

The Castle Overseeing the Valley

It was once upon a time and if it wasn't it wouldn't be told, a traveler, a man of many talents, wandering around with his stories to tell for those keen to listen. Being a wanderer is a heavy job after all, you follow directions, you can even find yourself lost at times and you are an easy prey for thieves, cut-throats and other ne'er-do-wells waiting to pray on those that are foreign to this land. Sleeping under stars can be both astonishingly beautiful and dangerous.

The night when it all happened, was one like this, dark and silent, lightened only by the moon. Like any traveler, tired of a long day walk, our traveler stopped, and made fire to close to the road, at the crossroads of where he came from, where he had been and where he will go. All coming from somewhere and leading to a direct point. As soon as the camp was set, the fire was lit and the food was finished, there was one more thing to do, to lay down and sink in a deep sleep for tomorrow, another long day for walking. Laying there, trying to sleep, he couldn't help but think what the city of Emilza has in store for him. Palaces made of stone perhaps, or just small peasant houses he wondered. Hour after hour, he struggled to sleep, feeling uneasy without knowing why, but eventually he fell asleep, and dreamed. But the rest unfortunately didn't last long.

Through sleep he heard what seems to be a worried voice, 'No, no, no, this can't be good, wake up, wake up I said.' The bard just ignored it; it must be one of those strange dreams where you think you are awake, he thought. Just trying to sleep harder. But suddenly a push, a pull and what seemed to be a very strong kick in the back woke him up for good, and realizing there is no dream, but the reality just became a nightmare for him. In front of him stayed a pale man, not too tall but not short either, having a long white hair, with dark circles under his eyes, like he forgot to sleep for centuries, a long nose, hanging from his face like a beak, wearing an elegant white shirt covered by a long dark coat up to the ground, that in a certain light seemed to fly and fade in the darkness of the night and on his head wearing a pointy stupid hat that seemed like it has seen better days.

'Good you are awake; this is so good, yes' the stranger said

'No, it is not good, who are you and what are you doing kicking awake people in the middle of the night?'

'My name is...' and after a short pause, he continued with a little sadness in his voice: 'Ahem, not important, for now. What are YOU doing sleeping in places like this? Deep into the dark forest, full of lurking shadows, and even worse, camping at the CROSSROADS? Do you have any idea to what dangers do you expose yourself to?'

'No, I do not have any idea to what dangers I expose myself to, as far as I am concerned you are the only bother, I have for now' answered the traveler with anger in his voice, while starting to pack things in order to get away from the annoying stranger.

'No idea? What you mean no idea? Everyone knows why! Unless... you must not be from those parts aren't you traveler?'

'No, I am not, and soon I won't be' answered the man woken so violently.

'In this case you must have my apologies' said the stranger, and taking his strange hat off, did a little bow in front of the traveler, 'I am a native to those parts, to the land over the forest to be more precise, and... I have been for many, many years' continued the man. 'Let me be your guide, pack fast, and I will lead the way, you will be out of here in not time, let me do this in exchange of the troubles created. You are going to...?'

'To Emilza'

‘Oh, that is amazing, lively city in this time of year, very good choice’, while staring down the foreigner that he just encountered. ‘Now finish packing, I will wait.’

‘Now?’

‘Now.’

‘Now! It is the middle of the night, what way could you possibly lead in peach black darkness like this one?’ answered the foreigner already tired, of sleep and of his wannabe companion. ‘I am going nowhere, you can either lead the way in the morning or you can leave now, alone, without me.’

‘Waiting to morning is not a possible is not an option, and leaving you here is not one either, for I know the terrors that prey in those parts. As someone once said, “that which does not go willingly should be perused”, perhaps you would change your mind in exchange for means such as this’, and with a simple hand gesture, as by magic, a bag of what sounded like coins appeared in his hand. ‘Sights of hand are not my only expertise my lost friend, you can have this, and many more if, and only if you are willing to pack now, and leave with me’ and as he said that something changed, a fire seemed to light in his eyes, a desire for something he could not have.

The bag looked heavy enough to maintain a good lifestyle for weeks, months even, no more sleep for dinner and no more insanitary rooms split with different crawling insects in shady parts of the town, or even worse, stables, no more living at the hand of mercy for now. ‘I don’t care where this crazy man takes me, as long as I get the coin, I will be all right for some time now, sleep can wait for now’ the traveler thought to himself. Still with hesitation in his voice, he answered to the pale man ‘Too well, I accept your deal, you will take me to the gates of Emilza but you give me the money now, not after or during the trip, and if we get lost, I will demand more’. ‘If things get sideways, I can escape with his money’ he thought to himself.

Hearing this, the bizarre stranger looked first at the sky, and quick to the East, and answered ‘fine by me; after all, they are of no use to me’, throwing the bag to his lap.

Eagerly, the traveler started to count them wondering what the man meant by “no use to him”, are they fake, but no, with his best expertise he guessed, metal of the highest rank, 10 000 of them. ‘Fine by me’ said the bard packing the last things from the camp. ‘Lead the way’ he continued, ‘Just make sure you follow the right direction’.

From the beginning the traveler had many questions about this man, especially since he did not give a name an occupation, any personal details for that matter. He figured while going blindly into the night and following what seems more and more a floating coat created from the same material as the fabric of night itself, he might lead an inquiry, he might find any small information about the strange man that was leading him into this forest. But every question he asked was answered dry with yes and no and maybe some monosyllabic word but mostly his questions were refused to be answered.

‘So, how old are you?’

‘Old.’

‘What bought you here?’

‘The road.’

‘What is your name?’

‘Not important’

‘What are you doing here now?’

‘Guarding’

‘Guarding what’

To which he turns to the traveler, with a short sigh and answers ‘I see you, and I see your questions, but you have to understand, there are things beyond your understanding. Answers about myself cannot be answered but, there are many things you don’t know about those parts’ foreigner, why don’t you shut up for a moment, and listen, and I will tell of the land and its fading glory.’

After which the pale man turns his back again and begins his story.

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There are many stories about the strange places and people that lie behind the deep and dark forest in the East and the strong and tall mountains in the North. But there is a particular one that you should be aware of, the one about the Castle of the Mountain King, how it came to be and its glorious legend. If you cross the deep woodland, eventually, at its end towards the East, you will find a lonely peak, looking over a valley with a shy river that flows south until it meets the sea.

It is said that long time ago, in the beginning, a shepherd walked his sheep to the river, and while he was there, he was astonished by the beauty that surrounded him, and so, he decided to make a sheepfold there, a permanent residence. Time went by and soon there was a small community, several houses, a church and even a small market. Unfortunately, not all times were so good, with the passing of years a great invading force started to advance and conquer everything in their way towards the sunset. Those worrying times... The men-built fortifications to protect themselves, traps in the outskirts of the city to stop any advance of the enemy and, the most importantly, as a last resort, a dark castle on the tip of the mountain that will forever keep a watchful eye on the small city. Every single detail was carefully managed by the current leader, King Mirovoi, a tall dark man, with a slim face and long boney fingers blessed upon birth with the most impressive gift of all, a real ‘evil eye’ in his left eye socket, a true amulet, a symbol of power and protection, or so the voiced of the town were saying, since that one eye was always covered. The times were not good with our monarch, causing him to gray before the time, and worry to be constantly on his mind. We like to say that we are products of our time, and this can be also about our sovereign, skilled in combat and cunning as every ruler should be.

