no time at all, and with a little cajoling from a quick round of drinks, Luciano brought her out of the downtown area to the suburban landscape where the mansions rose above the rolling

fields with huge lawns, tended gardens and high iron gates surrounding the perimeter. They walked along a tour of a recently open-sale mansion, which was on the market for somewhere in the northern tens of millions of dollars, which Luciano knew was absolutely nothing compared to the cash he had on hand and the excess he could gain through careful investing.

“All for us,” he said, showing it off from the center of the front garden. “Do you like it?”

“What do you mean?” she said, ecstatically. “I adore it! It's so... unexpected. Are you serious about moving in next week?”

“Sure,” he said proudly. “Most of the decoration is in place. It's just the time we need to get some of your favorite art.”

He fished two things out of his wallet. One was his credit card, his personal one with low APR and an unlimited personal spending account. The other was a business card from Raphael Stetsky, an interior designer, and his card was a work of art in itself. “You could do some shopping or talk to Raphael here. He's a real expert.”

She looked up at him and made a quick, half-sigh. “You know, it's a dream. But I'm still confused. How are you going to break up with Alice?”

He nodded as his smile drooped slightly from her words. “Well, you know, that'll take some time.”

“That’s what all men say,” she said, derisively. She shifted the cards around in her hands and then started to hand them back. “You know, I’m not interested in -.”

Luciano put his finger up to her lips to stop her.

“Look, Claire,” he began, “this is serious. I am moving in here with you. Just give me some time. Just a month or so. That’s not too much to ask, is it? Think about Alice: she just had a major financial shock, moved to a new place, I have to be careful here.”

“I understand,” she said with a thoughtful nod. Then she held up a finger of her own, just one. “One month,” she declared. Luciano leaned in and kissed her on the lips in agreement.

Alice waited for most of the day in her new apartment. It took a while for Luciano to return to her side but she was overjoyed to see him regardless. She hugged him tight around his side with her face stuffed into his shoulder so deep that she couldn’t see the guilt that settled deep behind his face.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Claire took Luciano's directive and invitation with total earnestness and started clearing out her office space the next day. She put in her notice and made it clear that, for personal reasons, she would not need the job that she otherwise spent a great deal of time lifting herself into by the sweat of her brow and the straps of her boots. It was a sudden turn for many, and no one was more curious about it than Amanda.

"Seriously," Amanda said, "you're leaving? Where would you find a salary as good as this one?"

Claire responded first with a coy smile while she threw some of her old affects into a box. "Maybe I won't have to work."

"What?" Amanda said in disbelief. "Did you win the lotto jackpot?"

"In a way," Claire shrugged.

"Come on!"

"Well, it's still a secret," she declared.

Amanda looked over her shoulder and zipped her lips shut. Claire gave her an uncertain look. Amanda drew a cross over her heart and then stuck her fingers under her jaw like a gun. She waved Claire over and offered her the fake gun, giving her full

control of her life if she lied. Claire pushed her hand aside and whispered the secret into her ear.

"I'm moving in with Luciano."

Amanda backed off with a start. She held her hand over her gaping, gasping mouth and her eyes were wide open. Claire nodded with an increasing grin and continued softly. "In a new mansion he bought for us. I'm about to finish our bedroom with the interior designer." Claire went to her purse and took out a receipt from the designer's office. It was just a quote, circled several times, but it was written off and approved already.

"It costs a fortune," Claire went on, "but with his credit card and the help of Raphael, it's going to be insanely beautiful."

"You're kidding," Amanda said. She almost smiled for Claire with her mouth still open, but a lingering thought shot her lips back down. "Did he break up with Miss Kammerstein?"

"Yes," Claire said, wiping her hands through the air. "It's over."

"I thought he wasn't even your type," Amanda said.

"Well, I guess I changed my mind," she said with a growing laugh.

"Congratulations," Amanda said. She reclined back while Claire accepted her praise and heaved the box she packed off the ground. Amanda waited for her to go before she started biting her lip with jealousy. She noticed that the receipt from "Stetsky interior design" was still on the table. She left it behind like a piece of random trash. She may have considered it trash like any

other discarded receipt, but Amanda knew better and put it in her pocket for later.

Later that same day, somewhat near but still removed from the city center, Alice and Luciano enjoyed a humble dinner of spaghetti with red sauce, sourced from the local street vendor market. The sauce came from tomatoes that were freshly picked and canned that morning and the pasta was discounted for having too many broken strands. It cooked just the same and was garnished with fresh herbs that Alice was starting to grow on their windowsill garden she planted, along with a bright purple flower, one she kept with her from the garden of the mansion she left behind.

The atmosphere was dull and quiet. The ceiling was so much lower and the floors were creakier. The distant muffled sound of a TV playing at too loud a volume in the neighbor's house came through the open window into their small combination of living and dining room. Alice ate with a smile while Luciano was slumped over. He lacked energy and stared down at the empty space between them like he was glaring down an infinite hole.

"You haven't said anything since you came home," Alice mentioned quietly. "Is anything wrong?"

"Sorry," Luciano said. He didn't raise his eyes to look at her immediately. Her plate was already half empty while he barely got a start on his. "I just don't know how to start the conversation."

"You've changed since we moved here," she said, concerned.

“It feels awkward,” he admitted. “It’s much smaller than the house, isn’t it?”

“It has three huge rooms,” she said, gesturing to the combination entrance/kitchen, the room they were in, and the bedroom with attached water closet. What was absent was a laundry room, a substantial parlor or living room. The bedroom was as small as her previous walk-in closet with just enough room for the bed itself and a stuffed-full closet. “We don’t need more, do we?”

“I don’t think you should speak for both of us,” he said as he ducked his head and started eating. He ate just a little too fast and could barely taste the sauce. It was rich and vibrant, just a little spicy from vinegar that was made from the extra batch of the seller’s home-made wine, and the pasta was *al dente*, nice and soft but still a bit chewy. The herbs were well picked as well, a combination of parsley and oregano that gave it a grounded, earthy palette.

“Oh, sorry,” Alice said. She heard him slurp the noodles up quickly, like it was instant ramen, and waited for a break when his mouth would be too full to add more. “I didn’t mean to -.”

“Alice,” he said, disregarding the contents in his cheeks. He chewed fast and swallowed deep so he could clear his mouth to talk. “There’s something I should have told you before. I don’t know how to....Please understand.” He put his hands together, as if he was praying for her understanding. She gave him her full attention. He took a short breath and tried to meet her eyes but

turned away just before he started talking. "I love someone else. I can't help it."

Luciano focused on the flower. He finally noticed it as it was lit up by the light of passing cars. The thin petals refracted a deep magenta hue into the room in tiny strands of air. It was a beauty he never really recognized before as it was clustered together with dozens or hundreds of other flowers of the same kind. He finally turned back to Alice. She looked speechless but not upset. He couldn't find a trace of anger on her, or betrayal. She mostly looked confused, as if she didn't know what he wanted her to say.

"Aren't you angry with me?" he asked.

She shook her head. "How could I be angry with anyone who's in love?"

Luciano stood up in shock. A wave of strange emotions came over him. Most of all was relief which spurred his actions. "Oh, thank you!" he said, shaking his hands gratefully, as if he had been blessed. "I thought you'd understand. Thank you!" He grabbed her hand and kissed it passionately. "You're a wonderful person!" He looked up at her and she still had the same patient, understanding expression that she usually did. He was too relieved to be put off by her ever-present, almost unresponsive, joy. "You're my best friend. You'll always be my best friend."

"Of course I will," she agreed. Luciano thanked her again and quickly fled her apartment, leaving her alone with his mostly

eaten plate of spaghetti to clean up. She closed her eyes with a wince of pain and held her hands over her face for a moment. She took a deep breath in and smelled the rich roman tomato zest that was fully soaked into the barely salted pasta and it made her smile again.

Outside, Luciano boarded into his own car and drove away. He was in full sprint to leave Alice already. Her graceful go ahead was like a miracle. It was strange - almost inhuman - how forgiving she was. He was sure she was hurting, or perhaps was lying to herself. She was so loving that she cared more about his happiness than her own inner pain. But he was thankful for that, and for meeting such a miraculously fortunate woman. He got everything he'd ever wanted in the end.

His phone rang again. He sent the call through a wireless connection to his car's digital stereo so he could take the call without handling his phone.

"Hello," he said.

"It's Amanda Roth," the calling voice replied. "I'm really sorry for disturbing you. I just thought there's something you should know about Claire."

Luciano took a second to remember who Amanda was and her connection to Claire. It seemed innocent enough, as co-workers, but the conspiratorial tone she took made him think otherwise. "What are you talking about?"

“Meet me at Cafe Rouge,” she instructed. She hung up the call, leaving him entranced in a suspenseful state of affairs. All the uplifting joy of his departure from Alice was cut short by the new and intriguing offer. He was already dead-set on bringing Claire with him on his fast escalation into a better life, but one off-chance meeting with a former fellow employee couldn’t hurt...

