Jan Piszczek

Faustian Love

Droplets of rain rattle against the glass-metal walls and roof of the greenhouse, sliding down the translucent panels and then flowing into gutters and barrels that collect rainwater for later reuse around the house. Few last rays of the sun pierce the thick layer of clouds, joined by the occasional thunderbolt.

I'm lying on the cold stone floor, hands clasped together on my belly. Silent and unmoving, I'm looking at the raindrops sliding down the glass. Kasha lies right next to me, on my left, purring quietly in her sleep. The old black cat has always been the textbook definition of calmness, unbothered even by thunderstorms like this while other animals panicked and hid.

I've always loved watching the storms from here. Here I feel removed from the chores and duties, from the endless lectures and… all of that. The place feels so separate from the rest of the manor, though it really isn't. It's just at the highest level, almost like a big skylight.

I hear footsteps coming from the stairway at the end of the greenhouse and know that my and Kasha's relaxation time has come to an end.

"Miss Yana," the housekeeper's voice is as stoic as usual. His aged face enters my field of vision. "I thought I'd find you here."

"Is it that late already, Peter?" I ask without taking my attention away from the moving droplets on the glass.

"I am afraid so. Breakfast is ready. Your mother is awaiting you in the dining room."

"Can this not wait another ten minutes?" I sigh. Kasha wakes up and yawns, slowly looking around the room.

"She appeared quite adamant about your punctuality. I would advise you to be there on time for a change." Peter holds out his hand. I roll my eyes and finally meet his gaze. His expression is kind but serious. I take his hand and get up, petting Kasha one more time, then dust off my skirt and fix the back of my hair, which has turned into some kind of flat, homogenous mass after a long time of lying down.

"Lead the way." I fake a faint smile and follow Peter downstairs.

The breakfast is ready and served by the time I reach the main hall, having parted ways with Peter halfway through the last corridor. I take a seat beside my mother, on the first chair to the right. She pays me little attention, turning to her food as soon as I take my place next to her. My presence here is less about spending time together and more about drilling the importance of punctuality into my .

I take a quick glance across the long ebony table. The half closer to the great hearth, the one where me and my mother sit, is filled with all sorts of food and drink, while the other lies completely empty. Out of the dozen cushioned chairs, only two are filled. I remember days when it was not so, when morning meals were not this bleak.

I hastily make my way through the bread rolls, eager to get out of the hall and, hopefully, return to the rain-watching.

“You are aware that you are turning eighteen this week, correct?” Satisfied with her own food, she puts her hands on her lap and looks right at me.

“Yes, mother,” I nod.

“Good,” she takes a swig of her wine. “And yet, despite my best attempts, none of the nobles have found you a suitable match for their sons.”

It takes a great deal of effort for me not to snort. I do remember all those great sons. Every time one thinks she has seen the bottom of human decency, someone new knocks from below. Heh. I remember breaking a boy’s jaw one time when he tried to go in for a kiss after I had already said no. That was quite funny. Me breaking his jaw, that is.

“However,” my mother goes on, “this will no longer do. I have sent invitations to every lord and lady of renown to attend your birthday ball this Sunday. By the end of the day, you will have found someone who chooses you as a good fit for a future wife. I know turning down suitors has become somewhat of a habit of yours.” She stares daggers at me. “But that ends the moment you enter the ballroom. Do you understand?”

I remain silent for a long while. I want to scream, to protest, to simply get up from the table and leave, but I know how little that would grant me. So, I remain silent and try to steady my breath and sound as neutral as possible when I answer. My mother repeats her question before I get the chance.

“Do you understand?” the sharpness in her voice now matches the blades in her eyes.

I often wonder when exactly my mother began to hate me like this. Was it when my father died? I was barely old enough to remember that. I know that death of a family member cuts deeply, so death of a spouse surely must cut even more, but it’s not like I killed my father in childbirth or something.

Then maybe it was when my brother died? Cayne always was the heart and soul of the house, never falling into dark moods, always able to cheer up those around him. I was old enough to remember his funeral. So many people came over to pay their respects, one could mistake the funeral for a wedding party. But then again, same as with Dad, I had nothing to do with Cayne’s death. He wasn’t even home when it happened.