Preparations were made, the walls of the town looked ready to withstand any invading force no matter how great or how prepared it was supposed to be and the castle shining in its glory like it will be capable to withstand the time’s challenge forevermore, like it did centuries before since the days of the old kings of yore, ready to defend that which is the most precious jewel of the crown, a dark mirror which was in the possession of the crown since the time of the old kings of yore. The days passed one after another one, each of them seemingly passing slower than the one before and just slight faster than the one after. Eventually the time became meaningless. Forever ready for an enemy that didn’t show or perhaps just missed them, maybe the Easterling push to the West was stopped, many one of the very common crises of the time happened in their empire, forcing them to retreat or even their enemy might just took another route, completely missing them. Eventually after several difficult weeks with no enemy in sight, people started returning to their normal lives, bakers baked, children played and so on, it seemed as the enemy didn’t exist to begin with. And so, life continued and prospered, for now. All but one. The supreme ruler of the place who could not imagine only the great force that he will have to face, sooner or later. But the sentiment of peace didn’t last long for as fast normality was just resettling the place, the foe that was late to arrive was making way through the dark and swirling forest. Each junction looked like the last one and the trees with branches that seems to intercross up close to the end of the skies, castling long dark shadows on the ground, and the wild beasts that found place and lived in surrounded by those cursed forest, made the advance close to impossible. No defense is better than the one that is given to us by nature. Slow, and clumsy, eventually the

enemy made its way through the forest, and several months later, a guard started to see two forests instead of one: the regular one that was there since the beginning of time, and another one, full of metal spears, armor and horsemen, marching from underneath the tips of the trees. And so, just for a moment time froze again, not bird singing no wind blowing. Only deafening silence.

I cannot tell you about the bravery acts that happened during that day, for there were none. It was a short fight between an unprepared town and a conquering force formed from highly trained soldiers. Fortunately, the walls hold on enough time so most of the people could leave and take the trail for the next settlement. But soon the walls gave in, and the guards were eventually overrun. The invading force left no survivors and continued to push for the final objective of their invasion for now. After all, a conquered nation without a king is a loyal one. The push ravaged the town and eventually reached the tallest construction that was there, the castle, the fort, the symbol of the power that our monarch holds.

Steady and dark, ready to withstand any force that would come to pass, the castle was an unconquerable monolith, built long time ago by the ancestors of the king. Built on a steady single rock, with a post nearby. Very few were the one who were privileged enough to see what lies behind the hidden doors of the fortification, to the common folk it was all legends, all smokes and mirrors, put precisely there for a reason. Of outside views, there are very few for even the windows are small, leaving little to no light on the secrets sheltered inside. It is said that not even the door is in plain sight, it hides behind a camouflage, allowing it to exist undetectable. Majestic and proud it stayed on the lonely hill, overseeing the town for many years, and the mysteries that lie behind his shut doors are of legends. For one instance, it is said the inside of the castle is not what you could expect from such a building, the inside is like a labyrinth full of dark corridors that lead to each other or most often in dead ends, illusion and traps at every step. There are stories of how the royal bloodline benefited from their status, dealing with dark arts, mysticism and magic, creating an ultimate defense, an unbreakable defense. But the crossing with the magical realm doesn't end here, it is said that deep into the mountain the original architects of the place dug deep and where now lies the royal library, large and uncanny in its look, it shelters many interesting things, manuscripts, scrolls in languages long forgotten, occult objects and artefacts, weapons of the likes that were never seen, blades of fire and arrows that listen to every command, overall, a place for strange and the hidden.

The stories of the dark cliff, where the old castle lies are many, of its mystery and of what lies behind its dark and imposing façade can keep going, but for what happened to the invading force in that day it is another tale. Almost for everything in life, there can be more accounts or versions of one single thing, yet for incident of that day there is only one way to describe how things went. The invaders followed the king deep into the forest to his castle, but as soon as they passed the fort, a very thick fog started to follow them and eventually surround them. The orders of the generals were simple, if the door cannot be found, just lay siege of the castle, after all it is one building defended by one single man. Eventually a breach was made in one of the walls, but no one was prepared for what was found inside. A labyrinth, but not as the ones that can be found in the stories of the sailors coming from the South and not as in the beautiful gardens of the high class living far in the West. A labyrinth in its own, empty rooms that look as if they have been abandoned for centuries and long corridors that seem to go on and on leading nowhere, traps and dead ends at every corner, but the most terrifying of all, the stairs that lead to the tower on the top of the mountain, those stairs can't be considered your regular way to move from one floor to another, for the simple fact that as soon as you put your first step on them the anguish begins. They seem to go in circles all around, moving from up to down without much sense, easily getting disoriented or in most instances lost. But the most frightening of all the things that the invaders had to deal in their siege was a very strange feeling of unrest, like someone or something was always following them, watching their every step, hearing each of their breaths, something lurking in the shadows forever keeping an eye on them. But nothing they faced in the hellish march forward through this desolate place, where god's holy light stopped shining long time ago, could prepare them for the final thing they had to face. The King, standing alone, with his weapons laid down, in the highest point of the castle, surrounded only by old wooden pedestal on which sat big book covered in a dark purple cover, a broken mirror that lied behind the monarch and two small hourglasses placed in the frame of the very mirror.

All while the king was humming something that seemed to be one of those old ballads whose authors were lost to time, wearing his everyday bandage, for the first time on the other side of his face, revealing a dark blue eye, that harshly gazed upon the invading force that started gathering to the door frame.

What happened next are things taken from fairytales. The fragments of the mirror that previously lied scattered on the ground now seemed to catch life and easily floating all around the room until eventually ten of them seem to find a place, levitating just above the monarch slim and bony fingers. For a moment it seemed that all was silent not a single sound was heard, filling the room with a heavy pressure, ready to be released the very next moment. Slowly each fragment pierces the skin drawing a drop of blood as the ruler, took a short break and whispered a final word of his melody, ‘crapă’¹. As each letter slip from his mouth, fragments of his body started to crack and fall. Two beams of light started to flow and fill the room. One dark in its complexion, like the moonless night and the other warm like the first ray of sunbeam in the morning. The beams filling the room eventually spilled in the whole castle and in the end, it affected the nearby earth, for even now the earth around the castle looks freshly scorched. It is said that the two beams of light were seen from the people that evacuated the city, and not only that, but screams were heard coming from cliff. What happened to the invaders are only speculations, but one thing is certain, they perished, and so the conquering ambitions were stopped. How they perished or where did they go no one could answer. Some speculated that the light somehow consumed them or that the unseen fire incinerated their bodies.

As in many stories told, no victory can be achieved without a price. The Monarch was never seen again, and the old dark castle remained a place of memory, a place where even in the darkest night, the brightest star will still show the way. Him as a person, might ceased to exist in this world, but parts of him continued to live on. Soon after the people of the town came back, they tried to give a proper burial for the last governor of the land. All those that went to find the body or even went close to the forest surrounding the castle were never seen again, and those lucky enough to return would only be able to murmur incoherent words, all but one.

The castle became a place of memory, a place of by gone times. The disappearances of those that were brave enough or some might argue foolish enough to explore the Dark Peak, as it was renamed, didn’t encourage any more expeditions in those parts. This combined with the access difficulty, the fear and the mysticism the surrounded the place, both before and after the incident, lead to the abandonment of castle, not only as a place but also deep in the back of the memories of people. The place became shunned by people, of fear mostly, leaving it at the mercy of time. Legends of the event or even of what lurked near the place spread. Soon a whole continent knew of the story of a single man that stood in front of many, defeating them, defending his home, all at one price. Time passed and the children nowadays go to sleep with stories of brave heroes of old, but the exact road to the place was lost to time, no one knows how to get there anymore, and if you ask me, it might be for the best.

