

## DARK PRESENCE

Reuben kept his eyes closed as his fingers danced across the strings of his mother's old violin, trying to appear lost in the music.

In truth, he had never managed such a feat before. Even as his body swayed and the song flowed through and out of him with every kiss of his bow against the strings, Reuben was aware of the crowd watching. More than that, with the assistance of his crowdcraft, he could *feel* them.

The elvish woman near the front of the stage watched with admiration—but also a sprinkling of envy as Reuben's performing partner, Isolde, dipped backward and sang out a long, soulful note. Missing her own youth, the music whispered to him.

Further back in the crowd, disgruntlement emanated from a few customers of dwarvish descent. Upset at their obstructed view as Reuben and Isolde did a bit of synchronized footwork, he knew without even looking.

And then there was the infernal-blooded man exuding impatience on the sidelines—waiting for the next stellas to perform, Reuben's crowdcraft discerned for him.

It was overwhelming, tapping in to so many emotions and intentions over the course of a half-hour. But still well-worth the discomfort. With enough focus and his violin as a conduit, Reuben's crowdcraft could sift through the masses until he spied out those who watched his movements with particular interest—and lust.

Which would make his next job easy. By the time they played their last number, Reuben always knew which customers would welcome his attention, as sure as their apparel would soon tell him how much cantergold that attention might be worth.

No, Reuben never escaped his surroundings when he made music. Sometimes he became much, *much* too aware.

Tonight, one entity stood out of place, distracting him. His music echoed back an unusual, powerful presence in the crowd, focused solely on him—not admiring or lusting, though not carrying the rarer reactions of scorn or judgment either.

Instead, the sheer intensity of it felt malicious . . . and familiar, somehow.

And yet, to Reuben's growing unease, he could not spot its source with his own two eyes during any part of their act. Not even at its end, when he could scrutinize the sea of faces better whilst channeling the final riff of his violin into a small demonstration of crowdcraft, a sparkling burst of illusory petals falling over them in time with the applause.

Only his years of practice in this particular craft of magic kept him from doubting whether he'd imagined it entirely. So as Isolde collected their tip bowl from downstage, Reuben took the chance to scan the cheering masses more blatantly, searching for the dark presence in their midst. Watching Reuben fiercely in return.

His search proved useless. Isolde walked in front of Reuben's view as she waved one last time and hurried off the stage, breaking his focus before he could make any conclusions. And Reuben knew he

should follow.

Still, he paused just in front of the curtains, his gaze lingering over the crowd right up until his friend pulled at the chiffon of his loose, slitted sleeve, raising a brow at him.

Reuben gave one last glance over the still-applauding audience—justifying it with a flirtatious wave and wink—before giving up on the search and ducking through.

“I wish you would sing and I accompany,” Isolde grouched the moment the curtain closed, muting the crowd. “My voice already needs a rest, and the night’s just started.”

Reuben swallowed down the remnants of his unease and let out a perfectly soft, light-hearted laugh. “Oh, I think our clientele would have my head if they never got to hear their *Songbird* again,” he said while they walked the short distance to the backstage green room. Adding, as he placed the violin back in its case, “Although your lute doesn’t require much upkeep—I’m about to run out of rosin yet again.”

Isolde sat down in front of the mirror vanity, eyes narrowed at his bow through the reflection. “Hm. I’d wager the fraying hair on that is to blame.”

Reuben hid the admittedly old horse-tail bow behind his back and gave her a look of scandal. “I think that’s the first time anyone has *dared* to insult my hair,” he scoffed, nodding down at his actual red-gold locks, still perfectly waved and swept over one shoulder.

“Good thing I’m here to keep you humble, then,” she smirked, though didn’t let the matter drop yet: “Surely it doesn’t cost much to rehair a bow?”

Reuben shrugged, watching as she dumped the bowl and began splitting their earnings in half. Talk of personal expenses was one of his least favorite subjects, right next to hobbies and health and the future and—well, anything personal, really.

Luckily, just then two of their fellow stellas—the young dwarvish twins Bittie and Gringoll—burst through the door.

“Late as always,” Reuben commented while the two hurried past them in their usual bright, coordinated outfits, Bittie still tying up her dark hair and Gringoll tucking his heel into a shoe.