So then, is it the reason for my mother’s hatred? Perhaps both. Perhaps neither. Perhaps the true source of it is something else entirely, some offence I never realized

I committed. Would it be so hard to just tell me? Then I could least try to heal the rift between us? Families are not supposed to be like this. There are times when I am angry at my mother, sure. Times when I curse her silently, when I wish she'd disappear, but all that ends with an angry shout or two at most. I wish it were the same for her. I wish the many scars I bear were all the result of accidents, not wounds inflicted with intent.

But now, in her eyes, I don't even see anger. Just a commanding glare, like one you would give a hound in training.

"Yes, mother. I understand," I say under my breath. "Is that… all?" I add a moment later in hopes of escape.

"No. Mrs. Dale informed me you had not attended the last lesson. Why?"

"It was raining all day." I shrink down in my chair. "I assumed she'd stay home. Mr. Peterson stayed home."

"Yes, that's why Mrs. Dale will continue to tutor you, and Mr. Peterson will not. This house demands perfection not just from us, but also from those we employ. Everyone ought to remember that." There is a tinge of threat in her voice. She leans back in her chair and signals for the house staff to begin clearing the breakfast from the table. "That is all."

There are ruins close to the house, remnants from the time when the manor was still a castle, before one of my grandfathers tore down the damaged structure and built the present house in its place. Still, traces of the old fortress remain: b, moss-covered stone walls and collapsed towers circle the back of the mansion. Rusted cannon fragments lie half-buried in the ground, and shallow ditches mark where trenches were once dug, all remnants of some long-forgotten battle from a long-forgotten war. Lines of broken-down moss-covered stone walls and collapsed towers circling around the back of the mansion, rusted pieces of cannons half-buried in the ground, small ditches where trenches were once dug, all remnants of some long-forgotten battle from a long-forgotten war. Beautiful flowers and heaths now cover the field, perhaps a little ironic that so much life grew over the place where so much blood must've once been spilled.

Some claim the area is haunted. They say the spirits of the fallen soldiers still haunt the ruins, trying in vain to fulfill their final orders. Some even claim to have heard cannon fire echoing from the old battlefield, though such claims often cost people their jobs.

Still, these superstitions mean that no one really comes down here. No one except me, that is. I love this place even more than the greenhouse. Here, I don't need to pretend I am away from the manor. Here I simply *am* away from it. I walk around the flower fields in peace, while the great building looms over on the hill behind me.

And moreover, this is where I first met Lucy, wandering alone across the moors just beyond the edge of my family's land. It's so heartwarming to have a friend who is not employed by my mother. Part of me always feels like those *must* like me to a degree or at least pretend they do in order to keep their job. Lucy is different; she has no reason to come out here again and again to meet me, nor I to meet her, other than our affection for one another.

The worst of the downpour has passed, though not fully. Rain still bangs against my umbrella and drips down onto the muddy earth. More of the sky has cleared up, whole patches of sun now shining through the dissipating cloud cover.

I find her near the usual spot, just past the iron fence marking the extent of the property. She's holding a round window with a gilded metal rim above her head, looking almost like a halo. I have no idea where she managed to scrounge this thing, but then again, I know little about the land beyond the manor grounds.

We find a dry piece of the fence's extended stone base, saved from the rain by a large oak tree growing nearby. We sit down on opposite sides, our backs touching through the gaps between the vertical iron bars. I lock the umbrella in place above on the fence-top, so that it gives both of us decent cover and lets Lucy put down the heavy piece of glass.

"A whole birthday ball?" she says whenever I am done complaining. "Sounds fancy."

"Sounds like hours-long living hell." I rest my head on my knees.

"So, what's the plan then?"

"I don't know," I whisper.

"You could always do the usual strategy and rapidly decline all of them." She smiles coyly. "I bet that would be pretty fun to watch."

"I could," I exhale, amused a little at the thought. "But…"

"But?"

"I'm afraid of what my mother will do if I decline everyone. I feel like she will no longer take any excuses or just… put me in front of some old noble one day and make me marry him on the spot." I shudder at the thought.

