



The Coachman

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Category: Fantasy

Description: As you draw your final breath, the coachman waits...

Awakening in a dreary, unknown cabin with no recollection of how he arrived there, Livingstone Wright is about to discover that hell is just a coach ride away.

Mysteriously cursed to serve the dark lord, he is now responsible for ferrying freshly freed souls to the fiery depths. As he struggles to come to terms with being resurrected, given a home in purgatory, and learning a new profession, he discovers that he is not the only servant of a higher being biding their time as death creeps closer.

For if the devil is waiting to lay claim to a soul, then so too must the Almighty be.

It's during the sometimes long wait for a person to breathe their last and the final judgment be made that Livingstone meets Hamiel, the light to his dark. The rainbow walker is fair-skinned with golden locks and wide amber eyes behind wire-rimmed spectacles, a soothing aura, and a highly inquisitive mind. The two soon become unlikely friends and then much more as they set out to unravel how it was that Livingstone came to be in Lucifer's employ.

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CLAWING FROM THE DEPTHS of a deep sleep is often unsettling.

This awakening was worse than most. As I roused from slumber, I tasted anise, old blood, and ash. My eyes refused to open, which was a blessing for my entire body ached like an infected toe, allowing me to lie abed for a bit longer as I tried to recall the previous night. The torment of sunlight could be put off for the moment.

I had no recollection of where I had been or how much I had imbibed but given the stiffness in my limbs combined with the agony and forgetfulness of my mind, I must have drunk a generous amount of whiskey at The Mottled Lichen. What drove me from the comfort of my little room at the stables into Avers Mill and that depressing pub was missing from my recollection. Slowly rolling to my side, I groaned as every joint in my body ground together in unison. Then, I was falling, hitting the ground with a thunderous jolt. The pain was incredible, even if the tumble had been short. Winded by the severe discomfort, I lay on the floor, gasping, the growing heat of a nearby fire striking a chord of terror deep within me.

Agonized or not, my eyes flew open as I scrambled away from the fire like a rock crab. My legs and arms gave out before I could put a foot between myself and the hearth. Heart pounding and head spinning, I sat on the floor, legs akimbo, staring at the tasteful fireplace in loss. This was not my home. My sight flew around the small parlor as the fact that I was nude finally registered. My gods. Had I gotten so drunk that I had gone home with some strange woman—or more damaging to my reputation in Avers Mill—a man?! What would Theo think of my infidelity? It was too painful to consider his reaction should he find out, for he could be a jealous, insecure man at times.

I could not stop staring at the flames dancing behind the ornate fireplace screen. Made of brass and colored glass, the screen was oddly shaped, and a dark gray buzzard working into the artful panes was discomfiting. As I sat bare-assed on the dusty wooden floor, my gaze flew around the room. Windows with delicate lace curtains showing a gray light outside, a needlework settee I had tumbled from, a few armchairs, a table with a pitcher and glasses, and a wall filled with books. Two doors on either side of the parlor were closed. In one corner sat a small table with two chairs and a worktable for preparing foodstuff. I noted a round loaf of bread and several carrots on the table. My stomach rumbled, though whether in hunger or pain, I could not tell, for all of me ached.

I inched away from the hearth. Using the settee, I gingerly hoisted myself from the floor, confusion fogging my thoughts. Wherever I was, I needed to find my clothes. Not only was it wholly improper to be stumbling about someone's parlor nude, but it could also be a damning incident in the eyes of the good folk of Avers Mill. A few townsfolk already had suspicions about the tall groom at the town stable. They whispered about me behind their hands. I knew this to be fact, but since I was generally discreet about my liaisons with the same gender, no scandal had befallen me. There was no acceptance of invert, tribade, or oddities such as myself, who were equally attracted to both sexes in the year of our Lord 1814. So, even if the locals found me bizarre due to my height and build, they gave me a wide berth most generally. A good thing, for I was a private man at heart and wished only to tend to horses and spend my nights in the arms of the mayor's son. Illicit our relationship may be, but it was pleasant on the whole. Theo adored me, and I cared for him a good deal. Not that it would lead us anywhere...

That was one of several positives about being in a relationship with one person. This sort of horrific morning—if it were morn given the skies outside were the same tone as an anchor—simply didn't occur. Had Theo and I quarreled? I ran a hand through my hair, tugging at the thick ebony mass to shake out small bits of burned timber and staring blankly at the charred chips as they floated to my thighs and timid cock. I

dusted the flakes from the hair at the root of my prick and then took a few shaky steps toward the door on the western wall, my unease lessening as I put some distance between me and the hearth.

If I were fortunate, I could find a closet or wardrobe that held my clothes. A trip to the outhouse would also be agreeable as my bowels felt oddly tender. As I reached for the knob of the western door, the eastern opened. I spun, hand over my genitals in case a lady entered, and locked gazes with a creature that sent my bare back to the door.

The monstrous thing was as tall as a child of maybe six years, with skin scarlet as an apple, ears long and pointed, eyes as red as Mistress James' hydrangea, and a snout like that of a pig. It wore clothes of a sort, ragged trousers with stripes, a white shirt with various stains, and bare cloven feet. It was carrying a bundle that it dropped in fright when it saw me. We both screamed in unison, my bellow deep and low and theirs high-pitched enough to make me wince.

I fumbled with the doorknob, now fearing I was in a fever dream and not merely hungover. With a grunt, I opened the door and fell into a bedchamber that had not seen a broom or feather duster in many years. I slammed the door closed on the screeching monster, chest heaving, and ran to the bed. The coverlet was tattered, mouse-chewed on the edges, and smelled of...nothing. Uncaring at the moment, I tore it from the mattress, tied it around my waist, and looked about the room frantically for a weapon.

Finding nothing but a water pitcher with the skeletal remains of some sort of rodent at the base, I dumped the bones onto the table and turned to face the door as something—the shoddily dressed demon dream creature—scratched at the jamb.

“Big human man,” it called through the crack. Oh wonderful, it spoke English. I’d hoped my mental breakdown would not be able to communicate with me, but it

seemed I was not so lucky. Not that a man slipping into madness could be lucky in any way. “You needs cover your cockery before he arrives. He does not like cockery.”

“Begone, nightmare!” I shouted, lifting the pitcher over my head, ready to strike.

“He will kick me if you are showing cockery. He likes kicking Delmar.”

“I shall help him kick you straight back to the depths of my rancid brain!” I yelled, moving closer, the covering tangling around my legs. The monstrosity at the door sighed as if put out with me. Did delusions of insanity grow impatient with you?

“No, no, do not kick Delmar. Just take clothes. Cover cockery.” He opened the door, threw in a brown bundle, and then darted off, the scrabble of his long toenails on the hardwood floor making me shiver. I slammed the door closed on my delusion, lowered the pitcher, and picked up the plain brown paper package. The contents were soft, befitting clothing as he’d said, and so I made my way to the bed and sat down to open the wrapped package. The twine fell away to reveal a rather handsome ensemble: black trousers, waistcoat, tailcoat, and a long ebony duster. A white shirt with a slim black tie cravat, drawstring drawers, and knee-length cotton socks were amid the dark clothing. The door opened once more. I watched one large black boot and then another sail into the bedchamber, followed by an ebony top hat.

“For your head and feet. Cover the cockery fast now! Do it before he comes and kicks Delmar!” the beast outside the door screeched.

Should I even converse with the thing or should I ignore it and the clothing? If I had fallen into a bout of scarlet fever—it had been circulating amongst the children of Avers Mills—would speaking to a demon whilst bound in mind horror be seen as a sign of mental instability when, or if, I recovered?

“Who is coming?” I chanced as I stood to dress. If this were a nightmare of biblical proportions, I wished to have my manly parts covered.

“He is coming,” the thing shouted and ran off again.

“That clarifies things well. Thank you, Delmar,” I huffed as I stepped into my drawers. They were fine undergarments. Nothing of great softness like the sort that Theo wore but not made of coarse material either.

“No thanks, big human! Dress fast, thank later,” he said as the sound of splashing water floated into the eerie silence. Once I was dressed, I went to the door, peered around the opening, and saw Delmar mopping the floor with a cloth. He was humming a tune with a familiar yet haunting melody. Seeing the sopping wet floor, I returned to the bed to sit and pull on the quite well-made boots. Shined to perfection, the black leather was supple. And to my surprise, they fit very well. Rising from the bed, it came to me that these clothes all sat on my body comfortably, as if they had been tailored for my stupidly large frame. Grabbing the duster and hat, I strode to the door, now intent on facing down this brain madness with my cockery covered. How grand. I was now speaking like my demented brain imaginings.

Delmar’s eyes flew to me as I stepped into the parlor, hat in hand and coat over my arm.

“You are the biggest human Delmar has witness to eyeballs,” he said as he continued slopping water from a metal bucket onto the floor and pushing it about with a filthy cloth.

“Where are we?” I asked. It was the first query that fell off my lips. Several hundred more swirled about inside my skull.

“In a parlor, dumb big human. No, I am not saying dumb to the coachman!” With

that, he darted toward the window, hit it at high speed, and crashed back to the floor, hooved feet kicking madly as he tried to regain his footing on the wet floor.

I shook my head. This creature, for all its terrible features, was rather pitiful. I took one step closer to help the poor thing when a flash of dark smoke appeared to my right. The flames in the hearth soared higher as a crow appeared amidst the cloud of thick vapors. Delmar began to screech, all cleaning forgotten, as he prostrated himself on the wet floorboards. I took several steps in reverse, unwilling to give credence to the sight I was obviously witnessing, even though I was obviously witnessing it. To my knowledge, crows did not apparate in the middle of a parlor. The cloud swirled about the flapping bird, the stench of rotted flesh and brimstone flowing about it as the blackbird elongated. Wings stretching out into arms, bird-like feet extending into spindly but human legs.

My ass hit the wall beside the kitchen worktable. There was no explanation for anything I had seen since I awoke other than that I had slipped into madness. Corvids did not turn into gangly men with glowing eyes the color of red wine. So, to that end, I was now a lunatic. Soon someone would haul me off to the new asylum in Cornwall Cove.

The man turned his attention to me. His face was long, his nose sharply pointed, and his skin as craggy as the weathered chestnut in the town square. Long, ashy hair hung from his skull and lay on the shoulders of a detailed day suit of darkest chestnut. Where boots like the ones I wore should have covered his calves instead were the feet of a bird. Fear thrummed through me but given that I was no longer sane, my terror was lessening with each oddity witnessed.

“You are awake, good.”

I nodded. He walked toward the shivering servant on the floor, kicked him in the ribs so hard the little imp cried out in pain, and then looked about the parlor. “You were to

have this abode cleaned for the coachman. What were you doing instead?"

"I clean! I clean so hard, please no kick me no more!" Delmar wailed, the sound so loud and piercing my head ached.

"More likely you were in the garden attempting to pierce the shroud," the man said, his voice that of an old man who had smoked too many pipes over his lifetime. Delmar whimpered like a struck dog, his clawed hands hiding his ugly face. I felt bad for the little monster. "Your duty is here, wastrel. Now tidy this hovel."

The red imp crawled away as fast as he could, whining as he went. When those scarlet eyes found me, they narrowed. "Now, for you, Coachman. We shall walk. I wish for you to meet your steed. Time does not stand still while you relearn how to button your breeches."

"Where are we?" I asked, again, hoping this illusion would provide a sensible answer.

"We are in the shroud, a place in between the world of the living and the realms of the dead," he said matter-of-factly, flicking at a black feather stuck to his robe. It fell gently to the floor. I bent to pick it up. The feather felt real enough, the pointed end of the quill sharp, and the vane tight yet soft. My confusion compounded. "You are here now to repay a debt owed to my master."

"Debt?" I inched away from the wall, curiosity making me bolder.

"Yes, a promise made in exchange for favors granted to your father. All will be explained. Now, if your flesh has re-knitted enough for you to journey to the stable."

I gaped at him as he turned and walked off, his claws striking the damp wooden planks on the floor. My father? But that made no sense. My father had been a learned man, a doctor, a hero of the war against the British. He and Mother both served in

whatever capacity they could to succor the sick and wounded American troops as we drove King George's army from our lands.

They both perished during an outbreak of smallpox that ravaged the Continental Army to such a degree that General Washington ordered mandatory inoculations for new recruits. Sadly, my parents contracted it and perished as did many others.

I'd been given to Pastor Colfax as a babe and delivered to the only relatives who wished to have another mouth to feed, that being the town stable master and his wife. To say my father, a hero and self-sacrificing man, would pass his only son to Satan is utter nonsense. All of it!

The man in the cape opened the front door and stepped out to be swallowed by the lightless gray that I had seen through the window. I followed. What else could I do as I was now embroiled in my own imaginary figment? Pausing at the threshold, I reached out to swipe my hand through the veil that seemed to be both solid and gaseous. The feel of the shroud was unsettling like a fog of ill omen dampening my hand.

A small whimper by my feet pulled my sight downward. Delmar sat huddled on the step, his knees under his red chin, black lips drawn into a sneer. He sat beside a lamp with a wick that danced inside its glass shrouding.

"Go back inside, finish your duties, lest you find yourself punted into the fire," I said softly as the shape of the crow man disappeared into the shifting clouds.

"His cockery has rotted off," the creature muttered, passed me the light, and then rushed back inside. I stepped fully into the undulating haar, the door to the cabin closing behind me. I took a moment to look over the home. It was not as foreboding as I would have thought. Cloaked in a shifting mist, it appeared to be the lone source of the delicate glow of the oil lamp inside. The scent of white birch tickled my nose,

unseen in the constantly moving fog but still present. It was a small homestead with only two rooms, but solid. A hand fell to my shoulder, startling me. I jumped and spun. There he stood, staring at me, his feathered brows drawn tight.

“You shall see much of this hutment over your time serving. Now come. The dying need their coach ride.”

“The dying...who are you?” I shook off his hand, my apparent derangement making me suddenly bold. If this man-bird were nothing more than a product of my unsound mind, then what harm could he cause me? None. “I demand to know who you are!”

The tips of his ears sparked. “You have the temerity to speak to me in such a way. I should spill your guts to the ground for such boldness, but the master has chosen you.”

I felt proud of myself. Not that it required great bravery to speak out to a delusion.

“Who is your master? How did I go from a solid-minded man to a slobbering lunatic?”

He sighed dramatically. “I am known to those who matter as Malphus, he who sits at the right hand of the fallen lord, the second-in-command to the prince of darkness, prime council to the Tempter, Idolater of the Accuser.”

The lantern in my hand felt heavier. “Malphus.”

That name I knew well. Pastor Colfax had mentioned the foot soldiers of the dark angel in many of his blistering Sunday sermons. For he believed that all of God’s children should be armed with the knowledge of Satan’s minions so they could fight any who tempted them. Bile raced up to my mouth, making me swallow loudly so as not to regorge my last meal...whatever that may have been. He smiled. The grin was

something that would be forever burned into my fevered mind, for it was so purely evil.

“So, now you speak with respect.” He was pleased with my fright. “Follow me. He bids me to teach you what you need to know. Come. The stable is this way.”

He melted into the gloom. I glanced back at the cottage as the name of the demon knolled over and over inside my head. Yes, I was most certainly insane. Fumbling, my boots clacking on the flagstone path leading from the whirlsome fog into the shroud, I stepped off the stones onto softer ground. The mist obscured my surroundings. I walked forward with care as I could not see my boots nor the hard-packed soil under them. With the haze lingering on my lips, I licked them and grimaced. The moisture I’d gathered on my tongue was unpleasant indeed, tasting melancholy and bitter. The murk seemed to intensify as the whirls thickened, dark clouds spun around me madly, and misty fingerlings of fog reached out for me. When the smog skimmed my cheeks, it felt icy cold. The cold floated across my hand as I held the lantern higher. Each touch seemed to bring a whisper with it, a haunting undervoice, a breath-seeking aid.

I began to turn in circles, the lantern light slowly becoming engulfed in the cloud of murmurs. The lantern trembled as the pleas for help began to grow more insistent. Their calls for my assistance became a cacophony inside my head, the sound becoming so intense that tears welled in my eyes as I swung the lantern in a manic circle to drive back the whispers. The light did nothing. The cloud of noise thickened like gravy given too much flour. Madness, it seemed, made a man scream out into the void. I’d heard tales of raving lunatics begging for surcease from the voices inside their heads. Now, Livingstone Wright was among the blathering lunatics.

“Coachman, direct them back,” Malphus said from somewhere ahead of me. I could see nothing but the touches of my imaginings grasping at my face, and cold, misty fingers probing into my ears, nose, and open mouth. “Direct them back!” he shouted,

his gravelly voice cutting through the sheer panic I was feeling.

“Leave me be!” I screamed, whipping the lantern to and fro as if trying to fend off a bat. The mist drew back slightly, heaving away from me as if struck. I bellowed again, and again, and again until my throat was hoarse. The clouds dispersed with speed, their pleas going with them. I dropped to one knee, my heart thundering in my chest, the lantern coming to rest by my knee as I fought to regain my breath.

“That is your first lesson,” Malphus said as he neared. I could see his clawed feet before me. I swallowed loudly, but there was no spittle to ease my throat. “The spirits here are drawn to you, for they know you can ferry them to their final destination. They do not realize that they are here of their own faults. All they know is that this realm feels unfinished to them. You must control them lest they overwhelm you. With practice, you shall gain the power to simply will them away, but for now, command them to leave when they congregate. Now rise. We have much to cover yet.”

I lowered my head, closed my eyes, and ran my free hand over the sooty ground. It felt as real as the spirits that plagued me a moment ago.

“Where are we?” I asked yet again. “A sick and tormented place inside my head, I know, but insanity is not this real.” I picked up some soil and let it drift through my quaking hand.

“Surely, you can stand and continue on. Did I not mention time was of the essence, Coachman?”

I got to my boots and stared at the demon before me. We were of the same height. With wet cheeks and a sickness of the brain, I suddenly discovered I was beyond fear.

“I will not step onward unless my questions are answered. Your master may suckle

upon my stones for eternity if that is the punishment for my brazen manner.”

Malphus folded his arms across his lean chest. In a more sane time of my life, I would know that even though I stood well over six and a half feet tall and possessed enough strength to lift two large bags of horse feed with ease, my chances of besting a demon from Hell was small. Of course, were I not a raving madman I’d not be having a meeting with an archdemon.

Is it possible when one truly went mad, reason fled with a person’s logic?

Well, obviously so, Livingstone.

“Finally, you show some backbone. You will need it. Walk with me to the stable as I directed moments ago, and I will fill in the blank spaces that your death has carved into your mind.”

My death?

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MALPHUS STROLLED OFF , his gait odd and bird-like. I kneeled in the dirt outside a hovel in some nether realm while a red, impish creature was scrubbing the cabin floor with an old cloth after being told that I had recently died. Surely, the second of Satan could give me a moment to absorb all that had recently befallen me.

“Come along, Coachman. Your duties await,” he called over his shoulder. The clearing of the spirits had shown me a wide open space with ashen willows scattered here and there, two outbuildings—one an outhouse and the other a shed—and a rather large stable.

Or perhaps not. Unable to make two and two equal four, I pushed to my boots and found my top hat that had fallen off when I had been flailing about madly to drive back lost souls that were seemingly bound to this space.

Madness was a terrible thing. I would never speak ill of those who had lost their senses again.

“You say I died,” I dared to say as I replaced my hat to fall in behind him. His unpleasant aroma left a wake that I took care to avoid, striding faster to come up beside him. The willows hung limply, their long tendrils the color of sour milk lying listlessly on the lifeless ground.

“I did, yes, burned to death,” he replied. I had to stop. My lungs felt thick with grief. A fire. I recalled no fire. Where? How? “Your soul was unable to be claimed by either my Lord or the others who dwell above. Therefore, it was sent here, purgatory, to join with the mists that linger, awaiting a final judgment.”

“I did not go to Heaven?” He paused just long enough to level a burning glare at me, then motioned to our surroundings. Right, yes, this was not the Heaven Pastor Colfax spoke of every Sunday at the Avers Mill Baptist Church. “Why did I not join the angels?”

“Why do you think, Coachman?” he asked, suddenly seeming to be taking some enjoyment from my dilemma. Which was understandable. He was a hell-spawn.

Had I sinned that greatly? Why had I burned? When did that happen? “What year is it?”

“The same year it was when you were plucked from the heap. Eighteen fourteen.” He walked toward the barn, a massive building that housed a huge ebony coach parked under an awning attached to the stable. The odor of horse and hay reached me. I breathed it in deeply. That smell was a familiar one. I’d worked the stables since I was ten, starting as a lowly stall cleaner and then, over time, moving into being a stable hand and groom. I was now head groom. No, no, I was not. I was now dead. My legs felt unable to hold me up. “Please, if you drop to your knee again, I shall either kick your face in or feed you my cock. Given your proclivities in your former life, that should be a well-known feeling for you.”

My eyes widened. They knew about my attraction to men? How? I had always been discreet.

“How do you know...that I am...”

“An invert?” He chuckled as he reached for his fly. I staggered away from him, wobbly yes, but staying on my feet. “We know all of your secrets, Coachman.” I let my back rest on the rough bark of the willow. Malphus rolled his blood-red eyes. “For a man of your imposing size, you are certainly faint of heart.”

“Pardon me, but I just learned that I died,” I ground out as I patted at my face, sure that I would find it scarred but no malformity was to be felt. It was smooth, or as smooth as normal, given I had not shaved in what felt to be many days.

“Yes, you died. Burned, terribly. You were a horrid mess when you were brought to the coachman’s cabin.”

“Who brought me here?”

“The master.”

Oh. Well, it seems I’d caught Beelzebub’s eye. That was glorious news. “How did he know about my death?”

“He knows all. Now, are you willing to be silent and let me explain what has transpired over the past several weeks, or would you prefer to ask inane questions that will only delay your taking the reins?”

“I thought that only the Lord knew all,” I replied and got a look of utter disdain.

“The rulers of both realms are aware of everything. I understand that your preachers and priests enjoy telling their flocks that only their savior is all-seeing, but that is a fallacy. We know when souls are ready to leave their bodies, which is why you are here now. Your duty to fulfill is to gather the souls that are judged to be ours and take them to the gates of perdition.”

The tree behind me was sturdy. Thankfully. If not for it holding me up, I would have been on my ass yet again.

“Why was I chosen?” A small mote of a spirited drifted past as if seeking someone. I could not feel a breeze, but it seemed there was one. “Where is the coachman who

served before me?”

“His tenure expired. It is now your turn. Our master has chosen you. Your knowledge of equines must have been part of his decision. I do not question those above me. I merely serve.” He gave me a pointed look. “Is there anything else you wish to know?”

“Yes, many things! Where was I when I perished? How long have I been here? If this is truly purgatory and all the souls who were banished here cannot leave, how is it that the one who ferries the souls to Hell can push through the shroud? What exactly is the shroud?”

What kind of devilry had brought me back? What sort of dark magic healed my flesh? There was a mountain of questions that needed answers.

He held up a hand with long, long fingers and dark nails. “Your curiosity is not my concern. I am here to show you your job and then set you upon your duties. The very fact that I have given you the time I have suggests that I am in a good mindset on this day. Do not push your luck, Coachman.”

He walked off. My inquisitive mind had always been a problem. Poor lads who forked manure were not supposed to be bright or eager to learn. Only I had been. I’d been taught to read and write and knew how to tend to the books and ledgers, all because of the grace of my great-aunt Hester Martin, the wife of Norman Martin, the owner of the town’s stables. She had never been blessed with children of her own, so when I was orphaned, they welcomed me into their home. Norman for free labor as he cared little for young ones, but Aunt Hester clucked about like an old mother hen, shielding me under her wing from the less-than-kind boys of the well-to-do families.

My knowledge of horses and carriages was what caught the eye of the dark lord. Maybe I should have studied less and played more nine pins on the green. Many had

been the time that Norman had taken a switch to me for reading books instead of forking shit. He always claimed that a lad of low birth should only be educated enough to make an X on a sale paper and know how to say “Yes, sir” to his betters. His putting food into my mouth was mentioned daily, more so when he might catch me hidden away in the hay manger with my nose in a novel. Mayhap old Norman had been right. If Aunt Hester had left me uneducated, I’d not be here. Then again...

The whinny of a horse pulled me from my thoughts. I jogged ahead of Malphus, threw open the door of the large stable, and felt my breath catch in my newly healed lungs. In a large stall that rested beside a shining black brougham carriage of the finest make stood a massive steed of pure ebony. The horse was easily seventeen hands, with a flowing black mane and eyes of purest white. He reared up as we entered. I took note that Malphus did not move closer to the horse, unlike me, who walked slowly to the stall, removing my hat so the horse could see me clearly while speaking to him—he was too magnificent and big to not be a stallion—about silly things. Apples, sugar cubes, pretty mares, lush pastures, sweet hay. His ears flicked back and forth as I neared. I now wished I’d have thought to bring those pale carrots from the cabin, but I’d not imagined I would end up here. Dead. Locked in some sickly world between worlds.

“His name is Abyss,” Malphus called from the barn door. “He is yours now to care for and keep groomed. Do not let the pissant creature who will clean your chamber pot anywhere near him, for the horse despises Delmar as much as he dislikes me.”

“Abyss,” I whispered, drawing closer. The horse—even with those unearthly eyes—was the only thing of any comfort I’d discovered since coming awake, naked and alone. I touched his nose. It was soft and warm, solid, not an imagining of a fetid mind. So I was truly here, somehow, and not in the confines of a mental illness, for fever dreams were not flesh and bone. “We shall talk, I think, you and I, of many things that confuse us.”

The horse's flat ears lifted upright as he sniffed my hand, mouthed my fingers, and then shoved his head against my hand. Maybe if I closed my eyes, this whole nightmare would dissolve, and I would come awake back at the stables with a slight hangover.

“You and he seem to have bonded nicely. That will serve you well. You will know when you're needed to fetch a soul from the earthly plane, for the summons is unmistakable.” I listened half-heartedly, my mind too cluttered with misery and confusion. “When the call comes, do not tarry, for you are one of the privileged of those who serve our master, and thus that privilege can be revoked if you fail to please our Lord. Take heed when you set out. Abyss is not a normal horse as his speed is impressive.” Did this hellion think I was daft? Even an unschooled man such as I could see that this steed was otherworldly. “He knows where the portal is that will take you to where you have been called. Do your duty well, Coachman, for your time here shall be determined by how well you perform.”

A scoff bubbled out of me. Surely my tenure in the service of the dark lord was not judged by a high job performance. That was a lie. Blatant and crude. Pastor Colfax always spoke of the forked tongue of the Hell dwellers. How they would lie, manipulate, and seduce to lure a man into sin. My emotions were tender, anger and sorrow broiling about inside me. I spun to confront him on his untruth, but all I caught sight of was a black feather tumbling down to the acrid soil. Abyss gave his stall a sound kick. I went back to rubbing his sleek nose, letting my brow come to rest between his eyes. That seemed to please him. How long I stood there with the horse, I cannot say. There seemed to be no day or night here, just the dour gray nothingness. I wept softly for a long time as I mourned the life I had once lived. What would Theo do with me gone? He would be grief-stricken. Theo was a tender heart, a refined male with elegant tastes. The fact he had chosen me from among many who were indeed better-suited lovers had always puzzled me. Could it be due solely to the fact that men of our ilk were few and far between.

Yet, if I were dead, how was it that I was here in this shadow realm, experiencing loss and pain and fear and hunger and thirst? Did a soul that had passed over not require such things as food and drink? Did my stomach snarl because I was not heaven-bound?

Confusion warred with misery. I went to my knees, my cheek scrubbing the stall door, the smell of horse dung and cheerlessness thick in my nose. There I kneeled as if in prayer, brow to a rough wooden gate, asking the Almighty what I had done to deserve such a fate. A debt owed from a pact with my father. Another untruth, I was sure. Unless Lucifer truly did know of my lineage...

“Whatever is the point of living a good life if one is to be plucked from his body as if his soul were a loose thread in a tapestry and then dropped into a wastebin of existence?” I asked Abyss who, it seemed, enjoyed chewing on ascots, for mine had been left sodden. It mattered not. Given how much succor he had given me, his spittle on my tie was fair recompense.

I stayed there in the stable for many hours, moving from my sore knees to my ass, the shuffling of Abyss the only sound that soothed me. Outside, the whispering spirits whirled past, spinning up and around. A waltz of lost souls. My heart ached for them, for me, for my great-aunt. I cried, I railed at the ashy sky, and I slept fitfully. My dreams were horrific. Many hours later, who knew how long, I came awake with a shout, drenched in sweat. Gasping, I bowed my head, the lingering nightmare of flames and screams clinging to me as I pushed to my feet. Abyss stuck his head out, his mouth filled with hay, his ears twitching madly.

“My apologies. I did not mean to frighten you,” I said softly as I placed my hand on his neck. The feeling of strong muscles under a sleek black coat instantly calmed me. His chewing was loud in my ear. It eased the grip of the dream slightly. “Bear with me. My life has ended, but not quite. Perhaps that is how the afterlife is. Death then more work, which is not at all how the good pastor described it.”

“Coachman, the carrots is ready! I want to spit boots, but they were on big feet. I wash floor. Is he in the horse box?” Abyss bared his teeth at the imp shouting from the doorway. I gave the horse a final pat before turning to look at the little demon peeking around the stable doorway. “Look at his teeth! They are mean teeth. And his cockery is monstrous!”

“You seem to spend a goodly time discussing cocks,” I said, taking a moment to step over to the carriage and run my hand over the dickey box, or the coachman’s seat. It was a beautiful carriage. I’d never seen one finer, and our little town was a popular stop for people traveling to Boston. I’d seen many grand gigs and phaetons but none that shined in such an otherworldly way. It seemed to hum under my touch as if it, much like Abyss, sensed I was its new handler. But that could not be possible, for a carriage was not alive. Most generally. This new life after death held many mysteries.

“What else should I discuss? Rocks?” Delmar peered inside, his big ears flopping to one side. Abyss squealed as irate horses do. “Ah, his hate for me is big!”

Delmar raced off caterwauling, and Abyss whinnied in a pleased way. I untied my crusty chewed-on cravat, stuffed it in the pocket of my waistcoat, and stood outside the stable, surveying the wasteland that I’d awoken in. The area around the cabin was now free of the spirits, but they moved in waves just on the other side of the ring of willows. With the clearing of the souls, my sight touched a withered garden at the back of the cabin. Oddities upon oddities. What manner of vegetables could grow in a realm with no sun? Did it rain here? The ground was hard-packed and ashen. Yet, the garden sat there, overcome with weeds and brambles. So even in the outreach of Hell weeds existed. That came as no surprise. A few brave souls moved my way, shapeless forms that inched closer. Stepping out of the stable, I made my way to the cottage, unsure if I was hungry or not. My stomach cried out for food, but my heart was too heavy to care if I ate or not. What matter did it make if I were already dead?

But did dead men hunger? Frustration settled on me as the lost souls drew near again.