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



The Cafe Rouge was bright in the evening, one of the shining stars of the old downtown Paris stretch. It was in sight of the Louvre which shared its beaming presence from its masterpieces of art. The cafe was the hub of a small amount of both infamy and fame. It boasted a rich history of many different establishments, including a brothel and an anti-monarch execution ground, before finally settling into its deep red history as a mingling space for the lustful.

Amanda waited at a table out front in a deep red dress. She looked like she was wearing a rich bouquet of wine, poured over her body to cover her. The fine fabric draped against her skin like a liquid and smoothly shifted as she arranged her long, bare legs. Once Luciano arrived her mood became mysterious and flirty. She didn't match the direness she had before. Instead, they opened their much needed conversation with a shared bottle of wine, one of the house's finest.

Luciano paused the first taste of his second glass and gave her a look. The elation of Alice's blessed forgiveness was still fresh in his head and, combined with the loosening of his lips from the velvety wine, it made him much bolder than he expected to be. "Your dress is *very* nice," he said, looking at Amanda with overly leering eyes.

“Thank you,” she said. She re-crossed her legs in her seat. “I was going to a party, but I decided I should see you first.”

“You have something important to tell me about Claire?” He put the glass to his mouth and started drinking again.

“I just wanted you to relax first,” she said, swirling her glass in front of him. “And I love talking to you. Didn’t we have a good time?”

“Yes, we did,” he agreed.

“Well, you know, that’s not easy,” she confessed. “I’m very close to Claire, but I know how important it is to a man of your position to know who he can trust. Especially if it’s a person with whom you’re going to spend the rest of your life, right?” She saw him react with a mild surprise. He went on guard immediately, which made her titter with laughter. “Yes, I know. But I wanted to let you know something. She’s just doing it for the money.”

“What makes you think so?” he asked, more seriously.

“Well, I was looking for some papers on her desk and came across some bills. Quite by chance, you know. She told me it was for your new house, but really, does one buy 25 Chinese vases for one house? I won’t be surprised if 24 of them were given back to the store and the money was reimbursed to a whole different account. It’s 10,000 dollars for one vase.”

Luciano lowered his glass just before he was about to take a sip. The rim fogged up as he huffed out a breath that would have

otherwise turned into spit if the liquid went past his lips. “What proof do you have?”

“Did you see any vases in the house?” she asked.

He put his glass down and pushed it out of his hand’s reach. “I haven’t seen anything yet,” he admitted. “We’re supposed to move in on Monday.”

“Let’s go to the house and you’ll see for yourself,” she said, with an air of warning. She finished her drink and got up to leave, ready to walk there if he didn’t escort her instead. She took full control of Luciano, a sultry seductive siren of the night who beckoned him with guiltless promises.

Luciano drove her to his mansion, through the gates that were locked by RFID readers which only he and Claire had immediate access to and then up the rounded private road. His mansion was something of a far cry from Alice’s. In his mind, it would be a sleek and modern sort of design. Classic on the outside but reduced and minimal on the inside. He wanted a humble look to his opulence, something clean and easy to maintain. He didn’t expect to run out of money very quickly with half a billion that would later go into active investments.

The reception hall was more akin to a clean, sleek office environment than a lavish Haussmannian mansion. The floor was tiled with stainless faux-marble ceramic, practical without being bank-breaking, and all the furniture had contrasting finishes of dark material with white tops. He looked around with Amanda and grew more curious and upset as he searched.

“Well, you see,” Amanda said with an echo as her voice bounced off the sterile floors and walls. “I was right. There are no vases here.” She noticed Luciano’s back was turned and took the receipt out of her purse to put it on one of the tables in the hall, just askew enough that it looked easy to miss. When he came her way she turned around and pretended to just notice the slip of paper for the first time.

“Look, here’s some mail from Original Chinese Handicrafts,” she said. “Let’s see...” She held it up and let him come up beside her to read along. “Dear Madam, We are happy to confirm that the reimbursement for the returned items has been made to the following account.” She handed him the paper and let him read it on his own. “Does this account look familiar to you?”

Luciano gripped the paper tight at first, then his fingers went limp and he nearly dropped it. “It’s incredible!” he said, exasperated. “I trusted her.” He backed himself up until he was in the middle of the room, then spun around to find his way to the nearest couch. His emotions swirled like a hurricane. He stared at the ceiling, vacantly, until he leaned his head back down and saw Amanda standing before him. Alice, Claire, Amanda, Melinda - all the women in his life took so much out of him that all he had left was laughter.

“I’m so stupid,” he said between his fit of laughter. “Anyone can rip me off.” His laughter died down slowly into a droning, mentally pained groan.

“That’s not true,” Amanda said as she lowered herself to his side. “I think you’re too kind. You just have to understand people better.” Luciano turned to face her as she drew closer. A moment of silence passed between them. Luciano didn’t take her words into full account as he immediately leaned forward and kissed her with extreme passion. They carried their kiss all the way up the stairs to the main master bedroom. There, the kiss turned into something more intense and extreme as they lost their clothes and replaced them with bed sheets.

The bedroom had a large bed, much bigger than a king size. The sheets were bound by elastic bands to stay tucked on the mattress at all times, despite the rough movements that Luciano and Amanda made on it, the fabric beneath them always corrected itself to stay perfectly smooth. They could feel the softness across their entire bodies as they rolled and roiled together under the covers.

After some time they took a brief pause and went back to kissing. They did much more between the two sessions of lip locking. The passion was so intense and so sudden that they only had time and energy to talk when they weren’t moving.

“Look, I’m afraid,” Amanda confessed. “What if she comes here tonight?”

Luciano stopped kissing Amanda’s neck to reassure her. “Don’t worry, she won’t.”

Amanda sat up to kiss him and then go beyond kissing once more, when her face twisted into a look of shock. Luciano followed her gaze and saw Claire in the silent sliding doorway.

“How could you!” she barked.

“Just stay calm,” Amanda said with her hand up.

“Are you serious!?” Claire demanded.

“Claire, calm down!” Luciano likewise demanded.

Claire stomped her foot. “Put your pants on before talking to me!”

“Who are you to give orders in this house?” Luciano fired back.

“I know everything about you!”

“What do you know?” Claire insisted. “What did I ever do wrong?”

“All the money you’ve stolen,” Luciano said. “It’s disgusting. Was it really worth it? Just leave.”

Claire looked insulted, hurt, and completely confused. “What? What are you talking about?”

“Leave or I’ll call the police,” Luciano threatened.

“What happened here?” Claire demanded. “It’s ridiculous. What about us?”

“You should go now,” Luciano said. “This is my house. You don’t own anything here. I don’t owe you anything.” He looked at her as her eyes began to soak up with tears. He stayed upset with her and didn’t flinch or budge at all for her tears. “Leave. My lawyer will get in touch with you.”

Claire sucked up a breath of air and left with a mighty heave of the door. Luciano leaned back and sighed, not in exasperation but in relief. Amanda rolled over and kissed him on his chest. He gave her just a glance, then turned and sat on the edge of the bed with just the covers to keep him from being naked in the open air.

“What are you thinking about?” Amanda asked. She crawled up and draped her arms down over his shoulders. He stayed silent as the thoughts flooded his head. He wasn’t prepared to formulate a proper answer. “Well, don’t worry,” she said. “Just tell me what you want.”

“Sometimes I don’t know what I want,” Luciano admitted.

“Well,” she said, “we could start with a nice dinner. I think champagne for 2000 euros would be a good idea.” He looked back at her curiously and saw that she had something in her fingers, another guilt-soaked slip of paper taken from his pants on the floor. It was the check from the cafe so many months ago when he first met Melinda and wanted to pay for her drinks. “I found this in your pocket,” Amanda whispered.

Luciano saw it all happen, as if it was a dream or an out of body experience. He was talking to Melinda, or rather, she was seductively goading him on, and he was so focused on the closeness of her lips in the middle of that mid-day cafe that he didn’t notice himself depositing the proof of their banter into his pocket.

He turned to Amanda, mouth open and ready to explain, but nothing came out. For minutes, he said nothing. His silence was awkward. Her silence, however, was damning.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



It had been a few days since Luciano walked out of Alice's apartment and out of her life. During this time she needed to be alone and understand what happened. Her emotions were in order, but her heart was still troubled. She was alone in a new sense, but still had connections to the life she left behind so quickly out of love. Though her company was defunct, the people from it still existed and remembered her. Her personal concierge, Frederick, visited her at her home. He remained as regal and high-class as he always was, so much that his presence clashed in her humble little flat. It was like the building owner was visiting her, when in reality, the positions of respect and power were reversed.

"Madam," Frederick began, "before we get to the final details, I wanted to take a minute to thank you, on behalf of our team, for your efforts at helping us keep our jobs with the corporation after the merger."

"You're welcome, Frederick," she said.

He dipped his head in earnest respect. "I'm here to help with whatever you think is necessary for the last arrangements. However, I'd like to remind you that it might be quite risky to donate all the funds to this one charity."