"What about looking for a decent one in that crowd? Surely not all those men are that bad."

I chuckle faintly.

"I tried that before. All the partners I chose never made it through her approval system. They're either not wealthy enough, have an age-old gripe with the house, or… won't give her an heir."

I let the implication linger there without addressing it. But there is a reason that the house staff is almost entirely male these days.

We sit like this in silence for a few moments. I feel sorrow welling up in my stomach, slowly rising and intensifying. Lucy notices it soon and glances over.

“What’s wrong now?”

“Is… Is this goodbye?”

“Why would it be?”

I lean back, resting my head against the cold iron bars.

“If my mother finds a suitable husband for me, she’ll no doubt have me join him in his manor as soon as possible. Who knows where that’ll be.”

Lucy smiles and rolls her eyes, amused.

“Oh, please, devils like us belong together. I won’t let something as simple as marriage keep us apart.”

“Are you going to sneak in and pretend to be house staff?” I ask, smirking. Lucy returns the expression.

“Oh, I wish. But the father of your father placed holy wards around this place that keep demons like me from entering.”

I laugh at the absurdity of her declination. She laughs at me laughing and rests her head against the fence as well, exposing the line of scars wrapping around her entire neck, almost as if someone tried to choke her with a thorn-ridden vine. Apparently, it’s a memory of a particularly heated argument with her father, one that ended in her leaving her home. I often wonder what could have happened them, but it’s a subject Lucy does not wish to return to, and I, in turn, do not wish to force her to do so.

“You know what? Here.” She digs around in her bag for a moment and hands me a small necklace; a circle of tree-roots shaped into a serpent wrapped around the world, hanging on a thin metal chain.

I look at it in silence, taken aback. We have long ago agreed not to exchange gifts, unless it was the most extreme situation. No matter what we did, the difference in wealth between us always made the moment awkward.

Lucy chuckles at my stunned expression, turns my head around, and helps me put the necklace on.

“Tear it off,” she says, pulling on the chain to see if it holds well, then grunts in satisfaction. “And I’ll come to you, no matter where you are.”

I turn away from her to cover the faint blush emerging on my face. I know the promise is not literal, of course, but it sounds so kind and sincere that I don’t really care.

“I thought you said you could not enter the grounds?” I tilt my head and raise an eyebrow in challenge. Lucy grimaces a little, though the playfulness doesn’t fully leave her face.

“Yes, well, let’s hope the wards will dissipate, eventually. That, or maybe I find a way to scale the fence without the possibility of getting impaled.” She glances up at the sharp spikes adorning the end of each bar. “Until then, you said there are still three days until the ball?” I nod. “Then spend those days having some fun!”

“I’d really rather just stay here.” I watch the heath dance in the wind and rain.

“Yeah, but there’s more out there to do.” She turns around and points at the ruined battlements leaning from the hillside. “Have you been in there?”

“I’ve been there every week.” I look at her, confused.

“Well, I know that! But have you been *inside*?” She leans in closer.

“You mean the wine cellar?”

“This place used to be a giant medieval castle, and you think all that was underneath it is a wine cellar?” Now it’s her turn to challenge me with a raised eyebrow.

“I suppose not.”

“Then you should check it out while there’s time! Think of all the stuff that could be in there!”

“Like what?” I chuckle. Lucy picks the round window and presents it like a saleswoman at an auction.

“At the very least, you’ll have a good story to tell your new husband.” She smirks. I grimace.

The figure on Peter emerges in the garden, once again the symbol of my free time’s ending. I sigh and get up.

“Ugh, duty calls. I’ll check the ruins tomorrow.” I run a finger over the medallion. “If this is goodbye—”

“I told you it’s not,” Lucy interrupts me.

“Yes, but if it is… Thank you. For being here. I won’t ever forget you.”

She stands up and puts her hands on her hips, looking at me with a slightly annoyed expression, since now it was the second time I’ve attempted to turn the casual meeting into a teary farewell. Finally, she exhales and her eyes soften.

“*If* somehow this is goodbye…” She smiles warmly. “Then I won’t ever forget you either, Yana Elyse. You helped me more than you’d think. Are you happy now?”