I wished no further interaction with them, but they seemed to seek me out as I made my way to the cabin. With a growl and a warning, they fled back as I opened the door to the shanty I was to call home for who knew how long. Malphus had been little help, if I were to be honest.

Once inside, the whispers disappeared. The spirits returned to swirl around the cabin though, thick gray clouds that moved past the lone window. The fire in the hearth was burning hotly. The soup kettle resting on the table. I eased around the flames, my skin prickling.

“Carrot soup,” Delmar announced as he crawled like a cat to sit atop an old cupboard with no doors, only far uglier than any cat I had ever seen. I peeled off my tailcoat and went to the sink to wash my hands. “Dirty horse hands,” he sing-songed while I washed up with strong lye soap that burned some deep cracks in my fingers. Surely, I was still partially alive, for I felt pain. Or was that the norm for all who dwelled in purgatory? Did not the fine pastor say that torment followed a damned soul to perdition, so mind thy sins and repent?

“Tell me, Delmar,” I said as I dried my hands on my trousers, for there were no towels to wipe them on. “Did you serve under the previous coachman?”

“Yes, he had small cockery,” he replied while picking about inside his ear, his eyes closing as he found the itch he sought.

“I do not need to know that. What I wish to know is if you can tell me about him. Why did he leave?” I sat down with a huff, unsure if I truly wanted to eat what appeared to be a bowl of boiled carrots with some chopped grass thrown in. With deliberate care, I placed my hat on the table and picked up a spoon that lay beside the chipped bowl. I poked at one of the haphazardly sliced carrots. “Is it possible he perished from bad food that was befouled by your dirty hands?”

I looked up. He yanked his finger from his ear and sniffed it. “You are mean too.”

“Yes, Hell is full of mean people. You’re not surprised by this. Are you not a creature of these realms, born in the pits of torture?”

“No. Yes. Still so mean! I work hard for many days for making soup! Mean! Mean!” he shouted after licking the finger that had been in his pointed ear.

I opted not to eat the carrot and weed soup. Maybe if I simply wasted away, Malphus would find my bones, toss them into the fire, and go pluck some other poor bastard from the recently deceased. A wave of unholy fear washed over me as I thought of my bones being charred yet again.

“I will cook from here on,” I announced as I stared up at the little red face glowering down at me. “You may tend to the cleaning. I will handle the carriage repairs and—”

“It never breaks. Never. Always new. No break! Not ever.” Oh. That was helpful. Enchanted with some black magic then. It should have been alarming, but after the past day, little seemed to upset me. “Bad horse all yours. All yours! He kicks and bites. Bit off my tail!”

He reached round to pat his ass. A coin fell from atop the cupboard. He screamed and then dove at it, catching it before it hit the floor, then darted back to his perch to mutter to himself.

“Then you best stay out of the stable. So, what happened to the coachman who came before me?”

“He went away. Malphus kicked in his face, then dragged him to the pits.”

I gaped at the monster picking at his beak-like nose. “Wait.” I sat back to try to digest

what I had just heard. “Malphus murdered him?”

“No. Yes. Claw out his eyes, bash in his head. Bang!” He held up a wooden spoon and hammered the top of the cupboard with it, giggling with glee. “Bang. Splat. Head mush. Off to the pits. Pits. Pits. Nasty pits. Filled with mean people.”

“Why would he do that? Does Lucifer himself not pick his coachmen?” I was truly befuddled. Yes, I knew that the minions of Hell were diabolical, but that seemed extreme.

“Great master bid him to. Coachman make bad ride. Bad ride, bash head.” Bang, bang, bang, the spoon went as I stared at the imp.

“And to think that I used to bemoan a lashing with a switch,” I mumbled, my appetite gone completely, not that it had been strong before I sat down.

“No make bad rides. Make good rides you keep head whole,” Delmar told me before lying down to sleep. He cradled the spoon to his chest as his big eyes closed. Within seconds, he was snoring loudly, drool leaking from his mouth.

Bad rides. What did that mean? And how was I to avoid making one when I had no information about what made a good ride? I was growing quite aggravated. My first day of being undead was turning decidedly sour. As I shoved the soup away, a tingle erupted in my chest, a flash of pain like that of eating hot peppers, and it began to grow and grow, the agony flaring outward swiftly. I cried out, grasping my chest, sure that I was suffering from an apoplexy. But if I were dead, was my heart even beating? The pull to leave was enormous. It felt as if I had been harpooned, the shank now piercing my sternum, barbs embedded in flesh, as the hunting line was being reeled in by joyous whalers.

Delmar shot up from his nap, eyes wide, waving his spoon around in a defensive way

as I struggled to my boots. He looked down at me and lowered his utensil.

“You are summoned. Go. Go fast, Coachman! Make a good ride. Face too pretty for kicking brain stew.”

Ah, so this was the calling. It was miserable and painful. A calling card asking for my attendance or a chime of some sort would have been pleasant, but my current employers did not deal in pleasantries. As there was no denying the beckoning of my master, I stumbled about, grabbed my hat, tailcoat, and duster, and fumbled my way to the door.

There truly was no peace for the wicked or the weary.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:42 am

THERE WAS NO DENYING the summons to ride.

It was impossible to resist the pull to the stable, for the pain of trying to do so was crippling. The spirits that clouded the homestead seemed to whirl in a faster dervish as if they, too, could feel the call to escort a soul to the underworld. Certainly, these wayward entities did not wish to be sent to the pits of Hell that badly. I waved them off like a cloud of hungry mosquitoes, breathlessly jogging to the stable. Abyss was frantic in his stall, kicking madly, shrieking his impatience.

“Coming!” I shouted to try to calm the horse, but he was not to be pacified. I stumbled into the stable, my sight flickering from the horse tossing not only his head but the soft blanket that lay over a blanket bar beside his large stall. “Hotheaded are we?” I asked as a sharp glimmer to my left made me glance at the carriage. The lantern that hung off the side was now illuminated. The flame within a disquieting yellowish-green. A solid double-footed rear kick to the stout wooden walls pulled my attention from the carriage. Oddly enough, or possibly not odd at all, the pressure in my chest lessened here in the barn. “Easy, Abyss, before you knock the boards free.”

Abyss stamped his feet as I neared. The latch on the gate was barely open before the stallion pushed through, his snowy eyes glowing in the gloom. He trotted to a hitching ring secured next to the main doorway, where he then stood impatiently. Whoever had raised this horse from a colt had done a grand job with his training. Then again, maybe the beast had been birthed from the fiery pits fully grown. Yet another question for my new boss to answer when he returns. If he returns.

Moving quickly and with the speed of one who had harnessed horses for years, I set to work. Lugging the heavy leather harness and other tack from the storage room—a

small area fitted out with a worn saddle as well as all the gear needed to hitch the horse to the carriage—to the eager horse took time, and sweat was beading on my brow by the time I had Abyss ready. He nickered softly, nipping at me when I paused to wipe the perspiration from the back of my neck. I'd taken too long, I was sure, but checking every piece of equipment before placing it on the dancing horse ensured the animal would not have a sore rubbed onto his flesh. Is it possible, deep down, Abyss understood that? He nipped at my shoulder.

"I cannot move any faster," I told him. He seemed to understand, somehow, but still gave me a shove as if to speed me along. Once he was ready, I untied him, took his reins, and readied myself to ask a horse that didn't know me from Adam—and wearing blinders—to walk in reverse. Much to my great delight, the stallion backed himself to the carriage, stopping neatly between the shafts. I ran a hand over his side, brushing my fingertips over the heavy collar then giving the girth one final check before hoisting the shafts up, one by one, and secured both hands to the neck yokes.

"This is ass backward," I complained to the horse and carriage. When I returned from this ride, I would park the carriage outside. That was how Norman had done it, so it was how I would also do it. The pull of the summons flared up. The horse whinnied, and the carriage seemed to rock slightly on its large wheels. Hands on my hips, drenched in sweat, and dirt on the knees of my trousers, I tossed my dusty top hat onto my head. The carriage rolled forward as Abyss stamped his feet, obviously vexed at how slowly I moved. Ass barely in the coachman's seat, I picked up the reins and gave them the gentlest of flicks.

The horse exited the barn at a full gallop, his head high. The speed at which he left the stable snapped my neck soundly. With unearthly force, I was pressed to the window behind me, the wheels of the carriage spinning so rapidly they were a blur. We raced around my new abode, tearing past the overgrown garden gate and through a brace of willows. The limbs of the trees slapped the carriage—and me—while I bellowed for the horse to slow. He did not. The black bastard picked up speed, the

carriage wheels hitting ruts and rocks soundly, until...they weren't. The ride had smoothed. I straightened my hat. We careened along at breakneck speed. The wheels rolling but not touching the ground. Then a vortex opened up in front of us, a windless vacuum that resembled the whirlpool where the Avers Mill River meets with the Housatonic River. I'd only seen the phenomenon once when I had accompanied the Martins to a livestock sale. The rivers had been flooded and churning with raw power. It had been a frightening sight. With a yelp to the horse to stop, we rode into the vortex at full speed.

A moment, perhaps less, of crushing weight, and then we cleared the maelstrom. I sucked in a deep breath, my hands quaking, and then croaked out a weak, "Whoa," that seemed to fall on deaf ears.

"Whoa, slow down, damn it!" I shouted, giving the reins a sound jerk. Given this beast's unholy speed, I should have used a mouth bit, but I always found them unnecessary on most horses. Of course, Abyss was not a common horse. "Whoa," I repeated. The gallop slowed to a canter, and my grip on the reins lessened. My hat sat on my head at a wild angle, so I righted it, wet my lips, and then took in my surroundings.

We were not back in the mundane gray of purgatory. I deeply breathed in the fresh, moist air. The sound of the carriage wheels squelching along a muddy road was like a song of joy in my ears. The trees were green, the sky overcast but with breaks in the rain clouds, and the air was rich with birdsong. We'd crossed through the shroud. The carriage itself seemed to hum with rich tones that ran through the conveyance into me, the thrum as soothing as a lullaby. We rode along for two or so miles. The horse was taking us where we needed to go. The reins dangled from my fingers as I took in the colors of late summer in Massachusetts. I felt such joy to be back, to see color, to breathe in cool rain-washed air.

Abyss threw his head in glee, his long black tail high, as we rode through a thick

forest, the leaves still dripping rain. How was it that I could walk both planes? Was I not dead or was that a lie spun to me by Satan's second as a means of manipulating me? A dog barking not far off broke into my thoughts. Abyss dropped into a walk, ears moving, feet kicking up globs of clay dirt as we turned off the rutted country road into a small farmyard. The carriage's song seemed to vibrate more loudly the closer we drew to the rundown house. A small brindle dog darted off the front porch, hackles raised, barking at us as we rode through a flock of white ducks noodling about in a puddle. They seemed unconcerned about the horse and carriage as we rolled through the flock, but the dog was greatly disconcerted.

Two middle-aged men stepped out onto the porch, bearded, clad in work clothes, their noses large and bulbous things that sat ungainly on their faces.

"Shut up, you stupid mutt, there ain't nothing there!" the taller of the two shouted as he picked up a chunk of firewood to throw at the dog. The dog ran off into the trees, tail tucked, as the two men stared out at the yard. "How much longer you suppose?"

I slipped down from my seat, worked at righting my clothes, and watched the two men closely. They did not seem to notice me. The dog had, though, but not the ducks. Odd. Abyss nickered as an orange cat slunk into view. The cat spied us, froze, and then arched its back.

"Easy, puss," I called, for I had a fondness for barn cats. This one had no great liking for me, though. It darted off with a brushy tail and nary a glance back. So, only beasts with thoughts above that of ducks sensed us. But the two men now lighting pipes did not. I wasn't sure what that said about the intelligence of the duo before me. I took a few steps closer to the men, but they merely sucked on their old pipes as they worked to light them.

"He's been lingering for weeks now. I love Pa but I wish he would just move over," Tall One said as I moved to the porch, one boot on the rickety first step.

“Consumption ain’t pretty.”

Ah, so that was what was taking the old man inside. Yes, the wasting disease was horrid. Many believed it was passed on through families as it seemed to sicken entire households. I had no medical knowledge outside of how to tend to horses, so I thought little about what caused the white death. Even from where I stood outside, I could hear the death rattles of a man whose lungs were filled with mucus.

I placed a hand on the door but could not open it even when I pushed with all my strength. Maybe I was not to enter until the soul had left the body. I tried to twist the knob, but it remained sealed to me. Pipe smoke drifted under my nose, the dark scent reminding me of my previous employer. I may have disliked Norman for his misuse of his employees and my great-aunt, but at least he answered questions, which was a step up from the monster that I now answered to.

Unsure of what to do, I returned to the carriage to wait. Hours crept by. People in homespun clothing came and went, many with baskets. The two men greeted them all and then led them inside to pay respects to their mother. Abyss seemed content to linger and eat the tall grasses that filled the barnyard. I grew bored quickly. I tried to summon Malphus by using my mind, but it seemed my mind was too weak to reach him. Or the demon was ignoring me. If I were a betting man, I would place my coin on the latter.

Wishing I had a book, I let my eyes drift shut as the day grew warmer. A sorrowful wail erupted from inside the home. My lids slowly opened. A bright ray of sun broke through the clouds then. The beam was dazzling white, with tiny motes drifting about in its path as it changed from pure light into a shimmering rainbow. I blinked several times as a petite man of around twenty and five, wearing a white day suit, stepped from the beam and tripped over the chunk of firewood that had been thrown at the brindle dog hours ago. He fell forward as he windmilled his arms. I leaped from the carriage but failed to get to him in time. Down to his hands and knees he went, his

spectacles landing in the mud puddle the ducks had been dabbling in.

“Confound it,” he said, sitting back on his heels, his glorious blond curls falling into his face. I kneeled beside him, smiling softly, as he wiped his hands on the grass while squinting at his trousers. “My suit is quite soiled,” he mumbled to himself. “That will not go over well when I return. Sister Evangelista is always quite distressed about grass stains.”

“Are you unharmed?” I asked. His gaze flew from the mud on his white slacks to me. Eyes the color of a gold coin found me. He squinted at me. “Let me fetch your spectacles.”

“Oh, thank you. That is ever so kind!” He smiled at me. Something inside my breast warmed at the small dimple that appeared. “Wait. You can see me. Oh! Are you the new coachman?”

“I am, yes, and you are...”

“Blind as a bat at the moment, but rest assured I am here on the same assignment that you are.” He began patting the grass. “If only I could locate my spectacles.”

Sensing divinity surrounding this man, I plucked his eyewear from the puddle, wiped the lenses on my already dirty sleeve, and handed the spectacles back to him. “Oh grand! Thank you.” He looped them around his tiny ears. Then he took me in with a grace that I wished I’d shown when I’d been presented with something new not all that long ago. “You’re much younger than the previous coachman. I’m so sorry for your passing. I hope it was not a painful one. My name is Hamiel.” He held out a small, muddy hand—one that belonged to a lady more so than a man—to me. I pulled my soiled ascot from my pocket and placed it into his palm. “Oh goodness. What a mess I am. It is no wonder that Michael is always chiding me about my vestments.” He wiped his hand and stuck it out once more. “There. Clean! So yes, I am Hamiel.

And you are named what?”

It was a confusing time. Within a few mere days—if time in the shadowlands of limbo ran along the same timeframe here with the living—I’d gone from being a living man to a crisped undead helot. Or possibly a variant of such a ghastly thing as a walking corpse. I felt hale and whole and had no rotting flesh, maybe that process had yet to begin. An in-depth discussion with my higher-ups was sorely needed as soon as I could ascertain how one found a reliable courier service that delivered calling cards to the dark lord.

“It is wholly fine not to wish to tell me,” Hamiel broke into my mental ramble. “We are working for opposite sides as it is.”

I worked up my most charming smile. Hamiel’s pale cheeks grew as pink as a peony. “Please, no, forgive my discourtesy. I am new to my role and am still finding my sea legs.”

“Ah, yes! It can be quite befuddling. I’m so glad we can be friends then. Sometimes the wait for the soul to be severed and then passed to one of us can take ages.”

“Oh, I assumed that when the summons came, death was imminent.” I pushed to my dirty boots and offered the petite man in pearly white a hand. He slid his fingers over my palm, which created a soft warmth that spread to all the fingers of my right hand.

“How kind. Thank you so much...well, you never did relay your name. I’m perfectly happy to call you Coachman, or perhaps you would prefer Hackman or simply Sir?”

My grip on his slim fingers lasted longer than society would accept for a helping hand, so I let his hand drop.

“Apologies again. You may call me Livingstone Wright.” His smile was brilliant,

perfect white teeth glistening at me. I'd never seen such a divine male. "Are you an angel?"

"Oh golly, no! I'm a first-level rainbow walker. Angels are much higher up than I am. One must reach a level of holiness that takes centuries to be granted such an honor. I'm one of the many thousands who do the menial tasks of our Lord that keep the heavenly realm operating smoothly."

"So no wings?" I asked as we stood outside a home where a family was inside waiting for that final breath to leave a loved one's lungs. It all seemed surreal.

"No wings, not for many millennia." He sighed, pushing his spectacles up his button nose. "Someday, though, when I have escorted my quota of souls to paradise, I shall be granted a promotion."

I waved at the carriage parked in the shade of a mighty oak. "Come sit with me. I have many questions and you are the only one aside from an imp with an unnatural affinity for discussing impolite things that I have met since I was...reborn."

His gold eyes widened. "Oh my, that is sorrowful but not wholly out of character for those who dwell in the depths. Many of those above you take great delight in sending forth their helpers with no information, just to watch them suffer."

"That does seem like something Malphus would do," I mumbled. He had kicked a helpless imp while wearing a mask of great pleasure. I'd not think about what the demon had done to my predecessor.

"Oh yes, he is an unkind servant of the fallen one. The coachman before you, Master Greeley, had little good to say about him." He clambered up into the seat, situated himself primly, and waved a few fingers at Abyss, who had craned his head around to stare at the walker sitting with his grassy knees together and his spine straight as a

pencil. The soft, warm wind played with his curls. He was an enchanting creature. Were all of those who served under the Lord that lovely? The angel at the tomb of Jesus was described as having a countenance like lightning and raiment as white as snow. Pastor Colfax often spoke of the extraordinary beauty of the angels while also extolling how terrifying they could be. Lucifer himself was God's most beautiful creation, a divine being covered in jewels that glowed like the morning sun. I was not sure if Pastor Colfax had any knowledge of rainbow walkers, for not even the dark lord himself could be more winsome than Hamiel. I shook those thoughts from my mind. I'd left behind a good man and should not be so drawn to another. No wonder I ended up being chosen for this task. Coveting was a great sin. "That being said, I must relay that Master Greeley had little good to say about anyone. He was a sour soul, riddled with the need to return to his wife and son. Whatever became of him, do you know?"

"He made a bad ride and was punished," I answered.

Hamiel looked perplexed. "What is a bad ride?"

"I do not know. The imp who cleans my residence told me that a terrible fate befell Master Greeley at the hands of Malphus." In all honesty, it had been the feet of Malphus that had done in the previous coachman, but I did not wish to relay such a grisly thing to this lone ray of gladness in my new life. A wail broke free from inside the home. Hamiel gasped, and Abyss whickered.

"The judgment is about to be made," Hamiel whispered. He clasped his hands in prayer, closed those intriguing goldenrod eyes, and began to pray. I sat in my seat, listening to the dying wind as the farmstead grew quiet. Feeling quite the fool for not knowing what to do, I slid down from the seat, leaving Hamiel to his muttered whispers, and stood with my hand resting on the carriage door, the humming handle under my fingers. I opened it, unknowing of why, and glanced inside. A lone cushioned seat of dark black leather with no adornments to be seen waited for the

next rider. No cushions, no blankets, no hampers of food for the long journey. But such things would make the ride enjoyable. I was surprised to see the seat was not covered with fire ants or thorn brambles. That seemed like a cruelty that Malphus would inflict on a condemned soul.

“He is yours,” Hamiel said from behind me.

“I know,” I whispered, for somehow, deep within my newly-knitted muscle and bone under my ribs, I felt the need to open that door and welcome my passenger. I glanced down at Hamiel. He was crying. “I am sorry.” Why I was apologizing, I could not say.

“Are you? That is most unusual.”

Was it? Did Master Greeley not have any care for the souls who were about to be cast into damnation? I had so many questions.

“My time here is waning. It was a pleasure to meet you, Master Wright. We shall meet again soon, I am sure, for death is a battle that cannot be escaped.”

“Wait, good walker. I do not even know your last name!” I called as a fat ray of yellow sun fell down from the heavens to warm his curls. It felt impolite to be so familiar as to use his Christian name, having just met the man.

“We do not maintain surnames or memories of our past when we are called forth to serve the Almighty. Simply Hamiel shall do.”

“Then you may call me Livingstone,” I said and got a sweet smile before he vanished in a cloud of sparkling colors. I ruminated on his admission. It seemed incredibly sad to lose the recollections of those whom one cared for. Abyss stamped his feet. The carriage fairly sang with an energy that seemed attuned to my senses.

The door of the old farmhouse opened, and a skeletal man glided out. Older, possibly in his late sixties, with age spots on his bald head and withered arms and legs. He stood naked as one would about to be judged and then came toward the carriage, his rheumy eyes locked on me as his ghostly toes skimmed the ground. Inside the house, the keens of womenfolk could be heard.

“Your carriage awaits,” I said, the words tumbling out of my mouth unbidden.

“I do not think this is where I should be going,” the man told me after eyeing the carriage and the prancing, white-eyed steed.

“The judgment has been made.”

He wept as he entered the carriage and took his seat. I closed the door, climbed into the front, and plucked the reins from where they lay limply over the footboard. Abyss snorted, threw his head, and jerked forward. I nestled my backside into the hard seat. Eager to run, the hell horse exploded from the little yard, leaving behind the few lingering particles of blue, green, and yellow.

The Massachusetts woods flew by in a blur. We neared a large lake that seemed to be but a streak as Abyss raced onward. The carriage now seemed to float, the rumble of the ground falling off as we streaked toward a small cave crafted of massive boulders stacked atop each other. The opening to the Devil’s Den—a dark, haunted cave we had passed but once on the way to a horse auction in Hopkinton—surely was not large enough for a carriage of this size, yet as we neared, we were absorbed into the inky darkness. My brain was unable to take in all that it was seeing, and my eyes watered as I tried to cling to the reins while feeling my shoulder blades being pressed into the back of my seat. Our speed was so great that drawing in a breath was difficult as my chest felt flattened to my spine.

We exited the moist cave and ran into a wall of fire. The horror that engulfed my

entire soul was so overpowering that my mind shut down. I tumbled sideways, blackness consuming me, as the horse and carriage sped through the flames. A scream of sheer terror exploded from me as I fell.

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SMOKE AND FLAMES LICKED UP WALLS , the screams of terrified horses filling the night air as the fire spread with speed. I kicked at the tack room door, pounded on the frame, and dug at the lock until my fingernails tore off. No one came. Heat seared the back of my neck, the fire now inches from me. The heat...dear gods the heat...smoke, thick and rancid...the smell of burning flesh. Mine? The horses? I cried, prayed, and then buckled at the door as the fire jumped from the dry hay on the floor to my trousers.

“Please, please, help me!”

The scream in my nightmare tore from my throat as I flailed madly, trying to batter down a dream door that would stay forever sealed. Bound in agony and dread, my sight narrowed to a pinprick of reddish sky, and then I was, blissfully, lost in unconsciousness.

When I next found my senses, foreign and unpleasant sounds and scents greeted me, along with the soft brush of rubbery lips. A hot breath hit my face, though not wholly unpleasant. Tinged with the aroma of sweet grass, I knew it to be the exhalation of a horse. I’d smelled such many times.

“Move aside, you wretched beast!” a deep, raspy voice bellowed over the soft cries of hundreds of thousands of damned souls weeping and wailing. Their cries ripped at my heart, erasing the small moment of succor the brush of a horse’s muzzle had brought. My eyes slowly opened. I saw naught but the underbelly of a massive black horse, his long legs spread wide to shield me from whatever hells awaited. “Stand down this instant!” Abyss snorted loudly. “Bastard son of a whore! I am commanding you to move lest you feel my wrath instead of that buffoon you so stupidly protect!”

“Easy, boy,” I coughed, reaching out to run a hand along his front leg. Abyss picked up his foot, glanced down, and then with a tenderness I would not expect from a stallion born in the depths of the infernal regions, carefully stepped aside, rolling the carriage back a foot or so. I sat up slowly, looked at Malphus standing ten feet away, glowering at me, and then rolled to my hands and knees to wretch. Abyss nosed at my heaving back. Thankfully, there was little in my gut to bring up. Fainting had been embarrassing enough. Vomiting at the bird-like feet of my supervisor would have been horribly emasculating.

“Foolish beast.” Malphus spat on the warm ground, his spittle turning to steam. My palms rested on the soil but did not burn. Perhaps I was more hell-bound than I had thought. “Get to your feet, Coachman, and free your passenger from the carriage.”

I sat back on my heels, wiped my wet lips with the back of my hand, and then took in the area. Truly, it was not at all how I had expected Hell to be. Was Pastor Colfax working only on assumptions? The hells were hot, yes, and reeked of sulfur, that was true, but what I saw were rocks of deepest black and barren fields where spirits moved in seemingly random patterns.

“Get up. You have been lying there for far too long. Should Lucifer see you sprawled out on the barren fields like a maiden overcome with vapors, his anger would fall on me. Rise!”

I pushed to my feet, my gaze roaming over the lifeless vistas that ran on forever. Behind me a gush of fire pulsed out of the ground. I spun, my heart thundering, as the geyser of flame shot skyward, leaving a foul plume of smoke in its wake. I stumbled backward into the carriage. Shaking violently, I placed my hands on the cool door. The murmur of whatever magicks coursed through the transport helped settle me. But only just.

“You are not so tender as to be so terrified of a small geyser of hell fire?” Malphus

taunted, stepping a bit closer yet staying out of reach of Abyss, who was still hitched to the carriage.

“I died in a fire,” I weakly replied. His ruby eyes narrowed as a hot wind lifted his cape and long gray hair.

“Did you?” He eyed Abyss warily as he folded his arms over his thin chest.

“You mock me,” I growled, gathering strength from the affection shown by Abyss.

“I mock everyone. You are no different or better. Now free that spirit so he can be taken to the pits for his lifetime of perfidy. You have many more rides to make. The dead continue to die whether you are there to ferry them or lying here on the ground like a spent whore. Do your duty!”

“Will the flames greet me upon every arrival?” I asked. I had the right to know what I would face.

He smiled a gruesome grin that made my empty gullet clench. “What do you think, Coachman? This is Hell. Now gather yourself and get back to work.”

So the answer was yes. Bastards. What did I expect? This was the lord of darkness’s realm.

With that, he morphed into a crow. I stood there, quaking, rooted to the spot as he flew off toward a murky horizon where, far in the distance, shrouded by heavy clouds, I could see the vague outline of a castle. The king of darkness must reside there, seated on a throne crafted of dark marble. A shudder ran over me. One that had nothing to do with the warmth of these fetid lands.

I wet my dry lips, turned, and gazed into the carriage. The old farmer sat still, his

eyes locked ahead, his tears now gone.

“Your ride is over. Please exit the carriage,” I said, my throat dry as the dusty land I stood on. The words tumbled from me as if placed there by another. With a twist of my wrist, I opened the door. Abyss whinnied as he stared skyward with wide, white eyes. I glanced upward to see a foursome of winged creatures descending from the dark clouds. They were small, no larger than Delmar, with the darkest brown skin, yellow eyes as round as dinner plates, and locked bat-like wings. With fangs bared, they landed atop the carriage, sporting long-clawed hands attached to twig-like arms and short legs better suited for perching on tree limbs than on a carriage. Their claws must be gouging the paint.

One spoke to me in some sort of gibberish that I somehow could decipher to mean move aside. I stepped back, watching with sadness as the demons crawled into the carriage. My passenger did not go quietly. He screamed as he was yanked free from the carriage, his soul blackening wherever the devils’ claws held him. Up he went, dangling like a trout from the talons of an osprey. His bellows faded out, melting with the cries of the others wandering about below me.

Another jet of flame shot skyward, startling me. I thought to climb into the carriage to hide, but as if to prove the words that Malphus had thrown at me, the summons came. Abyss began to prance. The carriage hummed, and I closed the door with finality. My day had just begun as it was. Peeling my sight from the fire nearby, I brushed myself off, swallowed down my fear, and looked for my hat. Abyss stood on it.

“I have need of this,” I whispered to the horse as I ran my hand down his leg. He allowed me to lift it. His hooves were slightly worn down. I would need to care for them when our day was done. I possessed some basic farrier skills, enough to trim and file hooves. Abyss did not wear shoes, I was glad to note. “You are a grand and kind fellow,” I said while picking up my flattened top hat. I gave it a good shake. Dust flew into the stale air. Using my hand, I popped it back into

shape—somewhat—and placed it on my head. If I had my cravat I would straighten it but since I did not then that was one less thing to worry over.

I took a moment to press my nose into Abyss's side. He shifted closer, making the tack he wore jingle melodically. At least one sound in this horrid place was enjoyable.

“Right, through the fire,” I said with more bravery than I felt. “If I pass out, just let me lie for a moment or two then wake me up. A stout kick in the head should do it.” I ran my hand over his neck as I jested. Or was it a jest at all? What would happen should I die again? Could I even die once more? The training practices in Hell were ghastly. I'd have to speak with Delmar when I returned to my little hovel with the dead garden. Whom did one ask if one had questions? Even old Norman trained his hands. He then whipped them if they committed a blunder, but at least they had been instructed properly. “Yes. Here we go.”

The summons was pulling at me strongly now. I climbed into the seat, gathered the reins, and took a deep breath. With one last thought, I removed my hat and tucked the brim under my right ass cheek. It had taken a beating already today. I did not wish to soil it further. Or lose it. Where did one buy a new hat in Hell? Did the devil's city of Pergamum reside near that mighty keep, and did they have a damn hatter? So many questions...

I flicked the reins, bracing my boots against the footrest and forcing my eyes to remain open as we raced into and through the explosion of fire at breakneck speed. Flashbacks of ragged, bloody nails as fire engulfed me brought acrid spittle to my mouth, but I did not— would not —pass out again. Although tipping over was close as the horror swallowed me for a moment, then, thankfully, the flames dissipated. Tumbling from the carriage at this speed would be quite detrimental to my health, or whatever constituted health to one such as I.

The dark walls of Devil's Den flew past as I struggled to suck in air to steady my nerves. I could feel the hot wash of the fire we'd rode through tickling my face. Fear danced along my spine. The horse and carriage sped past the lake, the wind now deafening as we streaked to the next soul about to be judged. Fields and farms raced by, small towns, forests, and a mill. All seen then gone.