Alice winced a bit. The memory of her decisions, as rash as they were, reminded her of the one who failed to accept them and how he ran away. She second guessed her own ideal of goodness for just a moment before she continued. "Look, Frederick - I already made up my mind. I had a meeting with them yesterday. Mr. Flinton explained how hard they work to open schools and provide food for those children. This money will take their help to over 500 villages. I can't possibly say no to that."

"As you wish, Madam," he said with the same courteous obedience he had been trained to deliver. "Would you please sign here?"

He pushed a document across the table along with a pen. She looked over the paperwork while he watched over her. She went through it, page by page, and signed on every line she saw that required her signature. At this point she gave no extra thought to her actions. She was satisfied with what she did. Each signature was a life saved, a good deed in an unforgiving world. She finished up and slid the papers back carefully. "Thank you," she said.

He nodded as he accepted them. "There're also some issues we have to discuss in regard to the estate."

"We'll have to discuss that tomorrow," she said evasively. "I'm expected at a charity dinner in half an hour. But you won't have to stay overtime - you can go."

"If you wish," he said, "I'd be delighted to drive you there."

Alice looked up at him. She could only see sincerity behind his old smile, an earnest desire to help her and repay her for all she was doing. Seeing his true intentions with her nearly divine senses made her happy and she couldn't hold back her smile, but she shook her head. "No, Frederick, but thank you."

That day ended with her in a more positive mood. Unfortunately, darker forces conspired out of sight to ruin any glimmer of fair mood she had. Within the next few days, her hope in humanity was assaulted on all sides. She experienced a sudden breadth of despair, enough for the lifetime of a normal person, as each facet of her constructed life was torn down one by one.

First came the tabloids. Frederick assisted her in small ways, in a friendly manner, and delivered some things to her, namely newspapers. Just days after Luciano left her she saw him front and center of a candid shot with a stranger hanging off his arm. It wasn't the first time she'd seen the fascination of two people in love, but seeing it from the other angle where she was abandoned and he was still happy made her feel cold. The headline read "*Mr. Kammerstein's New Love Affair*".

A day after her charity dinner she received more grim news. Her appearance did not generate the positivity she wanted. "*Charity - Miss Kammerstein Desperate to Save her Image After the Disaster*" The whole article talked about her trying to claw her way back into the spotlight after willfully defaulting her company and draining its resources in a silly, undersigned maneuver that was regarded as childish at best and criminally negligent at worst.

Then another article hit her at her lowest. The charity she spent so much of her time trying to promote, so much of her money, came under the light of a national scandal. "*Behind closed doors - Kammerstein charity financing child abduction.*" She couldn't believe it. People were using the goodwill of others to commit acts of evil. The work of good men, in the end, benefited those who hid in the shadows and struck down the weak.

Every newspaper felt heavier in her hands until she couldn't stop her tensed muscles from shaking. She couldn't look at them any longer. After that, Frederick stopped bringing them to her, seeing that it would be better if she was not made aware of what was happening around her.

The only recovery Alice could seek was at the bottom of a wine glass. She had to do it to dull her pain for humanity. Her pain radiated out to everything around her. When she put her empty glass down it broke down into pieces as it touched the table.

The only other thing she had to keep herself company was her piano. She traded in the grand piano from the mansion for a much more convenient upright piano. It was compact and fit within her budget and space constraints. Alice played a page out of Haydn. No 39 in D Major.

She reached for the end of the page before she was ready and still had two hands worth of notes to play before she could stop. She tried to fill the space in with just one hand as quick as possible and reached up to the corner to flip it when a hand appeared from over her shoulder and turned the page for her. A

stranger was in her house without a sound or sight. She turned around with intense worry, which dissolved immediately into salvation when she saw the dark figure behind her.

“You,” Alice groaned. Melinda stared back, wearing enough of a smile for both of them while Alice stood up. Melinda sat down and continued to play where Alice left off, but her eyes didn't focus on anything. She didn't look at the music sheet or at the keys, she just played as naturally as if the piano was reading its own music.

“Were you expecting anyone else?” Melinda asked.

“No,” Alice flatly answered.

Melinda stopped and turned to the stack of newspapers that were bundled up beside the trash can. Even though they contained detestable material, Alice was still preparing them to be recycled rather than thrown into a landfill or burned.

“Aren't you jealous of Luciano?” Melinda asked.

“No,” Alice said. “He must love her. He did it for love. It doesn't matter whether he's with me or anyone else. Only his feelings matter.”

Melinda wandered away from the piano chair and tried to pick up a piece of the broken wine glass. “Right. What happened here?”

Alice pushed herself against the wall and tried to control her breathing. She felt like she was losing control. As if to reflect the state of her heart, the piece of glass in Melinda's finger-grip

broke as well and fell like frozen flower petals onto the table where they scattered around.

“Tell me,” Alice said breathlessly, “what did I do wrong?”

“Nothing, my dear,” Melinda said as she brushed the glass away. “You did nothing wrong. You just feel strange to be on planet Earth. And, unfortunately, you are not quite familiar with the concept of passion.”

“Yes, I am,” Alice said defensively.

“Passion is like tango,” Melinda said with a shake of her hips. “Do you dance tango?”

Alice huffed up her shoulders and tried her best to be defiant in the face of Melinda’s oppressive sarcastic smarm. “I can always learn.”

“It’s not that easy,” Melinda said. “Let’s see.” She turned and flicked her hand at the empty table. Suddenly a classic gramophone appeared with a vinyl record spinning and a needle ready to drop. She gently lowered her finger to tap the needle down from its position and the apartment was suddenly filled by an unfiltered rendition of *Entre Tu Amor Y Mi Amor*.

“Come here,” Melinda said. Alice started to walk forward, but Melinda was already dancing and she was expecting Alice to approach her with the same set of steps. Alice tried but failed to mimic the steps exactly. Melinda did it again, all to the beat. Alice took a moment to find the right place in the song where she should enter and then replicated Melinda’s steps flawlessly.

From there, they danced. Melinda's swinging hips lined up with the mood of the music, the painful query of love and lust that the tango evoked. Her steps were quick and loud. She stomped the floor with purpose. Alice followed through the same but was more gentle. She tapped the floor and showed more emotional sways of her shoulders than tantalizing swings of her hips. Her heart was still in the ballroom, and Melinda dove in to yank it out into the street.

As the song progressed, Melinda advanced the lesson into the give and take of hand-to-hip contact. She took the lead and directed Alice around in sweeping twirls and deep dips while Alice held her own and artfully submitted herself into Melinda's power. She realized the dance was more than just memorizing steps with rhythm. There was an exchange of power, of energy, that came with it. Their emotions also had to be in synch, and Melinda's were far more assertive than Alice was prepared to handle.

The touching escalated further. It was more than just handling hips. Melinda's hands gripped tight around Alice's waist. Alice attempted to repudiate with her own hand on Melinda's hip. She was unsure, both of the placement and of her own frankness. Melinda silently shifted her hand down a little more, and Alice responded with a firm caress.

The energy continued to build up into a swell that matched the music. Their moves became more assertive on both sides. Alice tried to dip Melinda and got her to swoon her head back, then

Melinda stepped in on the beat and lowered Alice until she was parallel to the floor. She was overcome with the sensation of being controlled in loving, passionate hands. When she rose up she leaned in close to Melinda's face. Melinda caught her in a gentle caress against her cheek and drew her in even deeper. Their eyes locked while their feet moved. Their bodies sent signals to their hearts that their minds couldn't handle.

Alice wanted to *kiss* Melinda. The music, the movement, the fast instrumental orchestration at the end of the last climactic movement; it all swirled in her head like lights in a kaleidoscope. It all ended when Alice blinked and realized just what she was thinking. She lost the beat. Melinda tried to recover it but she could tell Alice was being swept away by a distracting thought. Melinda tried to bring Alice back into the groove with a finger-locked twist and spin into a deep catch. Alice made half a turn, skid her heel against the floor and started falling in the wrong direction.

Melinda caught her anyway, just as the music ended, with a smile. Alice smiled back, meekly.

"You see?" Melinda said. "You can't do it." Alice's smile faded and she reached to pull herself up with Melinda's other arm. Melinda let Alice back onto her own two feet and stepped away to un-summon the gramophone with the same odd power that brought it there. "What counts in passion is the ability to follow it through until the end."

"That depends on the end," Alice said sagely.

Melinda smiled. "Not really," she said, brushing any of Alice's failing words off without batting an eye. "By the way, tonight you could attend a wonderful tango lesson with a great ending. If you wish to, of course. I promise you won't be bored. And I'll have quite a passionate partner."

"I can imagine," Alice said, snarkily.

"Luciano," Melinda said slowly. Alice looked shocked. "Are you surprised? I guess it's about time we ended our stupid bet. Shall we expect you to join in?"

Alice looked at Melinda's confident smile and haughty eyes, like she had Alice figured out - read through from beginning to end, index to appendix and all charted out. She controlled her through dance, and likewise expected to control her through the rest of their passion-placed wager.