We stand there like this for a minute. Then we hug through the fence. It's awkward. Uncomfortable due to the cold iron bars. But it… it *is*. And that's what matters.

I return to the backyard the next day together with Kasha right after dinner. I have diligently fulfilled all my tasks for the day, meaning the rest of it is free. Fortunately, my mother is currently too preoccupied with birthday ball preparations to find a suitable replacement for Mr. Peterson. One upside of all this, I suppose.

The largest patch of ruins lies past the gardens planted in overly complicated geometrical shapes, close to where the grapevines grow in descending rows. A large rectangular pit rests within the old confines of stone-brick walls, not yet fully covered up by the earth, despite its best attempts. The rear wall collapsed some time ago, letting in an avalanche of dirt inside. All items of value have long ago been removed from the ancient hall, leaving only broken-down furniture to slowly decay over time.

I have been in this ruined chamber many times before. It's a surprisingly good spot to hide from the house servants and wait out my mother's outrages. It was actually Cayne who took me here the first time, when we both needed a good place to wait out the cataclysmic argument between our mother and uncle. I thought I had seen everything it had to offer, but if Lucy is right and there is something more here, I am determined to find it. It's nice to keep my mind occupied by something other than the impending doom of marriage.

Kasha hisses from the corner of the hall to get my attention. I quickly turn and walk over to her. Suddenly, the click-crunching of my boots on dirt-covered rock changes and is now like the clanking of old wood over an open space. I dig through the thin layer of rubble and find a small trapdoor. It's odd I have not found it before, perhaps because I was always too preoccupied with whatever troubles at home had driven me here in the first place. Odder still, the trapdoor remains in surprisingly good condition, still guarding the ancient chambers it was built to seal.

I shoo Kasha from the trapdoor and force it open, its rusting lock easily giving way. I rest it against the wall, one of the hinges breaking apart and making the old wood lean a little to the side.

A two-meter or so drop welcomes me on the other side of the trapdoor. Pieces of a ladder lie broken and scattered on the stone floor below. I sit down on the edge and carefully leap down, barely considering any alternative. Kasha joins me right after, though her descent is far more graceful than mine.

The room looks as if it could've been a cellar once, cleared out of all items similar to the hall above it. It's incredibly dark in here, the far corners of the room blending into the gloom. Old pillars, some wooden, some stone, still hold up the weight of the ceiling that is slowly being drowned by rubble and earth.

I take out the candle and chamberstick I borrowed from my bedroom and light it. The pleasant smell of beeswax fills the area, illuminating it for the first time in years. Spiders and rats scurry to their hideouts, fleeing the sudden brightness.

A small doorway leads out of the cellar into a long, claustrophobic corridor, its end completely masked by the darkness, like the great yawning mouth of some ancient beast. The voice of reason in the back of my head tells me not to go in there, into a place this unknown, without anyone other than an old cat. But right now, the voice of reason is being drowned out by the voice of adventure.

It takes us several minutes to cross the burrow-like passageway. Despite Kasha's several attempts to trip me by walking between my legs, I manage to make the journey unscathed.

A long hallway now stretches out before us, the slowly rounding walls fading beyond my vision. Compared to the emptied-out rooms before, this feels like entering a different world. Rows of cramped cells or small storage rooms reveal themselves through small doors. Pieces of equipment line the walls, dot the floor, and fill the shelves. Skeletons gaze at us as we pass them, contorted in their final poses before succumbing to torture and starvation. Rats skulk around those remains that still have thin pieces of flesh on them, slowly eating what little has remained. Pieces of clothing still hang on the bodies, decolored tabards and insignia displaying crests of old houses.

A sound catches my attention as we near the end of the hallway. Fire crackling. This should be impossible down here, unless we've had a group of homeless folks hiding within the ruins the entire time.

We go through another doorway, vaulting over a fallen iron maiden. After crossing a small antechamber, we finally find the source of the sound.

The hall is round and spacious, with a high roof that completes the feeling of being inside a giant orb. Mirrors line the walls, dozens of them stacked next to each other, climbing up until they meet in the center of the ceiling, creating a kaleidoscope-like mixture of glass panels and metal trims. A ring of fire burns steadily at the base of the walls, right below where the mirrors begin.