“Can never tell when you’re finally done soaking up the applause,” Gringoll shot back, a playful smirk on his stubbled face.

“Wait, Bittie, don’t forget—!” Isolde warned, just in time for the dwarvish girl to rush back and take the now-empty bowl from her, blowing Isolde a quick kiss in thanks.

“Not that you need it,” Reuben teased, though that was an absolute lie. The twins were a crowd favorite ever since they’d been sent here to the Starlet Eye Bordello, almost five years ago now.

Bittie threw Reuben a rude finger gesture just before Gringoll parted the curtains, and with that, brother and sister both ran out together for the next act.

This time, just a brief glimpse of the crowd beyond made the hair at the back of Reuben’s neck stand on end.

“Catch the eye of a promising potential?” he distantly heard Isolde asking.

The malice itself wasn’t what made the presence familiar. Reuben had encountered plenty of terrible people with terrible intentions in the 46 years of his extended elvish life working at the bordello. Encounters he didn’t wish to think about, names he never wanted to hear again, old games he had no desire to play. Only to be expected, after so many decades.

No, there was something else about it. Like a haunting melody he could only remember a few notes of.

“Reubie?”

Reuben blinked; the curtains had already fallen closed again.

Isolde frowned. “You’re acting spooked. Is something the matter?”

"I'm certainly done performing for the night," Reuben side-stepped with a sheepish smile. Inwardly deciding that he wouldn't go fishing for the most agreeable, wealthiest customer he could find tonight, if it risked running into the person that malice belonged to. He might even leave a few hours of his schedule open despite the hit to his nightly income, and not look for trouble.

Unfortunately, Isolde noticed his tendency to dodge questions over the course of their friendship.

A flash of concern whitened her face. "Did you spot one of your old clients?"

"No! No, I didn't see anyone," Reuben denied, even as his stomach flipped at the thought.

But the bordello's security guards knew who to never let on the premises again, and truly Reuben *hadn't* spotted anyone at all. That was the unsettling part about it.

He reached out and squeezed one of her crossed forearms. "I'm probably just tired, Isi. Took on too many customers last night."

Isolde relaxed. "A lesson for tonight, I hope? I'm always telling you gold can't solve all our problems," she chided, waiting for his nod before she went back to counting coins.

His mother's stern wisdom often proved true: *In conflict, conceding a smaller, less-important thing often distracts the other party away from the original issue at hand*, she'd told him once, whilst smudging powder over her bruised cheekbone.

Reuben found the tactic worked wonders on stubborn customers and, over the last three years since Isolde started here, on his new, well-meaning friend.

After Isolde gave him his half of their earnings—a reasonable 20 cantergold—they exited into the back hallway, and Reuben resolved to put that dark presence out of his mind.

Just a trick of the music. Or another quirk of working at the Starlet

Eye Bordello, where people with all sorts of motives from nearly every walk of life could walk through its doors.

They entered the bordello's main hall from a side door just between the grand staircase and the main desk. While Isolde joined the masses, who were cheering as the twins performed another feat of acrobatics on stage, Reuben steeled himself and headed the opposite way. He didn't feel that unsettling presence anymore, but he wasn't about to linger in the crowd and find out exactly *how* familiar it actually was. No matter that he usually avoided this desk and the person behind it.

There stood a tall, slightly-stooped elvish man with receding brown hair and an easy, winning smile. Sidarchus—once a stella at the Starlet Eye, now the house manager—was busy scribbling into one of his ledgers, handing a key over to the person at the front of a surprisingly long line.

Of course, the bordello accommodated an array of overnight customers: some here just for a room with excellent balcony views of the city and mountainous skyline; some wanting a stella's company on top of that; and a spare few who paid for private showings of more sensual performances. With the crowd now spilling out under the vine-laced pergolas that wreathed the bordello outside, they would easily have every bed filled tonight.

Which gave Reuben hope he wouldn't need to posture and prance around to entice customers anyway. So he took no regard for the line, budging half in front of the horned, infernal-blooded woman about to approach Sidarchus next, and spoke loudly over the music and buzz of the crowd, "Sid! A moment?"