The Wolf Tower

‘But what happened to him? Did they ever find out?’ asked the traveler

‘Oh, they did, yes, a very select few and some that were foolish enough to look too far into the legend, because with the passing of time, this what became of it, a myth, something that might have been real or not, something the crossed the fine line of imagination and reality. A statue was risen in his name, not far from the middle of the town, in his name and its deeds, the legendary protector that was never seen again.’

¹ Romanian word for ‘crack’

‘But what about the one that came back? The one that survived to tell the tale? Sure, he could tell what is real and what is not.’

The pale man turned to the foreigner and with fear in his eyes like gazing onto one's very final moment he answered. ‘The story I will tell you should never touch your lips again. Never, under any circumstances, it should be told, because some things are better left buried, in the distant past and not to be brought to life ever again. You are not to speak of it with a single soul. Do you understand?’

Perhaps of the fear that was felt so heavily by the traveler coming from the deep eyes staring at him, like everything faded in the darkness, and it was only him and the pale man's eyes. ‘Agreed’, said the traveler with a trembling in his voice, ‘not saying anything to a single soul’.

To which the stranger sighted with ease at the answer he got, turned back, and continued to lead the way. ‘Good’ he continued with a certain calmness in his voice, ‘we can continue then’.

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The story I am about to tell you happened in the same set-up, the same long thin river passing through the same town, overseen by a castle on a dark peak, as a glance in the dark past, but the story I am about to tell you, comes just a few hundred years later, just late enough for the people to stop questioning the events that happened so much time ago. The people that lived through the events perished long ago and with them the stories of what happened to them and what their perspective was on the events of that day. Their children and their children's children possibly to have heard the stories, but most likely they forgot them, or as an extreme, never talking about them ever again, being considered a taboo perhaps. But people of today are not connected in any way to the people of those far-gone days, the past doesn't represent anything more than a ghost to them, a bad dream that passed and it soon will be forgotten. Those that know about the events, were the scholars, the elites, those rich enough to hire teachers to learn their offspring anything from the beauty arts to dark arts such as alchemy or magic, from literature to geometry. This would be the main population aware of events, but not only, there is only one institution that deals with such events: the church

Strong, rich, influential since the days of the begging of time. Meddling in affairs of many, dealing with everything and all they consider to be unhuman, unholy and overall, all that could not be put to use. High is position, second only to the castle, the church was visible from all parts of the city, being the tallest building within the walls of city. Its towers, holly in aspect and rich in decoration, meant to accentuate its role, as the second in command of everything. But in terms on time, many are the years that passed over the roof of this singular building. Back in the times when the city was just a small village, composed of several wooden houses, it was there, the only stone building of its time, even the first maps we have of the town depict several frail little houses and its imposing stature, almost as if the other buildings try to hide and find refuge in its holly majesty, just as chickens hide under their mother hen. The building change and grew with every century that passed, a new tower, a new hall, a new cellar, with the expansion of the city it grew more and more, until to the recent times when its towers, many in numbers, seem to grow endlessly into the skies, creating a mesmerizing bridge between the earth and the sky, between the living and those high above.

But it was not always like that, besides the beauty of the place, or as the legend tells, our shepherd, or as some people called him, the father of the village, found the very least an interesting artifact. The story tells of a bleeding rock that talked with the man during his dreams, giving him visions, of the things that will be if he listens and of the things that won't if he disobeys, telling him where to go and where to take his sheep in order for them to give good cheese, eventually leading him to this very forest, to this very place. And such he became the first ruler of what was then just a village, and not even an official one, a figure head

that would take care of what was going on. His visions continued, leading him through any problem like there was nothing. It is said that now the church stays on the very same spot where he found the bleeding monolith, and as a sign of devotion and loyalty, far behind its closed doors, he performed that which his vision suggested for years: 'Drink the blood that flows as the water stream the flows to your village shepherd, if you wish power among your fellow men, strength to withstand every enemy, cunning to outsmart those that seek to deceive you. Your bloodline to pass into legend shepherd, but only if you listen to me and drink deeply from the blood that pours from me'. The cold stone walls and the closed doors were the only witness of what happened that night. Did he give in? Did the shepherd follow his new Master? Hard to tell, but something changed in him for some time, almost like to entities in one body struggling for control. His prophetic dreams also ended from that day forward.

But why do I tell you all this nonsense? After all, he is not the character of this story, he is just a pawn in the great scheme of things, yes, but the bleeding monolith was the first object to be collected and locked deep in the cold cellars beneath the church, from the order of the shepherd. And this tradition continued with his children and his children's children and so on, a very interesting passion and orientation towards objects that seem to shelter more than it is visible at a first glance, after that the interest shifted into objects of mysticism, divination occult and magic, and as I told you in the last tale, their collection grew, and multiplied generation by generation, until it reached the massive knowledge gathered among centuries hidden deep and far behind closed gates.

But the one that came back is not of a rich or noble background, he can be seen more as an average man coming from a simpler family, one of those families with several children, each eventually fulfilling another role to the community. One of his brothers was sent to work under the watchful eye of a baron in the north of the village, one of his sisters, married to a merchant and moved away to other more exotic places, another of his brothers was sent to army, but he also had several siblings that didn't made it to maturity, but he, as one of the first born of the family, he was sent to the church. To learn to write, read and preach of their teachings, he will have a roof over his head and he would not have to worry of going hungry ever. Those are the intentions under which many people are sent to live sheltered under the roof of the divine, and for the most part they are not wrong, those people that chose to pursue this path are taken care of, and they are considered important members of the community, they become teachers, learners and overall, highly educated men, well versed in many domains.

Our man, ascended fast through the holly ranks of the clergy and reached close to the top, helped by his wit and intuition, curiosity and cunningness, he ranked up unusually fast, until eventually he reached one of the highest positions he could, without having a noble background or support coming from those that lie just above him, the strong elites with long familial traditions and connections in this institution. His everyday position consisted of taking a trip to the 4th tower of the building where you would find all the selected books that the clergy considered fit for the commoners. Even like this, the bookshelves seemed to expand endlessly, and every day they would seem to multiply from the last one. He would arrange them each day, every day, for years and years to come, this was his work, put everything in order, open the door close the door go pass the same stoned corridors all day long, for years. All day, every day, passing the same walls and the same doors.

But from all the doors he would pass daily on his cold and empty halls, there was one that always stood up to him. Simple, made to fit with all the other ones, not to stand out in anyway. Colored with a lively red and surrounded by a beautiful stone lacing like all the other ones. But unlike any other door, in all his years of hard work he never seen this door remotely open, or without the big lock on it, that seemed to hang heavily on the handle since the very begging of time. When a door is locked for all these years, just in front of your eyes, you start to fantasize. You think of the gold and treasures locked behind its key or about the secret knowledge hidden there or perhaps the beasts from folktales chained up and locked far from the public eye. All variants are possible in the mind of a man whose curiosity slowly slips into obsession with the passing of every day. So eventually, the thought of breaking the lock arisen in the back of his head and grew

each day stronger. He eventually made a plan, he has to see with his own eyes what lies on the other side of the door even if it is just a simple empty room, he studied the movement of the people that pass by it, possible extensions of what could be there using old plans of the building, after all his position was that of a glorified librarian, he has access to all the books and prints he wanted, he even learned how to pick the lock that started to drive him insane. So, one night, covered in darkness, he followed his dream. He will finally find out what lies behind the wooden door and his obsession will be over. Packed a small bag with essentials, that might help him in his way, for whatever he will find there, among which we could name a rope, torches, a recent map of the church, a hammer, a pair of daggers just in case things could go sideways in his little adventure.