The carriage slowed to a more sedate speed. We were now on a cobblestone street in a town I did not recognize. We passed several carriages, yet none of the mortal coachmen took note of the enormous stallion, the sleek ebony brougham, or the haphazard coachman minus his hat. Night blanketed the tiny town, with oil street lamps casting shadows on the storefronts. We rolled past a courthouse that announced the city to be Belchertown. I'd heard of it. It seemed like a nice town.

Leading us along, Abyss trotted down a dark alley and stopped outside an apothecary shop. I grabbed my hat, sat there, and waited. A stray cat strolled by while a dog searched through the gutters for scraps. The night was a bright one with a full moon. I soon felt myself drifting off into a sorrowful mental wander, mostly centered on the fiery dream I'd had. I'd been at the stable, that much was apparent, but why would I have been locked in the tack room? By whom? Had the fire been my fault? How did it start? What was Theo doing now that his one true love had been taken from him? Was he deep in mourning? I assumed so. He was a genteel man prone to displays of emotion. Could I manage to see him somehow? If I were not a wandering soul, could I ride closer to Avers Mill on one of my summons to visit Theo? Would he see me? The people here in Belchertown did not, it seemed, but mayhap the bond needed to be stronger? Surely his devotion to me would breach any chasm. Even death.

The arrival of a young spectacle-wearing rainbow walker stumbling from a moonbeam into a refuse pile pulled me from my musings. Broken glass and old rags littered the alley, along with sooty piles where someone had set some refuse aflame. Not a wholly smart idea when so many wooden homes were so closely placed, but then some people were not wholly smart. I smiled to myself as Hamiel heaved a

world-weary sigh and removed an old rag from his shoe. His white attire and golden hair glowed like a beacon in the ivory moonbeam. He really was a fetching man. He pushed up his glasses and then righted the small bag he carried on his shoulder.

“Good eve, Livingstone,” he called as he made his way to the carriage. “And good eve to you, handsome Abyss.” He removed a carrot from his pocket. Abyss devoured it hungrily. I would need to return home to feed and water my horse. After this soul was judged, I could do so, but for now, we waited.

“Good eve, Hamiel,” I called as he petted Abyss fondly. “You are welcome to join me here.” I tapped the seat and graced him with a smile. The first since I saw him last. If nothing of joy other than seeing this happy young soldier of God were to be visited upon me in this new existence at least I had these moments to enjoy. “If you do not think me too forward.”

“Oh. Well, that is very gracious. I would hate to sit in the gutter.” He jogged over and scurried up to sit beside me like a cheerful little chipmunk.

“Sister Evangelista was quite upset about the state of my garments when we last met. If I were to return with refuse stains, I am certain she would berate me severely.”

I admired his profile in the odd green glow of the oil lamp that hung beside the carriage door. Even in an olive-toned light, he was quite handsome.

“Forgive me if I overstep any bounds, but I had always been led to believe that when one arrived in paradise being scolded would fall by the wayside,” I said, leaning back to allow the tension in my shoulders to ease. The aura of the petite man seated so properly at my side seemed to lessen my worry.

“Oh no, please, feel free to converse on whatever enters your mind! It’s always so dreadfully boring waiting for judgment to be made. It’s nice to have a stylish gent to

while away the hours with.”

I glanced down at myself. My sleeve was stiff from horse saliva, my clothes coated with road dust, and my hat was crumpled. Also, I could pick up the faint smell of brimstone and eternal damnation from my attire. I could only assume my hair and face were in a similar state. Stylish I was not.

“You’re far too kind, Hamiel. I have, just within the past hour, literally been to Hell and back. I must assuredly reek of rotted eggs.”

He laughed lightly. The sound was joyous as if a light hand had set a glorious wind chime crafted of glass into motion. Melodious, his laugh was. While I basked in it, I felt a twinge of shame for enjoying being in his presence so much. Not a fortnight ago—or what I assumed to be that many days—I’d been with Theo, professing I cared for him, which I did! I adored him, obviously. I’d read enough accounts of love to know what we shared was deep and true, even if some insisted that men of our nature could not truly love each other. Not like a man would his wife, which was true nonsense. Many men and women, I suspected, married for reasons that had nothing to do with love. Even at times when Norman was particularly abusive, Aunt Hester would warn me to be wary of marital traps.

“I smell naught but that puddle of human waste over there.” He pointed to the slurry along the curb where someone had dumped a few chamber pots into the alley. “And I assure you that you do not smell worse than that.”

I inclined my head, pleased to hear a kind word or two. My stomach growled loudly. My cheeks warmed. How odd to be in this bizarre situation yet still feel such human emotions like hunger, embarrassment, or even appreciation for a beautiful face. It was beyond confusing.

“Forgive me. I’ve not had much to eat since my…” I stammered, then fell silent.

“Oh yes, a resurrection such as yours is rumored to be quite distressing.” He turned on the seat, golden eyes glowing like freshly minted coins behind his spectacles, and gazed at me. “I did bring a few small nibbles to tide me over.”

“So you grow hungry? I thought angels were spirits, so they did not need to eat.”

“That is true, but I’m not yet an angel. I’m much like you, a being of the in-between. Not yet given to our eternal forms as we have duties that require us to move between the realms of Heaven, Hell, and that of the living.”

“Is there a name for those of us who are not truly dead yet not truly living? Humans do not see me as I pass by in the carriage.”

He pulled his shoulder bag around from his hip to rest on his thighs, opening it to dig inside. Abyss seemed to have fallen asleep for naught but his ear twitched when a moth drawn to the green lantern flew too close.

“It’s quite a dichotomy, is it not? Living and non-living both at once. I have heard many terms bandied about by my superiors, but the one that I like to use is moribund.” He talked as he searched, removing items from his bag: a small white Bible with a slim pink ribbon dangling from its pages, a tiny bit of needlepoint in a wooden hoop, and a sprig of mint.

“Moribund,” I repeated as a soft wind rustled down the alleyway. “A good a term as any. So, we still experience what we did as humans?”

“Oh yes, only we’re granted the boon of limited invulnerability. Ah, here it is!” He produced a large orange from his satchel. “I also have some heavenly dates and nuts. We do not eat meat, only foods that were provided to Adam and Eve in the garden.”

“Is that a rule for all moribund?” I asked as I eyed the orange with desire. My guts

were wrapped about themselves like a ball of serpents in a den. Fitting, I supposed, as we were discussing the foods found in the Garden of Eden. “Are there any apples?”

His amber eyes flew from his bag, his hand filled with plump, dark brown dates. “Are you asking an honest question or jesting me?”

“I was jesting a small bit. Apologies.”

I felt my lips twist into a small smile. Hamiel stared at me over the top of his spectacles for a long moment before nodding.

“I thought you might be joshing me. I’ve not ever been good at humor. Yes, there are apples in Heaven. There is nothing in the good book that states the fruit on the tree of knowledge were apples. While reading some of the doctrines in a great room of books, I discovered an explanation saying that the apple of paradise may have come into the story of Eve’s temptation many years after the exact tempting took place.”

“There’s a library in Heaven?”

“Oh yes! And it is grand. I spend my few free hours there. It’s vast and contains many tomes from around the world. The Archangel Metatron oversees the celestial repository. He’s very kind but incredibly strict about overdue book fines. I have some honey as well if you’d like some. I like to drizzle it over bread.”

He showed me a small jar with thick liquid the same color as his eyes. “No, thank you. The orange will suffice.”

His thin eyebrows beetled as he placed the orange in my hand. “Are you sure? A man of your size surely must require more than an orange to keep up his energy. Take some dates too...no, I insist.”

“Many thanks. You’re very kind, Hamiel.”

He smiled brightly. It felt as if the whole dingy alleyway illuminated momentarily. I ate the dates first, saving the sinfully sweet orange for dessert. As I ate, Hamiel chatted away about a myriad of things that left me feeling like an uneducated dolt. Which, in all honesty, I was. I’d not attended a fine school. All my knowledge of reading and numbers had been taught to me by Hester. The vigil passed quickly with him for company, the apothecary not passing until dawn had painted the sky violet.

“Ah, this one is mine. He has saved hundreds of lives with his tinctures and knowledge, many that he gave freely to those who were too poor to afford them,” he whispered and quickly stuffed his belongings back into his satchel. “I shall see you soon, Livingstone.”

“Maybe so. Good day, Hamiel.” He sprang from the carriage, ran a hand along Abyss’s side, and then went to meet the bent old soul who had drifted from his shop. Abyss and I watched as the rainbow walker took the man by the hand, gifted him with a smile, and led him into one of the first rays of a new day to touch the ground. Tiny bits of color lingered in the sunbeam.

I felt a calmness in my now somewhat filled belly. Right before the yank of yet another summons clutched at my chest. Abyss tossed his head, white eyes wide with excitement at the prospect of another insane dash through Massachusetts. I barely had time to get my hat situated before the hell steed exploded into movement, orange peels flying from the floor of the carriage to litter the alleyway. The carriage wheels rattled along the cobblestones.

“Memento mori,” I mumbled softly as we went to meet the next person on what I suspected would be a very long daily list of passengers.

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WHEN ONE WORKED FOR SATAN , one had no negotiated hours of employment.

I ferried fifteen souls to the depths before my horse and I began to falter. Exiting the Devil's Den after dropping off a belligerent portly man of means to the winged demons, which I named harpies, the terror of riding into flames assaulted me. Thirty times I had ridden through it. Thirty times I reacted strongly. Heart thundering, eyes shut, a plea for help on my dry lips. I loathed that entrance. Suspicion that it had been set up just to torment me arose. Why I was being punished had yet to be fully explained. A deal with my father Malphus had said, but I stamped that out as a lie from a minion of the fallen angel. I knew not my father, only his reputation, and it was sterling. No, I would not believe such heresy until Lucifer himself spoke it, and then I would demand proof.

Still, until that confusion was clarified, I was locked into servitude. I'd not seen Hamiel after our time spent outside the apothecary shop in Belchertown. There was more than one rainbow walker I found out. Most were not as kind as Hamiel. Two of the four that I met were actually hostile, regarding me with distrust. Some even forbade me from going near or speaking with them. Agent of darkness that I was. As fatigue and hunger pulled at me, I found myself hoping that I would speak with him again soon. I refused to think about why I felt such a yearning to see the man again. That spoke poorly of me as I had been involved with Theo before I had become a moribund. I had a strong affection for Theo, and he for me. As the carriage sped onward through a dense woodland, the dirt road narrow and dark, I pulled up memories of the mayor's son. Theo was a lanky young man, possessed of dark hair and pale blue eyes. Smaller than I, but then most were, and he fit into my arms well. When we embraced, I could rest my chin atop his head.

He was not the most fetching man I had ever seen. Hamiel outshone him greatly, but he was steadfast in his love for me. We would meet up in the stables late at night to kiss and touch each other, hiding in the hay mound away from the eyes of the townspeople and Pastor Colfax. However, we could not avoid the all-seeing eyes of the Lord, though. It was something the good pastor always reminded us sinners of every Sunday.

The last meeting we had was murky as it was tangled like a fishing line into the time of my passing. My final days on Earth and the time after my death were bound in gray fog. Much like the souls of purgatory who floated aimlessly about my home. A home I was now desperate to return to for some rest and food. Abyss had slowed slightly after our last ride. Now he sped up, the carriage jerking as he raced at a small clearing among a stand of dead oaks. I felt the whirlwind of a realm shift engulf me, scattering my reminiscences as we hurtled through the barrier between Earth and where I now hung my rumpled hat.

As we cleared the shifting maw of time, a squeal like that of a cat with its tail closed in a door assaulted my ears. A small red ball of imp rolled out from under those huge pounding hooves, wailing as it tumbled ass over long, pointed ears. I jerked on the reins to slow the horse who was intent on his stall. The carriage skidded over ashen dirt, sliding sideways to come to rest beside a weeping willow with a soft thud.

“Delmar, are you injured?” I shouted as I dropped to the ground and ran to where the tiny demon lay in a ball. His already foul clothing was even dirtier now. The striped trousers had a rend that exposed his bright red buttock. I placed a hand on his skinny shoulder. He began to wail. The pitch of his keen made my eyes water. Abyss whinnied loudly. “Are you in need of a healer?”

Where did one take an imp for healing? Would Malphus tend to the little demon, or would he laugh and then kick him in the side? I opted not to find out. I’d do what I could for my servant. I assumed doctoring an imp could not be too different from

doctoring a horse.

“Bad horse! Oh bad horse kill me! Kill me dead. Dead! I am dead.”

Well, he was coherent at least. I rolled him onto his back. His red eyes were wide. A gash on his brow seeped dark brown goo.

“You are not dead, just stoved up.” Spirits began to congregate around us. “What were you doing at the edges of our boundary?”

“Nothing! Nothing! I was doing nothing! I was doing good things. Looking for stones for soup! Yes, stones for soup.”

Stone soup. That sounded delicious. I eyed the little bugger with suspicion. “Well, be advised that when we are gone dithering about by the borderline between the realms, it could be dangerous. Can you die?”

“Yes! No! I am not sure. But the horse is evil! Bad horse!” Abyss threw his head in vexation with me, I was sure. “Ahh! He wants to kill me.”

Delmar raced off, his backside showing. I blew out a loud breath. Several cloudy souls came closer as I shook off the exhaustion that was pulling me down. I could rest once Abyss was curried, fed, and watered. The carriage...well, that seemingly took care of itself. This was a welcomed respite, for the fifth person they summoned me to take to the pits had a gunshot to the head during a poker game gone badly. He'd bled profusely. However, after they carted him off to his eternal fate, I glanced inside the carriage and there were no signs of blood or brain matter to be seen. So, at least a small favor in that. I had no wish to have to scrub away such a mess.

A black snout pushed at the back of my head, nearly sending me face first into the dirt. I caught myself on splayed hands and gave Abyss a glower over my shoulder.

“You lack good manners,” I grunted as I pushed to my boots. “Come then, let’s get you settled.” I petted his jet-black nose. His white eyes closed, just for a moment, and then he began nudging me toward the stable. We had a moment of conflict when I unhitched him outside, leaving the carriage sitting beside the barn. A wisp touched my cheek as I worked to lift the heavy leather collar from the horse. A glistening spark of emotion seeped into me where the wandering spirit had brushed against my rough cheek, leaving a spark of recollection. There and then gone. I swatted at the spirit as if it were a pesky fly.

When I had Abyss settled, I left him to enjoy his food. I took note that the mangers were always filled with fine hay. His grain appeared when his nose entered the bucket and water flowed into his trough when he touched it. It seemed Satan cared a great deal for this stallion. It was good to know that the dark lord cared for something in some way. Pity he did not think to supply his coachman with decent food. I’d curse him to perdition, but he ruled it, so I cursed Malphus instead as I tossed a thick blanket over the horse’s back after brushing him down. With a weary sigh, I closed the stall and turned around to see that the carriage was sitting where I had first seen it back inside the barn.

I was too tired to argue. And what kind of discussion of reason could I have with the devil’s carriage? I washed up at a rusty hand pump located on the far side of the barn. The tepid water was cloudy at first, then cleared as it ran, the faded dirt soaking it up like a sponge. Parched beyond belief, I cupped my hands under the flow and took a taste. It had a soft metallic aftertaste, but otherwise, it seemed fine. The horse drank it with no ill effects, but then again, he was a creature of the depths. Thirsty beyond care, I drank my fill. If I died—again—my miserable supervisor would have to find a new man to press into servitude.

Coat, hat, and cravat in hand, I loped to the house, brushing away lost souls. Entering my home, I saw that Delmar had indeed made soup. The tiny cabin smelled of ginger. My stomach roared.

“I made good soup!” He scurried around the cabin, the cut on his head coated with what looked like black boot polish. “I cleaned the floors. See the floors?”

“They’re lovely,” I dully replied as I dropped down into a chair by the table.

“I did them good. Your boots are dirty. Dirty boots. I spit them clean!” He ran over from the fireplace, grabbed my foot, and then nearly yanked me from my seat. “Spit the boots! Spit the boots. Coachman has shiny spit boots. Yes, ma’am, good boots. Shiny boots.”

I braced for the second boot to be removed, then turned to stare down into the bowl sitting on the table. Thankfully, there were no stones in the soup. There were carrots, potatoes, and some sort of stringy meat floating alongside a chunk of ginger root.

“What manner of meat is this?” I asked, spooning some of the ginger carrot soup minus the meat to my lips. I was too hungry to be finicky.

“Not rabbit. No rabbits here. I like rabbits.” He sat at my feet, my boot resting in his arms, drool leaking from his cracked lips as he rubbed the spittle into my left boot with his shirt sleeve. “Only shades. No rabbits.”

I paused going for a second taste. “So what kind of meat is it?”

“Tree meat. Good for big cockery men,” he said between expectorating.

“Wonderful, well, at least you didn’t cut off your fingers for the soup.” I left the tree meat—I was not a beaver—but devoured the soup, going back for four bowls total before my stomach was full. “Can I bring food back from the human realm?”

He looked up from his boot duty, shifting red eyes round. “Yes, yes, rabbits! Rabbits. You should take Delmar with you to find rabbits. Look at your boots!” He held up a

boot as long as he was tall. “I spit boots good. Very good! I can find rabbits too. Catch them. Cook them for you. I take good care of the coachman, yes?”

Fatigue began to settle on my weary shoulders. “Yes, you do a good job. I’ll be happy to take you with me on the next summons.”

He yelped in glee before running over to hug and then kiss my calf. “Such a good man. Great coachman. Best coachman ever. Hugest cockery! Delmar will add special polish to your boots. Shiny, shiny, shiny!”

“Okay, that’s fine. I’m going to bed. Thank you for the soup.”

I staggered to the bedroom. It looked much as it had when I’d last seen it. Someone, Delmar I was sure as he was the only other living being here, had stuffed some dead branches into a cracked glass bottle and placed it on the windowsill. As I undressed for sleep, I padded to the streaky window to watch the spirits who were stuck here swirling past. Lost souls serving time in a realm of dull grayness for who knew how long. Much like me. Perhaps I shouldn’t but I felt an affinity for them. Sleep called me from the window. Down to my drawers, I stretched out on the too soft bed, pulled the dusty coverlet up, and fell into a deep sleep, listening to Delmar sing a happy song about boot shine and rabbits.

A sharp pain in my chest pulled me from sleep, shattering the murky dream I had been locked in. The fire in the stable. The night of my death. I’d been at the door, the flames dancing up my legs, the pain immeasurable...

Gasping like a fish on the shore, I sat up, muscles stiff, back straight as a sawyer’s new board, soaked in sweat. Truly, if I had to wade through that horrible night every time my eyes closed, I should seek ways to remain awake. Shaking, I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, my hands falling to my lap as I glanced at the window. Foolish of me. There was no moon nor sun to gauge the time of day. And did it matter? The

summons was clutching at my breast, yanking me to my feet as the pain grew from a dull ache into a more commanding wrench. I stumbled about, trying to push away the nightmare, as the bedroom door opened. Delmar peeked around it, his ears perked like a curious dog.

“I hears big shouts. Soup left.” He bolted inside, his attire still a fright, but in his hands he carried a pile of clothing. “We ride soon? I wash clothes. Good job! I do good job. See, look. Look!”

He ran to me and held the somewhat neatly folded clothing skyward. Since I could not find my outerwear that I had tossed aside before my rest, I had to assume these were the same. Shaking them out, I saw that he had washed the tie cravat and seemingly brushed the trousers, waistcoat, and tailcoat.

“You did a fine job.” The compliment made him dance in place like a child on Christmas morn. “I’ll look most dapper.”

“Yes! Yes! Dapper. Most dapper. Hurry now! The dead wait for no man. I grab soup for you. Feed you good!” He bolted off, tiny cloven hooves click-clacking over the worn floorboards as I dressed with speed after making use of the old chamber pot in the corner. The call to duty grew stronger with each passing moment. From inside the house, I could hear Abyss outside voicing his displeasure. Delmar met me at the door, skipping about me in circles, a glass jar held in his two small hands, as we left our dismal home behind. “I bring soup! Good soup. When we have rabbits and potato, I make best soup ever. No more tree meat for the shiny coachman!”

The carriage awaited us, sitting outside the barn, as Abyss kicked at his stall over and over.

“Why did you not do this on our first calling?” I asked the fashionable gig, but obviously, it did not reply. I glanced down at Delmar at my side. “You may climb

into the coachman's seat to wait. This will take a few moments."

"Yes, yes! I will wait in the seat. Hold the soup!" He scrambled up into the front seat, his grin wide, the cold soup in a jar spilling as he clambered into the seat. He'd not repaired the tear in his breeches, I noted. "Soup for the cockery coachman! Soup, soup, soup!"

Shaking my head, I entered the stable. Abyss was furious. His ears were flat, his nostrils flared, his white eyes wide with agitation. He bit down on his gate as he eyed me coming closer.

"If you think about nipping me, I shall leave you in that stall for the rest of the day," I warned him as I reached for the gate latch. He threw his head but kept his teeth to himself. He came out of the stall like a musket ball from a rifle, nearly knocking me on my ass. "The previous coachman was lax in your training," I muttered as I strode out into the barnyard. "We will work on common courtesy, my friend."

The horse nickered at me. A hurry-up in horse speak if I ever heard it. Delmar sat in my seat, eyes wide, soup clutched to his scrawny chest, as I worked to hitch the horse. As soon as we were ready, I jumped up into my seat, the pale green lantern throwing an odd juniper toned coloration to the spirits moving about us.

"You should have sealed that soup. This carriage moves at great speeds. You may get doused," I told the imp as I lifted the reins.

"Oh, I fix fast!" He passed the jar to me, pulled off his shirt, and tied it around the top of the jar. "Fix it! See how clever Delmar is! Soup for the coachman!"

I had my doubts but gave the odd little devil a smile. Funny how a man could strike up a companionship with a horrifying demon when he was alone save for a horse and an otherworldly carriage. He grinned up at me, pointed teeth on display. I clicked at

Abyss, snapped the reins, and sat back. Delmar's eyes popped when we exploded from the stable yard. His slim form slammed into the seat, but he held onto my cold soup for dear life.

"This is where we cross over," I shouted to him as we streaked to the doorway from purgatory to Earth. He whooped in glee. Ten feet or so before we thundered through the portal, Delmar shrieked and disappeared in a puff of alabaster smoke. The jar of soup fell onto the seat. Stunned, I grabbed the jar, saving it from dumping all over the seat and me. We hit the other side in a jarring whoosh. I shoved the container between my thighs and yanked on the reins with all my might. Abyss was at full ungodly speed, and with his hooves flying, it took him some time to slow to a stop. The carriage hummed under me, clearly upset, as was the black horse who stamped his hooves while throwing me dark looks. "Where did he go?! Is he dead?"

Neither the horse nor the brougham had any reply for me.

"By the damned," I grumbled, thinking of turning around to check but unable to do so as the pain in my chest was like a hot poker to my soul. Placing the jar between my feet, I gave the horse his head. I would find out later, I supposed. I prayed the imp would be fine. Even with his fixation on cocks, he was the only soul aside from a certain rainbow walker that I had to converse with in this new afterlife. This ride was not starting well at all.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:42 am

ARRIVING AT A SMALL HOMESTEAD along a lazy creek, Abyss slowed, then stopped, flicking his tail as a few flies found him. The day was warm and humid, and the small farmhouse cast off an aura of immense sorrow. On the front porch, sitting beside a small rocking horse made of dark cherry wood, sat Hamiel. His gold eyes found me as the carriage stopped. He looked downcast. I slid from the carriage, not bothering to tie the reins. Abyss would not venture far hitched to the carriage as he was. Also, he knew his job well and would wait until the judged one was in the brougham. For now, he was content to pull long wildflowers from the lawn.

It was distressing how happy I was to see that slim, flaxen-haired man in white. Something had to be wrong with me. Coveting someone while your heart is promised to another is surely a sin. Pastor Colfax would say that lying with a member of the same sex was an even greater sin, but I could find no reason to claim that affection for another could ever be wrong.

“Good day, Hamiel,” I called as I walked over to him, taking care to avoid stepping on the small, hand-carved wooden soldiers on the steps. I removed my hat and gave him a short bow as a gentleman in my attire would. I’d not had such fine clothes before. Even though I was still just a hulking stable hand, I felt more like a dandy with my duster and top hat. “You seem reserved today. Are you unwell?”

He exhaled slowly, his eyes damp. “A child lies within.”

My sight flew to the closed door. No wonder the home was cloaked in misery. “Is the child ill?”

“No, it was an accident. He simply fell from a tree.” Hamiel sighed.

“May I sit with you as we wait?” I asked and got a nod. Even his bouncy curls seemed melancholy. “It is a terrible tragedy for any child to leave this world. I am sure you will be escorting the young lad into the arms of the Lord.”

“Yes, I am sure of that. He said let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these.”

I nodded, rubbing the brim of my hat with my fingers, elbows on my knees. “Your knowledge of scripture is impressive. I must confess I paid little heed to the sermons I was forced to attend every Sunday. Were you a pious man in your previous life?”

“I do not know,” he said as he stared down at his tidy boots.

“Oh forgive me. I forgot.” I glanced out at the yard at the clothes on the line and felt great sorrow for the parents inside this small home. They woke today assuming it would be a day like any other. And now it was one of the darkest. There was no knowledge of when one would ride with the coachman or be escorted skyward by a fair man with alabaster skin. “Perhaps it is crude of me to say this, but it seems most cruel to strip a person of their fondest memories.”

He peeked at me around a wayward curl. “I’m not sure I find it cruel. What is crueler? Not recalling those you left behind or mourning their loss daily for eternity?”

“Hmm.” I flicked my gaze to a grasshopper resting on a blade of grass. “I never thought of it that way. I see your point. In truth, I do wish I could forget some of my past. The way I died. The people I left behind that are mourning me.”

“Was your death particularly horrid?” he asked in a soft voice as a bluebird sang from a fence post. How peculiar it was to witness the world moving on as it would for all but those cloistered inside this small home.

I nodded. "I have terrible visions of a fire engulfing me at the stable where I worked. They are vivid, and so, I must assume they are not just random frights in the night but recollections of my passing."

He touched my arm. Just a pat of comfort, but it seared through several sleeves to send a rush of solace and heat throughout my body. The sensation was unlike anything I had ever felt, and it startled me so much that I jerked my arm in response. Hamiel pulled his hand back instantly.

"I'm sorry. That was incredibly forward of me. I meant no disrespect, of course. It was a gesture of comfort, nothing more," he rushed to say, cheeks glowing pink.

"It was me, truly," I rushed to explain my gaffe. "Your touch was most consoling. I was just...it was unexpected is all. Do all rainbow walkers possess a healing touch?"

He stared at me in confusion over the top of his spectacles. "No, we do not have any special healing powers. Only those who have wings possess palliative skills. Why do you ask?"

My fingers still vibrated from his touch as did other parts of my body. I shot to my boots, babbling about my hand going pins and needles. Shaking my arm did little. The low burn in my abdomen could not be erased by pacing either, I quickly found out. As I walked, I blathered nervously, hat in hand, toy soldiers scattered as if someone had bowled them over. I wished not to think about how or why they were kicked aside.

"What do you know of dreams?" I asked as he watched me with curious amber eyes, the rustling wind pushing his hair into his face. He thumbed a curl from his eye.

"Oh. Well, a goodly deal. I've read up on such things. Dreams are used by heavenly beings as a way of communication. Take the stories of Daniel and Joseph. Do you

think that your dreams are the Almighty speaking to you?"

"No, no, I doubt that he would be communicating with a servant of Lucifer." I pushed my hand through my lank hair. I needed a bath badly. If my servant isn't a pile of ash forever, I could try to persuade him to heat some water and find a tub sizable enough to hold me.

"Mm, yes, maybe not, although your position does not preclude you from being saved once your tenure as the coachman is completed."

I stopped cold. His eyes flared as I stared down at him. "This you know to be fact?"

His pale cheeks reddened. "Well, no, it's conjecture." My sigh was long. He quickly reverted to dream talk. "I do recall seeing some other material in the heavenly library that dealt with dreams and their meanings. Mayhap you are revisiting your death in your sleep to try to clarify the reason for your demise."

Abyss snorted to my left, his tail swishing lazily at several flies attempting to bite his backside.

"What do you mean exactly?" I returned to the porch to sit at his side.

"For instance, the Greeks and Romans believed that dreams could give us information about the past, present, and future. Quite a few American Indian tribes considered the dream space to be sacred grounds where a mortal could escape the boundaries of our everyday lives and reach out to interconnect with the consciousness of the universe."

I could not look away from him. He was excited now, the pallor he'd been draped in when I arrived lifting as he chattered about dreams and portents.

“So, you think that I may be able to plumb my dreams to discover how it was I came to be locked in the tack room?” I chanced and got a brisk nod.

“Yes, well, it could offer a clue.” He seemed to drift for a moment. “You know, I could try to sneak a peek at the book of lives. Just to see if it lists anything about your passing that might help you in your search for answers.”

“Would that be allowed? Might you get in trouble if you’re caught?”

He smiled, just a little, and it lit up the porch just like someone had put a match to a torch.

“There are no set rules about who may peek at the book of lives. Yes, Saint Peter may become cross if he catches me, but I’m always nearby, handing off those that I help cross over...” One of his slim shoulders lifted.

“But that is...I don’t wish for you to get yourself into trouble over some sinner’s nightmares.”

Again, his hand landed on my forearm. I did not jerk my arm away this time. Instead, I let the warmth suffuse me.

“You are not a sinner. And even if you were, which I do not think you are for your dark eyes are soft with caring, there is always redemption. Luke said there would be more joy in Heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people.”

I dropped my hat to place my hand over his. Our gazes met and held for a long moment.

“Thank you, Hamiel. For being a kind person.”

“You’re very easy to be kind to.”

The door opened behind us, a creaky hinge announcing the arrival of a recently departed. We’d been so caught up in each other we’d not sensed the child passing. We both rose quickly as the little boy slipped outside, his sight going back to his home. The soft wail of grieving parents floated out the open window. I stepped down to the grass, hat in hand, and watched in silence as Hamiel took the child’s small hand in his.

“Have no fear, child, for your days will be forever filled with sunlight and games from here on,” he softly said. Then, with one last look at me, he turned to lead the boy into a fat beam of sunshine.

“Mama says Pap-Pap will be there to greet me. Is that so?” the boy in raggedy slacks and a loose homespun shirt asked.

“I am sure it will be so,” Hamiel assured the frightened lad.

I watched until they were naught but sparkling bits of light that danced on the warm wind like dragonflies, then wept for the little boy, his family, and the life that had just started. What a pity. I had at least lived for close to thirty years before my end.

Heat erupted in my chest. I closed my eyes, scrubbed at my face, and then opened them to look back at Abyss. Another summons. Another judgment to be made. Another ride into the fires. My job was rather terrible...

During my days on Earth, I had been considered a rather kind soul.