Sidarchus startled at the sight of him. "Is it Isolde again?" he said, half-shouting as well.

Reuben leaned in. "No, she's fine, just—open my appointment book tonight, when you can? I'm feeling a bit under the weather to mingle for myself."

Unsurprisingly, Sidarchus wasn't quick to agree. "That is highly irregular for you, Reubielocks," the older man replied with a grimace, opening a smaller book. He flipped through the pages holding the schedules of all 24 stellas who worked in the bordello, muttering, "And on a night like this, with every page and merchant and off-duty guard in a twenty-league radius here in Sazzera . . ."

The large woman behind Reuben blew out a breath and took an impatient step closer.

Reuben leaned further against the desk, both to avoid her and to argue back, "On a night like this, it should be easy to fill whatever openings I have, should it not?"

Sidarchus found Reuben's section, just then, and they both looked down to find an entirely blank column.

Reuben *did* often struggle to secure repeat customers these days.

Sidarchus made a short *tsk* sound. "I simply won't have the time. Now please," he gave Reuben a dismissive wave, "you're holding up my line."

The bordello house manager could be frustratingly hard to work with at times.

In his desperation, Reuben nearly resigned himself to what helped soften Sidarchus in the past. Whoever the dark presence belonged to, Reuben was in no mood to get threatened, he couldn't afford to be robbed, and he'd rather not get beaten by another old rejected customer with how his flimsy health liked to collapse of late. There were much safer, if more distasteful, options.

But before he could so much as grab Sidarchus's weathered hand in his, the infernal woman intervened.

She stepped forward with a gruff sound, nudging her shoulder into Reuben's—not with any considerable force, but plenty to throw *him* in particular off-balance. A twinge of pain followed down his always-aching spine, and by the time Reuben righted himself, she

had placed a small envelope and sack of gold on the ledger in front of Sidarchus and turned his attention away.

Sidarchus began apologizing to her in that entreating, yet assured way of his, opened the letter at her decisive nod towards it, and entirely ignored Reuben's presence.

He would have to brave the crowds still. Either that, or waste an entire night of pay and use savings he desperately needed to hold onto for more dire times, like when his legs wouldn't work or Isolde had an episode.

Worry was not enough justification. It never had been. And if there was one thing anyone here could say about him—not the favorite or the most beautiful, but the most seasoned in the bright constellation of stellas working here—it was that there was little Reubielocks *wouldn't* do for a gold piece.

Reuben gave the woman's back a half-hearted glare before he looked towards the nearest willing body.

He made it just a few steps before Sidarchus called, "Reubielocks! Wait!"

Reuben paused and turned, brows raised. Approaching the desk again, he was just in time to see Sidarchus draw a line through every appointment slot on Reuben's schedule for the night.

"You've been requested for *especially*, stella." Sidarchus smiled proudly, gesturing at the woman Reuben had budged in front of. "For the whole night, too."

"Me?" Reuben repeated, glancing at her with incredulity. Taking in the gray horns that curled up from her forehead around a head of short, dark hair, the warm fuchsia tone to her skin, the forked tail behind her, the thick leather she wore as well as sheathed blades on either hip. Perhaps a lone traveler along the Red Road, or some kind of muscle for a merchant.

Most stark of her features—no pupils. Nothing but a flicker of icy



white flame amidst black sclera, in the gaze that might or might not have been side-eying him now.

For a moment, he feared *this* was the source of the presence he'd felt earlier. Customers rarely booked for a full night with him, and it certainly seemed uncanny for two out-of-the-ordinary things to happen at once.

But even without humming a tune to channel his sharper intuition, Reuben could already feel a dutiful-if-disgruntled aura about her. Infernal heritage aside, there was nothing of uncanny intensity or malice, and certainly nothing . . . *familiar*.

"She will take you to her employer at a private location for the night," Sidarchus continued, halting Reuben's assumptions of this woman being the client. At hearing about a private location, however, a new wave of uncertainty washed over Reuben while Sidarchus gestured at the letter in his other hand. "500 canters up front, the other 500 upon appointment completion. Dear—this is only *half*," he said, winking.