"Sure," she said. Melinda turned and started to walk out. Alice shifted her feet uncomfortably for a moment before she spoke up right as Melinda reached the door. "Why didn't you get him to be one of your toys from the beginning?"

Melinda paused for a moment. She felt compelled to give an honest answer to any of Alice's insistent questions. "He wasn't worth an argument with you," she answered. "And he still isn't." She opened a door - not the one to the apartment, but one that hung in the air and opened up into a tunnel of deep shadows. She returned to the castle and left Alice behind, but the portal stayed open...

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Alice finally returned to the castle grounds. The otherworldly atmosphere felt far more liberating to her compared to the stuffiness of Earth. She appeared in the courtyard next to the tree. The old, skeletal figure loomed over her in a haunting manner but she felt no fear or oppression from it at all. Actually, as pitiful as it might be, she was tempted to give that thing a smile and a soft pet on its bark if only it could feel her love.

She saw one of the doors was still open and made her way inside the main hall. She saw Melinda walking with Leander in his grand robes. They were locked into a conversation, or perhaps more like an argument which Melinda did not give her full attention to. Alice entered and followed them from a distance, keeping her presence and her aura concealed as much as possible so she wouldn't be discovered.

Eventually, they entered one of Melinda's rooms in the East Wing. The hall was vast and majestic, but it contained no furniture at all. Alice stood in front of the closed door that separated the hall from the entrance with a door that had a glass opening in it. Alice couldn't help watching the action through it.

Melinda's eyes were looking anywhere but her boss, who paced in front of her with wildly gesticulating hands as he pointed and

swiped and grasped at the air. When he turned to her for an answer he noticed how she wasn't paying attention and he reached out to her shoulders. He gripped her so hard that his nails drew blood from her skin.

"You always played with other people's lives," Leander said, in a harsh demanding tone. "Not with your own! Our deadline is tomorrow. What do you think you are doing?"

Alice was deeply revolted to see him hurting Melinda. She set eyes on Melinda's coat which was right beside the door. The lush velvet drapery blended in with the stark, semi-Gothic taste of the room. Alice reached over to try and hide behind it further like it was a curtain or part of the wall, but her hand wandered too deep into one of the pockets and she found something odd there. It was heavy and firm and part of it was very sharp. She took out the dagger and looked it over. Her eyes went from the tip of the blade to Leander's back just as he removed his hand from Melinda's shoulder with blood trailing down her pale skin. Alice was ready to strike Leander with the dagger if he continued to hurt Melinda, but he didn't and, strangely, Melinda didn't seem to feel any pain at all.

"Luciano will be here in a minute," Melinda said. "And it will all end tonight."

"And if you fail?" Leander demanded. Melinda simply gave him a courteous, charming smile. He grimaced and wiped his hands of her blood off of her own shoulder, smearing the red stains across her skin. He left the room and failed to notice Alice hiding

behind the door. Melinda followed him out and stood in the doorway. She closed the door already knowing that Alice was behind it.

“Were you spying?” she asked.

Alice stepped out, dagger clenched in her hands awkwardly, like she was afraid she would hurt herself. “I was waiting for you.”

Melinda looked down coyly at the dagger. “By the way, you can let that go,” she said. “It’s highly inappropriate to hold it like that, unless you plan to hurt or kill someone, which is of course far from your intentions.”

Alice sucked in her lips as she failed to find any words to defend herself with. She let Melinda pluck the dagger away by the tip of the blade and watched her stow it back in her coat pocket, all while little beads of blood continued to form and drip down her shoulders. Without a second thought, she threw on her coat and draped it over her reddened flesh.

“Someone has to stop all this insanity,” Alice said demandingly. “Why do you let them hurt you?”

Melinda looked at her in confusion. “What are you talking about?” Alice furiously pointed to Melinda’s wounds. Melinda shrugged. “It doesn’t hurt.”

“Maybe because you are so used to it!” Alice said. She assertively stripped the coat down from Melinda’s shoulders and let it hang off her upper arms. Then she gently touched Melinda’s skin. A bright white energy flowed out of her hand and covered

Melinda's skin. In a moment, the wounds started to close, but Melinda swatted Alice's hand away soon after.

"It hurts like hell," Melinda complained.

"It can't," Alice protested.

Melinda rolled her eyes. "Would you do me a favor," she said, "and learn a couple of things before doing anything like this again?" Melinda shifted her gaze from Alice's growing guilt to the inside of her own room. A guard arrived bearing a guest, the dashing Luciano. He was escorted through a series of magically linked portals disguised as real doors that existed on Earth and led to the karmic palace of the dark angels. He was ushered in and left alone to be watched from behind a one-directional glass pane in the door.

"Well," Melinda said, all her charm and sarcastic vigor restored, "our friend has arrived. I suggest you stay here and wait until our conversation is over."

Alice looked over and saw him. Her heart skipped a beat but she maintained her resolve. "I must speak with him first."

Melinda held her hand out. Alice mistakenly reached for it when a plume of dark flames burst out and formed around the shape of a folder containing a stack of papers. "You should have a look at these while I'm chatting with him" She handed Alice the papers and waited for the full weight of the stack to make Alice's wrists bend as she held it. "And, by the way, if - oh well, when he kisses me on the mouth, he'll die. That's the deal."

"I must talk to him!" Alice demanded.

"Do you call off our bet, then?" Melinda asked. Alice looked uncertain, then turned her head down to the papers. "Don't worry, I'll warn him. I promise. It will be the choice of free will. Unless you object, of course."

Alice took in a calming breath and stood her ground. Melinda tapped on the file in her hands and left her to it with something important yet to learn for herself while she left to entertain her otherworldly guest. Alice stared through the window as Melinda made her fearless, sultry approach. Luciano looked more than pleased to see her.

"Thank you for inviting me," he said. "This place is amazing. I don't even know how I got here..."

"You are late," she said, interrupting his already trailing voice.

He shrugged his head. "I couldn't come empty handed. I heard it was your birthday."

"You heard wrong," Melinda said.

"I'm glad I did," Luciano smoothly interjected. "It makes my present unexpected." He walked around Melinda but she kept turning to face him. When she finally agreed to stand still he carefully took off her hypnotic pendant to replace it with one that was lined with perfectly cut diamonds.

"Where did you steal these?" she asked.

“It's worth over a million dollars,” he politely bragged, “and it's all my money, my queen. But let's not talk about it. You look stunning.”

While Luciano and Melinda flirted, Alice was left in a state of torn confusion. It was one thing for him to find another woman. And it was another thing for him to then abandon the woman he abandoned her for in favor of Melinda, a woman he most likely knew the least out of every girl he'd been with up to that point. Alice opened the file and looked over the first page of documents. They were copies of a private bank transfer, clandestine information only available to highly powerful executive heads within the bank itself, from the Lindberg Corporation to Luciano's independent bank account.

The diamond necklace finally made sense. She looked up just as Luciano started kissing down Melinda's neck. Melinda glanced at the window. It was opaque from her angle, but she knew Alice was watching. Her eyes also wandered further beyond Alice, which caught Alice's attention. She turned and saw Leander was observing from a bit further away, gleefully, like he was watching a trap about to be sprung around an unsuspecting prey. He gave Alice no mind at all and left the room, leaving the events to their natural course.

Luciano worked his way around Melinda's neck, up her cheek to her chin and was just about to plant a kiss on her lips when she halted him with a finger between them.

“Let's dance,” she said.

“If you wish,” he said with a cocky grin. “Some say I’m a pretty good dancer.”

“We’ll see,” Melinda sneered. She snapped her finger and the room filled with music. Luciano assumed it was a built in audio entertainment system of some kind. The notes of *Asi Se Baila El Tango* came through the walls and pulsed through the floor. Luciano gripped Melinda tight and let his hands travel across her body in rhythm with the song while she spun favorably and guided his hands with just the movements of her hips and legs.

Once more Luciano started kissing Melinda all over and worked his way up to her mouth. Melinda pulled away and committed herself to the dance swinging of her head and hair. He matched her moves and brought her in close for a dip, and a kiss, but she leaned away and spun. He grabbed and yanked her into a tight embrace. The tango looked like a luscious sex-driven grapple.

“Aren't those diamonds worth at least one kiss?” he asked. “Just one.”

“I already told you,” she said as she pushed him away, “you shouldn’t attempt to buy what’s not for sale.”

“Can’t I offer you anything you desire?” he asked.

She smirked. “There is one thing,” she said. “But I’m not sure you’d agree.”

“I will,” he said, nearly pleading “Anything I can afford. Just say yes to that kiss.”

Melinda looked over at the glass pane in the door again. She made the best show she could to prove Luciano's will was his own and could feel Alice's desperation from the other side.

"Yes," she hissed.

Luciano gripped and tore open her coat, revealing her blood-stained shoulders. He grabbed her around the bare base of her neck and brought her in for a long and deep kiss. Melinda pushed back into his kiss and returned the same effort. When they parted they both took a breath.

"Well, that's better," he said.

"If you say so," Melinda said, heartlessly.