Many people who came into the stables commented to Uncle Norman that his nephew was a good boy with proper manners. As I grew, I felt myself to be a conscientious man who thought the best of people for the most part. Aunt Hester had

been a great influence in my temperament, I was sure, or mayhap a man was born with his personality already intact. I read a good deal despite my great uncle's dislike of books and had never seen any solid reply as to what crafted a man—or a woman—into the adult they grew into. Nature or nurture. Who could say? What I could say with some certainty is that some people were miserable. Most while alive, some even after death. Of the dozen or so passengers that I had ferried to the brimstone realm, the majority had been contrite. They now saw what their earthly aggressions had wrought. They wept, they wailed, and they wheedled. One man, a wealthy bookbinder, offered me a hundred ten-dollar U.S. mint gold coins to return him to his mansion in Boston. I'd snickered at the offer. As if tipping Lucifer's coachman would help his cause. He cursed me as he was hauled off to the pits, but not once in his diatribe and blandishing did he ever once ask for forgiveness of his sins.

Even that man, with his blustering ways, did not hold a candle to the threesome stuffed into my carriage at the moment. Three souls who bickered endlessly amongst themselves. The man had married two women. When both women discovered his perfidy, they attacked each other in a marketplace. The husband tried to intervene, but they all stabbed each other to death in front of a fisherman's stall in Newburyport. When I arrived, their judgment had been served, and they were waiting for me to take them from where they had fallen.

Judgment went quickly in certain circumstances, it seemed.

The bickering and name-calling were so severe I was overjoyed to ride through that flaming portal. No, that is a lie. I was not overjoyed at all. The flames rushing up to swallow me made me feel sick to my stomach, but the slowing of the carriage was a blessing.

I bounded from the brougham before it had completely stopped. Abyss whinnied as he flicked his ears.

“They make my ears hurt as well,” I told him as I threw open the door. The pallor of green light fell over me as they continued to fight, scratch, and punch each other. They reminded me of a traveling puppet show that had visited Avers Mill when I was younger. “Your ride is over. Please exit the carriage.”

They flung vile words at me. With a sigh, I stepped back, folded my arms, and watched the winged demons descend. My shirt collar was damp and dirty. The threesome was ripped from the carriage, their shouts at each other fading away as the nether harpies toted them off.

I caught the wings of a large crow in my peripheral. Malphus transformed several dozen feet away from Abyss, taking a moment to run his hands over his day suit as small black pin feathers rode the hot, dry currents.

“I see that your entrance to our world no longer requires smelling salts and a fainting sofa,” he tossed out in that raspy voice that grated along my marrow. It was an unholy timbre.

“Surely making a servant who passed in a fire ride through flames to finish his route is beyond cruel,” I snapped, taking off my hat to slap it on my thigh to remove the road dirt.

“Coachman, what realm do you think you serve? Would you prefer kittens scampering about your boots and tiny golden cakes for you to nibble on when your ride is complete?” His smile was malevolent.

“You are a hateful soul,” I growled. He wet his index finger and ran it over his left eyebrow.

“Thank you,” he purred, the sound making the damp hairs on the back of my neck rise. “You have a need to discipline your servant when you return to your hovel.”

“So he is alive?” I was oddly happy to hear that. The dark lord’s second nodded. A piercing scream floated by us, a sound that was, morosely, far too common here.

“He is a demon. He cannot die unless he is ground under the foot of Lucifer. Though he can be punished, and I expect you to whip him severely for his foolish attempt to leave purgatory on your carriage.” I glanced at the empty glass jar on the seat. I’d drank it down several hours ago to quiet my riotous gut. “If you do not get the tiny bastard under control, I will be forced to do so. I dislike dirtying my hands or feet as it were, so I leave his punishment in your hands.”

“I’ll speak to him,” I ground out as a geyser of dark smoke shot into the sky several hundred feet away. Mottled faces in the smoke twisted and cried out silently as the eruption spewed the condemned skyward. “He was with me only to hunt for rabbits. In case it has escaped your notice, I am moribund. I require food to survive.”

He stopped picking at his lapel to level a flat look at me down his beak-like nose. “You ride the earthly realm day in and out. Take what you need from the humans.”

I shoved my hat back onto my head. “You expect me to steal from people?”

He huffed in exasperation. “Livingstone, you are not planning to cling to your shaky morals now that you’re in our employ, are you?”

I was slightly shocked that he had used my name. “Your predecessors had no qualms about taking what they wished from the earthly realm. Food, drink, women, men. You are a condemned soul, locked into a contract with our Lord, the dark one. There is no redemption for you, so why shackle yourself to those ancient tenets?” He gave me a lascivious wink. “We know what you did in the hay mound with the mayor’s son. Your pretense of being sinless is stained already, so why cling to the ways of the pious unless you plan on taking vows of chastity, poverty, and silence to make your acclimation even more painful?”

My mouth fell open. Shame coursed through me. They knew of my trysts with Theo. Then it occurred to me. Of course they knew. I knew not who sat on the judgment counsel, but whomever it was certainly read over every sin committed while the dying was alive. But I was not here based on a deathbed adjudication. I was here to fulfill a promise my father had made, or so this vile beast had said.

“I care not what you know about who I bedded.” Malphus tittered like a drunken strumpet. “I serve you and your Lord only because of a supposed deal between my father and the prince of darkness. My sins are mine to carry. What I need from you is clarification as to this reputed deal. My father was a doctor, and my mother was a nurse at his side. They were good, caring people. Your lies about his giving up his only son to Old Scratch only serve to show what a cowardly creature you are!”

His eyes flared. In the space of a blink, he was before me, his hideous breath in my face, his long fingers around my neck. My feet left the ground as he raised me into the air, the calls of the winged demons all around us. I clawed at his hand, unable to draw in a breath, my toes above the rocky soil.

“You speak with no knowledge of me, this realm, or the dealings of our master. Our master. You are his, Coachman, for as long as he bids. So, I suggest you temper your mouth, take your servant into hand, forget the sniveling sermons from your past, and tend to your duty lest I tire of your prattling and find a new coachman to tend to the ingrates who flow in through our gates.”

“Kill me then and let your Lord find another,” I wheezed. His brows knitted. With a snarl, he flung me to the dirt, my head connecting with the side of the carriage with a sharp crack.

“You think of yourself as above us, but you are not so mighty as you think.” He flung his hand out at me. I braced for an explosion of hell fire but all that hit me were coins. Gold coins. Several dozen of them. They lay on my legs glimmering softly. “Take the

coins. Leave them for the humans when you take provisions if doing so assuages your tender guilt.”

“What of my questions about my father?” I snarled as I ran a hand over the back of my head. No blood, but a goose egg was forming already.

His lips curled into a wicked smile as his arms began to feather. “Make an appointment with Lucifer. I’m sure he’d love to have you in for tea.” He laughed as he took to air, the cackle turning into a throaty caw when his body finished the transformation.

I glowered at him until he was but a dot above the far-off castle. “I shall knock on Satan’s door someday...maybe,” I mumbled as I gathered up the coins like a beggar. When my coat pockets were full of more cash than I had ever seen in my life, I picked up my hat and climbed into the carriage. The brougham hummed at me as I settled my ass to my hard seat. Abyss looked back at me, his white eyes curious.

“Let us venture to the nearest town for food,” I called as I snapped the reins. Knowing what was to come, I forced my eyes to remain open as we barreled through the fires, a scream held tightly in my chest. I would not give Malphus the pleasure of hearing me cry out in fear. I would choke on it first. And nearly did as we left the realm of the damned behind to pilfer from hard-working people. Since they could not see me, buying outright was impossible. Instead, I took what I needed from closed stalls or butcher shops and bakeries. I crept into springhouses, taking milk and butter, leaving coins where crocks of fresh butter, buns, or hanks of ham once hung.

With the inside of the carriage seat filled, and my pockets lighter, we went home. The rush of the wind in my face made my eyes water as did the vortex leading to limbo. As we cleared the border, I heard the cry of a tiny imp being run over, yet again, by a hell horse. This time, Delmar rolled like a ball across the dusty yard, landing against the stable with a yelp. When the carriage stopped, I jumped to the ground, smiling at

the imp massaging his head. The wooden spoon he had been holding lay beside him, broken in half. Abyss began to vocalize.

I kneeled down beside him. "I'm glad to see that you still live."

"Your horse is mean. Mean, mean, mean! I smell hams!" He righted himself and wobbled to the back of the carriage, scaling it with ease and dropping inside. "Ham! Breads! Potatoes!" He peered up at me when I opened the door, his arms filled with produce. "I make good soups for you! Best soups! Pig meat and bone soup! Beans, beans, beans too!"

"I look forward to your soup." I chuckled as he bit into a raw potato with a sound akin to a fine lady biting into a sweet cake. The imp curled around his bounty, chewing merrily as I unhitched Abyss and tended to his needs. When I exited the stable and removed the demon as well as our provisions, I looked down at Delmar. "I'll need a bath. Is there a tub for me to use?"

"Hmm, yes, a washtub. I find! Fill with hot water. Soap too! Wash your back and cockery!" He dashed off in search of a tub, his belly podded out after his meal of a whole, unwashed potato.

I decided that I would wash my own cockery despite his kind offer.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:42 am

AFTER A brIEF BUT FIRM DISCUSSION with my manservant about washing his grimy hands before preparing a boiled ham and potato meal, I set off to find a tub. It took some digging, but I eventually unearthed an Oxford hip bath buried under dusty hay behind the carriage. I had to evict several families of resident spiders—odd pale things with eyes like chips of charcoal—from the hammered tin tub. I toted it back to the house, brushing aside the lonesome spirits that lived here with me. I was growing accustomed to them. They seemed gentle but lost, a lot like me, which is why I felt a kinship with them, I assumed.

Stepping inside, I found Delmar hacking at several red potatoes atop the table, the flash of a cleaver catching the light from an oil lamp.

“Did you wash those?” I asked, placing the tub close enough to the hearth to feel the heat but far enough from it to not risk an ember falling near me.

“Yes, yes, wash hands!” he called over his bony shoulder over the thunk, thunk, thunk of his cleaver.

“I meant the cleaver and the potatoes.” I removed my duster, eyeing it sadly. It would require a good scrubbing as did the rest of my attire. My top hat was also in need of a good brushing. I glanced at the imp standing on a chair after he made a sound of aggravation. “Did you wash them?”

“No, I wash hands. Bad soap burns!” He spun to glower at me, red eyes sparking. He could be a fearsome creature if one ran into him unawares. “You no say wash potatoes!” He waved his cleaver at me as he spoke. “I never wash hands or potatoes or blades. Never! Greeley Coachman no say wash things. Never! Now you want wash

things all time. Stupid. Stupid cockery coachman!”

He scrambled down after gathering up his potato chunks. Sighing, I nonetheless set about getting my bath ready. A tiresome chore that required hauling buckets of water from the hand pump inside to heat in a cauldron. I did that four times. Delmar glared at me all the while as he tossed potatoes, a mauled head of cabbage, and several chunks of ham into a smaller kettle. With two hooks we could heat both the bathwater and the boiled dinner at once. After the tub was half filled, I dumped in a few buckets of cold and then stripped down fully.

The water was hotter than I expected and the tub was much smaller. When I finally managed to get my ass into the steaming bath, my knees were under my chin. Nothing unusual. I’d spent a good many years being the recipient of pointed jokes about my height, hitting my brow on doorframes, and being unable to purchase anything from the haberdasher in Avers Mill that did not need sizable alterations. Still, even folded into an origami ball, the bath felt good.

“Tell me something, Delmar,” I called over my shoulder while trying to find enough room in the hip bath to wiggle a tarnished pewter pitcher into the water.

“I wash clothes, yes, wash everything! I do wash. Good boots. Spit boots good. Polish hat too! Rub hat with elbow. You see!” he chattered away as he stirred our dinner over the fire.

“That’s good. Thank you. I wasn’t asking about my attire, though. I was wondering if you could tell me more about Coachman Greeley.” Scooping up some water, I dumped it over my head. The tingle of the hot water on my skin stung for just a moment. Then it felt glorious. I did that several times, for my hair was thick and then called for the lone bar of soap. Delmar trotted over to fetch it, then came to me, holding it between his clawed fingers as if it were something vile. “Thank you.” The soap fell into my hand. “I was speaking with Malphus and he mentioned that

coachmen in the past have taken things from humans.”

“Yes, yes, not Greeley though. No, no, he no take nothing. He hate it here, hate me, hate horse, hate everything. I wash back. Big back, wide, strong. I wash good.”

“I can do it, thank you.” He hopped around the tub to stare at me. “So he never brought anything back from the world of the living?”

His brow furrowed. “One time bring lady,” he whispered, his ruby eyes darting about. “She come just once, saggy like wet shirt. He make plans. I warn him. I say bad ride. Bad ride, but he throw me out the door. Lock it. Not let me in. Then crow boss show up. Mad! Oh so mad!” He clambered up to sit and balance on the of edge of the tub like a gargoyle. Water dripped off my nose. “He rip door off hinge. Drag coachman out, kick in his head. Kick, kick, kick! Then take lady spirit and Greeley away to the pits. I clean the floor. Blood everywhere. I wash and wash. For days. Bury body alone. So hard! Dig for days behind stable. No food only tree meat and bendy carrots. Then you arrive. End of story.”

I sat back to ruminate as I scrubbed days’ worth of road dirt, ash, and the clinging stink of brimstone from my skin and hair. So my predecessor had brought a corpse here. Into purgatory. And he had made plans of some sort. The kind of plans a man made with a cadaver was beyond me. As I scrubbed under my arm, the soap lathering nicely in the thicket of dark hair, I wondered what kind of schemes they had made or was Delmar inventing things. How did one bring a human into the realm of shades? The myth of Orpheus popped into my head as I ran the soap over the pelt of curls on my chest. Greeley had not journeyed into the depths themselves to bring a loved one out, but he had brought a cherished one to purgatory. How? Was this not the realm of those who were not ready for the glory of Heaven and required purification? The living should not be able to enter this place.

“The lady that he brought back,” I asked after a moment or two. “Was she alive when

she arrived?”

“Why so nose about Greeley? He is roasting in pits for disobeying rules,” Delmar said while picking his nose. I pointed at the soap. His lips twisted into a grimace, but he splashed about in the bath, those long claws coming dangerously close to my cockery. Oh glory. Now I was using that term.

“I’m curious as to how a moribund can bring a human here.” I closed my legs quickly as he made a show of washing his hands.

“She on cusp.”

“Cusp of death?”

“Yes, cusp.”

“Did she not have a judgment at the time of her passing? And if she were sent here she would be a spirit like those outside.” I waved a wet hand at the window, my sight drawn to the passing psyches as they wafted by the smudged glass.

He rolled his eyes while shaking water from his hands. “You big, pretty but dumb as horse.” I frowned at the imp. “He bring body before judging. Cusp. Race fast. Horse foamy on face when arrive. Final breath of lady wife leaves. No judgment. Her soul is here. With him. He catch it, in jar, like beetle. So bad. So bad. Malphus come, huge and angry, take jar. Kill Greeley. I hide behind tree until they fly off, then I come inside. Bury body. Make ready for next coachman. Then you come in his arms. I peek from bedroom. He is prettiest of pretty. More pretty than you even. He drop you on bed. Burned bad. Face not pretty. Ugly human fire log. Bid me to wash you and feed you soup.”

“Who did this? Malphus?” I asked, even though I knew otherwise. There was only

one in this realm whose beauty was so blinding.

“No, he is ugly like horse ass.” He jumped down to poke our dinner with a wooden ladle. “Our dark lord bring you. Pick you for his coachman. Always this way. He loves the horse. Wants a good coachman. Greeley not good. Greeley wants his lady wife. The dark one chose poorly with Greeley. Ham, ham, ham! Pig meat for dinner!”

He sang as he stirred. I lounged back into the tub as much as I could and rinsed at my leisure. The hot bath had eased some of my knotted muscles, but even as my body calmed, my thoughts spun like that whirlpool I’d once seen.

“So moribund can bring others here?” I posed the question gently as if it were just a passing thought.

He fished a potato from the cauldron and poked it with his finger, a long claw cutting it in two. “Bad ride. Bad ride. Humans not good here. No good. They wither and die, souls lost forever no moving on to final fate.”

“So humans who come here still clinging to life die.” He nodded as he threw the raw potato back into the pot to cook longer. The soft tapping of those who wait brushing on the window seemed louder now.

“This place not for living,” he stated, licking the ladle.

So there was no way of me reaching out to Theo. He could not see me on Earth, and if I somehow managed to get him into the carriage, he would expire as soon as he stepped foot in purgatory. Sadness and loss lay heavy on my shoulders. I’d had a spark of hope when Malphus had said coachmen could take what they wished from the humans. Women or men. But stealing them away would only bring about their early passing. What manner of cruel bastard would do such a thing to ease his own loss?

Would I ever see Theo again? What fate would befall him if I rode to Avers Mill on a summons and took a side road to his home? Would that be disobeying one of the vague rules, or would that be acceptable? And did I wish to view him again only to know that he was forever lost to me? No. That would be too painful. Best to let him grieve me and then move on with his life, find a wife someday, and have children. It was what he was expected to do.

I let out a long sigh, deeply felt. This was a bleak existence. Locked into indentureship with no friends save a heavenly being who hovered on the cusp of life and death just as I did.

I blinked. The water on my lashes fell to my whiskery cheek. “Delmar, what knowledge do you have of coachmen sprucing up this cabin?”

He poked at the fire with his toe, his head craning in my direction. “There is no other coachman. Just one. Just you.”

“Yes, I know. I’m just asking if any of my predecessors tried to make this cabin less depressing?”

“I do not know about deep ressing. I am cooking and cleaning for you. Why ask think questions?”

“Aren’t you curious?” I stood up, water sluicing down me, realizing that in my rush to bathe I had forgotten to locate something to dry with. Dripping wet, I stepped out of the hip bath and bent to pick up my dirty shirt. It would have to do.

The list of things that I would need to find on the other side of the portal kept growing and growing. What did Greeley do here? Obviously, not bathe or eat. Perhaps he gardened during his downtime or read, although there were no signs of books of any kind.

“Ask think questions get head kick,” Delmar replied as he threw a pinch of something that looked like pepper—please let it be pepper—into the boiling dinner.

“That’s a reasonable reply,” I said as I rubbed at my face to dry it. Keeping one’s little red head down kept one’s brains inside one’s skull. “Still though, if you do not question things, you never learn. I’d like to know how I was chosen, for example, or how it is that Abyss is treated so well, but Lucifer’s coachman only has one set of clothes.”

“Lucifer like horse better,” he answered matter-of-factly. “He craft mean horse from hot rock then blow life into big lungs. He only take you from fire then throw on sofa for Delmar to wash like bad burn meat. Stink too! Stink bad. But no thanks from dark lord. No thanks at all. I make quits soon!”

I turned my head to hide my smile. Quitting seemed a rather large boast from such a skittish little beast, but three cheers for his bravado.

“I hope you stay on,” I said. He threw me a suspicious look from the hearth. “Truly, I do. I’ve come to think of you as a friend. Of sorts. That is pepper you are dousing our dinner with, yes?”

“Yes, yes, pepper pig meat!” He began to do a macabre jig. It would be horribly upsetting to see—this little imp dancing in front of the flames—if I had just arrived. Now, it simply made me wonder if he ever planned to sew that rip on his britches. Viewing the scarlet stub where his tail had been was less than pleasant.

“When next I have a chance, I shall speak with Malphus about asking for more coins to make this house more of a home.” I rubbed at my thighs with my shirt as my mind wandered off to the small room I had had in Hester and Norman’s house. A tiny little place with one bed and a dresser, no more than a closet really, but it was mine. Despite what Norman claimed, I was grateful for them taking me in. I’d have been

tossed into the orphanage in Liverswell if they'd not claimed familial rights.

Many were the nights I slept in the stables as a lad to avoid hearing the shouting of the adults that kept me awake. Even as I grew older, the soft rustle of horses calmed me as nothing else ever had, short of falling asleep in a lover's arms. Theo popped up in my mind's eye as he was the last I had seen him. Or was it the last? The time of my death was hazy, fogged over like a winter window, so maybe we had managed another assignation. Or mayhap not. I would never know unless the murk around my passing lifted. In time, possibly. For now, I would have to keep prodding Malphus for information as I ferried unfortunate souls to the dark, hot depths while seeking something bright to hang on the windows.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:42 am

TWO WEEKS, OR WHAT I CLOCKED OFF as fourteen sleeps, which I imagined to be days, passed by without viewing Hamiel. The other two rainbow walkers were austere and silent, so my time spent waiting was dismally long. With the few coins I had left after locating seeds in some probably futile attempt to get the overgrown garden to produce some vegetables, I slipped into a bookseller's stall in Dorchester to purchase a few tomes. No one seemed the wiser as I plucked a copy of *The Lady of the Lake* by Walter Scott as well as a book titled *Zastrozzi: A Romance* by Percy Bysshe Shelley. I enjoyed poetry a great deal. The romance may have been a bad choice given my lonely state. Returning to the carriage that I'd left a block over, I placed my books on the seat, removed my hat, and was about to climb into the seat to wait for an elderly lawyer who was leaving this plane after sixty-five years when a sunbeam deposited a smiling perky rainbow walker into the street.

"Hamiel," I called out as he regained his footing. He waved madly, his grin instantly lifting the morose woes that had been clinging to me. "Come and sit with me as we wait. I've been hoping to see you these past weeks. Have you been ill?"

He skirted around a woman and her handmaid out for a walk, nodding at the ladies even though they could not see him. Abyss snorted at him, so he paused to run a hand over the hell horse's flank before darting back to the carriage.

"Livingstone, my goodness, it is glorious to see you!" He looked at me, bright gold eyes glowing, soft cheeks appled, and sunshine radiating from his yellow curls. My chest tightened as I looked down upon his beauteous face. "I was not ill, no, that is not possible." I reached down to offer him a hand. He took it, and that radiant heat I'd felt when we'd touched blossomed over my fingers and palm. "Ah, thank you." I moved over as my hand glowed internally, the warmth spreading like a low fog

over the shore up my arm to snuggle around my lonesome heart. Was this the common reaction when touching a heavenly being? I had to assume so, but I felt a pang of sadness for this kind of coziness I'd never felt before. "How kind. I have had something to tell you for a fortnight."

"Oh. Well, I am all ears," I said, wishing my duster were newer, my ascot tie tied better, and my trousers a little less dusty. "Were you assigned to another area of the country?"

"No, no, glory, nothing like that." He ran a hand through his hair, the curls stubbornly falling back to tickle his cheeks. Such smooth cheeks. Mine were always rough with whiskers. "No, sadly, I was working through a punishment." He peeked at me with a chagrined look. "Saint Peter caught me peering at the book of life and was not pleased with my behavior. He reprimanded me as well as Michael and then sent me to work with Sister Evangelista in the raiment and robes department."

"Hamiel, please do not say that you were punished for doing that for me," I said, guilt weighing down on me like a wet wool coat.

He waved it off. "It's fine, no truly. It was well worth the time spent casting a cleaning touch to a few robes." I sighed. "No, please, it was fine. I learned a great deal about how to properly care for dupioni and chiffon." I felt terrible. "Livingstone, do not feel bad. I have a new respect for what it takes to keep our attire clean and shall endeavor to not be so clumsy. So, all is good and right! Please, wipe away your frown, for I have some news about your passing that I gleaned before Saint Peter found me with my nose in his book."

Some of the shame left me at that news. Not all, of course, but a smidgeon. "What did you discover?"

"There, now I see a spark of curiosity in your lovely eyes." Lovely eyes? Surely he

did not mean lovely as in lovely as in...lovely. "When I found your entry in the tome, it had a mark by your name. Not the usual mark that he who guards the gates of Heaven regularly leaves as one passes by him. This was a bold swipe of a quill, a half circle, flat side down. I had time to research that symbol during my time spent repenting my sin."

"It seems that you spent more time in the heavenly library than asking for forgiveness," I teased and got a flush of pink to rise to his pale face. My guilt was still heavy, but I did not wish to burden him with it. He was a man filled with empathy.

"I did my penance, rest assured. Sister Evangelista runs a very tidy laundry. As is said in the good book, the glory of kings is to search things out, which means that the Lord loves a curious mind! Which I have." He pushed his spectacles up his nose. I could not help but smile. "Yes, so that symbol turns out to be a rune from the Ebla era of Syria. A random thing, with only seven other runes that worked in conjunction with it, but this one means stasis, which given your existence, makes sense. However, it is also used to signify when a person's journey is stopped or is standing in wait."

"That does make sense. Malphus said my time in service to the dark lord is due to a deal of some sort that Lucifer made with my father," I confessed.

"Yes, that could be, but Peter uses that symbol to also mark a person whose life has ended before its designated time. Your death was either a terrible accident or a vile murder, and so your soul was locked in stasis at the moment of your passing."

"Murder?"

His amber eyes flared. "Do not fixate on that, for you seem a most genteel man. I am sure your death in that stable was a most unfortunate accident."

I sat back, stunned, that one word circling about inside my head. Murder. No,

definitely not. I had never crossed anyone in Avers Mill to such an extent that they would seek to end my life. I'd not taken anyone to task, although I wished to at times, for the poor treatment of horses or those of the serving class.

"There is nary a person that I can think of who would wish to end my life in such a ghastly way," I finally said, the white eyes of my horse now locked on me. Long ago, I surmised that horses could sense human emotions. I worked to soften my brow and gave Abyss a smile. "I am sure that it was an accident. It could have been a lightning strike or a lantern mishap." Though neither of those felt correct to me, but since I had no recollection of a large amount of time surrounding my death, I could not rely on hunches.

"Yes, that is the crux of the problem. We simply do not know, which led me to delve into some other light reading." He dug into his shoulder bag, removing a few apples, his small bible, and a scroll filled with chicken scratching. "I know my handwriting is a terrible sight, but I have to wonder if it has always been so. I made some notes about the possibility of a dream walk." I was still watching Abyss who, it seemed, looked more at ease as he munched on what were some well-tended marigolds in a window box outside the attorney's office. I'd have to leave a coin in the box for recompense once judgment had been made. "As you may know, or may not know, angels can enter dreams. Livingstone? Are you shaken still?"

"Apologies. I was lost in thought." I turned slightly to face him. A welcome ease washed over me just viewing his face. "Continue, please."

He studied me over the top of his spectacles for a moment, nodded, and returned to his notes. "Yes, so angels can enter the dreams of mortals. Gabriel appeared to Mary, Joseph dreamed of an angel, and a heavenly messenger came to Zechariah with a message from God, just to name a few incidents. So, entering dreams is rather commonplace. Now, the questions are varied but important." He shoved his glasses up. "One is that you are not wholly mortal. I could find no references as to angels

entering the dreams of those like us. But that does not preclude it from happening. Secondly, and this is a bigger issue, is if one of the winged ones would consent to do this for you.”

“That hardly seems likely. Most of your fellow rainbow walkers will not even speak with me. I highly doubt that an exalted angel would lower themselves to my level.”

“Hmph, yes, that’s ridiculous. Your position with the fallen one does not make you an inherently bad person. I do not understand why so many harbor dislike for others before even getting to know the person.” That was a question that I also had no answer for. “So yes, I would surmise that many of those above us would also not be willing to aid you in this endeavor. Which leaves me.”

“You?” He bobbed his head, gold curls bouncing like wild springs released from a box. “But you are not an angel.”

“True, but I do possess many of their traits.” I mulled over his suggestion. “If you are not comfortable...”

“No, it is...” I glanced away. “It is just that you may find my dreams to be...unsettling for a man of your divinity. I am fond of men.”

I stared at the back of Abyss’s black head as I waited for the condemnation to begin.

“Oh. Well. That is nothing of concern. I, too, am fond of man.”

My sight flew from my steed to my angel. No, not an angel and not mine. “Hamiel, I do not mean in that I am fond of man in a benevolent manner as one of your kind would look on all mankind as men. I mean that I lay with men. I know them in a biblical sense.”

He bit down on his lower lip. A motion that did unsettling things to my body. “I understood,” he whispered after releasing his lip. “I, too, find myself drawn to the male form. I suspect I did when I was mortal as well. Although, it’s possible it is just a certain man who draws my attention.”

I stared at him as his meek confession sank in. The odd sensation in my lower belly grew as he peeked at me from around a wayward curl. The urge to touch his smooth cheek was overwhelming. I shoved my hands between my thighs as I willed the now familiar ember of desire to go out. Instead, it radiated outward.

“Whoever that man is, he is indeed a lucky,” I managed to croak out like a toad with pharyngitis. An awkward moment passed as we sat there in stilted silence.

“You’re very kind, Livingstone.” His reply was as soft as kitten fur. “Uhm, yes, so, we could...” He cleared his throat. I glanced over to see him adjusting the papers on his thighs, a soft wind rustling them so his hands were needed to keep them in place. What would he do if I plucked one of his small hands from his papers to drop a kiss on his knuckles? And why was I thinking of flirting with a man when I had Theo mourning my loss back in Avers Mill? I was a terrible sort of man. “We could give it a try?”

“You wish to try to enter my dreams?” I pushed away my guilt to deal with later.

“Well yes, but only if you so wish it.” He stared at me with big, honey eyes and I felt myself willing to do whatever he bid of me. He need only ask and I would ride through the fires of Hell a hundred thousand times a day if it would bring forth one of his smiles.

“Yes, of course. I would like to understand what happened. Stasis. That is a worrisome notation I suspect, so if we can clarify my passing, then it’s possible I could move past the nightmares that plague me whenever I close my eyes.”

“Excellent. I shall go with you to your residence in purgatory.” He began stuffing his papers and my new books into his ivory satchel. I blinked dully.

“Now?”

“Mm, yes, now is fine. The gentleman we are waiting for is putting up a brave battle against the cancer that is riddled throughout his body. I suspect we have several hours before his spirit leaves his body and a judgment is made.” He paused, placing his notes back. “Unless you wish to do this later?”

“No, now is a good time. I just...can you enter the shadow space?” I handed him my newly purchased books to place in his bag.

“Oh yes, angels are allowed to travel into purgatory. Many go there to carry the prayers of those who wish to be purified to the ear of our Lord.” He tucked his satchel under his backside, sat up straight as an arrow, and smiled out at Abyss. “I am most thrilled to finally take a ride in this magnificent carriage!”

While I did wish to bring out the truth of the day of my death, I was nervous about taking this petite heavenly guide into my dismal little hovel. Still, the man was ready to go. It would reflect badly on me if I were to back out now. Granted, most thought ill of me as it was, Satan’s coachman and all that, but what others thought hurt far less than what Hamiel might think of me if I showed any sign of cowardice. He had taken punishment for me. The very least I could do was not shirk from what could be an unpleasant nap.

So, I picked up the reins, placed my hat firmly on my head, and looked to the side. Hamiel fairly bounced in his seat, his excitement was so large.

“You may wish to hang onto something. Abyss has a great love of speed,” I warned my passenger. He grabbed onto my biceps. The heat of his hands flowed into me,

washing away my worries. “Off we go then.”