Kasha stays back at the doorway, while I move to the center of the chamber. On a raised octangular dais rests a stone coffin, a worn carving of some old knight adorning its otherwise simple, unornamented surface.

Who was this, I wonder? An old servant of the family? One of their vassals? A lord of the castle that once stood here? Perhaps even an ancestor of mine?

Curiosity drowns out my sense of logic as I begin to try to push the lid off the casket, hoping to find something inside that could reveal a clue towards the cadaver's identity. The lid is heavy, made to last generations. But it was not made to be unmovable.

Finally, it gives in, moving an inch, then another and another, until a thin part of the inside is revealed.

Then the lid suddenly flies off the coffin and crashes onto the floor, small chunks of rock breaking off. I jump, startled. Though all of my strength went into the push, moving the old stone lid a few inches could hardly have upset its balance enough to make it fly off like this.

I notice movement on the edge of my vision, accompanied by an eerie sound of scuttling. I catch the silhouette of some kind of long, spindly shadow in the nearby mirror, climbing up on the walls, almost like a giant centipede. But when I look over, there is no trace of it. The room is just as it was a few moments ago, safe for the coffin now being open. With nothing else to do, I decide to take a peek inside.

Bones of an old noble meet my eyes; his royal garb still somewhat intact on his gaunt form. In his unyielding grasp rests a sword with a shattered blade and… a guard bearing the sigil of a serpent wrapped around the world, exactly the same as the one on the medallion Lucy gave me. Did she want me to see this? Was this some ancestor of hers, instead of mine? But how could she know of this place? It's been a ruin well before I was born, and Lucy does not seem more than two or three years older than me. Is it some accident then, a discovery of a long-lost tomb of a prodigal daughter's forefather? That seems rather unlikely. Too many oddities over too little time. And the weird shadow, whatever that was. If it was even real.

With too many questions, and nobody to give me answers here, I decide it is time for me and Kasha to leave the dungeons. There is no way to say how long we have been here, but the hunger steadily growing in my belly tells me it has been a decent while. Best to return before everyone discovers we are gone.

As we slowly make our way back, I notice a glint of light shining through the minuscule space between one of the old doors and the floor. A shortcut back into the manor, perhaps? Seems like a better idea than crawling up through the old cellar.

I grab the doorknob and briefly test if it's a push or pull entrance. After my silent query is answered, I put my weight against it to force it open. It creaks and screeches, clearly not used in years, but, same as the coffin lid, finally gives way. I even manage to open it myself, without some shadow-centipede to do it for me.

I tumble and fall over from behind a painting of some uncle or another, managing to save myself and prevent my face from hitting the ground. I turn myself around on my back and look up… and meet the eyes of my mother, who must have been down here on a wine check-up before the ball. She glares at me as I lie on the floor, covered in dirt, dust and cobwebs, slightly scratched and bruised. Kasha leaves the underground next, striding pridefully as if no one could do anything to her.

"Hello, mother," I say weakly, already preparing myself for the scolding to come.

At last, the dreaded day has some. I am finally released from my room, in which I have been imprisoned for the last two days, though only to follow the strict timetable prepared by my mother. I spend the morning in the manor's chapel, half-listening to a long sermon from an old priest in overly lavish robes, said beneath the gaze of a massive stone crucifix statue. I do find it a little aggravating that my mother makes me attend these sermons, despite herself not doing so in many years, ever since Cayne's passing.

After that comes the makeup and hairstyling and dressing up. Fortunately, my mother's need to control everything means she cannot devote all her time to controlling me and lets me add at least a bit of personal flair to the outfit instead of making me wear the sort of massive lampshade she would otherwise have chosen for me.

The manor feels like quite a bizarre place today. Wherever I look, servants are working, hurrying from room to room, cleaning, polishing. I didn't know we had this many left. They labor tirelessly to ensure the house is at its best for whenever the guests arrive, outlining the areas my mother wants them to see and explore while blocking off and locking up those she'd rather keep hidden.