Luciano looked at her suspiciously. He suddenly lost his footing. He thought it was just the head rush of kissing a beautiful woman so hard that the breath was sucked out of his lungs. Then he dropped onto a knee. There was no pain when he fell, no thumping bruising ache. He just sank lower and lower and felt like he was passing through the floor. Eventually he tumbled over and fell onto his back.

"What's happening to me?" he whispered. "I feel like I'm dying."

Melinda crouched down over him. "You said *anything you can afford*." She reached up to the necklace and ripped the diamonds off of her neck. She did it gracelessly and the clasp left a shallow cut across the nape of her neck where it grazed off her skin. She dropped it next to him as his body started to shiver in convulsions.

“I,” he said with a shaky, raspy voice, “I loved you...” His eyes closed. His body slowed down until it came to a dead stop. Melinda checked his pulse for a few seconds, then pried open his hand to retrieve the pendant that he kept away from her the entire time. With it back in her grasp she turned to the doorway and went to attend to her captive audience.

Alice was standing against the wall, her eyes shut tight to seal out the truth of what she just witnessed. When her eyes opened, Melinda stood next to her. Alice couldn't contain her rush of emotions and she started to breathe heavily.

Melinda took the dagger out of her pocket and handed it down to Alice. “Would you like to use it *now*?” she asked. Alice's shaking hand reached up and grabbed it. The dagger felt twice as heavy as when she held it before. She looked at it with confusion, like she completely forgot what it was or what it did, and it terrified her. Then Melinda bent down and steadied her hand in a cold, hard grip. She pointed the dagger at her own chest with Alice's hand wrapped around the hilt.

Alice loosened her grip and let the dagger drop to the floor. She ran away, down the long hall to the room with the portal mirror, to leave the scene behind her. Melinda stood up smiling victoriously until Alice was out of sight.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Alice was emotionally broken. She felt cut opened and gutted, like all the feelings she could have had were simply gone. She couldn't help thinking of Luciano, who's body had since been taken by some guards and disposed of, back through the portals where he would re-emerge in the Paris night scene as a victim of some kind of strange tabloid circumstance. A meteoric rise of unexplained success that crashed and burned just like a shooting star.

She wasn't alone for long, however. Robert entered and immediately turned towards the chair where Melinda once sat.

"Robert," Alice said, with a sudden swelling of sobbing force behind her voice.

"Yes," Robert replied, even-toned and cordial as always - utterly ignorant to the obvious mood showing in Alice's face. "I am here to clean." He went about his task immediately with a moist mop and dragged it around the floor.

"How do you feel about serving evil?" Alice asked.

Robert looked up and blinked rapidly to process his answer. "With all due respect, my Lady, I see no evil here. What I would call evil is on my planet, orbiting Rigel. We don't have any

personal choice, only collective consciousness. Melinda isn't evil. She's my light, my angel."

"Is that just because she has individual consciousness?"

"Yes. Because she hates you." Robert scanned over Alice's face. He sensed that she was hurt but the way her eyes widened and her mouth gaped open slightly. "I mean, because she loves you. Love and hate are the same, indifference is the antipode. Didn't you study that in school?"

Alice calmed down and settled into a perplexed confusion. "I guess we didn't go to the same school."

"Did I answer your question?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "You did." Alice looked out the window and gazed at the sky. She felt like she couldn't bear to be left alone with her feelings. She had to talk to Melinda. She left Robert to clean the room and went out to seek a way to clean up her own mess.

She found her way back to Earth through the secret passage in the castle halls Melinda showed her and followed a trail of imperceivable energy that twisted and wound through the streets to a nightclub. It was deep into the evening, past midnight when all the sultry, sinful types prowled for those willing to share a night of passion. Of course, it was the perfect place for Melinda. Everything was a match for her heart. The deep, driving trance music, the psychedelic strobing lights and

the dizzying fog of free spirited substances that filled the air. She was in her element: dark, mysterious and fun-loving.

She was away from the crowd, in a lounge all to herself. Thanks to her unlimited wealth she could stay suitably inside the club but have privacy as well if she wanted. She had an enviable seat, and caught the glances of those who were striking out and losing their chances for love on the dance floor.

Not that she needed to try. She already had a companion at her side, Leara, a young woman with long red hair that saw fit to caress Melinda's shoulder as lovingly as possible. Her kind eyes, full of light hiding some sort of deep secret. Melinda enjoyed it for the attention but hardly felt anything else that could flutter her heart the way the girl's heart fluttered for her. Then she saw Alice walk in with sharp, soulful eyes.

Melinda whispered to her companion. Leara got up and walked away, just to pass by Alice as she approached. Melinda shot a hot glare at a couple that were at a nearby table which forced them to leave.

"Are you angry?" Melinda asked as Alice worked her way into the round of cushions to sit down. She couldn't decide if she wanted to be far away from Melinda or right up close to her. She settled for something in between, with Melinda occupying a far corner, and Alice squeezing herself into the nearest one that still had enough space for two between them.

"Why did you kiss him?" she asked.

"You upset me," Melinda rejected. "I just so happens that I never kiss first." Alice pulled back under the firmness of Melinda's somewhat taunting tone that forced her to face the deep underlying truth in her words. "After all, it was the deal. His love didn't mean anything to him. I won."

"What you did was pointless and cruel," Alice insisted.

"I wouldn't be so sure," Melinda said. "Just curious - it was a fair win, so why are you so angry?"

Alice closed the distance before Melinda could lean in to try and meet her halfway. "Because you make me suffer and it feels strange. Because I can't love you. Because I feel like an idiot and you are the only one who does this to me." Alice closed her eyes tight. "Damn it, damn you and damn me!"

Melinda sighed. Her breath felt freeing and natural. Despite the heavy air of flavors and stagnant smells of unfinished drinks in the air, her sigh of satisfaction felt like the purest breath she ever breathed. "Did I ever tell you I find you beautiful?"

"You shouldn't have killed him," Alice said, grimly.

"Me?" Melinda said sarcastically. "He could have left quite easily, if you weren't so obsessed with this stupid bet of yours. *You* wanted to trust love, betting on his life. And... if you were smarter with your money, you'd still be partying in your paradise."

"No," Alice calmly protested, "that's not true. I don't want anything that isn't deeply true or that's not for love."

“Your obsession with love is amazing,” Melinda said with honest fascination.

“Allow yourself to love and you’ll see that anything that has a chance to exist is love, and only love.”

Melinda laughed. “It’s a strange concept to me. And besides, I have a couple of other things to do before offering my life for this ‘love’ of yours.”

“No,” Alice said. “You won’t die. You’ll just know the truth.”

“Ah, that old joke,” Melinda said with another deep, haughty laugh. “I don’t play these games.”

“Trust me,” Alice said. The drop in her tenor, and the flatness of her voice, was emphasized by a roll of thunder outside that rumbled the building even more than the thumping of the cranked up bass. Only the two of them seemed to notice it.

“Trust?” Melinda said. “If I fall in love like you, I’d become like you. How would it change your feelings for me, by the way?”

“It’d just be different,” Alice said.

Melinda grew even more mysterious, and quiet. “And have you ever considered that I might not want it to be different?”

Alice looked at Melinda with bewilderment. Melinda's statement sounded like a declaration of love, but she still couldn't put together all the weirdness of it with her own harmonious view of the world. Before Melinda could point out Alice's inconsistency again, the bright angel felt she didn't have

any more to say, stood up and started leaving. Just then, Leara returned with two drinks, just in time to draw Melinda's attention.

Melinda took her drink but kept her eyes on Alice who mixed herself into the crowd and spent a moment with her back to the wall, deeply lost in her thoughts. She blended into the procession of party-goers so effortlessly that no one saw her. No one had eyes for Alice but Melinda at that moment.

Alice started going back to her. In response, Melinda leaned into Leara and whispered to her again. Leara reacted by kissing Melinda along the neck just before Alice came in sight. Alice was taken aback to wander into such a scene. Suddenly she felt something unknown to her. An emotion that seemed to be a mixture of jealousy and pain which she couldn't explain and which Melinda was openly playing with acting as if nothing was going on at all.

"Any other announcement?" Melinda said, forcing herself to sound annoyed.

Alice clenched her fist to prepare herself to deliver her actual final message. "Just forgot to tell you that I'm leaving tomorrow." "Bon voyage!" Melinda replicated coldly, turning her focus back on the caressing of her red haired girlfriend. Alice turned on her heels and left. As soon as she was out of sight, Melinda leaned back into the sofa while Leara intended to go on with the kissing. Melinda stopped her with a cold glare. The girl also parted away, leaning back into the sofa with a sigh, staring at the ceiling.

“You’re in love with her,” Leara said.

“No,” Melinda immediately fired back.

“Then why can’t we just -.”