I snapped the reins over the back of the magnificent black stallion as the carriage vibrated in soft pulses. The horse spit out his mouthful of flowers, laid back his ears, and hurtled into a gallop. The apples he had placed on the seat rolled off. Hamiel squealed, his fingers digging into my arm, as we sped through streets and woodland in the blink of an eye. His hoots of glee made

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:42 am

“ WATCH THE IMP !!” Hamiel shouted as we flew through the vortex between Earth and the realm of the shades. Delmar, who once again was doing who knew what at the portal, was knocked pointed ears over tailless rump to the side. Abyss and the carriage slowed, skidding over the dusty ground before coming to a rest in front of the stable. Hamiel hopped out of the brougham before it even stopped properly to dash over to Delmar lying beside the front gate of my dismal little front yard. I jumped down to the ground just as Delmar, still clutching the new wooden spoon that I had bought for him, righted himself then looked up at the sunlit stranger running at him. His red eyes went as round as the carriage wheels.

“Ah! No, not again! No, humans no here! No, no! Bring the crow man! Blood, brains, me scrub for days! Dig hole with hands. No, no, I do not like!” Delmar lobbed his spoon at Hamiel, then streaked off into the house, slamming the door while screeching at the top of his demonic lungs.

Hamiel stood at the gate, shocked and confused as he looked over his slim shoulder at me. “I only wished to tend to any wounds he may have incurred being run over by a horse.” He stooped down to pick up the spoon.

“He’ll be fine. This happens every time I leave. I suspect he is trying to pry open the doorway between realms. To what purpose I do not know, for he incinerates the moment he passes through the portal.” I watched the rainbow walker sigh and trudge back to me. “We shall unhitch Abyss.” He nodded, aiding me in the task. The summons burned dully in my chest. We had time. I hoped. After the stallion was in his stall resting, I motioned to the little cabin amongst the willows. When we left the barn, the spirits that usually came to greet me arrived with gusto. Surrounding Hamiel, they surged out of nowhere, hundreds of them.

I pushed them aside. “I was told to ignore them.”

“Oh no, that is not what they need at all. They simply wish to move on.” He opened his hand and a flittering spark of what remained of a person’s soul settled in his palm. His eyes fluttered, long yellow lashes coming to rest on his flushed cheeks. The others in the cloud came closer, bouncing off my face and body like a swarm of starving bot flies. “They think we can aid them. They sense moribund as they do angels. I wish I could deliver them from this lost hellscape, but I cannot carry their invocations to the heavens.”

He blew on the small gray mote. It seemed reluctant to go. The others milled about us. I swept them out of our way, taking Hamiel, who was close to tears, by the elbow to lead him into the house. Once inside, he drew in a shuddering breath. “So many souls that seek freedom. Can you help them, at least the ones who are bound for the depths?”

“I was told no, that they were sentenced to this nothingness.” I removed my top hat and placed it on the table. The cabin smelled of roasting meat. A large haunch of venison that I had acquired cooked slowly over the fire, the fat dripping into the flames to fill the cabin with glorious smells mixed with a hazy smoke. The fanciful screen pushed aside to accommodate cooking, something that unsettled me for if an ember sprang from the hearth...

I swallowed down the surge of panic as I glanced about to find Delmar atop the cupboard, hunkered down and fangs bared. “Their freedom from purgatory is not mine to grant. I am sorry. I see how upsetting that was for you.” I tossed the spoon to the imp, who caught it neatly while glaring at my guest.

Hamiel dabbed at his dewy eyes with a wrinkled white handkerchief. “I had heard rumors that this realm was rife with sadness beyond belief.” His gold eyes swept over the cabin. It had not improved much since I had come awake here several weeks ago.

I had bought a rug for in front of the hearth, not that I ever stood on it, but there it lay. A few trinkets sat atop the mantle. It felt a woefully horrid place to bring a soul of such light and love. “Your home here is quite...homey.”

I snorted. “It is a dismal place, but I thank you for your kindness. Hamiel, this is my friend Delmar.” I waved a hand at the imp glowering down at us. “He is my valet, my cook, and my boot shiner.”

“Ah, well, good day to you, Delmar. I have often admired the fine clothes that you dress your master in as well as his shiny boots.” Hamiel bowed politely.

Delmar shook his spoon at us. “I no clean up blood when bad times come. No more. You make brains, you clean brains!”

With that pronouncement, he spit on his hand, wiped it across his black brow, and curled up like a cat atop the cupboard. One eye open and one pointed ear twitching.

“Dare I ask?” Hamiel enquired.

I shook my head. “I’ll explain sometime later. I suppose I should rest now?”

“Mm, yes, that would be recommended. Unless you wish to fall asleep standing? A skill that I find most impressive amongst horses.” I snickered as I sat on the lounge facing the fire to remove my boots. I took off my coats, leaving only my shirt and black tie. “Feel free to make yourself comfortable.” So I loosened my cravat tie but left my shirt buttoned as I lay down on the needlework settee. “Let me fetch a pillow.”

I began to protest, but he’d already darted off. I stared at the flames tickling the roast, my heart beating rapidly as it always did when near fire. With the help of Hamiel, I might finally be able to sort through the quagmire of horror that surrounded my

death. Mayhap, once I knew how things had transpired, my fear of fire would die down. I doubted it would ever fully be extinguished, but perhaps I would not retch or feel faint whenever I arrived in the hells. Even that would be a huge blessing.

“Here we are.” Hamiel arrived at my side, my bed pillow in hand, and placed it gently behind my head. “Oh dear, this settee is a tad small for a man of your stature. Should we venture to your bed and—”

A vision of us lying abed, tangled like honeysuckle vines around a pergola, flashed to life. “I mean, that is very kind, but I am quite comfortable here.”

To prove my point, I lay down, propping my legs over one arm of the settee. Hamiel glanced at my calves resting on the arm but said nothing. I could see that his clever mind was hard at work, though. “I nap here like this often.”

One slim golden eyebrow arched, but he said nothing to refute my lie. Naps were rare for me, sleep even more so. I slept in dribs and drabs, grabbing a few hours here and there before either a summons woke me or I catapulted from my lumpy bed bound in a fiery nightmare.

“As you wish.” He grabbed one of the moth-eaten armchairs and dragged it noisily across the floor to sit beside me. “What I shall do is, once you are drowsy, I will place my hands to your face thusly.” He reached over to touch my temples with his soft fingertips. My body responded instantly as waves of easement flowed over me. My lashes fluttered. “I will attempt to follow your mind as it weaves into slumber. Entering your dreams may be rather clunky as I am a novice and probably lack the training required to speak to you as you sleep, but I hope that I can view what you are seeing. Much like Morpheus who could view dreams. I will not be able to interact with or influence your visions but will witness what I can and then relay what I saw to you. We might be able to pick up something that your fears are blocking out.”

“Yes, that sounds good.” I was nervous beyond measure. Hamiel gave me a kind smile and sat back with his hands in his lap. I closed my eyes. Moments ticked by. The venison spat, and the fire danced. The sound of Delmar muttering in his nook and the soft click-click-click of souls striking the windows like moths drawn to a heavenly flame filled my head. I shifted and sighed and forced myself to think of carriage parts instead of pondering the beauty of the man seated so primly a mere foot away. “You seem restless.”

“I am, I am so sorry,” I confessed after releasing a hearty sigh.

“No worries. I think you need a distraction. Let me fetch your new books. I shall read to you and maybe that will quiet your distractions.”

“That may work,” I admitted, opening my eyes to watch him remove his hands and then dig into his satchel. He took out both of my books, laid one on the floor, and then gently opened the other.

I watched in silence as he pushed a curl from his brow, nudged his glasses up his nose, and settled those beautiful harvest wheat eyes to the page.

“Canto first. The Chase.” His voice was as pure as a first snowfall, as gentle as a fawn, and lilting like the song of the oriole. I let my eyes close, folded my hands on my chest, and focused on the words falling from his soft lips.

“Harp of the North! that moldering long hast hung,

On the witch-elm that shades Saint Fillan’s spring,

And down the fitful breeze thy numbers flung,

Till envious ivy did around thee cling,

Muffling with verdant ringlet every string...”

My thoughts began to drift. I tried to picture the Scottish landscape, the deep greens, the red stags, and the bitter cold lochs. The land of Caledonia came to life for a few moments and then it shifted, as dreams want to do, to a pasture in Massachusetts. I stood beside a dapple gelding, no tack on the horse, as a small orb the size of a blue jay hovered about me, as if watching the scene unfold. The smell of sheep was strong. White ewes with lambs dotted the landscape. The sky above us was vacant of coloration, yet I could hear the bleats of the sheep. Among a stand of white birch, I was facing Theo, his face a mask of anger the likes of which I'd never seen before.

“Theodore, this cannot continue,” I pleaded as he shook his dark head. “You are recently betrothed to Lillianne Cabott. Surely you cannot wish to continue our relationship while you are lawfully wed?”

“She’s just a means to an end,” he argued as he stalked the trees, the spring sun low in the west. The air was cold, our breaths fogging in front of us. “I’m only marrying the wench to satisfy my father. I do not care for her. Not one whit! Nothing like I care for you.”

I shook my head. “No, Theo, no. I cannot in good faith lay with a married man.”

“What does a sodomite such as yourself care about faith?!” His shout echoed off the hillsides. I was thankful I had chosen this spot several miles outside of Avers Mill for this unpleasant talk. “Faith! You suck my cock and then talk of faith! I will not have it.” He went to slap me, but I caught his hand. He spit in my face. I released his wrist to clear the spittle from my cheek. “You are a sickening bastard of a cock tease. I will see you dead before I have to spend the rest of my days watching you mince about town with some other poor besotted fool while I am plowing that sow wife of mine!”

“Theodore...”

He shoved around me, flung himself onto the back of his racing horse, and rode off flinging vulgarities back at me over his shoulder.

Then, as if a string got snapped, the countryside blurred, and the soft winds blowing over Farmer Morton's sheep pasture morphed into the sound of flames roaring along dry wood, gorging on mounds of hay, and crackling along the walls as I clawed at the tack room door.

"Please, please, help me!"

Flames danced up my trousers. I flailed at my pant legs, my lungs beginning to sear. Terror set in wholly. I pounded louder. Screamed to the gods. To anyone. Please, dear God, please...

Muffled weeping on the other side of the door.

"I cannot see you with another. I am sorry," Theo called through the door. "I warned you. I told you not to leave me. This is all your fault, Livingstone!"

"Theodore!" I bellowed, then fell into a fit of coughing.

Smoke filled my sight, my throat, my lungs...

Tears clouded my eyes, and I hit the door once more. My shoulder popped out of its socket just as flames lunged from the wall to my shirt. I spun from the door, arm dangling, to watch the blackened beams overhead buckle and fall down upon me. A final scream broke free.

Nothingness. A voice. Male. Pleasant, yes, so pleasant. Whispered words beside my ear. His voice was like honeyed wine.

“Your debt comes due, Livingstone Wright.”

I curled into his embrace as I grieved...

I came awake with a bellow.

Hamiel’s voice, soft and calm, floated into the confusion as his warm hands fell from my temples. I lashed out, still bound in the fire, the haze of reality clinging tenaciously to the fog of dreams. I fell from the settee—yet again—to land on my hands and knees. The tumble was short, the pain to my kneecaps sharp. I sat back on my heels, eyes wide but not fully seeing, chest heaving.

Tears flowed freely followed by huge rasping sobs. Unlike the previous times, I did not face the aftermath alone. Lean, strong arms enveloped me, the scent of spring flowers, the touch of winsome curls on my damp face.

“I have you, Livingstone. You are safe in your home.” Hamiel’s tender words were like a balm. I leaned into them and him and pulled him into me. My arms encircled him, tugging him even closer. I buried my face into his hair, inhaling his unique scent, as the shudders began to slow. The tears stopped. Yet I did not let go. I did not know if I could. He was soothing in ways I did not understand. “Easy now.” He rubbed my back and my shoulders as I fought to find some modicum of control. Lashes damp, I opened my eyes to find the cabin just as it had been when the poem had begun. Delmar sat atop the cupboard, eyes as round as dinner plates, his spoon pressed into his scrawny chest. “I have you. You are safe here in my arms.”

“I wish to never leave them,” I confessed into supple ringlets. No truer words had ever left my lips. His arms were mecca.

“Then I shall hold you for eternity,” he whispered, leading my head to his slim shoulder. My back bowed uncomfortably in this position as he was much shorter than

me. The crick in my spine be damned. Let my back stay bowed like a crone's.

The tug of a summons lit up my chest. Damnation, this job was the worst. If I could sever my employment, I would. Leaning back, I gazed at Hamiel, his cheeks also wet with tears. Before I could stop myself, my hand came to his face. Using my thumb, I cleared a glistening droplet from his skin.

“You are the kindest, most beautiful man I have ever met,” I whispered as he gazed at me through smudged lenses. It came to me then, as I studied angelic beauty, to question why he wore spectacles. Did not all his earthly infirmities cease when he was accepted into Heaven? I would ask momentarily, but for now, I wished only to revel in his grace.

“As are you.” He batted damp lashes, and before I could thank him properly, he pressed his lips to mine. Unsure if this was proper, I nonetheless fell into the wild kiss. My arms cinched tighter around him, sealing his mouth to mine as his fingers dove into my hair. His lips were pillowy, ripe, and opened with just the slightest touch of my tongue. A madness took me over then. Hamiel, a willowy man of half my size, moaned softly as he deepened the kiss. Our tongues tangled as I tasted sweet apple. My hands roamed over his back, finding his slim waist, then clasped his hips tightly as we explored each other's mouths.

We gasped at the same time. My chest ached as if Abyss had kicked me. The summons would not be ignored for much longer.

Hamiel, his cheeks now rosy, stared at me as if I held all manner of ancient secrets. “I have longed to do that for many weeks. I dreamed of it when I was pressing robes. Did I move too quickly? Was I too ungentlemanly? Oh bright stars, I acted most unbecomingly!”

I stole another kiss, a tender one, to quiet his spiral. “You were perfection.”

“We need to speak about your dream before we are separated.” He ran a finger along my whiskery cheek, sat back on his heels, and righted his white suit. His arousal was easy to see through his satin trousers. Mine throbbed in my pants as well. Plainly being half dead did not kill a man’s libido. “I was witness to a personal moment, and for that, I apologize. I did not...my thinking going into your dream was to see only the nightmare, but...” he stammered and then fell silent, his chin dropping as he closed his eyes in shame. “I did not wish to intrude on such a painfully private moment.”

“You did not intrude,” I said, tilting his chin up so he could see how earnest I was. “I invited you in to my visions. And I am glad of it, Hamiel. So very glad. I have been drawn to you since that first meeting. You fell over a chunk of firewood and I was smitten, but I was bound in such chagrin about being attracted to you while being romantically involved with another. But that has been proven to be wrong. I was free of him.” The joy I felt over my shamefacedness over being unfaithful to Theo evaporated like water sprinkled on a hot skillet. The man I had been intimate with, whom I had felt gentle affection for, had been privy to my death. He’d been there. On the other side of that door, crying, yet unwilling to free me. That knowledge sent me back to my ass in shock. “He killed me...”

“It seems so.” Hamiel sat beside me, uncaring of his white trousers, and took my hand. “I have no words to express my sorrow.”

“What can be said in the face of such betrayal?” I whispered, clasping his small hand in mine. “Given our last meeting, and the threat against me, I can only surmise that he made true his vow to see me dead.”

Hamiel sighed deeply. “The fire does seem purposefully set by the man. I wonder if he passed in that fire or if he still lives? Many times a crime of passion involves two lives lost. I can check the book of lives to see if his name is listed.”

“Hamiel, no, I cannot allow you to do that.” I shook my head strongly. “You have been punished once on my account, and I could not live with the guilt if you were to be disciplined again. There is another way to discover if Theo yet lives. I shall go back to Avers Mill to locate him. He works in the town hall during the day and returns to his small residence on his father’s property at night. Both places I know well.”

His amber eyes filled with sadness. “Will seeing him bring back memories of a lost love?”

“No, I think not. Whether he still lives or not, he is my murderer, and any feelings I may have had he has tarnished beyond repair.” I turned his hand over to rub his smooth palm with my thumb. His lips parted slightly at the intimacy. “I had broken it off with him before the fire, so even if he died in the blaze in a misguided taking of his own life over our relationship failing, our affair would have ended, regardless. I do have morals.”

“I know that. I do, Livingstone. I see your kindness every time we are together. Cling to that empathy and humanity. It will keep your heart pure even if you are bound to the lord of lies.”

I smiled shakily at the infusion of comfort his touch gave me.

The fire licked at the roast, fat oozing from it to sputter on the hot logs. Delmar, as quiet as a cat, had climbed down from his perch to hide behind the dining table, his long pointed ears drooping down. Finally, I shook free of the trauma of the dream and the revelations it had brought. A sharp jolt to my midsection startled me. I looked at Hamiel. He, too, looked pained.

“We must go,” he whispered. “If you wish for me to accompany you when you seek out your...the man who...the person that...” He shrugged. “I do not know what to

term him, but if you wish me to go with you when you seek out more of the truth, then all you need to do is ask and I shall go.”

I leaned over to touch my lips to his. A lightness lifted my soul as he breathed into the kiss, his aura seeping into all the dark corners of my heart.

“I think that’s something I need to do alone, but we will spend more time together. If you wish, of course?”

“Yes, yes, I do so wish it.” His smile twisted into a grimace. “We must go. The judgment is being made as we speak.”

I rose to my boots, pulled him to his feet, and ran the back of my fingers along his jawline. I thought to say more but did not wish to in front of Delmar or while the summons pulled at us so painfully. There would be time for us to explore our newfound admiration of each other.

If there was one thing we had ample supplies of, it was time and the dying.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:42 am

AVERS MILL WAS QUIET this Sunday morn.

Sitting atop Abyss, leaving the carriage behind at my shadow-riddled home, I rode through the muddy dirt streets with a myriad of emotions lodged in my chest. The memories of my life here, good and bad, flowed over me like a summer shower. The general store was closed as was the town hall and the barbershop. I rounded the corner. There stood what was left of the town stable.

“Whoa,” I said, squeezing Abyss behind the girth with both legs as I took a deeper seat in the worn leather saddle.

The hell stallion was a magnificent animal, incredibly well-trained but always eager to push his boundaries. Riding through the portal betwixt realms in a saddle was quite an experience. How I’d stayed in my seat was down to strong thighs and a stronger will to not die a second time. I’d lost my top hat, so I would need to find another. A task that I was sure would be harder than leaving coins behind for seeds, drawers, or pork loins. I would have to track down Malphus, who had been absent whenever I arrived with a new passenger, to request more funds. I ran my hand down his neck as I sat, reins loose, hands on the pommel, to stare at the charred shell of my aunt and uncle’s livelihood.

What a loss. Not only to Norman and Hester but to the town itself. With no stable to curry and feed the horses that came through on this busy route, then riders and stage coaches would simply bypass Avers Mill for the next town with a sizable stable.

The largest regret, and I had many, was that I was partly responsible for the loss. While I had not started the fire that killed me, it was my actions that predicated it.

Telling Theo that I was no longer willing to be his lover had brought about this tragedy. It could be a triple tragedy if he, too, had perished in the inferno. Given that murder is the sixth commandment, his soul must have been judged to be evil, which means somewhere in the vast pits and fire caves of the underworld, Theodore Clifton toiled under the lashes of the overlords of Hell.

If he passed in the blaze. The vindictive part of me hoped it was so and that right now, on this peaceful Sunday morning, the man who had snuffed out my life was cowering at the bird-like feet of Malphus. Hamiel would chide me for those thoughts, and rightfully so, for he was a good, reverent man. I, on the other hand, was a petty one, it seemed. Could this be why I had settled into the role of coachman with such ease? Maybe laying deep within me was a wickedness I had never known existed.

I rode on, leaving the shell of the stables behind, the gentle roll of the horse under me as we passed the small bank on the outskirts of town felt natural. Abyss had a fine gait and enjoyed his head, which I would give to him once we finished our excursion. Whether this was considered a bad ride or not I would soon find out. If a lashing was in my future then so be it. I would at least know the answer to one dark mystery. The other, this familial curse, could only be answered by two people. Malphus or Lucifer. I doubted Malphus would tell me, for what fun was there to be had in giving the cursed the answers they sought. No, I would need to speak to The Tempter himself, and that would be a ride through the rings of Hell. Someday, perhaps, my ignored temper would get the better of me. But for now, for this day, I was seeking answers to a different query.

The lane leading to the mayor's property was quiet. The sugar maples fully leafed now, and the sound of small birds leaping from bough to branch as the sun warmed the fields was rich in my ears. I missed the song of birds, the buzz of honeybees, and the gentle whisper of a warm breeze through leaves. Purgatory was silent, the skies gray, the ground dusty. No barking dogs, laughing children, or the lowing of cows with full udders. Sound was a blessing I had never taken into consideration before,

but now I cherished it each time I left the in-between. And then there were the aromas of summer...

The clomp of hooves on a soft packed dirt road joined in the late morn concerto. The bells of the Baptist church rang out, signaling the ten o'clock hours. Services would start within an hour.

We rounded the corner, Abyss tossing his head in boredom as the mayoral home came into view. I pulled back to a stop as the family was outside getting ready to depart for Sunday services. The mayor, his good wife, his son, and his son's fiancée. My breath caught in my throat as I gazed at Theo aiding Lillianne into a fine blue carriage pulled by two sleek brown horses. The Cliftons were quite wealthy in horseflesh and were not averse to showing it off. Theo helped the petite redhead up into the carriage, then barked at the young negro stable hand for moving the portable carriage steps too soon. The child sent off with a box to his ears as Theo climbed into the carriage with ease. Lillianne's servant, a slim, dark-skinned woman, rode with the footman in the back.

I'd always confronted Theo about his misuse of those below him, even though I, too, was technically his inferior. Seated here watching him, myself now a moribund, not wholly dead or alive at his hand, I questioned myself as to what I had ever seen in the man. Yes, I had been incredibly lonely, and yes, he was a reasonably attractive man who was fond of male flesh, but he was an unkind human being. He was nothing like Hamiel. Seeing Theo chatting with his future bride-to-be as if he had not promised to end my life and then seemingly had done just that sickened me. Revulsion at myself ran rampant, only to be taken over with a newfound worry for Lillianne.

She was a sweet girl, the daughter of a banker in the next county, and wholly unknowing of what kind of man she was betrothed to. Someone should warn her about Theo before she does something that he dislikes and harms her—or worse.

I eased Abyss back into a small clump of mountain laurel as they passed. Foolish, I know, since they could not see us. The carriage rumbled along, dust rising as the Cliftons headed into town to attend church as if their only son had not recently sent a man to his early grave. Right, yes, allegedly sent a man to his grave. Hamiel reminded me of that fact whenever we were waiting for another soul to pass. He'd cite the need for proof. I'd then ask what good would it do if we had it. Then, I could counter that unless we had a means of knowing the weather that night, we could only go on assumptions as well as a heated promise to see me dead. It all pointed to Theo setting that fire, but Hamiel wished for more, and so, as he wanted, he was hoping to speak to Ariel. As I cared for Hamiel greatly, I reined in my need to do something—what that something was, I had no clue—and agreed to bide my time.

Abyss shifted under me. “Yes. boy, I know. Let us ride.” I gave the blue carriage a final dark look, then leaned low over the hell steed. “Run until you cannot run any further,” I whispered in his black ear, and we were off. The wind in my ears was deafening. It blew my worries away, cleansing the upset from me as only a hard gallop could. When we reached the portal, Abyss was lathered, I was tousled, and we both felt better. For now.

The next summons came three days after the trip to Avers Mill. I'd spent the time between jobs toiling in the garden behind my home. Delmar had been some help in that he stood beside me with a rake—yet another item I had found in the barn along with a manure fork and a rusty shovel—waving it about to keep the forlorn souls from bothering me. I'd chastised him for swinging at the balls of waning life energy, but he persisted, saying they were bad people. This coming from an imp birthed from the gurgling calderas of Gehenna. During that lull, I'd worked and planted over four rows of vegetables, then watered them and stood back, shirtsleeves rolled to my forearms, with my scarlet gardening assistant at my side, to survey the work.

“I wonder if they will grow without sun.” I looked down at Delmar.

“No sun here. Only gloom. Gloom. Gloom. Gloom. So much gloom.” He ran off to chase souls with his rake. I’d never had a child, nor would I now, but I had to assume having an imp was much like having a perpetual four-year-old.

I’d been more than ready to leave the shadowland when the next calling hit me. Within an hour, I was parked outside a blacksmith shop, eyeing a fine top hat in a haberdasher’s shop window, when a sunbeam broke through the thick clouds. Smiling, I ran my hands over my hair, as Hamiel appeared from the ray, his excitement at seeing me showing in his wide grin.

“Livingstone!” He ran at me, arms open, curls bouncing. I swept him up into the carriage as if he were a feather. His laugh rang out like a Stradivarius violin. I barely had him settled on the coach seat when he slid his fingers into my hair and kissed me. Overjoyed to have him in my arms again, I met his kiss with equal vigor, moving him into my lap. He shuddered at the brush of his shaft over mine, his tongue slipping into my mouth. We drank deeply from each other. “I have so much to tell you. Kiss me again. I have dreamed of your arms and lips for days!”

“Truly?” I asked, brushing tiny pecks along his dewy cheeks and eyes, his lashes fluttering as my lips touched them. He melted into me, his long neck exposed to me. Was it beyond sinful to want to touch and taste this heavenly being? If so, then so be it. What could be done to me? Send my soul to hell? Banish me to a dark, lifeless realm? Place me in the employ of Lucifer for who knows how long?

“Oh yes, truly. I could barely contain myself when the summons came.” He writhed around, his erection grinding into mine, causing me to lose most of my reason and all of my ability to speak. Wicked thoughts of peeling him out of his white coats to feast on his ivory skin overwhelmed me. “This is...I am unsure of what this is, but...oh I do want more.”

His innocence was so appealing. I longed to lay him down and shower him with

affection, show him the way of love between two men, and carry him into the heavens in my arms.

“As do I,” I confessed, peppering his brow with kisses. I cradled his face in my hands and gazed into golden eyes as rich as any king’s treasure. His cheeks were pink, his round spectacles askew, and his lips swollen. “But we must go slowly. I do not know what will befall you if it is discovered that you and I are...” I fumbled for the correct term. Even though my heart and soul cried out for more, I knew that he was naïve about such things as passion. His memory of his life before his death was gone, taking with it any recollection of intimacy. He was virginal in many ways, and that realization helped to douse the fire in me. Just slightly. Enough that I could grasp a sliver of control.

“Rapturously smitten,” he supplied. Yes, that fits quite well.

“That is perfect.” I lifted him from my lap despite his moan of irritation. With a soft grunt, he was placed on the seat. I smoothed out his lapels, patted his curls, and straightened his spectacles. His pout was amusing. “Do you see that hat in the window?”

“Yes, it is a fine hat,” he stiffly replied, his irritation obvious.

“I think I shall buy it.” I gave his knee a pat, climbed from the carriage, adjusted myself, and slipped unseen into the haberdashery. A small old man dozed softly behind the counter, his chin on his chest, his wiry arms resting on his belly. With a practiced ease, something that I was not pleased to have acquired, I lifted the hat from the stand. Placing it atop my head, I was happy to find that it fit well. I placed my last remaining dollar on the windowsill, nodded at the dozing shopkeeper, and then slipped back out. Hamiel was still pouting, but his temper evaporated when he saw me in my new hat.

“You look quite dapper,” he called as I strode up to him, strutting like Beau Brummel himself. I bowed gallantly while waiflike children dashed by in a game of tag. The sounds of a bustling village were enjoyable to me. My home was quiet, deathly so.

“Thank you as do you.” I climbed up, sat down, and placed my hat between us, using it as a barrier for my greedy hands. “So, tell me, what is this news you were so excited to share?”

He sat sideways on the seat, his gaze moving over my face, his pink lips entirely too kissable. “I truly do get lost in your eyes.”

“And I yours,” I confessed. “The news?”

“Oh yes, I’m a bit befuddled. Seeing you does that to me.” He pulled his satchel to his thighs and rifled through it, his tongue caught between his teeth. A horse and buggy passed. Abyss snorted at the roan as it pranced past. “So, I had a most enjoyable visit with Ariel. She is a very pleasant sort who takes her job of overseeing the planet’s elements with great pride. Now, of course, the Lord commands storms, but Ariel has knowledge of anything that affects nature, and a thunderstorm that strikes a stable and kills many horses would certainly be under her watchful eye as she protects animals and plants. To that end, she vividly remembers an outcry from injured horses on the seventeenth of June,” he glanced up from his scrolls filled with notations, his eyes alive with excitement, “in Avers Mill.”

I let that information soak in. “The horses, did they all perish?”

His expression softened. “Such a kind heart you have. No, not all of them. She could not save six. I am sorry. But she is healing fourteen who were burned or injured themselves when the people began to show up to free them. So, that is a good percentage of them on the mend, Livingstone.”

Yes, yes, it was. I hoped that Delilah had escaped. She had always been one of my favorites. A lovely docile mare with dark brown hair and a creamy yellow mane. Many people say that animals are dumb. I disagree strongly.

“I am glad to hear it. That was eating at me. So, now I know the dates on my tombstone, that is if anyone has paid to have one erected in the Avers Mill Cemetery.”

“I am certain your relatives have done so, and with great care.” I nodded for his sake. My great-aunt most certainly would have done something, but my great-uncle? I suspected his only regret was losing a strong back. He and I had never gotten on well. “She also mentioned that during her observations, no storms were in that area, which narrows the causes of your fatal fire to human error or murderous intent.”

“I cannot accept that someone would have been so careless,” I stated. The anger of knowing that not only had I perished, but six innocent animals had lost their lives that night burning brightly. “No, no one that worked there would be so haphazard.”

“I am sure not, and you most especially, but they are only human, Livingstone, and young ones at that. Lads are known to be reckless. I’m sure it was not intentional, but there is a small possibility, is there not?”

I shook my head vehemently. Hamiel sat quietly at my side, chewing on his lower lip, his glances in my direction filled with patient concern. Several moments ticked by as we sat there in silence. I took a long, cleansing breath and released it slowly through my nose.

“There is a small possibility,” I ground out.

He sighed wearily as he nudged his spectacles up his nose. “That was not said with much conviction.”

“That is because none was felt.”

I glanced to the side. He looked crestfallen. I felt his guilt in my breast like the steady thump of the summoning when it first hits. “A threat to a life is something of import, and when it is levied by a man with such anger, it should not be ignored. His own words, coupled with the fact there were no major weather conditions in the area, point a rather large finger of guilt at Theo. I know you wish to think the best of people. That is an endearing quality, but I find that I cannot sift through the ashes of my life to find forgiveness. I hope my dark thoughts do not sour what you feel for me, but those are my honest feelings. I will not lie to you simply to ensure that I can continue to sample your sweet lips when we are together.”