With a little struggle, the lock fell and the door was open for the first time in who knows how many centuries. In front of the wanderer didn't lie any room full of unimaginable riches or even some beast from bygone times, but what could be found was a set of stairs leading far, into the darkness. For a moment, he stayed and gazed into the endless darkness that seemed to even spread outside the room, and contemplated his next actions. Took a deep breath, lighted a torch and pressed on into the unknown. He seemed to be walking for several hours on an uneven road, dark and full of mysteries, going up and down and following whenever the stairs would lead him to, following what seemed and endless maze succumbed into a pitch-black darkness that followed him, until eventually he reached another door, identical in size and shape with the first one, but this one open, no lock or key is needed. With a small push it is revealed a total new environment, the door coming out of a small fort surrounded by what seemed to be scorched earth, as it was burned just a few moments ago. In just a few steps from the place where the door was leading to, he found himself in front of a great building, dark and imposing overseeing the city down below. And at the very moment he understood where he was. He found himself in what people used to call the off-limits, places deemed dangerous by the people that lived long time ago. The dark castle and the fort, the last defense on the town during the invasion coming from the East. But something was not right, everything looked new, like the battle happened just moments before. 'There is something going on, I just know it' he said to himself. For a moment, being caught in his own thoughts he heard another voice in the back of his head: 'Leave'.

'After a long night of not sleeping and wondering in the dark of course my mind is going crazy' the man thought, 'it is a normal response to fatigue', he continued.

'Oh, oh, oh, we are not the fatigue you are feeling stranger, for you are trespassing our domain' and in that very second a tall beautiful woman with a bandana covering her eyes and a small necklace that looked like a mirror fragment covering her neck appeared as bought by the wind in front of the man. In fear of his life, the man took the knife a strike her down in fear. But in an instant, the blade went straight through her, like you would try to cut a cloud. 'Our name is Vision, the judge, the sole guardian of this place and its secrets and the first of the virtues. You can take out of blade out of us now, for no blade made by man can touch us'

The man just stood there, frozen, unable to recall his weapon, and with every word she spoke more questions appeared in his mind.

'Our name is Vision despite of our lack of sight, because we can see the past, present and future, and judge freely and fairly.' She continued, 'We already know who you are, we need no information from you, we already knew your blade will strike us, and we already know that today and here you will make a decision, you are not here by accident, you obsessed over the secret tunnel that connects your church and this place for many weeks now didn't you?'

'Yes', the man answered with fear in his voice, trying to find power to move his limbs, but instead, he found power only to mutter one single question: 'What are you?'

'What are we? We just explained, we are the first of the virtues, you as a man of books, you know about this place, perhaps you don't know how we came to be. All 10 of us were born from a single man that gave his life force for us to walk the earth and to defend his kingdom in his place. Five of us are the virtues and the other five are the fears, we are not embodiments of good or evil, we are just us. We serve the old

Master, for he is still our father, but that never stopped us from serving other lesser masters. We split in the word, never to lurk in the same space. The mirror that split the man gave us life, and when we will finish our duty, we return to it. Be not afraid of us, for we will not end your life here and now. You will die at an advanced age, in your bed, but with your hands stained of blood by your own choice'

Hearing that is time is not yet up, the man starts to feel alive again, start to get control of his limbs, and sighs with ease. 'You know the past and the future guardian, tell me, will I achieve that which I desire?'

The woman, after one moment of thought, answered calmly, 'yes but in only one way and it depends, what are you ready to willingly sacrifice for it to be real'

'What I am willing to sacrifice? Everything, anything, I worked hard for my life and I can see my dream slip through my fingers only because of my status, only because I am not part of the families that influenced this land for centuries! I will do it, I will find the way as you said, the only way.'

'Then leave and be on your way, and let your destiny flow, from one event to another, be confident that things that were meant to be will come into reality, I have seen them, seal the door shut behind you, and don't look back, never to come to place again, for the next time we might not be so kind with an intruder.' And with those words, the woman disappeared as quick as she appeared, leaving nothing behind, just what seemed to be a threat.

In fear of her wrath, since he didn't actually see what she is capable of, the man started to walk, slowly and steadily to the same door from which he came, sad, and disappointed, after a long night with little to no sleep, tired and weary, having to leave with more questions, but he did as it was told. As he was reaching for the doorknob, he saw the sun rise, most beautiful of all the ones he had seen, with each sun ray starting to hit the earth, and warming it with their heat, but something caught his eye. It was a small part of what seemed to be a black mirror, similar with the one that the woman had by her neck. 'A small good bye gift' he thought, 'from a place I'm bound not to see again'. So, he picked up the shard, put it in his pocket, and left closing the door behind him and he presses on in the darkness carrying the same torch that led him there. Found his way through the same thick darkness, and arrived in front of the same door, the same door that made him obsessed and led him only to have more questions, disappointed in himself and the world, he opens the door, puts the lock back on it, and never thinks of its existence again, going on with his regular boring day.

At night, tired he returned to his dark cold chambers with a simple bed a nightstand and a religious symbol hanging on the wall, it was a church after all, where he lived since always. Tired from the lack of sleep, he tries to remove things from his pockets and in an instant, he feels a sharp pain, realizing that clumsy as he was, he cut himself in the shard of mirror he found in the morning. Hastily trying to stop the bleeding, he puts the shard on the nightstand, with the tip still covered in his blood, and without giving it much thought he continues with the night routine. By the time he puts himself in bed, ready to sleep, he feels a cold breeze prowling around him, but what was flowing around his bed was not the wind. He opened his eyes and came to find, what seemed to be a giant black wolf, cold as he was born of winter and dark as he was made of shadows, not with one or two eyes, but many, to many to be counted in one glance, as if the initial eyes of the beast multiplied and moved all around the body of the monster. Great in size, yet its fur was so dark that the body was almost indistinguishable from the shadows from and room, as a floating fish school made out of eyes was hunting his room.

'Beast', the man murmured under his breath, 'unclean demon of hell', while trying to reach the holly symbol on his wall.

Hearing this, the Wolf, confused for a moment, looked at the man, and with a big smile he answered. 'Go reach for your holly symbol, new Master, if you feel it will grant you safety. But I am no hound of hell or beast from your holly book. I am as full of god's light as you are.'

Puzzled, and unable to respond, to comprehend what just happened, 'a dream' he thought 'no, a nightmare' kept talking to himself refusing to acknowledge the reality that he was facing.

Seeing his confusion, the Wolf continued, 'New Master, my name is Hunger, the eye-seeker, I am the fourth the virtues and I hunger for fame, wealth and status, I hunger for things that are rightfully mine, and I help those in need of assistance to achieve their highest goals' and with slowly he started to come closer and closer to the man until he looked at him from the same level. And, with an even greater smile than before, 'tell me, new Master, what do you are hunger for?'

With a small stutter and fear in his voice the man asked 'What are you doing here, Wolf?'

'What am I doing here is a silly question, new Master', he answered while he continued moving like he is about to have a great meal out of the man, 'you invited me here, Master, of course!'

To those words the man felt frozen in fear, 'Did I invite this demon in my own home? Was the guardian wrong? Will I die?' just several of the questions that came to his mind.

'But of course, you did it, new Master, you took me from my own place and invited me into your pockets! Into your home! Into your life! We traveled a lot already!', the wolf continued, 'you even fed me, with your own tired hand, your own life essence! I am bound to you, for now and for all your remaining days, Master! Now tell me, what is that which you want so much that you need my assistance with, new Master?'