I meet her about half an hour before the first of the nobles arrive. She's wearing an elaborate dress in the black-and-green colors of the family, which looks anything but comfortable. She inspects me; her gaze judgmental of the changes I have made to the clothes she picked for me. No doubt she would force me to undo them, had she enough time. But it is too late now.

The first groups of guests begin to arrive at the front door. Peter valiantly holds the gate, greeting each newcomer with unwavering warmth and kindness. They slowly gather in the main hall, which has been prepared at length for this event. Tables stacked with refreshments line the wall on the right side of the room. On the left, in the corner, stands the piano gifted to the family before I was even born, now played by some musician brought over from the city. My mother and I join when nearly all the guests are present, some nonsense about being fashionably late and making an entrance.

Then comes the worst part: meeting with all the invited nobles. She parades me around like a prize horse, from one group to the next, from a tall double-chinned man to an ancient hag still trying to marry off her middle-aged son. They all scan me up and down, judge me, search for any imperfections. They question my mother at length about me but never extend the same courtesy to me. Many of them mention my father, giving her condolences or comments as if he died just yesterday.

Oh, Eveline, it's unbelievable it's been so long since Adam passed away…

It must be difficult to manage the manor and the family all by yourself…

How are you holding up…?

Finally, the limit is reached and then exceeded. I thought the last few years of meeting one prospective suitor after another, only to turn them all down, would have prepared me for this. But it's all too much at once. Across from me sits a man old enough to be my father and, judging by his features, the first in generations to marry outside his family. I endure a seemingly endless account of heroic exploits that likely never happened, sprinkled with flirtatious remarks that border on being outright revolting. All the while, my mother lingers nearby, paying no attention. Her thoughts are fixed on the wealth and status an alliance with his family might bring. The next pickup line finally breaks me. I hastily excuse myself just as I hear her all but seal my fate and sentence me to a life at his side.

I flee to the balcony and break down. The prospect of marrying that sleaze is enough to overwhelm me. But I am not given even a few minutes to myself before my mother finds me, shutting the door behind her.

"What is the matter with you?" she hisses. "A powerful contender for a husband presents himself, and that is the moment you choose to leave?"

"I can't do it!" I wallow. "Mother, I can't do it."

She grabs me and pulls me up, anger flaring in her eyes.

"What do you mean *you can't do it*? I told you already, no more dodging marriage. Don't you understand that *you* are the last one of a long, proud bloodline? Do you not care to fulfill your duty to the family? To preserve it from rot and extinction? "

"I DON'T!" I yell back at her before I realize it, then immediately curse myself for it.

"Insolent brat!" Her hand hits my right cheek, the dozen rings cutting lines across it, deep enough to draw trickles of blood. One of her fingers catches the medallion from Lucy as I fall back onto the ground, breaking the thin chain holding it together and casting it across the balcony. "Now look what you've done," my mother barks, straightening her rings and adjusting her necklace. "You'd better hope anyone chooses you now."

The sound of a carriage arriving in front of the manor stops her from scolding me further. I use the brief moment of respite to wipe the blood from my cheek with my handkerchief.

"Get yourself back together," she hisses. "I will see what this is about."

She leaves the balcony, already veiling the fury on her face with fake kindness. I wait a moment longer, then follow, skulking along the raised gallery to spy on what has caused the growing commotion below.

To call the woman standing in the doorway scandalous seems like an understatement. Her freckled face is painted with heavy makeup; the type people nowadays associate with actresses or prostitutes. Her outfit is a bold mixture of both men's and women's clothing; the upper half like that of an elegant dress, but with dark leather pants instead.

Heeled shoes clink against the floor, accompanied by those of an ornamented cane. Clearly, the woman does not use it to support an aged or weakened frame, but instead to draw everyone's attention to herself. And she does. Every noble turns their attention to her, abandoning any previous conversations to whisper about who she could be. She does seem familiar somehow, though I cannot quite place it.

"I have heard many tales about the Elysian Hall." She gestures at the chamber as she approaches the hostess. "Though one truly has to see it to appreciate it in full."

"Truly," my mother repeats, eyeing the newcomer up and down. "You must excuse me, but I cannot place your face in my memory. You are not a scion of House Terrivane, are you?"