Melinda interrupted Leara with a light caress of her hair. “In an hour. In my West Wing quarters.” she said in a low voice. Leara lost her breath for a moment, stunned by Melinda's directness and the invitation that she thought unimaginable. Melinda turned to sip down some of her drink and noticed a man in a dark suit signaling to her from across the floor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Alice walked through the castle corridors in an ambling, purposeless fashion. She held her hand up to the wall until she could feel the bumps wearing away the feeling in her palm. Then she balled up her fist and pressed her knuckles against the hard stone until she left a thin line of blood in a long smear down the path. She questioned why she ever bothered to come in the first place.

Meanwhile, in the main reception hall, Leander and Melinda met while the former observed the grand drapes and tapestries left over from the previous castellans.

"She's leaving," he said. "That's a victory. Congratulations."

"I think we could have more fun," Melinda said.

"What do you mean by that?"

She gave him a wry smile. "Nothing very complicated, really."

"Can you think of a way to kill her?" he asked, eagerly.

"No," she said. "You know very well that we can't break that deal. But after all, I think it would be even more interesting if she did it herself, wouldn't it?"

Leander stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Quite intriguing indeed. I can see how amusing this will be to you."

“Certainly,” she said. She bowed slightly and exited the room. She headed west to her other quarters. On the opposite side of the castle, leading into a tower that faced the opposite direction along the petrified architecture, was Melinda’s private room of splendor. It was the opposite of her stoic, flat and empty eastern quarters where she went to tend to matters of business. Her West Wing quarters were lavishly decorated and furnished in finery from wall to wall and floor to ceiling.

She had perplexing art strewn about, from tapestries to sculptures that fit together in a bewildering ensemble. Even the windows were artisanal, the stained and frosted glass made it so that any light which came through was sublimated into a calming twilight of light blue and relaxing silvery strands. It turned any time of day into a perfect sunset night light.

The open space had a door that led to her bedchamber, where her “living finery” could join her (if she so desired, which was an utterly rare occasion anyway) under the finest sheets in existence in any world. Her chosen partner that night was Leara, her red-haired maiden that entertained her and helped her taunt Alice at the nightclub before. The girl laid beneath the covers, vulnerable and exhausted, still trying to regain her breath, her head on Melinda's shoulder. Melinda, fully energized, was smoking her elegant smoking stick. After a moment Leara's breathing turned into stifled sobs. Then her tears started to flow and pecked Melinda’s shoulder. Melinda fixed her eyes on one corner of the ceiling where the chandelier light wasn’t quite

reaching the edge of a tapestry driven into the wall with a silvery spike.

She turned quietly to Leara who was embracing her very tenderly with an arm wrapped around her neck, just in sight enough for her to notice what looked like a self-inflicted wrist injury.

“When did that happen?” Melinda asked. Leara wiped her tears away.

“Three years ago,” she replied. “I had a dream that I thought would never come true. I couldn't cope with my feelings.”

“So, did it come true?” Melinda asked.

Leara nodded. “Now it did.” Melinda's eyes filled with recognition that the deep secret the girl held was the love for her, strong enough to lead to a suicide attempt. Although that seemed stupid to Melinda, she felt tenderness for her new lover. Leara looked Melinda in the eyes. “You've been thinking about her. I can feel it. What's so special about her?”

Melinda did her best not to reveal any of her emotions. She was deep in her thoughts. Indeed, like Leara said, although she wouldn't admit to it, the only thing that occupied her mind were thoughts of Alice. In all honesty, Melinda couldn't figure out why, even at the end of it all, with the bet won and Alice's dignity in tatters, she did not feel quite like a winner. Even her new caring lover who could amazingly see into her soul and love her for who she was, couldn't help to fill that void.

“I love you,” Leara said, forcing Melinda’s focus back to her present situation. Leara looked Melinda in the eye and understood the complexity of what was going on. She knew Melinda's reaction to such insights too well and she was aware of the risk of getting that close to her. “You won’t kill me, will you?” Leara asked, almost freezing at her own words.

“No,” Melinda said indifferently, as if she was answering a far less important question. She turned to Leara and tapped her smoking stick over the side of the bed, gently letting the ash from her cigarette drop onto the expensive area rug that surrounded the bed. “Unless you ask for it.”

Leara leaned in for a kiss which Melinda returned very gently, more with her breath against Leara’s open mouth than with the force of her own lips pressing into hers.

“Go tell Mellan,” Melinda gently commanded without breaking the kissing distance, “I want to make an announcement tonight.”

Leara understood too well the meaning of such an announcement and a sight of horror reflected in her eyes, while she was deep diving into Melinda's, staying at the same kissing distance and almost touching Melinda's lips. “De ce pas,” she whispered.

While Melinda savored her romance deep in the halls of the castle, her announcement, that Mellan courteously relayed, disturbed one of the guards into removing his armor to better present himself to the dark angel inside. His senior looked up in

admonishment but kept the distance on the other side of the entryway, unwilling to interfere with anything more than words.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going in there,” the young guard said with a hint of self-satisfied conviction.

The older guard shook his head. “You’re literally out of your mind. It’s butchery!”

“I know,” he admitted. “But something tells me it’d be different for me. I believe in miracles, you see.”

“Not with her.” the old man warned. He finally took a step forward, not enough to cross the yard yet. “You really aren’t up to the challenge, you crazy man. She’ll kill you. Don’t you understand it?”

The younger guard finally unlatched the last of his leg guardian and stood in a shirt and trousers, his arms proudly at his hips. “You know what? The funniest thing is that, ultimately, I don’t care. I want that night with her. And you’re just jealous because you’re too old and ugly to even be invited in.”

The senior guard shook his head. “That’s nonsense. I wouldn’t have gone, even I were on the list.”

“This desire is stronger than me,” his junior insisted. “I must go. Don’t you understand? That’s my only chance.”

“Don’t you care about life at all?” the senior guard asked with one final approach. After all, Melinda’s announcement

contained no ambiguity with regards to the outcome of her invitation.

“I do,” the younger guard confidently said. He completed the distance between them and shook his older colleague by the shoulder. “Just wait for me. I’ll be back tomorrow morning.”

He bravely turned and walked up to the main gate and entered through the gatehouse door. His older companion stayed behind and shook his head. He gathered up all the armor that was left and rolled it piece by piece off the far cliff that the castle entrance faced.

When a new guard came they were given new armor, and that armor was to serve as their second skin and the source of their new life. Abandoning their armor or being stripped of it amounted to their demise as keepers of the castle gates. Eventually the old guard knew he would get more company to replace that which was gone, and hoped that before the final moment arrived his young companion would find some solace before his brutal death.

An acceptance of death through love was the most he could hope for. If he died for what he loved then all his living was worth the time he spent.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



In the East Wing of the castle, in one of the rooms Melinda claimed as hers, was a throne. It was a spare from the main room, a Queen's chair meant to fit beside a King's, which was absent and left unattended in the furthest North Wing, covered in dust. The Queen's throne, however, could freely be moved from place to place and was set up in Melinda's eastern quarters to be flanked by the decor which best reflected her mood.

Severed heads were stacked improperly in a mound around the sides of the blood-splattered golden arm-frame of the throne. The bodies were disposed of behind her in a layer that covered the floor. Blood streamed into the brickwork and filled any space not pushed out by the mortar.

Melinda sat on the throne, half asleep. She wore a long velvety cape and a short lace night robe. Standing up would be enough for it to get very close to revealing too much, barely covering her upper thighs and leaving her legs completely bare from the ankles up.

The head of the brave and love-inspired guard rested on the throne between her spread legs, blocking any direct sight into the place that he, in life, coveted enough to sacrifice his own existence to get close to. He had a mask of strange horror on his

face as the disbelief of how he died overwhelmed his senses in the final moment before it happened. The majestic weapon, a great crescent-shaped ax, leaned at Melinda's side with blood still fresh against the brassy finish of the blade.

Before her was the same guard's body, locked by ropes that tied his arms behind his back. Her feet in high-heel sandals, perched on his shoulder and knee, giving her a bit of an automatic balance. She had many other weapons besides the executioner's ax nearby, seemingly one for each of those who she beheaded, all stained with blood and stuck in the floor.

Her infrequent lover Mellan entered the room and met the sight with a wry smile. Melinda woke up at the sound of his footsteps as he approached.

"Your breakfast is ready," he said. He cleared his throat and kept going with as pleasant of a tone as he always had. "Shall I order it brought to you?"

"No," she groaned. "Just champagne."

"Of course, milady," he nodded. "I should have guessed." Melinda pulled herself up to fully take the throne with a wider posture and nudged the ax that leaned against it until it fell over with a stiff, metallic splash. "You didn't have to do the finishing touch all by yourself," he said, growing politely concerned.

"I know," she said. "I just felt like it this time."

Mellan bowed and turned to make a quick retreat to the entrance where a butler was standing by, gawk and wide-eyed at the state

of the room inside. Mellan pulled him aside to talk about his duties and his task at hand. A moment later, the butler left in a forward-tilting power walk. He returned readily with a tall glass of champagne that remained perfectly balanced in his hands. Mellan insisted to take it up to Melinda.