The man, still frozen in fear, still trying to find out a way out of this conversation, still hoping that he will wake up, didn't answer.

The Wolf, still getting closer and closer again, talked again: 'New Master, my hearing is soft, I hear your heart beating faster and faster with every step I take towards you Master, and my nose is as good as they come so I smell your fear, Master, with each step I take you are more frightened of me, Master. Perhaps I scare you, new Master, perhaps my eyes intimidate you? They follow you, Master?', and with this, the many eyes of the wolf start to move like they are alive, like they are individual being, shrink and become smaller, unite and eventually form a single blue eye in the right socket of the wolf's head. 'Tell me, Master, are you feeling better now? Am I more familiar now to you?' and with the same big smile as before he continued, 'After all if I wanted to, you would have already been dead without even realizing, you fear me and you are right to do so, Master' and climbing on top of the poor man, and wolf continued 'And now I will ask you one more time, new Master, what is that which you hunger?'

In fear of what could happen if he would fail to give an answer to the beast the man whispered the answer 'status' and after a short break 'I hunger for status' he continued 'I want to be the head of the church, to rule over it unquestioned and unchallenged'

'Well, new Master, now we are going somewhere', the wolf replied moving again, giving some space to the man. 'I can definitely help you with that, just point in the right direction. Who are those that wronged you those that betrayed you, Master, in your quest for ascension? Who is to blame for the fact that you are stuck on this hierarchical ladder?'

With more confidence in his voice, as if a sudden wave of bravery overtook the man's mind, he answered 'The 6 great archbishops yes, the ones from the old families that have been swimming in wealth and influence for centuries, leading every important decision made by church and stopping every outsider from entering their high ranked circles! Them! They are the enemy! They are the one that stopped me! Go and get rid of them wolf for me and I will be forever thankful!'

With the same big smile, the Wolf responded: 'Yes, that is what I like, I see and smell and feel that hatred you feel for them, new Master, the old lords that unfairly robed you of your rightful place! Them, they are the enemy yes, Master, yes!' and with licking his sharp teeth, the wolf continued: 'Don't be so quick in asking for favors for I have my own price. After all, gratitude never filled and empty stomach, Master, didn't

it? I am bound to you, new Master, yes, by your blood and by your own foolishness, but never consider me a servant of your will, never consider me a toll in order you achieve your own desires, I have my own will and judgment and can act on my own. Those being said, tell me, Master, what are you willing to sacrifice for your dreams to come true?’

With the shutter back in in his voice, the man answered ‘S-sacrifice? What is that you could wish? If you will truly help me reach the top, you will never go hungry again! You could have every feast for every meal, eat all you want, eat how much you want all day every day, I can even build you a tower here inside the church, where you would live in luxury, a tower made to look in your own reflection and anything else you desire as long as you help me.’

‘Anything I desire, Master, this is a dangerous choice of words’ and starting to lurk in the shadows again ‘I demand tribute, dear Master, after all nothing is free. I can smell all the colors of your life, I can smell the frustration, the anger, the wish to be more, but just as strong scent I feel your ingenuity your cunningness and intuition that lead you were you currently are. I will help you in your quest to satisfy your hunger, dear new Master, if you will help me to satisfy mine. I need no fancy banquet of yours, but I demand two sacrifices from you, one to put you on your place and one to keep you there. At the end of your life, when you are weak and your bones are fragile, I will demand my payment for those deeds, I demand your heart, carrying your soul in your last moments of living, Master, and this is my first price to put you in your rightful place. And to remove those that by weapon or sword will wish you harm, Master, I ask for a yearly sacrifice in blood, on this very night, for every year in which you will draw breath. Those are my demands, Master, and after all they are not so great since it is anything, I can desire, and backing up from a deal is unbecoming, isn’t it, my dear new Master?’

The man found himself stuck between a rock and a hard place. On one hand, his wish since always will come true, but at a cost, but if he would back down, the animal would kill him in an instant, since death is the only certainty in life, with a deep breath, he answered: ‘I shall not back down from your terms, Wolf, because my wish for grandeur is greater than my fear of death and what lies behind it. But I have my own terms of the agreement, you will live in one of the towers of the church, where you will be taken care of. After I became the archdeacon of this institution, you won’t go hungry by my hand, but I ask you not to roam freely the land, and at the end of your service, at the end of my life you will be rewarded with that which you demanded.’

‘I will take your terms, yes to all but one, new Master, I am not a pet to contain in your walls of stone, live by my own will in your said tower, yes but never fully contain me at my full extent. There is no lock nor key able to keep me behind closed bars. I’m humble in your presence for I am bound to you by blood, and for all your life I shall be, Master, but never order me, Master, for you are not in the position to do so’ getting impatient with the man, the Wolf’s many eyes started to reappear through the dark fur of the animal, becoming the frightful beast from before, getting closer and closer to the man, he continued: ‘will bidding shall be done only in return of my terms, say yes, agree to my terms now and forever the bind onto me the way I am onto you, or refuse my conditions, in which case I will leave never to be seen again by you, and with me, all your dreams will shatter, you will go with your days and work the same thing you did for years now, and follow the same old fools you did for years, Master, think, my demands are not outrages if you balance what you ask me to do with what I ask you to provide. Put everything in balance, my dear new Master, my freedom and my satisfied hunger, against your much desired title and my everlasting protection for my Master. In case of your reckless decision of declining my help, do not worry for me, I won’t leave this place on an empty stomach. I know what is your choice, Master, do you?’

The man seeing the true colors of the beast, realized how deep his troubles were, and under the threats he just faced, agreed to the terms of the monster, answering with a simple: ‘Yes, I accept, now it is time to hold your part of the agreement first’

‘You have not to worry about my loyalty, Master, once I said something consider it done. Keep my mirror shard with you, Master, so you can ask my help anytime.’ And as he was speaking, he started to back off, slowly merging into the darkness of the room, losing its shape until only his eyes, his multitude of bright red eyes was to be seen like a storm of fireflies in the night, until those also disappear only one more line was heard from the monster: ‘time to rest now, soon you will be in power, Master Archdeacon’

After their interaction, the man fell into a deep sleep almost immediately, making him to oversleep, not long, just enough to make him late. Wakening up, he thought that was one of the wildest dreams he had in his entire life, not giving a thought, rushed into his morning routine, and fast on the corridors that always seem to never end when you are late. But this morning was special, the halls were particularly empty and quiet, like every life from it suddenly stopped existing. But in his hurry, he found the people that were missing from the church halls. All gathered in front of the door of one of the heads of the church. No one could say anything. No one would dare to say anything. In his fast passing, he got only one glimpse of the grotesque scene. One of the archdeacons lying in bed with one hole in his chest and a facial expression that would denounce the greatest fear that man could see. And in the blink of the eye, our protagonist understood. His dream was not a dream, it was a nightmare, and even worse, one set in reality, the treacherous monster was on his way to hold his part of the deal. Now at this point it is no time to feel remorse, there is nothing that can be done, the plan is set to motion, and he could only accept the price paid for that which he hungered for take time and make peace to the situation. After each night a new archdeacon would die, all in the same way, fear running down on their faces and a hole in their chests.