His exhale was mighty, lifting his slim chest under his pristine white tailcoat and shirt. “I understand, Livingstone. The man does seem to be strongly linked to your demise. I wish we had more evidence. Assuming guilt without solid proof is a dangerous thing.”

I nodded. He was right. I was not a lawyerly sort, but even a man with my level of education knew that you could not simply accuse a person of a crime without hard evidence. A threat was not enough. If people could be sent to the gallows for menacing another, there would be bodies swinging all over. While I knew what he said was true, it did not lessen my gut feeling that Theodore had killed me.

“I wish I could say that I did not harbor these malicious thoughts of vengeance, but they linger. They are not godly, this I know. They are vile and bitter, but I only seek some sort of justice for his crimes.” I let my eyes drift shut as the hubbub of normal lives continued to carry on around us. “What sort of justice a man like me can receive, I do not know. There may not be any, but I will do what I can to assure that others are not caught in his web.”

Hamiel slipped his fingers into mine and dropped his golden curls to my shoulder. A

generous wave of condolence engulfed me, his comforting essence alleviating some of the rancor I felt for Theo. I lifted his hand to my lips, inhaled the summer sweetness of his skin, and placed a small kiss on his knuckles. “Forgive me for being so dogged by this. We share such limited time and here I sit snarling about an act that I cannot change. He may continue to live his life unfettered and carefree.”

“It is understandable to be pained. If he is responsible, and I do have to agree, the evidence is strong that he did harm you grievously, then he shall pay. It may not be while he walks the earth, but when it is time for his final judgment, his sins will be accounted for.”

“And it may be me who ferries him to the pits.” I could imagine it now, and it felt glorious.

“Though I do not know how long you are to be the coachman. Has none of your superiors ever told you?” A stray cat darted across the street, followed closely by a larger feline. A tom on the trail of a hot queen, no doubt. The drive for sex was strong across the species. I know firsthand that a stallion can scent a mare in estrus from several miles away. “Livingstone?”

“Apologies.” I snapped back to this small street, the wafting smell of a nearby tannery now blowing under my nose. “I was thinking about horses.”

That made him chuckle. A lovely sound indeed. “You do seem to have an affinity for them. Tell me about your youth. Were you always an admirer of fine horseflesh?”

Possibly from hearing the words “fine horseflesh,” Abyss tossed his head up and down as if to ensure we both looked upon his beauty.

“As far as I recall, yes, I was always drawn to horses.” I removed my hat from between us and placed it on Hamiel’s head. The hat slid down to rest on his tiny ears,

and he grinned like a jack-o'-lantern. "My childhood was one of hard work and loneliness. My parents had died, and my great-aunt took me in. She was happy to have a small child as her womb had been barren. My great-uncle, a taskmaster with a predilection for hitting anyone who did not jump to his bidding, was less enthralled but felt the payback of food for labor was worthwhile. Until I began to grow."

"I imagine it must take a goodly amount to feed a young man of your size." He sat up straight with my oversized hat on his head, blond curls poking out around the shell of his ear. I pushed a random lock back, which made him titter. "Did you not play at all as a little boy?" He wiggled about on the hard seat, tucking his muddy boots under his backside, to stare at me with big golden eyes. "I should imagine you were quite good at boyish games."

"I was not well-liked by the other children. I was poorly dressed, lived in a horse stable, and had an elderly woman at my side most of the time. The other boys picked at my lack of parents as if it were a scab. For many years, their taunts made me bleed inside. Then, as I grew larger, their taunts dwindled. The first time I punched one of them in the nose and broke it was the last time they called me out."

His face fell. "Did you not have any good times as a youngster?"

"Why do you wish to hear of my youth? It is not a tale of wonder or excitement. I read a great deal, spent most of my time with an old lady or horses, and worked under a man who would rather use a willow switch than words to make his point."

"I just...I seem to yearn for that which I do not have. Memories. I do apologize for raking you over hot coals in order to feed my own needs. Your past is yours to speak of as you wish. Forgive me, please."

"There is no need to ask for forgiveness. I sometimes forget that your recollections are wiped away when you are chosen for heavenly duty." I chucked his chin up to

look into his eyes. As gold as a summer sun, they were bright, holding all manner of succor. “What I do not understand is why that is so. The Lord must see how it pains you to be bereft of the memory of your loved ones.”

“But he does see, and that is why we are washed clean of all earthly attachments. The pain of leaving them behind would be too great. We are given unto his service wholly, much like the sisters and brothers who devote themselves to their callings to take vows of chastity, silence, and or poverty. Those are solemn covenants among the living who are called. I like to imagine that I lived a good life, albeit a short one, and was chosen to serve on the merit of my days on Earth.”

I smiled at the sheer joy in his words. That he was proud to be a rainbow walker was evident. Having to forfeit his memories of his earthly days seemed a small price for him to pay. I wished my life had been one of such brightness to garner being called to heavenly service.

“I find your words enlightening. Thank you. You find great joy in your work.”

“And you do not. Tell me again of this pact that so bounds you to the fallen one. I know that agreements between humans and Lucifer are common, but to hand over a child to the dark one seems...”

He bit down on his bottom lip.

“Yes, there are no words.” I looked away from him to the sky where dark clouds were moving in. Rain was on the wind. Women began pulling down the wash from the lines spread high above the side alleys. “I do not know of the pact, or what it all entails, but discovering why I was offered up like a spring lamb is eating at me like a cancer. Much like knowing that Theo is about to wed a woman who has no inkling about the man she has been pledged to.”

“That is understandable. I want to help in some small way, but we have no knowledge of the deals that are made by the fallen ones. I could visit this young woman in her dreams since we proved I could enter your dreams.”

The distant rumble of thunder rolled over the village. A goose herder hurried her flock past us, the white geese honking as they ran, wings out as the soft pit-pat of raindrops hit the roof of the carriage. The offer was enticing, to be sure, but the moment to reply was lost when Hamiel’s eyes glowed brightly.

“Judgment has been made,” he whispered as if in a state. I nodded, for I, too, had felt the verdict being delivered. The soul, a massive man with arms as thick as oaks, floated from within the smithy shop. I listened for the wail of loved ones, but none could be heard. The bearded spirit seemed reluctant to go. Most were. His shadowy eyes fell on us. I could tell he was not mine to escort. “I must go,” Hamiel whispered as he removed my hat. “We shall talk more. I will think of you every moment that we are parted.”

“And I you,” I softly replied.

He pecked my cheek before leaping down into the soft rain. The smithy wiped his hand on his leather apron, the worry leaving his face as Hamiel took his hand. The storm cloud overhead parted for just a moment to allow a beam of soft yellow light to hit the street. They stepped into it, the walker and the smithy, and then dissolved into flecks of red, yellow, blue, and violet before the thunderhead overtook the sky once more.

I let the rain beat down on me. It brought back memories of being a young lad who never missed a chance to dart out into a downpour simply to splash about in puddles. Many a time Aunt Hester would run out to join me, her laugh loud as we joined hands to sing “Ring around the Rosy” as we were drenched to the skin. I missed her. She brought a small amount of kindness and mothering that I sorely needed. I picked up

the reins, water dripping from the brim of my new hat to my thighs, and gave the straps a light flick.

“To Avers Mill,” I called to the horse. Time spent seeking out my great-aunt called. Whether it would be uplifting to see her or not was yet to be discovered.

I rushed to slap my hand to my hat as the horse rocketed from the silent blacksmith shop. We rode into the worst of the storm. The rain hitting my face and hands like shrapnel until we skidded to a jolting stop that nearly tossed me out of my seat. In the middle of a muddy road deep in the woodlands of Massachusetts stood a sodden Malphus.

He did not look pleased.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:42 am

THE CARRIAGE SLID ON THE SOFT DIRT road, whipping about to nearly slap into Abyss. It took all my skill and strength to not only right the panicked horse but not to have the damn brougham flip over and kill me, the horse, and the fucking fool who stood in the road.

Anger, white-hot and livid, engulfed me. I sprang from the carriage to run my hands over Abyss to ensure he was unharmed. I had no knowledge of if the stallion could be hurt at all, but that mattered not. I rubbed his sides, checked his rigging, and once I was assured there were no outward injuries to be seen, I ran my hands down his legs. He allowed it, but barely, given his mood felt to be as dark as mine.

When I finished checking my horse, I turned, with fists clenched, and stalked toward the crow-like ass who had not moved an inch. I would have admired his bravery for holding his ground as an otherworldly carriage rocketed at him at high velocity had I not been outraged over how close it had come to possibly injuring Abyss. The horse pawed at the ground, eyes flared, ears back, teeth bared. He did not like Malphus. I felt the same.

“You could have killed that horse!” I shouted, storming closer, my hat lying somewhere along the road, lost in the chaos.

“Do not be a fool. That hell spawn cannot be harmed. Just as the carriage heals, so does the horse. As for you, a man already dead cannot die twice.”

“I’m not dead, not truly. I am moribund,” I snarled, advancing on him, ready to punch his long, pointed nose. He sighed, flicked a finger, and I was flung into the side of the carriage like a pinecone tossed by a child. The impact cleared my lungs of air. The

back of my head cracked into the carriage step, and the pain was sharp. I reached up and felt blood seeping from my skull.

“I would suggest you curb your temper, Coachman. You may be his chosen hackman for now, but you are not irreplaceable.” Malphus walked over to me, making a wide berth for Abyss, who stretched his neck as long as he could to try to nip at Malphus. I rubbed at the bloody spot as his long, bird-like legs grew closer. “Rise. I will not speak to an underling lying on the ground like a beaten dog.”

I pushed to my feet and wiped my bloody fingers on my duster. “You are a most unlikeable thing.”

He smiled a smile that sent a cold finger down my spine. “That is the kindest thing that you have said to me since we met. Tell me, Coachman.” He paraded about. The bird-like gait was smooth but still unsettling to my shaken brain. “What is it that draws you to Avers Mill so frequently? Spying on your ex-lover must be quite painful. Are you the sort of man who enjoys pain? If so, I am sure I can find a few helpers of Asmodeus who would enjoy putting a lash to your back as your cock spewed seed.”

His leer was disturbing. “Why I ride where I do is no concern of yours,” I fired back as the trickle of rich red blood down the fine hairs on the back of my neck gave me gooseflesh.

“Au contraire, my fine coachy, for where you ride is of the utmost import. Your mission is to ferry souls to hell. You are not given to larking about in the human realm, weeping copious tears over the loss of a few mangy horses, a rundown stable, and the man who let you bugger him while he planned a wedding with another.”

“You are a vile fiend,” I ground out. The fact that this rancid bastard knew my past indiscretions made me ill.

“You are headed there yet again. Tell me what it is you hope to see this trip? Do you wish to sneak to his home to see him feasting on his fiancée’s tender quim or watch him feed her his cock as he used to do to you in that flea-infested haymow where you and he spent your nights licking up each other’s spend from your flushed cheeks?” I snarled. He chuckled. “Mind your temper, Coachman. It would be a trivial thing for me to stomp your weak little skull into plum pudding.”

Inhaling deeply, I managed to push down my anger. I was treading on shaky ground here. If Malphus knew of my trip home, he also knew of other things. Things that may involve Hamiel, and I would not risk him. This demon had dispatched one coachman. I did not wish to join my predecessor in the pits or see any harm come to the rainbow walker with the golden curls.

“I was going to Avers Mill, yes, but not to see Theodore.” He rolled his eyes. “Believe me or not, I do not care.”

He stepped closer. That was when I noticed the songbirds, the insects, and the wind had all ceased. There was no sound other than the soft crunch of his clawed feet on the road. As he neared, the reek of burning flesh filled my nostrils.

“You should care, Coachman, for what I see, I report back to the dark lord. And what I have seen so far is that you are pushing against the rules of your employment.”

“I do not know the rules! How can I be held in contempt of them when you have never told me what the regulations are?!” My bellow seemed incredibly loud in the vacuum of time and sound that Malphus had created. Was this how it always was when demons walked the earth?

“You are given the knowledge you require for your tasks. The horse takes you to the dying, you wait, and when judgment is made in our favor, you bring them to the underworld and then return to your hovel until you are summoned once more. Why is

it that you moribund are so decidedly, stupidly stubborn about visiting a world where you no longer belong? If you are not gazing with tears of love lost in your eyes you're trying to bring a human into purgatory to keep her essence with you. Why can you not simply let go of what once was and accept that which you are now consigned to?"

His mention of the mistake the coachman before me committed I knew of thanks to Delmar. I would not betray his confidence so I did not ask for clarification.

"We moribund are not just half dead, we are half alive. And as such, we still experience loneliness and loss. You can't hold that against us. I only wish to watch those who meant something to me when I was alive."

"You humans are emotionally stunted slugs," he spat as if the mention of humans left a sour taste on his tongue. "I shall have to speak to our Lord about simply having a demon as the next coachman."

This made me smile. "I have seen how Abyss and the imp that shines my boots hate you. I do not think he would listen to anyone other than a moribund who has a rapport with horses. That, I suppose, is why Lucifer plucked me from the smoldering fire and revived me."

"He chose you because you know horses, yes, but he also chose you because your sire promised you to our employ upon your death." He patted my face, his expression smug. Where his long fingers touched my face, the skin began to singe. I did not jerk away, though. "I see how much that hurts you to think about. That your sire would do such a thing. Could it be he knew you were a dimwitted child? Animals are known to get rid of offspring that are not normal. Given that you rut with males, perhaps he sensed you were a deviate, so he simply got a boon in exchange for a future sodomite?"

“I would tell you to go to hell, but you would enjoy that too much, so I will say that I shall pray for you.”

His fingers bit into my face, the heat now making my flesh smolder. Tears sprang up. “You would do better to pray for your own rancid soul, Coachman. I have no need for those whispered pleas of the weak-minded. Now, I would have your attention.” He lifted my face to stare into my eyes. I could see the dancing flames of Tartarus in his lifeless eyes. “You are not to travel about the countryside with that carriage as if you were livery for a rich whoreson. You are to do what you were brought back to do. If you continue to take that carriage through the portal for excursions other than bringing the damned to us, you shall be terminated. Do you understand?” I ground out a low grunt of understanding. “I would hear you say it.”

“I will not...take the carriage...out for anything other...than what it was...intended.”

He searched my face for a long moment, his grip too tight, and my jaw creaked. Then he released me, his sneer a frightful thing to see. I did not reach for the burns on my cheek and jaw. I used the pain to stiffen my spine.

“I shall be watching you, Coachman.” He flung a handful of coins at me. “Your wages.”

My sight stayed on him as he transformed into a crow, black feathers exploding into a cloud of ebony that fell to the road. The wind then arrived as did the call of a black-capped chickadee. Only then did I reach up to touch the burns. I winced and spewed out a string of foul words that I was very glad Hamiel was not privy to hearing. After shouting a few more vulgarities, I picked up my pay and went to find my hat. It had been rolled over but popped back into shape. As I brushed at the brim to remove some dust, I began plotting how best to reach Lillianne.

Malphus may well cave my head in, but I would have that young woman warned one

way or another.

Two days later, I was sitting inside my carriage in the town square of a small fishing community known as Perry's Mill. It sat along a wild bit of shoreline, and while the weather was unpleasant, the view of the thundering surf was invigorating. And slightly terrifying. Waves the size of buildings crashed over rocks and docks, ripping boats from their moors and shattering them into bits on the jagged boulders.

The summons had woken me from my rest. The strongest I had felt since my tenure had begun. Upon arriving, I found Hamiel hiding inside a painfully quiet stable in the center of the small seaside village. I'd motioned for him to sit in the interior of the carriage then joined him. What reason could there be to sit out in the deluge when we could be inside while we waited? Abyss, slick with water and surf, was happy to stand just inside the horse barn and talk to the other horses. I did not imagine they could hear his whinnies, but if it made him happy, then what harm was there? Assuredly, a stallion grew lonesome just as I did.

Hamiel had hurried into the carriage, soaked but smiling, and stole a kiss before his speckled glasses were removed so he could dry them on a handkerchief he removed from his satchel. He squinted at me and placed a damp fingertip on the burns on my jaw.

"What has happened here?" he asked, and I lifted a shoulder. There was no need to relay the incident with Malphus. He pressed his soft lips to the blisters. A wash of relief from the pain coursed through me. "There, that may ease your suffering. You need to be more careful."

"Thank you." I plucked a wet curl from the mop of ringlets and rubbed it between my rough fingers. "Just seeing you was balm enough."

A raucous wind rocked the carriage slightly. "These sea storms are most violent.

What a horrid time this will be.”

“There is little to do in the face of nature when it roils so.” I let my hand dive into his hair and slip to the back of his neck. He sighed at my touch as he rubbed at his spectacles.

“Something has angered our Lord,” he whispered as if the sick and dying in this tiny fishing town would possibly hear us over the din of the wild weather rocking the shoreline. “We are in for a long and busy time if the surge comes over the docks.” I glanced through the glass in the carriage door. The skies were so dark it was like night, and the light cast from the carriage’s green lantern blowing madly to and fro made it look as if a sea demon’s long shadows danced along the docks. Should I move the carriage from the edge of the sea...

“But I have thought ahead.” He gave me a wink as he dug into his satchel to produce, with great flourish, a wooden checkerboard. “Do you enjoy this game?”

“Yes, a great deal.” I moved away from him so he could place the red-and-black square between us on the padded seat. “Do you recall how to play?”

“I did not, but I have read about it,” he said as he dug about in his large shoulder bag for the checkers. “It seems an easy enough game. You move only once on a diagonal during your turn. Then the players take turns. When a checker reaches the last row, it is kinged and then it can move up and down. Right?”

“That’s the basics, yes,” I replied as he handed me the black checkers. “I used to play this with Aunt Hester in the evenings.”

“I hope I provide a small challenge once I am familiar with the game.” We placed our checkers on the board as the wind howled around us.

“Where did you come by this board?” I asked, nodding for him to go first. He slid a checker out after a long moment of concentration. “Is there a game room in the afterlife?”

“No, no, nothing like that. The angels are encouraged to sing and play musical instruments, but games such as this are nowhere to be seen. No, I found this in the stable when I arrived. It looked to be mid-game.” He glanced out at the village, but the interior glass was already steaming from our slow but still warm breaths. “I pray there are no children suffering too great.”

“Let us hope not,” I whispered as I made my move. The first game was a bit rocky. I won with ease. Once Hamiel caught on, he became quite the checkers player. He pondered over every move like a chess master, whereas I was too enraptured with his lips and nose and long gold lashes to focus on the checkerboard. I could not look away from the tip of his pink tongue caught between his lips as he contemplated his strategy.

When he took my final checker, his explosion of joy was the kiss of the morning sun on one’s face.

“I won!” he yelled, his shout barely heard over the roaring winds and surf. I had to laugh at his exuberance. His arms went up in victory and he almost flew across the seat to hug me in sheer joy. The embrace was tight. His curls tickled my cheek then, slowly, they pulled free of my thick whiskers as he sat back, his knees atop the checkerboard. My gaze met his. Those golden eyes were mesmerizing. They seemed to hold the sun itself. I could not stop myself. I kissed him, hard, and he melted into me. With ease, I moved him to my lap, the soft sound of wooden checkers hitting the wet carriage floor lost amid the waves slamming over the docks and our heated pants. The taste of him was divine. I’d never had such a glorious flavor flow over my tongue. He was light and good and as sweet as apple bread. Warm as freshly baked bread as well. Gentle heat radiated from him, seeping through the cloth of our

trousers and wet coats.

“I so love your kisses,” he whispered as he tugged at my ascot necktie, his slim fingers adept at untying it, then opened the collar of my shirt. My hands lighted on his slender hips, in an honest attempt to still his gyrations for the rub of his shaft over mine was maddening. I did not want to push him or entice him into something sexual. I had no idea if he should even be doing such things, and most especially with a minion of the underworld. But he was unable to stop moving.

“You are like an eel,” I panted between long, searching kisses. He rolled his hips, his cock tight to mine, and my breath hitched. “Hamiel, you are driving me over the edge of restraint.”

“Good, for I wish to feel what it is to love again. I need to experience passion once more.” His mouth sealed over mine as his sleek hands ran over my chest, the damp linen of my shirt no barrier to his curious fingers. He found a pebbled nipple. With a shaky sigh he pinched it. I groaned and licked inside his mouth. It was madness, and yet it felt right in so many ways. His lips left mine, and he licked a wet stripe along my jaw. “I love the rasp of your stubbly face. Oh yes, I do like it a lot. When I was alive, I must have had a fondness for men.”

“It would seem likely,” I panted while he tasted down my throat, yanking my shirt open to lick my clavicle. Yes, it would seem quite likely given how he enjoyed the feel of a male body.

“I am very close to spending,” he confessed as he nipped at my earlobe. “In my trousers...”

“Do you wish to not do so?” I asked, feeling like a total fool for asking such a question. He shook his head, curls whipping about as lightning lit up the dark skies outside the carriage. I hoped that was not a portent of warning from an angry God.

With shaking hands, I wiggled my fingers between us, his teeth raking over my neck, and found the placard on his trousers. "Please stop me if I do anything that you do not wish to have me do."

"You are doing what I crave for you to do." He kissed the corner of my mouth as I opened a few buttons, just enough to give me some room to delve into his drawers to find his cock. It was wet, hard as a spike, and slim. I slid my fist around it. A shiver ran through him. "May I do you as well?"

I croaked out a feeble "yes" before his hand joined mine. My cock sprang from my trousers. Slippery and throbbing, I took us both in a firm grip that he aided by placing his hand around us as well.

"So thick," he whispered beside my ear as we began stroking ourselves. His smooth shaft pulsed within seconds, his seed coating our cocks and easing the awkward jerks. He bit down on my shoulder, his tiny white teeth digging into the flesh, and I lost control. Spend spurted from me, his seed and mine mixing into a froth as we both pumped madly. I carded the fingers of my free hand into his hair to lead his mouth back to mine. Mouths sealed, we rode out the small storms taking place inside the carriage as the cacophony outside battered the shore.

"Merciful motes," he huffed as his puffy lips broke from mine. His brow fell to my shoulder, where he licked and then gently kissed the tiny nip he had given me. "I am so sorry for marking you. I never thought...I was quite caught up in the moment."

I smiled, eyes closed, chest heaving, warm spunk slathered over both of our pricks. Rain pounded the windows and roof. Abyss had been clever to pull us as close to the stable as he had. A clever horse. Much smarter than I, it seemed, for all I could think about was seeing the man now spent and glowing like a fine beeswax candle.

"As was I," I admitted, releasing our still-stiff cocks and opening my eyes. He lay

upon me, his legs on either side of mine, his cheek on my shoulder, his hands resting on my chest. We rested for a few moments, gusts of wind rocking the carriage. The green lantern never went out as the winds and rain continued to decimate the village. “I think I have never felt for anyone as I do for you, Hamiel Walker.”

He picked up his head. His spectacles were pushed to one side and horribly smeared. He righted them quickly with his clean hand before extracting his soiled fingers from between us to stare at the semen on his palm.

“I have no last name,” he reminded me as his gaze lifted from our mingled spend to me. “If you wish to give me one, I would be honored to use yours.”

“We cannot wed,” I softly reminded him as I dug out my handkerchief to begin cleaning his hand, then mine. “But if we could, I would gladly take you as my spouse, whichever it would be.” I wiped gently between his slim fingers. “Maybe someday a romance such as ours will be acceptable to the world.”

“I love you wholly and without shame. Why is that not enough?” he asked, and I could only shrug. I had no answer for him. “Do you have feelings for me?”

I glanced up from his hand. His eyes were dimmed slightly now with concern. “Hamiel, I have never felt for another as I do you. You captured my heart from that first time you fell into a muddy duck puddle and you have held it in your caring, tender hands from that moment on.”

“My internal doubter wishes to ask about Theo, but I shall not do so.” He placed his brow to mine, his eyes a beautiful amber light in the gloom. “For I have seen that your affections for him have withered. Rightfully so. Still, if I do seem to waver in my confidence, do not be too harsh in your reprimands. This is all new to me. New, wonderful! Yet so frightening.”

I cupped his face with my clean hand. “I will never reprimand you, Hamiel. I vow to never knowingly harm your genteel heart. Whether we shall be allowed to continue this idyll, I do not know. My employer’s overseer is a bastard with a cruel streak as wide as the hells themselves.”

He turned his head to kiss my rough palm. “His darkness shall never overpower the light of love. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” His sight caught mine, long thick lashes framing magnificent eyes. “Love never ends.”

I kissed him tenderly, happy to steal one final moment basking in this moment. When finally we had to part, it was with long looks, soft smiles, and blushes as we righted our clothing and picked up the scattered checkers.

“I do wish this storm would lessen. Do they blow like this for long?” he asked before pressing his nose to the window like a young lad might on a trip to Boston.

“They can yes. We may have a long wait,” I confided as I dropped a checker into his open bag. “I am glad we have this time together.” He turned his head to smile at me and returned to watching the breakers slam into the dock. Worry began to nibble at me about our safety. I would venture out to move us further from the raging tide soon. “I would speak with you about Lilliane for her safety concerns me.”

He moved from the window to sit facing me, his muddy boots tucked under his backside. Sister Evangelista would be very displeased.

“Yes, I am worried about her as well. The longer I ponder on it, the more I find myself swayed to the conclusion that Theo had a large hand in your passing. I know it is wrong to cast judgment on others, for to do so will bring judgment upon us as well. It is a perplexing situation to be in.”

“Agreed.” I pushed my fingers through my hair, shoving the overly long mess from my brow. “If we can find a time when we are together, could we ride out to her home?”

“We can, but I could simply try to visit her slumber from a distance? The winged ones do not fly down to Earth each time they wish to speak to humans?”

“But you are not winged,” I pointed out and got a flat look that I kissed away despite his little harrumph. “If you are willing to try, that would save us a journey.”

“I shall do my best.” He settled back, hands folded in prayer, eyes closed. As I waited while he whispered his devotions, the wind and rain seemed to lighten all of a sudden. I felt the tug in my breast immediately. Hamiel gasped, his eyes flying open, when the summons hit him as well. “We are needed to escort those who have passed.”

“Yes, I know.” I took his hand between mine. “When next we meet, we shall try again.”

“We shall.” He pressed his lips to mine all too briefly and threw open the door. Salty air entered the carriage. I followed Hamiel outside. The docks were torn asunder, the homes lashed into bits, yet somehow the sun shone down on the wreckage. A dozen or so walkers stepped from that large beam to move among the bits of fishing boats, their boots flecked with sea foam. Some glanced my way with a frown as the souls of those who had been drowned began to approach the heavenly ones. Spirits of all sizes and ages were visible. Most were taken by the hand of the other walkers, but a few felt the pull to my carriage. Hamiel, the bravest soul I had ever met, gave my hand a squeeze. “There are many dead or dying here. We shall speak again soon.”

I nodded, reached back inside for my hat, and fixed my gaze on the stern woman staring at me from several yards away. Her dress was plain brown, stained red from a

jagged shard of what could have been a part of her home that had impaled her. She was shoeless.

“Your carriage awaits,” I told her.

She threw her sodden hair from her face to join me, never saying a word. I did not ask for any conversation from any of those I ferried but many sought to talk or bribe their way out of their last journey. Whatever her sins, she seemed resigned to her eternal fate. I offered her a hand into the brougham, and with a look filled with fear, she took it and stepped up as regally as a duchess off to a grand ball. I closed the door with a snap, glanced about at the wreckage, and climbed into my seat. The reins were wet. The smell of sea, sodden leather, and death sat on the still air. Several bodies were trounced about as the sea seemed to throw waves over the rocks and broken piers from all directions.

All of those who escorted the dead to their final destinations would be busy for quite some time...

MASSIVE SUMMER STORMS WERE VICIOUS .

I had never experienced such a thing in my twenty and nine years. Having lived inland, we had gotten heavy rains at times but nothing could compare to the devastation and peculiar ways of this kind of hurricane. The skies seemed to clear, the winds calmed, and many of the survivors began to filter out of the ruins of their homes to search for loved ones. I'd taken the silent woman to her destination and returned to find that the storm had returned with just as much violence and deadly intent.

Our work continued. Abyss was not happy. He fought me terribly each time I would ease him out of his hiding spot in the town stable. I spied the walkers moving through the wreckage, amber forms pushing against the wind to lead those judged worthy skyward. Did they walk into the eye of the storm or through it? My riders were few and far between, a true blessing for them, and so I spent a goodly amount of time watching the rain batter the poor walkers. I spied Hamiel a dozen times and left my dry carriage to call to him, but he never replied. Did the winds carry away my shouts, or maybe he was unsure of how fraternizing with a coachman would reflect on him with his peers? Understandable. Whatever the reasons, he only came to my coach when the storm had begun to lessen. By my guess, we had been here for close to two days. Given how dark the skies were, judging time was tricky. Someday I should invest in a pocket watch. Would it work in the nothingness of purgatory where time seemed endless? I had no clue, but the thought of having one made me feel less moribund in some small way.

The rain now was heavy, but the winds calmer. When only one walker remained, I saw his slim form darting my way, leaping over the remains of homes, boats, and in

some cases people. I threw the door open for him. He climbed in, water running from his once pristine white suit. His curls were flat, plastered to his head, and his spectacles doused.

“You poor man,” I whispered as I handed him my damp handkerchief. He sniffled, sneezed, and then removed his spectacles to dry them. “I should have thought to bring towels.”

“Oh, that is kind, but I shall dry soon enough.” He looked exhausted. It was taxing work to take the spirits of the deceased to their end. Many were far too young. I’d seen a few children being led into the light before the eye of the storm had moved up the coast. Losing little ones bothered Hamiel the most as it did all of us. “There are a few left lingering. You feel them?” I nodded, the summons alight in my breast, but the pulses were dull. “We may have to wait awhile for them.”

“Then you should rest here with me.” I wished we had a blanket or some other means of warmth. I lifted my arm. He smiled despite his fatigue, placed his spectacles back on his nose, and curled into my side. The windows were steamy. I placed a kiss on his wet curls as he nodded off instantly. Outside, the night settled on what was a thriving fishing village. Come morning, the tempest would be gone, rolling over New Hampshire then Maine. I whispered a prayer that those in its path would fare better than this little town had. Also come morning, I suspected the survivors would find little left. As much as it pained me, there was nothing I could do for these people other than my job, and that was not much comfort at all.

My eyes grew heavy as Hamiel slept tight to my side. A gust of wind shook the carriage, pulling me from the beginnings of my usual fire-filled dreams. I blinked awake just as Hamiel did. The green lantern still burned, the eternal olive flame casting a bit of light in the darkness of night.

“The wind seeks to push things about yet,” he said, stretching his arms over his head.

I patted his hair, glad to see a bit of bounce to the curls as they dried. “The rain seems to have stopped, though.” He leaned over to rub a circle in the condensation of the window, his face gleaming that unearthly green from my lantern. “Those who battle to live are still fighting.” He looked back at me. I nodded. “I wonder if there is any food nearby.”