Mellan balanced the glass as best he could with both hands. The golden liquid inside wavered and shook despite his steady, straightforward steps. Once he was close enough he side-stepped the body and offered it up very carefully, making sure she took a commanding hold of it without threatening to break the glass in her divine grip.

He looked down at the corpse where her feet still rested. "Any announcements for tonight?" he asked.

"No," she said. "That'd be it."

"They'll be disappointed," Mellan said.

"Just tell them," she ordered, " they are lucky to be disappointed."

She lifted her leg up and shoved the head off her throne with the high heel of her sandal. Then she crossed her leg over to make sure she remained obscured and elegant instead of spread open and profane. "And tell them what you saw."

Mellan nodded. "If only that could *discourage* them."

"Oh, the wishful thinking," she said sarcastically.

"Yes, and some ego," he went on. "And -."

“Thank you,” she snapped back, “for enlightening me.”

Mellan saw her drink and dared to give her a sensual touch along the length of her arm. She shivered in a pleasant way, then reached for her ax. Mellan bowed and turned to walk away quickly. He got up to the door, ready to depart, but turned around to address her again, certain that he was out of harm’s way. “Anything else, milady?”

“Yes,” Melinda said as she kicked the body over. “Clean up and call for Alice. To my West Wing quarters.”

“At once,” Mellan confirmed. She watched him go and suckled on her champagne until the tall glass was empty, then she looked through it. Some foam still survived her purging consumption. It stained her view and made it blurry. Time itself was a blur to her. For eons, at least, most of her time went by in flights of hazy nothingness while she was waiting for something to really pique her interest or rise her deeply repressed sense of purpose as everything from sex to slaughter only deepened her dive into emptiness.

Until one would come along who was different.

Alice stood outside Melinda’s door with nothing but her heart to push her forward. She knew in her mind it was a bad idea to entertain Melinda any further, and her body was worn out, but something much deeper and more powerful inside of her soul wanted her to try. After some hesitation she entered and saw Melinda lounging on her luxurious armchair with a smoking

stick. She was just as elegant and refined as always, displaying a restrained sensuality and a complete aura of control.

“Did you ask for me?” Alice asked.

“I did,” Melinda said as she blew a pillar of smoke into the air. “I was glad to hear you hadn’t left yet. Have a seat, make yourself comfortable.”

Alice didn’t approach. She stood firmly away as the smoke wafted into a cloud. “Would you please stop smoking? It’s poison.”

“Sure,” Melinda said with suspicious legerity. She put her stick aside and let it trail itself into a cold smolder on a glass top, gold framed stand. Alice approached. Out of all the fancy, deep and comfortable chairs that were before her, she chose to stand, defiantly.

“What do you want, Melinda?” she asked.

“I’m tired of dealing with humans,” Melinda admitted.

“What do you mean?”

Melinda sighed and looked up to Alice with wide, sincere eyes. “My fate is bound to their fate. They’ll never learn. I’ll never be free. You were right, it’s a dead end. I don’t own this job, it owns me. I’m imprisoned. I’m tired of being the mirror image of other people’s choices. For once, I want to live my own life. I want to undo this program.” Melinda wound her head back and took in a deep breath to prepare herself for her last words to Alice. She wasted much of her breath on a long, weary sigh before the

words formed almost against her own will in a sincere half-whisper. "Help me."

Alice was stunned. She could see there was no second handed trick or insincerity in Melinda's words. They were intentional and spoken from her heart, not careful dictations born from her mind and tactically delivered.

"How can I help?" Alice asked.

"I thought you already made a suggestion," Melinda said.

"What suggestion?"

"You suggested I should fall in love."

"Ah!" Alice exclaimed in a moment of epiphany. "It felt like you didn't think it was a good idea."

"Don't be cruel," Melinda said.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Alice said, trying her hand at sarcasm. "I thought that's exactly what you wanted me to be."

Melinda looked up at her with a smirk, one that was far more practiced than the white angel's try at a smarmy look. She stood up and hooked her elbow into Alice's arm and forced her to follow to another corner of the hall.

"I'd like to tell you a story," Melinda said. She waited until they were in even pace with one another. She was directing their sudden excursion but let Alice set the pace. "Once, I made a joke about great darkness being transmuted by just one sacrifice. It appeared I was wrong. And now I have to make up for what I

once believed. Because indeed, any darkness can be transmuted by just one sacrifice." She paused and looked around the vaunted halls of the castle. "But... not just anyone's," she concluded. "And only on one condition."

Alice felt like she knew who Melinda was talking about. "What condition?" she asked.

"The one who's willing to do it must be killed by the one he wants to save," Melinda explained.

Alice looked up at her, struck. "Why?"

"Oh, it's an old tradition," Melinda said, flapping her hand in the air. She could see the reflective turn Alice's face was taking. She was already fair and white but she grew even paler as she realized it. "It's just some wine. It won't hurt at all."

"Do you want me to drink it?" Alice asked.

"No," Melinda stated firmly. "You decide what you want to do."

"Is that all?" Alice asked.

"Just one more thing," Melinda said. She stopped in her place and came in close to speak more privately. "If you agree to do it," she whispered, "I wouldn't stand parting from you without living through what we feel for each other."

"Ah," Alice said. "And in what way?"

"Making love of course," Melinda said plainly, and tauntingly. "Unless you have a better idea."

Alice was captivated by Melinda's deep, vertigo-inducing eyes and looked away to the other side of the room behind her. There she could see the bedroom door was slightly ajar, and the messed up sheets and pillows on the bed stood out amidst the golden silk and silvery lighting.

"Is it a joke," Alice asked, clearly refusing to become another night trophy, "or part of an old tradition?"

Melinda could tell that Alice was, once more, speaking from a place of purity and innocence. She breathed the very air she spoke with in like it was a fine perfume. "You are my breath of fresh air in the midst of this smoke," she said. "My sip of water in this desert." She neared again until the only thing Alice could see was Melinda's face. "I am in love with you. I can feel under my skin how you are dying to touch me, yet stopping yourself from doing so. Come here."

She tried to bring her lips together with Alice's but never seemed to reach. It was right there, a kiss lingering and waiting to begin, but couldn't happen because Alice refused to let it. She backed away, out of Melinda's grasp. "No."

Melinda felt shocked. Like she'd been shot through the back. The pain subsided, physically at first, but remained deep within. She controlled her voice. "I knew that. I know you wouldn't." She quietly stormed away to the exit of the hall, leaving Alice to an entirely uncertain fate.

"No, wait!" Alice exclaimed. Melinda turned on her heels and went to Alice. Melinda started to undo Alice's long dress

without saying a word. She worked down, button after button, until the whole thing fell apart and pooled around her ankles, revealing her sheer white nightgown underneath.

Alice responded by going for Melinda's cape and undid the only button it had. The cape fell down behind her leaving a velvety crimson shadow on the floor. They stood facing one another, bodies identical in beauty but positioned differently. Melinda's confident stature and high heels made her appear inches taller than Alice with her protective meekness. Alice felt just an ounce of intoxicating power that Melinda lived with and it staggered her breath.

It was like a tango. Though no music played but the beating of their hearts, Alice knew that there was a dance at hand and Melinda wanted her to take the lead. Alice stepped forward and they pressed shoulders. Their breathing started to synchronize. Alice was fascinated by Melinda's everything, but she was hurt deep inside by the inner knowing that the ultimate and possibly only purpose of it all was to get her to drink the poisoned potion. She realized she could not escape her feelings for Melinda which led to her self-destruction. The only unresolved part of the contract was the reward that she could claim for this, and rising to the challenge of being fully honest with herself she couldn't help but admit that the closeness Melinda was offering her was the very thing Alice desired the most at this moment.

Alice went to the stand where Melinda was sitting to retrieve Melinda's smoking stick, which she lit with one of the candles of

a majestic baroque candelabrum and started to smoke. Melinda watched her, bewildered over how easily Alice took on Melinda's energy letting go of her own defenses in the blink of an eye.

"Come here," Melinda said.

Alice noticed the glass of red wine on the side table. She breathed out a comparable cloud of smoke to Melinda, as if it was her second nature.

"It's enough," she said. "Is this wine for me?" She took the glass and lifted the rim up to her nose. "A good one." She nodded over to the other bottle that was also open, which was smaller and had a distinctly evil looking color to it. "Pity it's poisoned."

"Yes, indeed," Melinda agreed.

"Just one drop would be enough," Alice said. "It kills so slowly and softly. No pain. Thank you." She swirled the wine around gently and watched it sift and dance within the glass. "And everything you just said was a lie."

Melinda retrieved her cape from the floor and put it back on. She closed in on Alice from behind and started caressing the angel's hair and neck. She sighed through pursed lips, barely off of Alice's tempting skin.

"Everything I said was true," Melinda said.

Alice closed her eyes so she could feel Melinda better. "You don't have to do it," she said. "You already won." Alice turned

around and her hand drifted up to the embroidery on Melinda's cape. She looked up and brought Melinda's eyes to meet hers.