The man’s ascension started again, revoking the need of council of deacons, becoming the sole ruler and head of his church, all with the help of the wolf. Eventually the monster agreed to live in one of the dark towers of church, but forever refused to be locked, after all, as he said, time and time again, ‘no lock nor key can keep a shadow caged’. Every night he would appear in the room of the new and sole archdeacon, talking with him, threatening him at times but most importantly giving him advice in his daily struggles helping the man to which he was bound, helping him enough to wonder who truly was the head of the church? The man of the Wolf. The man also kept his part of the deal, every year, on the night that they meet, he would give free range to the wolf, to hunt on a soul of his own choice. Sometimes it would be a drunk man in the middle of the road, a corrupt merchant, or sometimes a child that spent too much time far from home and got lost. The wolf would not care, good or evil, woman man or child, he would set his mind to a target, and hunt that poor soul and play and torment their mind for all night long before finally putting an end to their suffering. Along the years there also have been, incidents we might call them, but again, the power balance of their contract always seemed to incline in the wolf’s favor. The beast proved time and time again, not only that he is a smart noble beast, but also that he possessed what one might say the knowledge of the centuries, having outstanding information in lots of domains

The man lived a long life, out of fear of the inevitable end once might say, he became known as Siena the Elder, for his almost unnatural lifespan, but as all things, life must come to an end, and at the age of 111, during his last night, the wolf manifested again, uncalled for council of friendship by the man. Starting to move closely to the bed of the man.

‘Wake up, old Master, the time is here.’ Lurking in his specific style he continued ‘you lived a long-life, Master, unexpected even by me. Your bones are weak and your life is passing in front of your eyes as we speak, Master.’ And with his specific smile he continued ‘Don’t tell me you are still afraid of me, the most loyal of your subjects?’

The man, old and weak, muttered ‘I fear not, for you are not a hound you are a lapdog and you proved that in many of our interactions, Master Wolf. What will happen to me when you will take your most desired prize?’ the man asked.

‘Lapdog I am not and I shall never be. Tame to my Master I was and I shall be for this is the ordinance of the word. 78 years of service are something new for me also, old Master, and for all the years we’ve spent

together, I am glad that you found me or better said, that I went out of my way to find you. Since you are my old Master, and we are bound by contract, I feel the duty to let you know what will happen. You have two choices; you can try to flee to run away from me though you would not have succeeded 78 years ago you won't now. In this case I will hunt you down, or you could willingly accept your fate that was sealed so long time ago. In both cases you will become me, your knowledge, your secrets, your fears and your regrets will become as they were my own. You will become one if my many eyes, for the eyes are the window to the soul, dear old Master. Each of this eye that so much tormented in our encounters was once someone like you, they all are me and I am each and every one of them. The choice is yours.'

'I'm too old to flee from you, Wolf, and you know that too well. I feel the end coming soon, do that which you must, you helped me achieve what I wanted. You truly deserve your prize. Goodbye for now, Master Wolf' and with those last words, the man closes his eyes, puts his hands over his chest and waits for the end to come.

'There is no goodbye, Master, for we live eternally. We will find another pact and another deal and another desire. We will always hunger for something, old Master, and will forever help those that feel the emptiness of desire to chase further. There will be a new, new Master, dear old Master, and after that another one and another one so until the end of time, for we will never be full. Your knowledge will help them find their way the same how the ones before you helped you my dear old master'. And with a big smile that always was on his face, he got on top of the man and got his long-desired prize right from his chest, leaving a whole in it like all of his victims. But, unlike the ones before, there was no fear to be found on the man's face, there was only peace and satisfaction. While his blood flowed quickly from his wound covering his hands in blood. As the best jaws clenched around his heart, a new eye appeared on the body of the animal. A new eye, a new soul in the componse of the creature.

Soon the Wolf took his mirror shard that in his mouth, and in the same night he left the church, giving one more tour to the Wolf's Tower, that one that was his home for his stay here, and, in the cover of the night he left never to be seen again or not seen again so far. He patiently waited in his mirror shard, for a new Master to show up, and give him a taste of his new host, a new goal, and most importantly a new thing to hunger for.

On the other side of the Wall

'Your knowledge is vast of these secrets of this land, stranger, I will give you that' the poor lost soul continued after the end of the story that he just heard. 'But you continue to conceal your identity my guide. Why would you do such things to an already worried man?'

'Worried? Worried by what or who traveler?'

'By you?'

'By me?'

'By you, of course! You woke me up in the middle of the night and marched me into the dark forest instead of waiting for morning. Telling me stories and refusing to answer simple questions such as: 'What is your name?'

'I didn't march you nowhere! That is outrageous! I bribed you! The night was long and we or better said you are almost out of forest. By sunrise you should be in your destination, unfortunately for reasons that are above me you will enter the city alone. Perhaps another story would ease your mind, my dear little tired

sleepy fellow? What would keep your attention? Let's see... Dragons! No, too old fashioned. Pirates! No, I get sea sick only thinking. One with the witch from the swamp maybe!

'My dear guide, I'm begging you, tell me please a real story, tell me the one about you and where you came from, tell me about your life'

'Real? What do you mean real? They are very much real I can assure you this, traveler. They are real to the people that lived in them, they are real to the people that told the stories, and not a single drop of fiction was added from the events that happened in reality. Don't be so hasty to judge what is real and what is not, for you are merely passing those dark lands. A story from my life I shall tell you but I fear my life is not that impressive, and the most of it, I have forgotten, but I remember this one time. It should be long enough to carry us through the night right to the first light of the day'

'Real.'

'Yes, real.'

'All of it.'

'Yes, all of it'

'Ok! Fine! I'm too tired to question you and what you are saying just go on with your story'

*

The same little town grew and expanded far out of the initial border of the expanding in all directions. My story takes place the great house of a wealthy man that happened to be close to the outskirts of the city, up, to the East. The building large in size and had several advantages, its position, allowed great gardens and greenspaces to be built and grow all around the building, and since the main occupation of the owner and his wife were merchants, a small shop was installed in the very same building.

The shop, even small by proportions, it was of great help to the people of the town, it was said that there would not be a single illness nor pain of mind or body that would not have a cure that could be found in this place. Both owners were coming from good families, well read, geniuses at mind and well versed in things as different plants and mushrooms and all those other things that can be found all around us and for what they were good, how to ease the pain and heal. Yes, that is the adequate word for them, healers, both of them. I can still see their shop when I close my eyes sometimes, small with a beautiful entrance, on the right there was a small table where you would pay your purchases and all around the space beautiful nicely worked cabinets and shelf, built by hand from the trees of the very same estate covered in all kinds of products, strange looking small bottles and fruits and herbs from far distant lands, all laid before your eyes. The amazing smells coming from that place are one of a kind and unique to those part, close to impossible to describe them, and as I talk now and I see this whole creation in front of my eyes, I can't help but to be sad and lament for I no longer feel the suit smell of that singular room nor feel the slim cover of dust.

But you might wonder what part I play in this whole story. Well, at the point in time I used to work inside the very old house I'm talking about. I used to be a caretaker, and as the name suggest, I would be the one to serve the lucky couple and manage the rooms, both in their presence and absence, together with the other servants of the family, taking care of them and easing their daily duties and assisting them in their research by how we could. Dusting, cleaning, cooking, serving, all the normal activities that you would expect in a house of this size. From the rooms I don't remember much, I remember each of us had our own chambers, and from the other rooms I remember a beautiful living room covered in lively colors and a great library, with books on every subject from those very old to the ones just printed. Besides this I remember one more room, one hidden behind the library far from the common eye. That one was a secret known only

by the ones living in the mansion and very little of what was it was known, even for us, the workers, as far as I can remember it was the only closed room, no windows no keys only one secret entrance.