Reuben's eyes widened at the heavy sack on the desk.

The bordello naturally took half, not counting additional fees for rent, food, and other necessities. And most appointments earned Reuben 30 canters at best. When he ended the night with more than 50 pieces of cantergold in his actual pocket, he called himself grateful.

Still, even with the cut for his employer—500 *canters* of his own?

If Reuben could make half that amount every working night, he'd be free of this place in five years, not another forty. Or better yet, could pay off Isolde's debt before the job wore her down into the same shadow of a person he saw each day in the mirror.

Bright gold winked at him from the opened sack, and even from here he could see a couple of coins at the top stamped with the twelve-pronged, geometric symbol of the Zaldian Priesthood—designating it as the most precious, valuable substance across the entire continent

of Monmark.

“Where to? With whom?” Reuben asked, reaching for the letter.

Sidarchus pulled it back out of reach. “They’re paying so well for the sake of *privacy*,” he answered, coldness leaking back into his tone. “Don’t be difficult, dear.”

Reuben glanced at the tall woman, but she still said nothing. Just watched their exchange with a vague sort of vexation on her face.

Maybe she didn’t care to speak—or maybe, hidden behind her confident stance and strong figure, was a discomfort for this loud, boisterous crowd. Reuben could always get more out of someone when he talked to them one-on-one, in a place quiet enough for his voice to lull and soothe with the same lilting timbre as his violin strings.

And even if this job turned out a bit dangerous, that gold could mean *everything*.

Slowly, Reuben nodded. “Let me . . . fetch my things.”

As he climbed up the stairs, Reuben tried to recall the last time he worked outside of the Starlet Eye. In all his four decades here, it couldn’t be more than half a dozen times—and almost always for an event, not an entire night.

The one and only experience he’d met a new client in a private residence, Reuben tried never to think about.

But even in his coveted youth, Reuben never earned such a sum of gold at once either. That was for the concubines and courtesans of High Ring—a much smaller subsection of the vast city that the noble high houses and Zaldian Priesthood called home, where the Aureate Cathedral crowned the city’s summit with its impressive bell tower.

The most Reuben could recall earning for a single appointment was 200 canters, and he lost the ability to walk for days after the experience.

His feet faltered at the thought. What worse things could this

private client want for a *thousand* canters?

Reuben entered his chambers, taking a steadying breath. Even if their tastes turned out less savory than simple taboo, he couldn't pass the offer. Not if it meant escaping that malicious presence likely still in the crowd. Or if entertaining this rich new client might secure him a repeat customer, and actually make a dent in the debt that forever ruled Reuben's life—just as it ruled his mother's before him.

But Oriana had never given up: *Freedom is the only song a person must fight to sing*, she'd whispered just a few nights before her death, *and that is why we must. You must keep singing, Reuben, so long as your voice is still yours to lose.*

Most of the advice given to him by the distant, aloof woman he called mother was blunt and simple. These words, he never fully understood—but as he prepared for a night that could just as easily turn out a nightmare as a miracle, Reuben hoped he had some fight left in himself to lose.

## CHARMING WORDS

Reuben had done his three-fold preparations for the night already—rose oil on his neck and wrists to attract, base oil to loosen himself for penetration, and salve oil rubbed down the line of his spine to soothe the inevitable pains and aches.

But a little extra preparation never hurt. After entering his bedchamber, Reuben tied a small pouch to his beaded belt and stowed two additional items. First, an extra vial of base oil—in case the client offered none and asked for something that would physically injure him without it. Second, a tiny bottle of voleris—a potent, shimmering potion the Starlet Eye Bordello was famous for—in case the client demanded something Reuben couldn't *mentally* bear otherwise.

Only a few tasks remained. As he crossed to his personal vanity, Reuben smoothed a few stray curls in the mirror, then checked the gold dust at the corners of his eyes, which accented the gold ring in his otherwise-brown irises. But nothing looked smudged yet—the night was young, after all.

Next, Reuben pinned a sheer, beaded veil to fall over his face, a necessity in case he crossed paths with any Zaldian acolyte or priest in public. Then he slid his mother's ring onto his pinky finger, for

good luck.