“Isn’t it bizarre that we hunger, thirst, and lust like those who are alive and yet we are not truly living?” I said as the sound of the angry surf leaked around the seams of the door.

“Yes, it is a perplexing state. Not one that I am overly fond of, to be honest.” He rubbed his stomach as it rumbled. “Perhaps it would be best to simply be dead. Then we would move on to the glory of—” He bit down on his lower lip. “Livingstone, I am so sorry. I was speaking without thinking of your plight.” He grabbed my hands. “Forgive my inconsideration.”

“You have nothing to ask forgiveness for,” I assured him. “I am slowly trying to resign myself to my fate. Someday, I shall get the answers that I seek from Lucifer, but for now, railing against that which we cannot change seems fruitless. I will try to do what I can for those that I know need help. At least I have you.”

“Yes, you do have me!” He lifted my hand to his soft lips and kissed each scarred knuckle. “What say we find some food to ease our hunger? Abyss must hunger as well.”

I thought about that suggestion for a moment. “I think we can do that. Tell me, would you be willing, or able given how trying the past day or two has been, to visit Lillianne this evening? We have time.” I touched my chest to indicate the soft, hot pulse of the summons.

“Her fate worries you.” He didn’t pose it as a question but a statement.

“It does. I know there is not much we can do, but if we can influence her to reconsider or postpone, I will feel lighter.”

“Certainly, I shall try to reach out to her.” He gave my fingers a squeeze, let them fall, and settled back into the seat. I told him as much about the banker’s only child as I could, even detailing where she lived. I’d been tasked with taking a mare recently purchased from Norman to their estate in Hollyford a few years ago. Whether Hamiel required such knowledge, I had no idea, but I gave it to him just the same. “Thank you. That will surely help.”

I sat still at his side, unsure of what to do or if I should do anything at all. Hamiel closed his eyes, linked his fingers together, and began whispering prayers for divine guidance in his quest. Outside, in the gloom, a lone light could be seen, and if I listened closely enough, I could hear the call of a woman seeking someone named Gideon. Spouse, child, friend? There were many who had crossed over, many more still lying abed, waiting for judgment. Still, her voice in the dead of night was beyond mournful.

Hamiel prayed. I watched the lantern moving along the washed-out streets, then out to the splintered docks. There she stood, calling into the black velvet void as if she could summon her Gideon from the salty waters by sheer will. Her shouts went unanswered.

Hamiel continued his commune, his words falling into a steady tempo as his breath grew deeper. I pulled my sight from the woman on the docks to my companion. Was that a suitable term? I knew of no other word for two men who were intimate, so I settled on companion, for now. His lips moved but no sound came from him. He seemed to be in a trance of some sort. I recalled reading one of Aunt Hester’s books when I was young. It was by the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. He spoke of a sort of mental discipline and his thoughts on Stoic philosophy. As Hamiel was a heavenly being, albeit a novice one, he truly led a life of virtue, reason, and control,

or he would not have been chosen as a rainbow walker. Did he, like the emperor, have knowledge of meditation, and was he now freeing his mind and his breath to carry him to a higher purpose?

On the outside, the night tumbled back into silence. I glanced out the window. The lantern was moving off now, slowly, until it faded from view. Several moments passed, the shifting of the carriage under us signaling to me that Abyss was growing restless and hungry. As was I.

Hamiel came back with a soft gasp followed by a long exhalation. His eyes were lit from within as he blinked and blinked, a smile pulling at the corners of his lips.

“I found her,” he said, his voice as soft as dew. “It was difficult, but I was led to her goodness and virtue. She is a fine young lady, it seems. Her thoughts were filled with delicate pursuits. My visit was short, but I did place a thought into her dreams that she should postpone her wedding date, for her fiancé was not to be trusted.”

I hugged him to me, inhaling his summer meadow scent. “Perfect. You are a wondrous man, Hamiel Walker.” He pulled back, eyes round as wagon wheels. I kissed him with all the affection I had in my heart. “If I could take you as mine, I would, for your grace and love would surely make me a better man.”

“You are already a good man.” His warm hands cupped my face. The jolt of a judgment being decided hit us both at the same time. We both winced. “One of us is needed.”

We embraced once more and exited the carriage, the winds blowing softly now as if no monstrosity of a storm had ever existed. But it had. The death of yet another victim signaled it as so. The moon broke and peeked around a passing cloud. I saw the teen stepping from a makeshift tent of old tarps. He seemed confused, his ghostly form clad only in tattered trousers, drifting aimlessly toward us. Hamiel stepped

forward, his hand out to the young man. The burn in my chest lessened. This one was not mine. My love gave me a short nod and stepped into the moonbeam with the lanky young male. I watched them turn into stardust before I climbed into the coachman's seat.

"Let us return home to find food," I called to Abyss, shaking him from his sleep. Four massive hooves hit the sodden ground, and with a sharp jolt, we were off. My mind was on many things, but as we careened through the countryside toward the in-between, all I could think about was how much I loved Hamiel and how I hoped that a nocturnal visit from an angel-in-training would plant a seed of doubt into the mind of Miss Lillianne Cabott. If I had time on the morrow, I would ride to her home to see what I could see. It had been a long, boring time at the shore, and Abyss would certainly like a hard ride to stretch his legs properly. No one could find fault with exercising that magnificent hell steed, could they?

My return to my home, laden with fresh apples that I had stopped to pick after passing an orchard, came to the anticipated screeching halt when Abyss and the carriage ran over Delmar at the gate. The small spade he had been digging with flew into the air, landing atop the brougham with a clatter as the imp rolled across the dusty ground. Knowing the foolish little demon could not be killed, I nonetheless brought the horse to a sudden stop. Dust and ash clouded up around us as we slid into a near-complete circle.

Leaping down to pick up my hat and the dozen apples that had tumbled out of it, I walked over to check on my manservant. His eyes were open, his tongue dangling out between his dry lips, and his shirt coated with dirt.

"Are you grievously injured?" I asked, dropping to one knee beside him. Abyss was not happy about being close to his stall and his food, yet unable to access them. I glanced back at the horse, who was trying to finagle himself and the carriage into the barn. "The brake is set, so calm yourself." Abyss showed me his teeth but stilled. For

the moment. I turned my attention back to the quiet imp. "Are you unharmed?"

He blinked. I took that as a good sign. Then the imp sighed. Another good sign. "Bad horse always bad," Delmar mumbled, sitting up slowly, his scaly hand coming to rest on his head. "Seeing two coachman. Two for food?"

"No, there is only one of me. Come along, my friend." I stood and pulled him to his cloven feet. "Why are you always at the portal? I feel as if I ask this of you every time I return and you are caught under the hooves of Abyss, yet you persist."

"I go with you, away from here. It is bad sad here. Sad, sad spirits, me alone. So me go with you. Leave here." He took hold of my duster as a child might. Then he wiped his nose on my coat. "Me only go with you. Love you. Keep you good company. Better than angel face!"

With a gentle tug, I removed my coat from his grip. The souls of those who lingered clustered about, bumping off my shoulders like dragonflies.

"I would gladly take you, but you are not allowed to cross the barrier."

He swatted at the souls flitting about. "Stupid me not go. Me hate it here. Me want to see green. Green! Green! Green!" He raced off, climbed atop the carriage to fetch his spade, and vaulted back to the ground. He was quite the nimble thing. "I see green under feets. Be free! Free and green!"

And with a determination that I could only admire, he ran to the edge of our property, forlorn willow trees shadowing him, and began to dig yet again. I suspected he wanted free of purgatory more than he wished to be with me, but the sentiment was pleasant. Even if it was coming from a hell spawn. Abyss called to me, so I tended to him, leaving the carriage where it had stopped. It would return to the stable on its own accord. Once the horse was curried, fed, and watered, I carried my weary ass and

my now bruised apples into the cabin. A kettle of water was steaming over the fire as was a cauldron of lamb stew. Delmar had come far in his cooking now that we had some spices and ingredients.

With a rumbling stomach, I removed my outer garments, rolled up my sleeves, and washed up in the newly purchased wash basin and pitcher atop an old stand in the corner. The fire was low. The flames tickled the bottom of the kettle and cauldron, but my sight drifted to it time and again. Using a small towel also purchased after removing it from a wash line, my thoughts moved to Theo as I patted my whiskery cheeks. A shave was in order, but that could wait. What was needed more was food, a bit of rest, and a ride to visit Lillianne.

Delmar entered, filthy and with a goodly-sized knot on his head, to fetch me a bowl of stew and fix some tea. After I reminded him to wash his hands. Muttering as he pushed a chair to the washstand, he splashed about in the tepid water, even though he insisted it was burning his skin.

“Sit, we should talk,” I said after he plunked the bowl of stew in front of me. He studied me closely, water dripping from his pointed nose, then went off to pour tea into two chipped mugs. The stew was quite hearty looking with large bits of lamb, chunks of carrot and potato, and hunks of celery. My nose picked up the aroma of fresh rosemary, sage, and thyme. The imp could not read, but he had a fine memory. I’d told him what herbs to use for the stew and he had followed my directions well. If only he would stitch up the tear in his trousers. Half his red buttock was now showing.

“I did not do bad,” he said after climbing up to sit on the table, bowl in both hands.

“No, I know you did nothing bad. I’m wondering how the seeds we planted are doing. Any signs of life?”

“They are still sleeping,” he said between loud slurps. Seemed spoons were meant only for sleeping with or brandishing about as a weapon. “Bad seeds.”

“Are you watering them as I asked?” I’d been busy of late and so had to leave the gardening to him to supervise.

“Yes, water, water, water.” He crowed around a mouthful of half-chewed lamb. We would have to begin working on his table manners.

“And you are using water from the pump and not urinating on them. Correct?”

I poked at a carrot as he shook his head vigorously. One had to clarify these things with imps, it seemed. They tended to take shortcuts when they could. “Very good. I’m not sure what more we can do. They need some sunlight.”

“No sun here. No green, no sun, just sad.” He licked his bowl.

Only sad lived here. That I could not argue with. I sipped at my tea. A standard black tea but tasty if one ignored the leaves floating about in one’s cup. Another lesson about straining the tea before serving it was in order, but that would have to wait. With a full stomach and my cup in hand, my fatigue set in quickly.

After finishing my drink, I requested a bath.

“Again? Why wash so much? You just wash cockery two days ago!” He held up five fingers.

“I can smell myself.”

“I can smell me self too, but I don’t make baths for smell.”

He did as bid, but it was with a great deal of complaining. The hip bath was just as small, but the hot water and soap lifted my sagging spirits. I missed Hamiel. Terribly. My existence was bleak here, to say the least. I could fully understand why my predecessor had tried to bring his lady wife here, although his methods were rather barbaric. Granted, my job kept me busy, but when I returned home, I felt the pang of loneliness greatly. An imp, entertaining as he was, was no replacement for a loved one.

“Delmar,” I called after stepping out of the bath to dry off. He peeked down at me from his perch atop the cupboard, the goose egg on his brow very noticeable in the candlelight. “How many coachmen are there? There must be more than just me, for I have never been called to leave Massachusetts.”

“Many coachmen, many imps working for them. Very bad imps not good like me. Some bite and pick at masters. I do good. Make good food. Spit boots. Not look at cockery.”

I hurried to step into clean drawers as he was indeed looking at my cockery. So there were many coachmen in Lucifer’s employ. I’d not seen them, but there could be a myriad of reasons for that. My entrance to the underworld was here in Massachusetts. Was it possible each region of the country, or the world for that matter, had their own portals for delivering the condemned? Still, just knowing that there were others like me made me feel less alone in this ghastly job.

“Thank you for the meal. It was quite good.” I grabbed a bruised apple from the table and tossed it to Delmar. He caught it with a quick flick of a hand. “Enjoy your dessert. Keep the fire going if you would.”

His reply was lost behind the crunching of his apple. I padded into the bedroom, leaving the door cracked so some heat could filter into the room. The temperature in this dimension was not unpleasant or actually cold, but the air tended to cling to the

skin, leaving a body feeling clammy and chilled. Nothing about purgatory was pleasant but given the sights that I saw in Hell, it was a lovely stroll through Boston Common.

The soft burn of the summons still lingered in my chest, so I knew that I could be roused at any time to convey someone. The need was low though, so I climbed into bed, my head coming to rest on the feather pillow. Sleep came quickly as did the damnable dreams of my death, so I was awake with only a few hours of sleep to sustain me. I dressed and exited my bedroom. Delmar snored soundly on top of the cupboard. The fire was banked, so I crept closer, brow dotted with sweat, and tossed in a few round logs. The flames licked up over the dry ash, igniting quickly. With haste, I closed the unsettling screen and hurried back. There was no stew in the cauldron atop the table, so I grabbed two apples, cutting one into slices, my hat, and my dirty duster, and went out to greet the day. Night. Whatever time it was, I greeted it and the spirits who floated closer. As I walked, I ate my apple, spitting the brown bruised flesh onto the ashen soil.

I let one bounce along my arm like a dandelion blow as I made my way to the outhouse. The odor inside was unpleasant, to say the least, so I hurried to finish my business. Once outside, I washed up at the hand pump and entered the stable. The carriage was parked in its favorite spot. Abyss was awake. He smelled the apples in my coat pocket and threw a bit of a fit by throwing a blanket over his stall door to the floor as I climbed into the coachman's seat to check on the damage done by an imp's shovel. The roof of the carriage was unmarred, black and shiny like a raven's feather. I ran my hand over the roof and felt the hum of pleasure from the brougham.

"Such a fine carriage," I whispered to it. The paint seemed to glow a bit brighter in the green pallor of the eternal lantern. Abyss kicked at his stall. I threw a look at him. "And you are fine as well but throwing a tantrum will only sour your beauty."

I climbed down with a smile for the horse who was not the least guilty about his

childish fit. He pulled at my coat pocket after I drew close. “Impatient beast,” I teased and took one of the slices out to feed to him. His white eyes closed in ecstasy as he sloppily chewed his treat. After he was done, I ran my hand down his ebony nose. He huffed in my face, his breath sweet with fine hay and apple.

“The calling is dim yet. Shall we go for a ride?” I asked as if speaking to another human. The horse rubbed his nose into my cheek. I took that for a yes and opened the stall to enter. Within minutes, he was saddled. I removed my hat, placed it on the brougham’s seat, and climbed up and into the saddle. The old leather seemed less cracked this morning. The pommel shined slightly, and the seat felt softer. Was this saddle imbued with demonic magic much like the carriage? Now that it was in use, mayhap it would begin to care for itself, which would save me from rubbing fish oil into the leather to keep it supple.

Abyss was dancing about under me, his strong muscles tight in preparation for a gallop. His enthusiasm was contagious. I leaned forward slightly, my ass coming up from the saddle, and gave the horse his head. We hit the portal at a hard gallop, my coat flapping behind us as I kept my feet tightly in the stirrups. When we exited the spinning dervish, we hit the ground hard. My teeth clattered, but I did not slow the stallion. He pushed hard for miles, the towns and forests speeding past at a rate that would make most riders queasy. I was used to the sensation of this unearthly speed, so I let him run until we passed the steeple of the Baptist church in Avers Mill. Then I slowed Abyss down as we trotted along a country lane. Given the position of the sun in the sky, it was noontime. One never knew when exiting the in-between if one would ride into night or day, but I so preferred the sun on my face.

We left Avers Mill behind, crossed the bridge over the county line, and made our way to the Cabott homestead. The banker had a fine home, two stories, with a large stable filled with quality horses. I knew the location well as I had delivered several horses here that had been purchased at sales in Boston. The mare that Lillianne rode about, a fine dapple with high spirits, was one such horse. The whitewashed home came into

view after a lengthy walk down a winding drive. Abyss paused at a small creek that babbled alongside the drive to drink his fill. I sat in the saddle, eyes darting about for any sign of Lillianne, but saw only two dark-skinned maids hanging out the daily wash.

Then I spied a flash of buttercup yellow in the side garden. Abyss stopped at the tug of the reins. I slid from the saddle, looped his reins around a small hitching post, and leaned on a thick maple tree to watch Lillianne Cabott in a soft yellow day gown meet her fiancé in the garden. Her maid stood nearby, wringing her hands. What they were saying was hard to hear from this distance, but Theo looked to be growing upset. Lillianne was pleading with him, her tiny hands clasped. He slapped her hard across the face. I went to dash over to intervene, then recalled that I could do nothing. Anger burned white hot inside me to see a lady treated so harshly. What had I ever seen in that man? Lillianne gathered herself, removed the diamond from her ring finger, and threw it at Theo.

She stormed into the house, her maid in tow, leaving Theo in the garden. He kicked a bench over in a pique before bending to pick up the engagement ring from the lush grass, then stormed off. Petty as it might be, I was thrilled to see it. I hoped Miss Lillianne and/or her parents made a better choice next time. I was pleased to see that Hamiel's visit had helped or assumed it had. Mayhap the young lady had already come to her senses and that blow to her cheek had cemented her opinion. I would never know, but I could give my love the credit and would do just that when next I saw him.

"That will help me sleep better," I said to Abyss, resting and swatting flies with his long, black tail. I drew in a deep breath of warm summer air, releasing it with a rush as the summons ignited in my breast. Abyss grew twitchy. "Yes, my boy, we are being summoned. Let's fetch the carriage with haste."

I threw a leg over the saddle, tipped up my face, and took a moment to relish the

warmth of the sun on my face. Nothing could compare.

Knowing we were being called, Abyss and I hurried home to fetch the carriage. Hopefully, Hamiel would be the walker assigned to this passing, for I had much to tell him. Also, I yearned to simply gaze upon him again.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:42 am

I THREW A PLEADING LOOK at Hamiel standing uncomfortably by Abyss, his bottom lip caught between his pearly teeth. He lifted a shoulder. My attention went back to the soul that was my next passenger.

“Sir, get into the carriage,” I stated firmly for the tenth time. This bloated man was plucking the very last nerve I possessed.

“I have gold stashed away under my floor. You can have it,” the dead spirit of a cankerous excuse for what had once been a human being said. He was a tall man, lean, with limited teeth and hair but an overabundance of malevolence in his heart. “Real money. Not British.”

“Get. In. The. Carriage.”

“Please, I didn’t mean to kill them all. I just wanted to make them sick.” He fell to his knees, hands grasping at my duster. “It was just a tiny pig.”

“My patience is at its end. Either you enter the carriage on your own or I shall throw you in. Your judgment was made. You confessed to the walker that you poisoned your family well with a rotted pig carcass to sicken your wife and children. They died. You have died. The tainted water took you all save one. Your youngest daughter. All have been escorted to their final destination. You, sir, I will take you to the pits where you will serve out eternity paying for your crimes.”

He fell to the ground, kissed my boots, and clawed at his face. Hamiel awaited his youngest daughter after taking her brothers into the rainbow.

“They were disobedient,” he snapped when I reached down to lift him from the wet grass outside his meager farm. Even the animals that roamed about were in poor shape. Lean pigs, scrawny cats, and a horse that looked too weak to stand. I hoped the misuse of the animals here was added to the long list of his sins. The fire whips that would lash his back for eternity were well deserved.

“ You are disobedient.” I lifted him from the grass, feet dangling as he wriggled about like a worm on a hook. “I am done asking,” and I threw him into the carriage. The door slammed closed on its own accord. The man became incensed, throwing himself at the door, but it would not budge. I drew in a long breath, then turned to look at Hamiel petting Abyss. “I shall return quickly.”

“I am sorry he was so evil,” he whispered, his aura dulled by his accompaniment of three young boys under ten within the past several hours.

“His payment for his deeds is about to be paid.” I climbed into the seat. Hamiel stepped away from the horse as he stared up at me with concern. “Please, wait here.”

“Always. I will always wait for you.”

His love helped lessen the darkness brewing inside me. Somewhat. With a meager smile, I snapped the reins. Abyss reared, sensing my upset I was sure, and then bolted into a gallop that snapped my head back. I held onto the reins with both hands, planted my boots solidly, and took some joy from the howls of horror from the man imprisoned in Satan’s carriage. His yowls could still be heard when we burst through the walls of flame. Once we slowed, the reins slid from my white-knuckled grip. Abyss pranced about gayly. His mood was always good when we were in the realm where he was created.

I slid from my seat, plucked my hat from where I had been sitting on it, and snapped it back into shape. Then, I could see the winged shapes of the nether harpies

descending out of the smoky sky, and I threw open the carriage door. The killer bolted from within the brougham, tripping over himself to flee, but there was no escaping. Arms folded over my chest, I watched without emotion as they caught the man not two hundred yards from where the carriage sat, talons biting into his arms and back. His screams melded with the shouts and wails of all the damned as he was lifted upward. Four of the winged demons carried him off to whatever personal hell awaited him. My sight locked on the shifting horde of the miserable.

Abyss pushed at my back, breaking my fixation on the masses down below.

“Let us return to Hamiel,” I whispered and gave the horse a pat. Within moments, we had breached the wall of fire—my fear made the cold lamb stew I’d eaten curdle in my gullet—and were charging through the thick woods and small towns as if we were a chariot of the gods. Perhaps, in some macabre way, we were. Hamiel sat on a log fence, his radiance a beacon from a mile away. I shot a glance at the tainted well. The reek of sickness rose from within. A cloud of death. He ran to us, his satchel bouncing as I met him halfway. I took him into my arms, holding him close, breathing in the honeysuckle aroma that clung to his curls.

“You are a blessing of goodness,” I whispered into his golden ringlets.

“There are souls that would try the patience of Job. That you did so well with that man speaks well of you.” He rose to his toes to place his mouth against mine. The kiss, a chaste thing at first, grew into a wild exploration led by the petite bespeckled man in my arms. “The child is not at death’s door at the moment.” I nodded. The pull on me had disappeared. “May we go somewhere to play checkers?”

“There is room in the carriage,” I offered as a gentle wind shook the leaves on the trees.

“May we go to your home to play checkers?”

There was something in the way he asked that lit a match to the kindling of desire that sat smoldering whenever he was near.

“Are you asking me to take you to my home?” I wanted to be sure I was reading his request properly. He was, after all, rather inexperienced in the ways of passion, and I did not want to—

“Livingstone, I would like to visit your home so we can make love to each other.”

Ah, well, that was certainly clearly stated. If I had lived to be two hundred, I would never have imagined that a heavenly being would be so ardent. I’d been led to believe that all who served in his name were pious and virtuous, having left all the more sordid human desires behind.

“Do you not wish to go further with our love?”

His question yanked me from my meanderings. “I do very much so wish to love you more. I was just...” I felt stupid saying this, but his confusion required a small explanation to set his mind at ease. “I was mulling over how it is that we are still so filled with earthly drives. Hunger, thirst, anger, and lust.”

“We are moribund.” He rose to his toes to kiss the corner of my mouth. His lean frame tight to mine stirred the embers to life. “While there are downsides to being not wholly of our realms, there are upsides as well.”

I captured his mouth, eager to explore those upsides. With a huff, I cupped his tiny backside. He squeaked as I lifted him and toted him to the carriage. I deposited him inside with much more gentility than I had the rider before him.

“Sit here and be safe.” I ran the back of my index finger along his soft cheek. “I would not wish to lose you in the vortex.”

He nodded, smiling softly. Closing the door, I climbed into the seat, body humming in time with the powers of the carriage, and snapped the reins. Abyss was ready. He always was. My shoulder blades smacked into the hard back of my seat. I caught a soft thud in the passenger area but could not turn my head to look as my hat had blown down over my eyes. With a muffled curse, I yanked it off, lifted my ass, and sat on it as we catapulted along the countryside. Abyss hit the spinning portal at breakneck speeds. The winds were howling, the surrounding spinning mass of time dark with splashes of bright white. I only got a brief glance before we hit the ground in purgatory.

The yelp of an imp filled the now quiet world we had entered. Hauling back on the reins, Abyss and the carriage rolled to a dead stop. Hamiel thunked against the glass behind me as I fought not to go head first over the footboard.

“Ah bad horse! Break my face. Ah face broken!” Delmar was wailing off to the west. I slipped to the ground, minus my flat hat, and opened the door. Green light filled the interior to show Hamiel picking himself up off the floor, his spectacles hanging off one ear.

“Are you unharmed?” I asked, offering him my hand. He nodded, fixed his spectacles, and stepped out of the carriage.

“I’m quite well, just a little tumbled. Your servant is in great distress,” he said as he ran over to where Delmar rolled about on the ground. “Little imp, are you badly wounded?”

The imp glanced at me through his spindly fingers before shooting to his feet. His nose was bloodied, but he seemed well enough to stalk over to me and kick dirt over my boots.

“Why is him here?!” Delmar demanded while pointing a long claw at Hamiel

kneeling in the dry land looking perplexed. “Take him home. I make good food. For two!” He held up four fingers. “No feed pretty angel. No, no, no!”

“Delmar, he is our guest. Now, I wish you to show him into the house while I tend to Abyss. Unless you wish to unhitch, curry, feed, and water the horse?” I crossed my arms over my chest as he peeked over at the stallion. Abyss bared his teeth. Delmar shook his head, long pointed ears flopping. “As I thought. So, be a good host to my dear friend. Heat some water for us to wash up in, then we’ll enjoy your cooking.”

“I am bad host. Bad host. Spit in soup,” I heard him muttering as he spun on his tiny hooves and stalked over to Hamiel.

“Do not spit in the soup,” I called a warning and got a tensing of skinny red shoulders under his grimy shirt. “Go with Delmar. I shall be with you shortly.”

Hamiel bobbed his head. A thick cloud of lost souls gravitated to him as he followed the mumbling imp. Once they were inside, I rushed through my barn chores. Abyss seemed as put out as Delmar did with the quick curry, but I promised him I would bring him two apples in the morning. He nipped at my ass as I left the stall, which I took to mean he was happy with my offer.

“Three apples. No more than that or you will become flatulent.” I ran a hand over his ebony nose. He tossed his head up and down. Deal done. The mangers were full of summer hay, so he moved over to begin eating. I jogged past the carriage, tiny balls of essence bouncing off my cheeks as I ran to the house. The door opened with a slight creak. Hamiel was at the washstand, his coat on the back of a chair, his ascot gone, the neck of his shirt opened wide. A jolt of want coursed through me. The smell of dinner was secondary. “You found the soap.”

What an asinine thing to say. The man stands before you with soap bubbles on his chin.

“Delmar brought it to me. And this towel.” Hamiel gave a tap on the rough cotton hand towel resting on his shoulder. “He tells me there is beef barley soup cooking, which smells wonderful. But it will be some time as he has to fix his nose.”

I looked over to the table where Delmar was seated atop it with a tin of boot black. He smeared a gob over the slice on his nose while glaring at me openly.

“Possibly someday someone will stop trying to cut, dig, or wheedle their way through the portal, and then that someone would stop being trounced by an eighty-five stone horse.”

The imp stuck out his tongue. That made me chuckle. I removed my duster, tossed it over Hamiel’s, and joined him at the washstand to freshen up. He smiled tentatively at me, passing over the towel as I drank him in. This was a dark, dismal hovel, but his presence made it a palace.

“So, did you bring the checkers?” I asked and got a soft little nod.

“I would love to play...after we spend some time alone.”

Ah. Oh. Yes, that sounded excellent. I rushed through my ablutions, splashing water about like a duckling, and then, while still wet-cheeked, I buried my face into his neck as I lifted his tiny boots from the floorboards.

“Keep an eye on the soup,” I called over my shoulder as I carried this precious man into my bedroom, pausing only to kick the door closed before toting him to the bed. I wished I had a room fitting of his stature. Something filled with thick rugs, crystal chandeliers, and fine bed linens. Sadly, all I had to offer him was this dreary room in this bleak cabin.

“Your brow is furrowed.” He ran a finger over the creases. “Do you not wish to lay

with me?”

“No, I that is not it at all. I long to be with you, but I am saddened I have this cheerless hut to bring you to when you deserve so much more.”

His lips found mine for a sweeping kiss that made my knees weak. When his lips left mine, his amber gaze found my shameful one.

“I have all that I need when I am in your arms,” he whispered over the steady tap-tap-tap of souls drawn to us. I found his mouth again, tasting the glory that was his and his alone. He began to wriggle, his shaft hard against my stomach.

I placed him on the floor. “May I undress you?” I shakily enquired, my blood thrumming through me as I looked down at his beautiful face.

“Yes, please, yes.”

And so I did as slowly as I could to ensure he was not feeling rushed. I kissed his shoulders when his shirt slipped from his arms. I tasted his navel when I dropped to my knees to unbutton his trousers. I licked his hipbone when I slid his underthings down to his ankles. And I dropped a line of kisses to his calves when I removed one white boot and stocking, then the other. I kneeled before him, the light from a single candle on the bedstand paling in comparison to the ethereal light flowing from him. He was a work of art. A sculpture of fine pale ivory that only the finest artist could have crafted. Waiflike, golden, slim. Perfection in form and heart.

“You are too good for me,” I groaned as I cupped his buttocks to draw him closer. “I know this to be true, and yet I find I cannot send you away, for I love you far too deeply.”

“And I you,” he replied in a ragged breath. I rubbed my face over his stomach, his

cock tickling the underside of my chin. “Please...”

I knew what that plea was for and so I bent my head to take him into my mouth. His foreskin slid back as my tongue moved over it. A burst of salty divinity erupted on my tongue. His hips stuttered forward. I swallowed him down. A gasp followed by a moan filled the room.

“Livingstone.” He sighed, his short fingernails raking over my scalp. I sucked him until he was huffing like a horse ridden hard before pulling off.

“Let us move to the bed.”

He hurried to comply, his pearly flesh pinkened with passion, his cock slick with my spittle. I watched him stretch out on the bed, his gold eyes ablaze, curls framing his round angelic face, and pondered how it was that this man wanted me.

“You are wearing too much,” he pointed out as his head fell to my pillow.

I found my voice enough to reply, “I agree.” I undressed with a speed that Abyss would envy. Trousers, ascot tie, and underthings all flew to the four corners. When I stood naked before him, Hamiel’s eyes rounded in what I hoped was delight and not fear.

“You are a mighty man,” he whispered as I crawled between his slim thighs. Elbows locked not to crush him. I let my belly rest on his as I lowered my head for another kiss. His arms linked around my neck, his cock pressed into my stomach, and his ankles came to rest on my backside. He writhed below me, his prick leaving a wet trail on the thick mound of dark hair at the base of my cock. “Hurry, Livingstone, hurry. I am sure I cannot hold out much longer!”

“Slow your breathing,” I whispered over his puffy lips. “This may be your first time

with a man, and I do not want to harm you.”

“It may not be and so you may go faster,” he argued as his cheeks shone with a high patina of perspiration.

I smiled down at him. “We will never know, so we shall proceed with caution.” He huffed, and I captured it with yet another kiss. I could kiss him for eternity and never tire of it. Rocking into him now, my prick rubbing alongside his, we began to rut harder and harder. I knew he was close just by his jagged breaths. So I eased away, slipping off him, much to his displeasure. He grabbed at me, but I pressed his hands to his chest. “Catch your breath.” I dropped a kiss to a dark cherry-red nipple. His mouth fell open. “We need something to ease the way.”