Life was peaceful for quite a while, merchants by day and scientist by night, this was the routine for them and we took care for the rest. But as all stories go, something bad happened, disturbing the otherwise peaceful and calm life that settled over the mansion for years now. One day, the woman started to cough and cough again, one day passed, and do the next one and the one after, without giving much thought of it just the spring and the regular allergies she thought, taking only the regular medicine for cough like every spring. Unfortunately, it was not. The spring turned into summer and summer into autumn, but the sickness was still there, still trying to treat is as good as they knew, but soon the situation worsens. With the arrival of winter and the early rains of the season, making the whole environment wet and humid, her health only got worse. Her illness soon bound her to bed, and before anyone could do anything or before her loving husband was able to find a cure, she fell into a deep sleep and in just like that, she died. Peacefully in her sleep she passed away, without pain of struggle, so specific of this mortal realm, leaving the hardness of the world to be dealt with by the leaving. Soon she was dressed with a beautiful long dark dress, with beautiful lacing all over it. Like a princes dressed in black, a true raven queen one might say, she was laid to rest forevermore in the crypt built in the cemetery for her and her beloved husband.

Her fast and unexpected passing was a complete disaster for the master of the house. Countless sleepless night spent in the search of a cure, in the search of something, anything that could help her re-gain her health back, or at least ease the pain that she felt. Each night he would stay late, reading the same books all over again, thinking he missed something, something important, he must have overlooked something in his dusty old books. But alas, all was in vain. Her constant health degraded fast, and what was the most painful for the man, it happened right before his eyes, unable to help, unable to change anything in terms of how things were going. When she finally was put to rest in the crypt that eventually will welcome him as well in the future, he felt as a bolder that was tied to his neck started to fall, dragging him down to an endless abyss, where no light no matter how bright would shine, and no sound no matter how loud would withstand the fall. One might say that in that cold crypt was more than one single person, one dead by the grace of God, and one dead by choice.

Grief and loss are manifested different in all of us, some get over it easier than others. In the first weeks after her death, the man visited her daily laying new the flowers that she loved so much all over her tomb, eventually he bought a chair, to sit by her side and talk to her, day after day he would bring more and more things to her resting place, a table, shelves with her favorite books that he would continue to read to her, as a parent does do their child. Weeks passed and then moths and the man day after day he would spend more and more time in the grave, almost as she was still there asking questions and having full conversations with her. By day, he would spend the time with her, and by night he would stay closed in his secret library, far from us, reading, studying, and focusing on his old books, but some new books as well. In grief, the shop became our responsibility, but without the knowledge they possessed, we were nothing more than shopkeepers, trying to sell the last of the medicines that we had. Things started to go sideways, and they did fast, perhaps too quickly for me to notice. In lack of founding most of the servants left, in search for a better life, and soon I was alone. Just me in the great manor of my lord and him living like a ghost in his former house. Without the proper care, the house fell fast into degradation. I alone could not fix the meals for the owner, clean, do gardening, wash and so on, basically to do all the duties that a group of people used to do in the good old days, alone, all by myself. The high rooms of the building started to gather dust on the objects that lied inside and spiders on the corners of every chamber. To stop the continuously degradation of the furniture, I covered it with sheets and blankets to slow down the decay. In those dark days the house started to feel more and more cold as it was hunted, and we could say it was, the memories of her never truly left the masters mind, to him she would be so close to be alive again while the whole building started to look more and more as a sanatorium.

There are many sicknesses that can be quickly cured, especially the ones of the body, but the ones of the mind take time and might never heal. This was something that the woman would say in the good days, that now seem so far, a distant memory even, but she was extremely right. Years passed since her death, and her good old husband only got worse with the passing of time. His obsession led him to stray paths in his life, inviting all kinds of charlatans and frauds in his home, pretending that they can help him in many strange and ungodly ways, men that could talk to the dead, warlocks and necromancers, all kinds of people looking for a fast way to get rich on the back of a grieving man. So, one day I tried my best to confront the man that for most of my life offered me shelter and food in exchange of my services. So, I tried to convince him that no number of witches and warlocks shall bring her back, to explain him that grieving is normal, but living in a mausoleum with his dear beloved wife is not. And to my surprise, with a smile and happiness in his voice, things that I never seen on my master face for a very long time, he took a deep breath, and answered.

‘I will give you credit where there it is to give, charlatan is and charlatans shall be and you are not the only one to tell me that, even if you are the only living being that talks with me. You see, I am very happy, because I have seen her again, while her body is calmly put to rest, in eternal sleep, her spirit is free. She is here and everywhere on my land, she came home just a few days ago. She talks with me in my dreams and guides my hand in writing once more. Everything I lover about her, came back to me. I can assure you; she is very much alive.’

I was stunned. I could not answer or move, the only thing that was in my mind was that I’m serving a madman, someone that lost his sanity to time and grief.

‘Don’t look so surprised’ he continued when he saw my helplessness. ‘I am creating my life’s work right now, soon she won’t be just a floating memory, a spirit that speaks only to me. She will walk again and she will draw breath again, eat food just like you and me, just like in the good old times, before this dark cloud would settle over our beautiful home. Think of it VValter, the shop will be open again, we will help people, again, and even more, we will be able to make gigantic progresses in our field. No one would fear death anymore, no one would spend eternity anymore in a cold and shallow grave. The possibilities are endless and the opportunities just as much.’

Still in shock, I managed to ask ‘How? How is she here?’

‘Quite easily, all of those guests of mine they were just rip offs of course, any sane person could see through their tricks. But one stood out. Even if their so-called magic was not impressive, cheap at best maybe, but they had a certain book that I wanted, a real one, one that talks about bringing back the dead and rebinding them into this realm. So, let’s say I convinced them to leave me the precious book. Nothing too difficult, after all those years of negotiating and bargaining, I’m still a salesman after all. I used well this book and now she is once more wandering the halls of our great mansion’

It was clear, the man was delusional, insane even. So, I stopped him before saying another word. ‘You are a madman. Let the dead to rest. Those are things no one should intervene with. It is the ordinance of things.’

‘We believed so about many things. From the domestication of wild beast to treating the most common things. “It is the ordinance of things”, it is, but it never stopped the progress. We are advancing in time; we are no longer primitive beings. We can create a much better life for those that will come after us, there is trial and error but progress is inevitable. From tomorrow us, you and me, together will work to build a new body for her, a body that could withstand the time and sickness. Enough for now, go and rest for tomorrow will be a long day.’

I wanted to say no, to answer that I’m a leaving, that I will not help him in his crusade to conquer death for this is a battle the no one can win. But perhaps out of morbid curiosity I said only ‘Yes, Master’ and left. Still blaming myself for the rest of the night for my lack of initiative.

Early in the morning we started his great project, his life work even. We made what could only be compared with a doll that resembled his late wife, dressed it in her clothes and made it look as human as possible. In that very evening the doll sat with the madman at the table, treated it as it was already alive. It was a night of celebration for him, and one of worries for me. The next day he sent me in the town in a very specific shop to gather some of very specific ingredients that he desired. On all my walk there and back I was only thinking this was my chance to escape, my chance to leave and never return. I could skip town's even countries, start a total new life far from this madness. But I was still curious about the end of this story. Part of me still wished to see if his theories would be even loosely right, all everything will crash and burn as I was expecting. It was all what I was thinking, but I obeyed the orders, went to the shop and came back. When I returned, I could not find the owner of the house anywhere, looked for him in every room until finally I found him. In one room, the one she loved the most, where she would keep her plants and herbs during the cold season. He was there drawing with chalk strange symbols on the floor and the walls. Writings, symbols, and drawings, all kind of things like made by a child that rebels against their parents rules, and the doll set in the middle of the room. When he sees me, in a hurry he takes the things he asked from me, 3 different colored powders to be more specific, and makes 3 circles, one larger than the other around the doll.