"Oh, forgive my manners!" the freckled woman laughs, covering her mouth with a gloved hand. "The name's Fehr. P to make your acquaintance."

"Fehr? Since when is there a House Fehr?" grumbles one of the nobles, not at all asked for his input.

"Oh yes, I do not expect you to know; we are rather new to this," Lady Fehr indulges the question anyway. "Father returned from war with quite the fortune but had the bad luck of dying right after, leaving just me and my brother to take care of it. But as you all surely know, a house without a husband and wife to rule it is no house at all." She turns back to my mother. "And well, my brother overheard that the daughter of the famed House Elyse is finally reaching adulthood today, and it's an occasion we simply could not allow to pass us."

My mother is still looking at Lady Fehr with a degree of suspicion, though her interest is somewhat piqued at the mention of an unmarried lord and the supposed fortune belonging to him.

"I see. And is your… brother joining us?"

"Oh, sadly no." The newcomer-noble picks up one of the wine glasses and sips from it, her dark lipstick leaving an imprint on the fine glass. "He truly wished to, but there is simply too much work at the house today. So, instead, he sent me." She smiles widely, looks around. "Is the… lucky lady present?"

"Yes, of course," my mother clears her throat. "She is just refreshing herself; I will fetch her."

"No need," interrupts Lady Fehr. "I would not deny her the time to restore herself." She looks herself up and down. "Perhaps I could use that too. The journey was rather long, and I would prefer to be at my best when I meet the lady. May I…?"

"Please." My mother nods and gestures. "Feel at home."

Lady Fehr inclines her head and takes one more look around the hall. Her eyes meet mine for a split second before I hide back behind the pillar. The other nobles slowly return to their previous conversations, restoring the buzz typical of a party like this.

I wait a few more moments behind the pillar.

“Hell of a party.” I hear the voice of Lady Fehr right next to me. I freeze, not hearing any sign of her approach.

“Forgive me, Lady, I—” I stand up to apologize properly, but now, standing so close to the mysterious newcomer, I finally realize where I recognize her from. “Lucy?!”

My backyard friend grins devilishly, opening her mouth to say something. I throw myself at her and hug her tightly before she gets a chance to reciprocate.

“Good to see you too,” she finally says, her voice a little weak from the strength of the embrace.

“How did you—?”

“Told you I wouldn’t let some marriage keep us apart.” She smirks and cups my face with her hands. Her expression sours as she notices the fresh cuts alongside the right cheek. “What’s this?” her voice is tinged with concern as she gently tilts my head to the side so she can inspect the wound closer.

“It’s nothing.” I brush her hand aside and step a bit further away from the candlelight.

We stand in silence for a moment. Lucy walks over to the tall window and stares at the gardens with intricately shaped hedges and bushes.

“Walk and talk?” she asks over her shoulder.

“You’ve no idea how glad I am to have you here,” I say as we take a little turn next to a piece of shrubbery cut to resemble a stag.

Lucy doesn’t say anything, walking beside me. There is no one else around. At least no one human. I spot Kasha sleeping on one of the garden benches.

“But I thought you couldn’t enter here?” I ask.

Though originally I dismissed the comment as a simple joke, so much has happened since that now I am not entirely sure. Too many coincidences and events for me not to try to inquire further.

“That used to be the case.” Lucy nods. “But no longer. Whatever was keeping me out has finally faded.”

At this point, I am not sure if it’s a joke or not. We step onto a bridge standing over an hourglass-shaped pond. I stop a little before mid-way.

“Does it have anything to do with the coffin below the manor?”

Lucy pauses and half-turns towards me.

“You could’ve just told me, you know,” I add, tilting my head to the side.

“I am sorry to have used you like this,” the regret in her voice sounds genuine. “But I did not know what you would say or think.”

“Well, I have thought about it for the last two days now.” I slowly move closer to Lucy.

“…And?” she asks, a mixture of anxiety and uncertainty painting her face.

We stand right next to each other now. I look up a little to meet Lucy’s gaze and smile.

“And I don’t care.” I pull her closer and kiss her.