I left him splayed out on the bed, cursing myself for not thinking of grabbing anything for this before we retired. I crept through the doorway, locating Delmar spread out in front of the fire, his entire nose coated with boot black, snoring away. So much for keeping an eye on the soup. I had a thought to creep over, grab the fire poker, and move the cauldron to the side, but I could not bring myself to get that close to the fire. I ran to the jars stacked on the lone cupboard and grabbed the tin of rendered bear fat and darted back to my love.

He welcomed me with open arms. I kissed my way from his flat stomach to his tender lips as I shimmied over him. We touched and ground against each other for a moment. Hamiel was not to be put off, though.

“Please, love me before we are summoned away,” he pleaded as I tugged on a stiff nipple with my lips. Sadly, he was right. I pushed up and sat back on my heels, using my hands to spread his legs wide. He blushed deep red as I eyed his tight balls and pink hole. “Touch me or I may perish!”

“Drama surely was part of your past,” I teased but removed the lid from the tin just

the same. My control was thin as well. I dipped two fingers into the fat, pleased that it smelled of berries that the bear must have eaten before being downed. He took me by the wrist to lead my fingers to his entrance.

“There, right there. Oh yes, yes, Livingstone, yes.” His body undulated like a serpent, and I had a momentary worry that I was a vile thing to sully this stunning man. But as his channel clamped down around my finger all reasonable thought fled. I soon had two fingers in him, then three. He rolled his hips as he dug at the sheets. Each time I went deep, I found that magical spot inside him and pulled a cry of delight from his mouth. I kissed his cock as I worked him open. Nonsensical words fell from him as I readied him. “Stop, please, no more or I will spill. I need you in me.”

Yes, I needed that too. More than I needed to breathe. With a grunt that was supposed to be a word of some sort, I removed my fingers from him and coated my cock with grease.

Hamiel fairly thrummed with pent-up energy and desire. I eased him to his side, snuggling up behind him, and threaded my leg through his. I rubbed my chin on his shoulder, kissed his ear, and whispered delicate words of love into his curls as I nudged at his hole with the tip of my cock.

“So lovely, so very beautiful, so beloved,” I cooed as I pressed into him. He tensed, and I rubbed his back and sides, pulling back and then moving forward, inching my way into his heat. It took what seemed to be ages to be fully seated. I lay still, an arm lying over his hip, his flagging cock in my hand, to give him time to adjust to my possession.

“It is unlike anything ever,” he softly said as his head lolled to the side. I nibbled at his throat as I began to play with his cock. Soon he was stirring back to rigidity as I flexed, then relaxed my muscles, easing in and slowly sliding back out. The tension left him as he acclimated. When he began to arch his back for more, I rocked harder,

thumbing his slit to gather the droplets oozing from him. Down I stroked, then up, pumping gently, egging him closer to his rapture. With a shuffle of my weight, I found the tangle of nerves buried inside him. He cried out with each thump of my cock into that tight ball. Soon he was trembling as his seed flowed out of him and over my hand. I pressed in deep, with one long thrust, and flew to the very stars as his channel contracted around me. My cock spewed and pulsed, filling him with spend. I held him tight through his return, bussing soft pecks to his neck while telling him how glorious his love made me feel.

“This must be a dream.” He sighed as he wriggled about, my cock slipping free, to lie staring at me with adoration in his gaze. Somehow, in our madness to be with each other, neither of us had taken his spectacles off. I eased them from his ears now, rolling to the side to place them on the stand. I pulled at the drawers that lay over the stand—mine by the size—and wiped my hand before easing them between his thighs.

“It is a much better dream than I generally have,” I replied before pulling the rumpled coverlet over us. He burrowed into my chest like a borer beetle, his springy curls tickling my nose as he rained kisses over my throat. I held him to me for the longest time, neither of us speaking much. The scrape of souls at the window ever present. I may have dozed off, for when I opened my eyes, Hamiel was at the window, spectacles on, hand splayed over the dirty glass. He was in my shirt. A wave of admiration washed over me. My shirt was far too large, but he looked beyond stunning, even if his curls were knotted and his neck bore a few love marks.

“They call to me,” he softly said as the souls bounced off the window like flies. “There are so many. Why do the winged ones not come here to carry their prayers upward and free them from this misery in greater numbers?”

I rolled onto my back, hands behind my head, my sight locked on the wooden ceiling planks. Rough cut. They might be from the decrepit willows outside.

“That is something you would have to ask those of your realm,” I answered and moved my head to look at him. “Why not come back to bed? Our time here is short, and I wish to feed you soup if Delmar has not burned it out of spite.”

He moved from the window to sit on the edge of the bed. “We never played checkers.”

“We shall set up the board and play as we feast on overly salted soup. Tell me the truth. Am I not romancing you as if we were royalty?”

That made us both snicker. I reached out a hand to pull him back down when a shriek that penetrated through the tacky air ripped through the cabin. Hamiel jerked.

“I suspect that is Delmar forgetting to use the poker to move the pot from the fire,” I commented, for I had heard that cry before. I was about to mention how many times the imp burned himself when a sound unlike I had ever heard before echoed across the in-between. The spirits at the window scattered. Delmar threw open the bedroom door and dove under the bed, leaving a trail of urine behind him. I got to my feet. The front door blew open with such force it ripped from its hinges.

An angel strode into the cabin. Tall, wide, with wings of white tucked into his back. He was clad in fine armor and shining boots and carried a sword that illuminated the small home. His hair was reddish brown and to his shoulders, and his eyes, when they locked onto me lying abed naked with a half-dressed walker at my side, ignited from amber to molten gold. His grip tightened on his heavenly weapon.

“Michael,” Hamiel coughed out.

The archangel took a step and then paused as the ghastly wail from outside echoed around us once more. I jumped to my feet. The blanket tumbled to the floor when another entity strode into the cabin. A tall man, indescribably beautiful, with hair the

color of wheat, eyes as bright and blue as a sapphire, and a smile that curdled my blood. I felt his command of me deep in my bones. This was the one who had resurrected me. This was my new Lord and master. This wingless visage was the prince of darkness.

“Lucifer,” I gasped. The fallen one stepped inside, around the archangel, his dark red robes sweeping over the floor as he disappeared from view.

I glanced at Hamiel. He was as pale as fresh curds. “When you two are decently attired, I would have you join me and my brother in your antechamber,” Lucifer beckoned. There was nothing to do but obey. “Michael, do sheathe your sword. There is nothing in this realm for you to slay. The imp is below you, and the coachman is mine. Unless you are driven to run your walker through, the display of power is embarrassing.”

His voice was like velvet wrapped around death. The angel slid his weapon into the silver scabbard riding on his hip.

I moved quickly, finding my trousers and turning to find Hamiel whimpering, his eyes round. I pulled my breeches over my ass, fumbling with the buttons. Delmar whined under the bed like a terrified dog.

“Come.” I offered Hamiel my hand. He took it, his touch cold where it was usually warm.

“I shall be smote.” He sniffled as tears began to flow down his cheeks.

“Then he shall smite us both, for I shall never leave your side.” I put my arm around him, tucked him into my side, and marched out to the parlor that now smelled of burned beef and barley soup to face the piper as the old ones say. I suspected the tune we would dance to would not be a sprightly reel.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:42 am

OUR FEET HAD BARELY CROSSED the threshold when we stopped to gawk at the creatures standing in my bleak little yard hitched to a stunning short carriage, open to the elements, and painted darkest red. Red the color of dried blood. The buggy was beautifully crafted. The twin nightmares that pulled it were not so beautiful.

“Sweet hymnals,” Hamiel whispered, aghast, as the demonic beasts shifted side to side. I’d seen many kinds of horses, witnessed foals born with disfigurement, and defects that would turn the stomach of most people, but I had never laid eyes upon such abominations. I’d read books about centaurs, half man and half horse, from the ancient Greek mythos. These monstrosities were reminiscent of those handsome creatures, but only in form. They were gaunt, flesh pulled tight over their skeletons, white eyes much like Abyss but lacking my horse’s girth and beauty. A human torso from the waist up was attached to the back of a horse. The human part of these nightmarish things was the most distressing. Their mouths hung open and their skulls were visible through their paper-thin skin. A screech broiled out of them that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

Even the souls of those trapped here avoided them.

“Impressive creations, are they not?” Lucifer asked from across the room. So spellbound—and horrified—had I been, I’d briefly forgotten the dark lord was here. Foolish of me, really, since the white light flowing from Michael planted in the far corner by the kitchen table lit the room like a small sun. “I am particularly fond of my nuckelavees. They required a good deal of creativity on my part, and just the right souls. Those two are men who abused little children. Fitting for such a man, would you not agree, Livingstone?”

I ripped my sight from the damned beasts attached to my master's carriage. Lucifer stood by the fire, stirring the soup, as if this were a social visit of some kind.

"Yes, my Lord," I coughed out. Hamiel clung to me like wisteria. I wasn't sure if we should kneel or stand our ground. The archangel's glower felt hot on my cheek. "A very fitting end for such a vile sort. What brings you here, if I may be so bold?"

It was hard to recall that there were others in my cabin. Lucifer's countenance was so breathtakingly beautiful I felt as if I could simply stand here for eternity and bask in his exquisiteness. When he glanced at me from the hearth, I felt almost enchanted, so strong was his presence, but then he smiled at me, and I saw the flash of the tempter in his gaze.

"Boldness is a quality that I admire. This soup, on the other hand, is not worthy of your station as my coachman." He pushed the cauldron back over the low flames with distaste marring his face. "Would you not be better served to dine on quality fare? I have given you the powers to walk between the realms. A servant of your station in my army should feast on the best cuts of meat, the finest fowl, and the strongest cheeses. You should sip on the best wines. Smoke the heartiest cigars."

Yes. Yes. I should do all of that. So why was I tossing coins into root cellars for old potatoes and dried pork loins when I could be taking what I wished and saving my wages for myself? What kind of fool was I to deny myself when I was the coachman?! I was entitled to take what I wished. Food, drink, and the man at my side. Why had I been so stupidly virtuous?

"Livingstone," Hamiel whispered as he dug his fingers into my side. "You are a good man. Do not listen to the tempter's whispers."

"Stop toying with your servant," Michael grumbled, his mighty wings twitching. "I did not come here to watch you play. I came here to understand why one of our realm

is spending his time in purgatory sinning with one of your dark creations. I find it distasteful for angels and demons to be cavorting together.”

Lucifer sighed, bored already it seemed, and walked over to sit regally on the needlepoint settee he had laid me on after digging me out of my funeral pyre. His bare feet peeked out from under the hem of his robes. His toes were blackened.

“Fine, right to it then.” He arranged his robes around him with precision. “First off, my brother, they are neither angel nor demon. They are moribund and so are not constrained by the laws that govern the dark and the light. They seem to be quite smitten. Tell me, my coachman, does your heart beat true for this small beacon of light so tight to your side?”

“If you are asking me if I love him, then yes, I do,” I announced it proudly. Michael made a sound of displeasure that rattled the glass windowpanes.

“And I love him,” Hamiel stated, quaking still, but jerking his chin up just the same.

If ever there was a time for a smote, it was now. We could go together if the archangel drew his sword and ran us through. Maybe my second demise would see me taken to the pearly gates...

“This is appalling,” Michael spat while the air filled with the sounds of Abyss talking to the nuckelavees. Those wails of the monsters attached to the dark one’s carriage would surely find their way into my own flaming nightmares. The angel slammed his fist onto my table, shattering it into splinters. Hamiel jerked but did not move. If anything, his hold tightened. If we were going down, we would do so while holding each other. I could think of no finer way to meet the maker. If I would meet him. It is quite possible I would just be brought back to fulfill that damn contract. “We cannot have a walker leading those judged to be good to the gates if they reek of your unholy hackman on his flesh.”

“Michael, my beloved brother—” Lucifer began.

“Do not use that term with me. You are no longer my brethren, and this walker is no longer serving our Lord in this position anymore. If you wish to roll in the filth with swine, then so shall you be bound to do so. Hamiel, you are no longer worthy of guiding the pure to the afterlife. You are to remain here to carry the prayers of those who linger in here to the saints who intercede on God’s behalf. You will no longer be welcome past the gates.”

Hamiel shook softly at my side. I looked down to see him weeping and guilt overtook me. I had done this to him. If I had not been so weak, he would not have been cast aside to linger in this gray, miserable place with me.

“I understand. I shall do my job with reverence, for these forgotten souls only wish to have their prayers heard,” Hamiel, brave and good, said loudly even though his cheeks were wet.

“So be it.” Michael spun on his heel and strode out the door, leaving in a flash of light so bright I could not see clearly for several moments. Hamiel turned into my arms. I embraced him, holding him to me as I looked over his golden curls to see Lucifer’s lips curled into a smile of satisfaction.

“Well, that seems to be settled. Do not weep too hard, little prayer runner, for Michael cannot see that love cannot ever be wrong.” He rose, dusted off his robes, and stared at me.

“May I ask a question of you before you go?” I enquired as Hamiel used the sleeves of my shirt to dab at his eyes. Lucifer gave me a nod. I looked down at Hamiel. His lashes were damp, yet I saw a shimmer of constitution in his amber eyes. “Will you stay here at my side as we speak?” I asked of my beloved.

“Always. I shall always be at your side.”

I placed a kiss on his brow and turned my attention to Lucifer. “Malphus has mentioned that I was given to you for this position by a pact signed by my father many years ago. I would like the truth of that story if you would, my Lord.” Being polite seemed the way to approach the king of the hells. Hester was known to say that one caught more flies with honey than with vinegar.

Lucifer seemed at ease here. Was it due to the whisper of souls that flitted about and were stuck here for hundreds of years? Or mayhap it was the dreary nature of this realm. I could not say with certainty, but he moved with grace on charred feet around the small cabin as he spoke.

“Your father was a learned man, a medical man, who wed a charming woman who would become his nurse. They were deeply in love. Much like you and your little Hamiel.” I felt the man at my side stiffen at the slur to his height. I adored the fact that he fit under my chin. “He loved her more than anything, and that, poor Livingstone, included you.”

A jab of remorse slid between my ribs like a shive. “I am sure he loved me.”

He glanced over his wide shoulder. “Oh, he did, but when his lady wife was shot by a stray musket ball at the battle of Concord, his skills could not save her.” He strayed to the window. My sight traveled down his strong back to where two short stubs, which had been wings, I assumed, were under his robing. “He was desperate. Desperate men do desperate things, as you well know, for you have dealt with hopeless souls who have tried to barter their way out of their rides with you. When those above did not reply to his prayers, he turned to another. He offered up his firstborn son on the proviso that the child would only come into my hands when he had passed away. I could only assume he envisioned a long life for you. So, once the pact was signed, I held up my end of the contract. His lady wife survived being shot only to join him in

death not two years later due to contracting the yellow fever. Ironical is it not? He handed over his only son to lose her despite his conniving.”

The fallen one looked far too smug for my liking.

“So you tricked my father! You knew both he and she would die a few years later,” I barked, a slow fury beginning to swell in my breast. Lucifer merely shrugged.

“Such are the odds when you bargain with a power outside of your meager understanding. O fortune, fortune. All men call thee fickle.” He brushed his hair off his shoulder theatrically.

“You quote Shakespeare when he is pained?!” Hamiel shouted.

Lucifer shot him an amused look. “Little prayer carrier, we are all pained. I have swum in the lake of fire and sulfur for eternity. Pain is inescapable, it is joyous, it is alive. It is ever present. Now, I have my flocks to tend to and you two have souls to collect and prayers to carry to whichever saint is playing at benevolence on this day. Enjoy each other while you can. This respite will not last long. There are many wars to come, many plagues to sweep the lands, and much hatred in the hearts of men. Your services will be required for many years to come.”

“How long?” I shouted as Lucifer padded to the front door. “How long do I serve you?”

“Consider this, Coachman. When your tenure is over, your soul will leave this realm of purgatory and you shall be weighed. The fact that you have been murdered will not sway he who sits in judgment. Your golden-haired partner will remain here, for I doubt that the gates of heaven will swing open for one who chose to fornicate with my coachman. So, how long you serve shall be your decision to make. Ride well and true to me with those who are mine, and you shall be at his side for ages. Ride poorly

and you shall kneel before me in the pits, and I will not be as kind as you have known me to be.”

I glanced at Hamiel and knew my answer as surely as I knew my own name.

“Then I shall ferry souls for eternity,” I whispered as the shrieks of the nuckelavees shattered the stillness of the in-between. When I looked back at the door it stood open, the hell lord’s carriage gone. Several small balls of human essence floated into the cabin.

“I did not wish to condemn you to this realm forever,” Hamiel croaked. I turned to him and cradled his face. Tears were forming once more in his eyes. “My expulsion from the heavens has done naught but bring us—”

“A perpetuity to love each other.”

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:42 am

THE MOST UNSETTLING MOMENT in any day is coming awake, drenched in sweat, and reaching to find the one who soothes your fears is not beside you in your bed.

Swiping at the perspiration on my brow, I lay in our lumpy bed, straining to hear the sound of Hamiel and Delmar in conversation. Hearing nothing but the gentle scrape of the lost ones against the window glass, I kicked off the covers and cracked my stiff neck, for I had been resting without my pillow again. Hamiel had a habit of gathering pillows and blankets to himself as he slept. Like a magpie, but his preferences were for coverlets and goose-down pillows instead of shiny objects. I found my drawers draped over the finial of the bedpost. So Hamiel had awoken and tidied up. A warmth flooded me as I recalled the passion that we had shared last night. Several summers had passed and our love for each other had not dwindled. Nor would it ever, I was sure.

After I stepped into my trousers, I went to search for my beloved. The main room of the cabin was empty, a delicate pot of tea awaiting us on the table. Since Hamiel had made this hovel his home, the interior had become much more refined. Shelves lined with books and little statuettes lined one wall now. Good rugs covered the floor. There was less dust, the windows sparkled, and the meals were always served with tea from a lovely china teapot I had purchased from an antiques shop in Sandy Bay. I often wondered what the shopkeepers thought when their inventory just disappeared overnight but coin was left in its place. Perhaps they assumed leprechauns were at play. If only that were the case. I was as far removed from a playful wee man in green as a soul could be. Best they thought a tiny fairy had come to visit.

Wishing to break my fast with my soulmate, I walked outside, my bare feet kicking

up small clouds of ashen dust as I headed to the rear of the cabin. I could hear Abyss in his stall, tossing about his blanket as he chuffed loudly. Obviously, he had winded me. He would have to wait for a moment or two. Coming around the corner of the cottage, I found Hamiel and Delmar surveying our little vegetable patch.

“Good morn,” I called out. They both looked my way, Delmar scratching at his backside. He claimed the patch that Hamiel had sewn into his striped trousers irritated his tender skin. I suspected he just enjoyed the wind on his buttocks. “Any signs of life?”

“Nary a one.” Hamiel sighed as I closed the distance and pulled him into my arms. I buried my nose into his sweet curls and breathed him in. He smelled of soap and spring. I’d not met a more fastidious man. Delmar complained steadily about daily baths. “There is just not enough sun, I fear.”

“Mm, I have told you that many times.”

His arms wrapped around me. “If only I had some of that radiance that I once possessed.”

I took his face in my hands. He blinked wide amber eyes. “You are the most radiant being to walk this realm.” I pressed a kiss to his soft lips. Delmar made a gagging sound behind us. “We shall simply have to make do with the paltry things that do manage to germinate. Combined with my increased wages, we shall do fine.”

He blew out a breath. “Yes, I know we shall not starve, but there must be a way to bring sunlight to a patch of land that lacks it.”

I smiled down at him. His mind was very keen. If anyone could invent such a thing, it would be Hamiel. He read voraciously. Keeping him sated in bed as well as sated intellectually was a full-time occupation I enjoyed greatly. He pressed his lips to my rough chin.

“Fire makes light. We make fires around carrots. Big light! Big carrots!” Delmar shouted as he pulled on the seat of my pants. “See, Delmar is smart.”

Hamiel gave me a wink. He and Delmar had come to a truce a few seasons back. The imp had a terrible jealous streak which had caused some large issues during our first year or two living in this bleak realm. After a large kerfuffle involving an imp throwing himself to the floor in a tantrum that any toddler would envy, Hamiel and he had a long talk. It was laid out that Hamiel and he would share taking care of me as if I were a child who needed two nannies to coddle me. I would have been tweaked, but the notion that they both cared so much was quite nice. Hamiel took care of my personal needs, and Delmar took care of the cabin. And my boots. Even Hamiel confessed that his boot-buffing skills were meager compared to Delmar’s. Probably because he refused to drool on my boots to soften the leather before coating them with boot black.

“You are indeed very wise. We can try that,” Hamiel replied, then reached down to pat the imp on his bald head. I chuckled at the two of them, plotting to bring light to this eternally dismal place. A twinge in my chest made me wince. Hamiel placed a small hand on my heart. “A summons?”

“I think so.” I drew in a deep breath, mindful to keep my lips tight. Hamiel was always surrounded by souls who wished to move on. He could hear many of them, their prayers, which he would gather in a golden bowl and then send them forward to be given grace during the Eucharist. We had no way of knowing if his work was making a dint in the sheer numbers of souls seeking purification as the tiny orbs of essence never seemed to dwindle, but he clung to the notion that he was helping. And that was what faith was all about, after all. Belief.

“Then you should go. Oh, you’ve not had tea and toast yet. Let us gather you something to eat while you ready Abyss.” With that, he was off, wiggling from my embrace to race into the home we shared with Delmar on his heels. Shaking my head as I rubbed at the hot flare of the calling in my chest, I went back inside. I was about

to enter a horse's stall barefoot. Only fools and drunkards would be that half-witted. As soon as I entered, I found the two of them scurrying about to prepare a basket for me. I'd spoken up many times to tell them that I was a man fully grown and could prepare my own food and drink, but they insisted they enjoyed doting. So, I allowed them to dote all they wished. I dressed quickly, the pain of the summons growing so rapidly that it was hard to draw a breath.

"Here, let me fix your ascot," Hamiel said as I made my way into the kitchen after I was dressed. He rose to his toes to tie the slim black tie neatly. "You always look so handsome. I recall how breathless you made me when I first saw you."

"I thought you were stunned from falling over that chunk of firewood," I ground out, taking a moment to touch the tip of his nose.

"No, it was the sight of you." He stole a kiss, always mindful that we had company, and then placed a proper little picnic basket into my hands. One of his many finds on Earth that brought him great joy. "There is toast with some orange marmalade wrapped up as well as a tiny urn with tea tucked into the corner of the basket. Tell Abyss to travel slowly so as not to spill the tea."

A lick of white pain raced outward from my chest. "I'll tell him." With gritted teeth, I took the basket and kissed his smooth cheek. "I shall return. Do not let him place torches too near the cabin. It might not be much, but it is all we have."

"I will keep a close eye. Now go. You are white with pain." He hurried me to the front door. The ache in my chest made breathing hard. I wasted no time hitching Abyss to the carriage. The brougham thrummed strongly, a steady beat like a heart that I'd not experienced in all my time at this job.

"You are not to spill my tea," I told the hell stallion before giving the reins a flick.

He listened about as well as Delmar did, which was barely at all. The lurch of the

carriage forward sent me back into the seat with a grunt. The basket resting on the floor slid back, then left, and then right before it hit my ankle. Tea spilled out over my boot as we hit the portal. I would never tell Hamiel this, but 80 percent of the meals he insisted I take never made it to my stomach. Most were lost in the maddening race from purgatory to the home of those about to be judged. If I managed one slice of toast, I'd be lucky. But it was the thought that counted as Hester always said.

We exited the portal with a lurch to the side that nearly tossed me free of the carriage. I'd learned to brace throughout the ride over my tenure. My tea slopped out with a glug, soaking the toast, I was sure. Banking left, we raced over the lands, slowing as we neared Avers Mill. I'd not been back to my hometown for many months. My uncle and aunt had been good enough to have a burial for me. What they placed in the homemade coffin, I had no clue since Lucifer had pulled my burnt body from the rubble of the stable. Did they bury a pony, thinking it was me? The point was moot, but the thought was kind. Why Abyss brought us here was not clear until we trotted away from the small town to a pasture well known for early morning duels. I spied a fine looking mare, one that had been dear to me, and watched Delilah moving among the sheep hale and hearty. My heart swelled to know the horse had survived the blaze.

Abyss slowed to a stop, flicked his ears, and I sat dumbstruck, staring at the scene before me as tea soaked through my pant leg. Lying on the ground in a dark red puddle was Theo. Three men stood around him, and one man kneeling at his prostrate form was Dr. Willoughby. The others were unknown to me. One man, with a pistol in his hand, was striding away to his horse tied to a fence post. A flock of freshly shorn sheep stood on the other side of the fence, watching idly as the doctor pronounced Theo dead. The other two men, seconds to the duel, nodded dully. My shoulder blades hit the stiff back of my seat as I watched everything play out as if through a glass smeared with fat. Everything seemed hazy. I blinked several times to clear the film from my gaze. The men talked for a moment as I scanned the area for a rainbow walker, but none appeared. A dull mist settled over us as the sun slid behind some gray clouds. I could not recall showing up at a death and not meeting a walker.

Things made no sense.

Until a ghostly form rose from the body of my murderer. Theo, bloody shirt and coat, seemed confused. I dropped the reins. Abyss would not venture far. The grass here was thick and lush. My boots met the earth as Theo moved toward me, the hole in his heart oozing dark blood as he neared. My gut clenched to see his essence drifting to me as if pulled by a string. My hand went to the latch on the door, dread creeping up to embrace me. What would I say to him if he recognized me? I'd not interacted in my moribund form with anyone that I knew when I was whole. Did he recall his past?

He paused in front of me. I opened the door. "Your carriage awaits."

"Livingstone," he whispered as his gaze moved over me. "My eternal love."

I grimaced. If he thought to ply me with deceit he was greatly mistaken. Better men than he had tried to barter with me. All had failed. Hagglng with Satan's servants was a foolish last grasp for the damned.

"Your carriage awaits," I repeated. He moved closer. "Do not try to touch me. Any affection that I had for you burned to ash the night you murdered me."

"I was wrong. I know that. I was trapped, Livingstone, and your painful words pushed me over the edge. Surely you must see that if only you had gone along with my plans for us, that terrible night would not have taken place. Please, please. Do not take me to the dark one!"

He went to his knees, clutching my trousers as Delmar was known to do. I had never seen a more pitiful example of a man.

"You have been judged. Do not make me force you into the carriage. Rise and face at least this as a man."

His vacant eyes shifted from the brougham to me, then to the horse, and then skyward. “I hear no heavenly horns.”

“Heralds are not for murderers.” Slowly, he got to his feet and took a step. He paused, his confused gaze touching me, his eyes begging for salvation. That was a thing that I could not give him even if I wished to. Which I did not. “Judgment has been made. Get in.”

He let out a sad sigh but climbed into the carriage. I slammed the door closed, eager to get him delivered into the claws of the harpies and be home. My mind was jumbled. Abyss wasted no time. As I sat stiffly in my seat, my hat crushed under my leg, my toast and tea forgotten, I stared straight ahead at the blur of rich forests. Even when we hit the vortex of flame that shunted us into Hell, I maintained my stare. My passenger was silent. A true blessing, for if I had had to hear him beg for his soul, I might have steered us into a brick wall. Thankfully, he was quiet as we touched down, the rough stop tossing him forward with a thud.

I sat in my seat, the rank smell of burned flesh and brimstone thick on the heavy air. Fire spewed up in spurts from fissures, the wails of those under the whips down below seemed even louder this day. A crow appeared from the direction of the palace, growing larger and larger as a trio of winged demons joined him. Malphus touched down as a man, his wings disappearing once his bird-like feet were on the hot soil.

“A special passenger this day, Coachman,” he called as he smiled from a distance. The demons landed atop the brougham, claws raking the black paint, their devilish calls pulling a weak whimper from Theo. “Tell me, how do you feel seeing him dead and his soul banished to the pits? Does it fill you with glee? Anger, which impels even a reflective man to be harsh, which, far sweeter than down-dripping honey, swells in a man’s chest like smoke, Homer wrote. Tell me, Livingstone Wright, does your chest swell with pleasure seeing the man who took your life condemned to spend his afterlife under my heel?”

I found myself struck dumb. Some small part of me was happy, yes. I would not deny myself of that, but not to see Theo suffer eternally. That pleasure was for justice. It was satisfaction to see that a fair judgment had been made. Why Theo had been shot in a duel, I could not say, nor did I honestly care. He chose the path of evil and murder. He walked that road and now he was at the end of his journey. His decisions were his and his alone.

“No, it does not swell my chest.” I jumped down, popped my poor top hat back into shape, and turned to open the door for Theo. He did not go gracefully. Few did. The demons pulled him free, his screams melting into the din of all the others serving their time here. I watched as his soul was carried skyward. “If I feel anything at all, it is sadness that he wasted his life in such a callous manner.”

“You truly have lived far too long with that castoff angel.” Malphus spat on the ground, his black wings unfurling as he took to wing. I stood silent, my hand on Abyss’s strong flank, as the one who had ended my life began his eternal one. Regret for a life wasted filled me. Odd it was for I had been sure that when his time came, and it would, I would rejoice at his banishment to the hells. But now I felt only sorrow. Perhaps Lucifer’s second was right. Mayhap I had been with Hamiel for too long. I could only think that was a good thing.

The pain in my chest subsided. “Let us go home.”

Abyss was always ready to return to his stall. I flinched as we rode through the flames. I suspected I would never lose that fear of fire. The ride was quick, the horse eager to be fed and watered. My head was filled with a thousand different emotions as we rode through the portal between Earth and purgatory. Delmar was atop the cottage with a mirror as Hamiel stood on the ground with a lantern. The brougham came to a smooth stop.

Hamiel placed the lantern on the ground, his form outlined with a shimmering aura of souls attracted to his goodness. Much like me. I vaulted from the carriage to scoop

him into my arms. His breath left him in a rush. I rubbed my cheek against his curls, embracing him tightly.

“We are trying to make light for the garden, but so far the only thing we have accomplished is Delmar frying a small stink bug,” he informed me, his breath a warm rush over my throat. “Are you well?” I nodded, then loosened my hold. Just enough that he could step back a mite. “You look odd. Did your toast not sit well?”

“My toast...” I had to smile. “My toast got wet.”

“Drat. I was afraid of that. And that upset you for you are hungry. Come, let me make you more toast and tea. We can discuss your ride if you would like?”

I looked deeply into his gold eyes. His spectacles were smeared as always, and he had some dirt on his cheek. He never looked more beautiful.

“My ride was one that showed me that loving you has made me a better man.”

“Then we are truly blessed for loving you has made me a better man as well.”

I clasped him to me tightly as those who sought release danced about us in a rhythm as old as time itself. No matter where one resided, if the one who held their heart was with them, even the smallest cottage was paradise.