"Close your eyes," Alice whispered. Melinda blinked to prepare herself for the kiss Alice would finally give her. While Melinda stood with her eyes closed, Alice silently drank the wine. Melinda impatiently cracked her eye open and saw the treachery already underway. She grabbed the glass just as it was emptied and put it away. Before Alice could fully swallow her mouthful of wine, Melinda swiped some off her lips and licked it off her finger.

Alice gulped loudly and panted after her throat was clear. "What are you doing?"

"I thought you knew better," Melinda said with her finger still hinging off of her bottom lip. Alice smiled in surprise. Not only was she not dead, but even under the premise that she could have been, Melinda was thoughtlessly quick to follow her to the same fate.

"It's not poisoned," Alice said quietly. Melinda smiled, gently, for the first time. A kind of smile that Alice would give. "Deep in my heart I knew. But what is it all about? How am I supposed to free you?"

Melinda tapped her moistened finger against Alice's lips - an indirect kiss. "You just did." She traced her finger softly against Alice's plush, virgin pink lips and finally broke down her final wall of resistance and leaned in to do something she had never done first before. Their hearts beat together as one as they leaned

in and kissed. And then, from the darkness that once separated them, there came a great rising light which filled the whole castle, wall to wall, corner to corner...

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



The lone guard stood on duty, watching over the horizon. Unlike before, he did so silently and with great boredom on his back. Without a companion, the vast horizon seemed a degree colder and more distant than ever before. He felt more alone and in a loveless world. His colleague was stupid, flighty and ignorant, but at least he was interesting to talk to. He believed in love in a way his elder did not, as he had seen too much failure during his lifetime to properly bolster his faith in the better nature of others.

It was a quiet, usual morning, same as every other in a place that time seemed to ignore. Everything remained completely unchanged. He was sure the day would go slowly into a drag and a dredge which he would suffer through rather than live past.

Then, he saw a shadow. His own shadow started to grow longer in front of him, despite most of the light coming from under the mountains and cliffs far ahead. He stayed true to his post for a moment until his shadow became a long and slender stick of dark that was drowned out by the surrounding light. He turned and saw the castle change. A beam of light reached up to the sky and made the whole castle glow.

He watched through the blinding light as the stone ivy turned bright green and lively, as did the dark sod across the grounds. Life returned to the castle from every place and along every trellis. The high gothic architecture was resurrected into a splendid array of lights and colors, no longer drab and grey but vibrantly white and sky blue. The guard continued to watch in awe as the space-time portal opened and he could see the courtyard with the legendary tree from his old fairy tale. The epic legend of how the castle was created came to life. The Rabbit, Cernunnos, and the Cat also appeared out of nowhere, going about their business in the same courtyard.

The tree remained pretty much the same, except for two leaves on its furthest branch. Two dry, barely clinging leaves that rubbed together and were yellowed and brown with age, ready to fall at any moment. They didn't. They reversed and turned green. Deep, bright green, full of life, almost more than the dead tree could handle.

"Look! Look!" the Rabbit called, jumping up as he saw the change. "It's happening!"

Cernunnos was contented by the sight. Out of the whole tree which supported a galaxy of life and love, there were finally two leaves to prove that life still existed deep in its petrified roots. The great mural of the front gate burst into life and every character upon it faded from the gilded door as their true selves manifested deeper into the castle courtyard.

There they were: the Dwarf, the Greys, the Devas, the Thooks and the Wraiths; all were gathered once again around the great tree. Life was returning to the tree of legends, bringing along a renewed faith in love that spread to the guests gathered from far away planets. All of history paused until the moment finally came to pass.

Then life flowed deeper. From those two leaves a heartbeat echoed loudly over the silence of the court. Golden strands of rich, deep liquid leaked out from the leaves and flowed backwards, up their stems, into the tree. The dark boughs drank it up and brightened into a lively, earthy brown. First their branch was revitalized and more leaves began to grow in buds from the surface. Then more and more from branch to branch until life reached the roots.

The tree straightened itself up and its roots dug into the ground like great claws seeking to grip the ground for a fistful of dirt. They spread and snaked through the ground in infinite lengths, growing more roots as they split and spread throughout the planet, sending the great power of life, born through love, to all Creation.

The great tree brought life and light to all the other planets of the cosmos. Its power went out like a beam and connected to the stars, which then connected to other stars, forming a web that that became so intertwined that it was eventually a blur of unity and shared results. The light increased and grew infinitely until the universe was filled. Cernunnos was staring up at the sky as

the distant arrays and patterns of stars expanded and illuminated the permanent darkness.

All of those who saw it happening were in awe and filled with happiness. All except for the Cat, who stretched with his back to the tree as if it was nothing special. He ran off from the crowd as they surrounded the tree to praise it directly and found its way through the space-time portal in the brightened halls of the castle to a garden of green and scarlet red.

In the rosy park, Alice and Melinda laughed together. They held hands and reclined on a porch swing in matching dresses. Alice wore white and Melinda wore black, yet they did not clash at all, and in fact they blended together effortlessly as the light created shadows, and as shadows grew from the light. The cat approached them, unnoticed, and licked his paw as they talked between their pleasant titters of laughter.

“What’s your favorite one?” Melinda asked.

Alice tilted her head back to think, then smiled with an answer. “Earth, XVII century. You were a king and I was the mistress of a neighbor king with whom you strategically maintained peace.”

“Oh,” Melinda said, “I remember now. Talk about conflicting feelings...”

“And,” Alice continued, “another one where you were a beautiful actress. Very unhappy. And I was a delivery boy. Bringing you flowers from other men. Too young for you. I thought I would die.”

"That's a sad one," Melinda said, patting her hand over Alice's.

Alice shook her head proudly. "Not really. I grew up."

"Ah!"

"And became rich," she said smugly.

"Happy ending then."

"No," Alice protested. "Because you didn't want me rich and famous. I became like one of your admirers."

"Anything else?"

"Oh yes," Alice said as she bounced in place in excitement. "The one where I crossed the whole Universe looking for you. I learned the language and habits of your planet, but your people couldn't accept me as a being who didn't "belong" there. So, I learned to shape shift. But when I did so, I couldn't get back to the frequency where you actually loved me. And you were longing so badly for it, so you learned to shape shift yourself. That was beautiful..."

Melinda leaned back and watched Alice's face as she talked. She wistfully wove in and out of her memory with excitement and passion and joy and sorrow, all in time with how the memories lined up.

"Okay," Melinda said. "Tell me the best one."

Alice tapped her finger to her lips. "The best is yet to come."

"Oh?" Melinda said. "Is it a secret?"

Alice heard the purring of the cat and looked over to him. She knew of the Cat's significance and looked at it as it rested. The Cat returned her gaze and tilted its lazy head to the side. "She'll know anyways," it said with a stretch. "Go ahead."

Alice gave a mischievous smile and turned to Melinda who was on edge with anticipation. "Crossing the AN portal to the other Universe. It goes beyond the concepts of separation or unity. It's a whole different journey. But one can only attain it after unity is experienced at its core, while still being in the illusion of separation."

Melinda smiled. "Oh, finally I see through your true motivations. And where is this portal?" " she asked Alice, ribbing.

"Around Alnilam," Alice explained. "Epsilon Orionis."

She pointed up to the field of stars in the sky. They could see each star brighter than ever as the light of the tree filled the universe.

"How do you know it's there?" Melinda asked, looking to the point in the starry mass where Alice pointed.

"I just know," Alice said. "Even the pyramids on this planet are aligned to it."

Melinda turned her face away from the stars to enjoy the flowers which surrounded them instead. A whole curtain of roses served as their backdrop, with nearly no separation from one to the other as the petals poured out endlessly in a great blanket near their porch swing.

"I guess I'm still in love with this Universe," Melinda admitted. "What an ingenious idea for the Source to create the illusion of splitting itself into layers. Like you and I, the first layer of the onion."

"That's a nice metaphor," Alice said.

"That's no metaphor, sweetheart," the Cat corrected. "I thought you'd get the concept by now. You're literally one person."

Melinda shrugged. "It's such fun."

"Well, not always...." Alice admitted.

"What has been the hardest thing for you?" Melinda asked.

"It's not anymore," Alice confessed. "What was the hardest for you?"

"I asked first," Melinda sweetly insisted. Alice took Melinda's hand and criss-crossed their fingers together, then brought Melinda's hand up and kissed it.

"Loving you," she whispered.

With their palms together they became reflections of one another, light casting shadow and shadow chasing light. The love they showed for one another, an impossible bridge across unfathomable cosmic distance, created life for distant worlds and gave hope to the cosmos.

That hope was in their eyes. They looked deeply into each other's eyes and saw each other and themselves. They were already united in this Universe and would remain so for a loving

eternity. Through pain and hardship, losses followed by triumphs across many lives and in many ways their love for each other, spurned from darkness, created great light.

They sat together under the wise guidance of the stars, in the presence of the omniscient Cat, and let love set the course for their destinies. Their eyes remained locked on the stars of Orion, onward to Alnilam, Epsilon Orionis...

The End.