For those few blissful seconds, all the troubles of the world seem to melt away and disappear from my mind. For a few heartbeats, there’s no birthday ball, no fear of marriage, no worry about anything. There’s just us, together.

“YANA!” my mother’s horror-filled shriek ruins the moment. She advances towards us, flanked by a pair of armed house-guards, clearly out to locate me and force me back inside. “What in God’s good name are you doing?!”

She rounds up on us and grabs me by the arm.

“I thought I had made myself quite clear about wandering off on your own! We’ll talk about this later,” she growls with all the fury of a wild beast. “Now, get back to the house *this instant*!”

Her hand rises to strike me again. Before it can reach my face, however, it stops, halted mid-air by Lucy, who manages to hold back my mother’s arm with surprising ease.

“*You*,” my mother hisses at her. “I felt there was something not right with you. There is no brother, is there? You just came here to… corrupt my daughter, didn’t you?!” she finally wrests her hand out of Lucy’s grasp with a grunt of effort. “Will you leave on your own, or must my guards see you out?”

Lucy takes a step forward, now standing between me and my mother, and crosses her arms over her chest.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she declares. “You have done enough harm. It’s time to bring it to an end.”

At my mother’s gesture, the pair of guards move up and present their ornamental halberds. Lucy gives me a quick, apologetic glance, then swings herself over the balustrades and disappears into the water.

My mother scoffs, no doubt glad that the newly arisen problem resolved itself. She grabs me again and signals the guards to look around for any sign of Lucy.

Then the water starts to rumble and churn as if boiling. A long, spindly arm reaches out of the pond and grasps for the balustrade with elongated fingers ending in blade-like claws. The ornate metal starts heat up, to melt and deform beneath the creature's searing grip. The other arm follows; this one breaking through the iron barrier as though it were paper. The rest of the creature emerges, now that it has support. A nearly fleshless skull takes in the gathered people with flame-blazing eyes, a snake-like tongue with tiny spikes along its length unfurls from between the razor-sharp teeth. A broken halo of melting gold glows above multiple pairs of curling horns. Three pairs of wings spread from the back of the monster, ivory feathers fading into skin-colored membrane.

The guards charge at it without hesitation, but their halberds glow white-hot the moment they draw near, forcing them to drop the weapons and abandon the attack.

"David's child," the monster speaks in a voice sounding like a blast furnace. It approaches my mother, who right now is on the ground, frantically chanting her prayers. "How long I have waited for this moment. To repay your bloodline for the years I have spent divided. Do you have any idea what it is like to be torn in two? One part wandering aimlessly, the other caged within the bowels of a castle?"

Some pieces of metal armor melted into the creature's flesh clink against each other as it leans forward, exhaling hot air from its nose like an angered bull. Then, right when it seems the infernal creature is about to rip my mother to pieces, it straightens back. "Be glad I have found something far more precious than revenge." The creature turns its great horned head towards me and extends a gaunt hand. There is sudden fragility in those blazing eyes that did not seem possible. "If you would still have me."

I have remained quiet and motionless throughout the exchange, trying to organize the maelstrom of thoughts in my head. Should I be scared that the person I felt closest to, who I felt understood me best, turned out to be the actual devil? I probably should. Lucy confirmed my suspicions that she was not human, and I said it did not matter. But I did not expect her to be… this. So, should it matter? Should it change how I feel about her? Maybe. And yet, it does not.

I walk over and take Lucy's hand.

"Devils like us belong together," I say with a smirk. Somehow, the flensed skull manages to smile. Like an ocean calming after a storm, Lucy's demonic form recedes, returning her almost completely into the finely dressed woman, though still winged and horned.

I take one more look around. My mother, still on the ground, shaking in fear. The two guards, waiting for their weapons to cool enough to pick up again. The incoming stampede of nobles and aristocrats, some of whom must have noticed the small inferno burning in the garden. Kasha, similarly disturbed from her slumber, leaps onto my

shoulder and meows. In turn, I let Lucy pick me up. She does so with a strength and ease that still seem too great for her form.

And then, with a single powerful strike of her membranous wings, we lift off into the night sky.

Finally together. Finally free.



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