'Good, good' he said while finishing the last circle, 'we are almost ready. Now we just wait'

'Wait? Wait that? You ruined this room!'

'We wait for midnight, since her life force is stronger then, and worry not for the room. It is just a small sacrifice in the great scheme of things, she just thought would be great to regain her body in a room so familiar to her. Go and rest now, we have a long night ahead of us, and when this all is over, I can assure you that your service won't be forgotten.'

In the darkness of the night, I was summoned again in the same very room, with only the light of a candle to guide my steps through the cold and empty corridors of the house. Thinking only if the madman will truly succeed, is she really there giving commands? Impossible there is no way, but what if?

When I entered in the room, I noticed him holding the doll in his arms surrounded by the symbols and drawings from earlier, but now, they shine brightly in the pale light of the moon. He greeted me with the happiest 'Good you are here', genuinely happy to see me, like the days before everything happened. 'I will need you to do one more thing for me' he continued, light the circles on the floor on fire for me. I want to be with her in the very first moments when she comes back. Too tired, or perhaps his insanity took over me as well I do as I am told.

The 3 circles start with a timid red fire, almost as they are about to be put out, the man starts speaking, and so he speaks for some time, all in one single language that I am unable to understand. A language that sounds like nothing heard before, but I am able to understand one single word from it: 'Eleanor' the name of his long beloved wife. I could count the name in a total of three times during his monologue. The tone of his voice was sad and humble, like bagging for something that he can't have. At the end of his oration, when he pronounces her dear name the third and last time, the flames start to grow, and they do fast, turning and twisting, changing their colors from the bright red to green and then to a deep blue color. The firely flames start to get shape and form, and start looking like hands starting to hold on both the man and his puppet. And it that very moment, I saw her, the lady of the house, beautiful as she always was, dressed in the very dark dress with which she was put to rest, floating around, as she was born of fire, spinning and struggling consuming the man and his mannequin. And of all sudden the fire dies, and all the light of the room vanquished, darkness swallowing us all 3 together. And in that brief moment I see them, they are again together, him, aged and tired from years of unhealthy obsessions, and her beautiful as in the day she was let to rest. Once again together for one more moment. It is all quiet for a moment before I realize the macabre scene that is put in scene before my eyes.

The man holding her died from the burns suffered from the ritual, with a big smile on his face, and tears in his eyes. I am still astonished, he was right, a scientist a magician, what could I say about the master

of the house. A true mad man in every detail but one, did he know the risks he took, by holding on the doll? Was this the longest suicide letter or just an accident? Those are questions that I still wonder to this day. It was an equivalent exchange, one soul and body for another. He crossed the realm of the death, so she could live again. Definitely the calculations were wrong, or so it seems, since they got to spend just a moment together, but one is much better than none I suppose. Soon the lady of the house woke up and she was scared, so I tried to calm her down. It was a lot to comprehend, both for her and me, what I have seen was still unbelievable. She told me about the shadow realm where she spends the time after her death and of the things that she found there. She talked about the people from old times that were there, but most importantly, how she found her way back. Soon after, in a few days, she started seeing the master of the house again, just like he did. And for a while they went on with this way of life, him dead by choice and she brought back to life. Five months later, she told me, that feeling alive again was great, but she misses dearly her husband, and so she is choosing to go back to him, and spend the eternity in the shadow realm. She gave me strict instructions of what to do and how to proceed after her second passing. In that very night she said goodbye to me, one last time, and that they hope they will meet again on the other side, but not to hurry to get to them, so she went to sleep, and under my very eyes her human body started to change and transform again, reversing into her original puppet shape, leaving no mark that it ever lived.

The instructions given to me were clear. No man should be capable to play God, no dead shall be woken from their eternal rest, no matter how much the living are missing them. Their case was happy, for they did it willingly, but the rumors already started to spread, and if anything, this power can be used not only for good but evil as well. So, she asked me to purify the place. And there is no power in the world that purifies better than the one of fire. She asks me to burn down their dear old home, and make sure that no book escapes the flames. No such knowledge should be left into the world she said. So, I performed her wish as instructed and in that very night, I burn down the palace that was my home and theirs for some many years and left never to return again.

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‘So that is the story of my last occupation, my dear traveler’

‘If anything, you and your stupid hat are full lies, since you can’t seriously believe that anyone would think that the stories you tell are anywhere close to be real’ annoyed the foreign said, ‘you must be just as insane as your old master and also again you even forgot to give me your name!’

‘Forgot I don’t think so, if you listen my story well you would know my name. And I can assure you that they are very real, there are many things you don’t know about me after all’

‘All I know is that I want to be closer to Emilza’

‘Oh, but we are, just behind those trees, and you are there. Ah, the sunrise what a beautiful moment of the day. Too bad is the only one I get to see so often.’

‘You get to see? What are you talking about? The sun raises every day’

‘Why yes it surely does for you, and the likes of you’ and fixing his still funny hat on his head, with a lot more seriousness than ever before in that night he continued ‘you see the experiments of the house owner didn’t went unnoticed, and I was not unaffected by them. Have you wondered why the woman managed to find her dear old husband soul so fast when he struggled for years?’

‘Well, no... but’

‘No more butts from you, mister, you will shut up and listen now, during the exchange I was also affected you see, I lived now for what it seemed an eternity now, without aging, or sleeping, but remember that a slight of hand is not my only talent. Pay attention now to me, for I will say this only once, my birth given name is VValter but I have many names you see, I am Bridge, for I am the path from land of the living to the shadow realm, I freely and without worry cross the two realms, guiding those that are lost in both of them. I cannot die and I cannot live in the light, so I am here just a humble guide. At the service of those that get too close to mortal danger. It is my duty to guard protect and lead those like you; lost in foreign lands without chance of finding the way back.’

‘Lost? I was not lost, I think...’

‘You think? Well let’s see some outcomes then shall we?’ and with a hand gesture he opened a portal in air, clean as a mirror and large as one, ‘pay attention, master lost in the forest for this is just one of many’ and he showed in crystal clear, the place in which they met, the crossroads, the dark forest every detail, and showed him several scenarios, mauled by wild beast or robbed by bands of thieves one worse than the other and with a clap he closed the very same mirror and continued :‘You are welcome’

There was fear inside the traveler for in front of his definitely stayed a supernatural being, much stronger than he could ever be, what is even the right answer in this situation, and his stories in this case, they have to be real or at least the unbelievable part must be closer to reality than he initially thought. ‘Thank you’, murmured the man close to shock,

‘As I said, you are welcome’ and with an ample hand gesture a new portal gate or mirror no matter what you want to call it, was open behind the strange fellow. ‘My time is up, for now. I will go back in the shadow realm for now. Don’t be so harsh to judge what is real and not, for our realities are different. Press on the road that I lead you for now, and you will find your destination very soon’. Turning his back takes the first step towards the mirror, this one different than the other, with a dark color almost like nothing was on the other side, and stops: ‘And one more thing. If you look for stories, you will find here yes, but the dead tell much better tales than the living’ and holding his hat he pressed on in the mirror and disappeared into the darkness.

The traveler pressed on following the indications that were given to him by the fellow with the strange hat and reached Emilza in no time. ‘Stories of the dead are for the dead to tell’ thought as he entered to city ‘and they will deem me insane anyway if I would dare to speak on it’ continued the man passing the gates.