After picking up his violin case, Reuben couldn't stall further—and silently resolved to be brave for the sake of gold and his loved ones.

*An autumn crow knows, always where to go / A swan needn't wait, till dancing for its mate*, he sang silently to himself while heading back down, lyrics of his mother's favorite folk song from the southern heartlands. It still held some childish comfort after all these years: *The phoenix can feel—*

Reuben paused, noting the infernal woman waiting at the stairway's base. Her face was turned towards the crowd, though it was impossible to know what, if anything, her pupil-less eyes gazed at before she noticed his halted approach.

Reuben gave her a low bow. "A gilded blessing to meet you, saer," he started in a soft voice. "I had no idea I was jeopardizing my own prospects tonight, stepping in front of you like that. My sincerest apologies. Getting in my own way as usual, it seems." He offered a shy smile from under the sheer veil. "You can call me Reubielocks. Or Reubie for short, as you'd like."

She made another "Hm" sound, this time without annoyance at least.

After a short beat, Reuben added more flirtatiously, "Let me know if I can make it up to you, while you lead me to your master?"

The woman's neutral expression stiffened. She opened her mouth—then shut it, abruptly walking away towards the bordello's main doors.

Reuben quelled a frown before following.

It was a good thing his escort towered above most, or else he would have already lost her in the thick current of pedestrians as they walked out into the main ring's piazza—nearly as congested as the brothel tonight. Some sort of event or political happenings was likely to blame, Reuben thought dismissively.

As they moved west, she led him under stone archways and a labyrinth of lanes away from the main square, though the streets stayed busy. Ignoring the judgemental looks thrown his way by passing pedestrians, Reuben started, "So, may I ask what it's been like for you, working for this master? Are they a stricter sort, saer?"

The woman frowned tightly and looked down, walking faster.

Not that Reuben minded a fast pace on principle. The reason for the veil, according to the Gospel of Zald, was to shield clerics, children, and other innocents from impurity—though anyone could be influenced to sin just by looking into the eyes of someone like Reuben: whores, deviants, heretics.

Only once had someone thrown a rotting vegetable at him before, but he'd rather not experience it a second time—especially not prior to an important appointment. The smell was terribly hard to get out of one's clothing.

"Do you know any Dijheri hand gestures?" Reuben asked around slightly-labored breaths. "I'm not fluent, but I have a friend who's taught me enough of the basics, and if you'd be more comfortable—"

The woman came to a stop just then, however. Reuben barely avoided running into her on the unkempt stonework of the older street before he noticed the sight ahead: a pair of sentry guards speaking to a white-clad Zaldian cleric, standing between them and the main stair that led down to the Hollows—the poorest section of the city.

Her face danced through a complicated set of emotions before she took an abrupt left, long legs striding even faster. Reuben was forced to jog to keep the pace. And no matter the lean strength Reuben could claim, it did little for his endurance or the harsh impact of stone pounding an ache into his back.

"Wait!" he called between pants, when all but her tail had disappeared around one of the narrow switchbacks of stairs and

streets.

She came back into view with a disgruntled expression, though it faded the moment she took in his state.

Reuben tried to hide how fast his chest was moving, adjusting his veil and giving her a weak smile. “A moment, saer,” he huffed. “I don’t like sentry guards either, I just—need to catch my breath.”

Then he glanced around them; built entirely on a mountainside, Sazzera’s ancient, lowest tiers offered a breathtaking view of the mountains around Sazzera—currently a ragged line of snow-capped peaks reflecting the crescent moon with a ghostly sheen. Sentry guards were stationed to regulate who passed through each of the city’s tiered levels, but the ones who guarded *this* part of the city were particularly unfriendly. The old hollowed dwellings saw little upkeep compared to the tiers of architectural splendor above them. The impoverished had been left to burrow deeper into the mountain, or otherwise collapse right where they worked in the Ravine mines below, with debtors and criminals beside them.

Which was where Reuben could have ended up, if not for Sidarchus’s generosity—and a reminder of just how important his earnings tonight could be, Reuben reminded himself before pushing away from the old limestone wall.

“Ready,” he lied.

The smell greeted him first, once they descended enough stairs into the Hollows. Thyme bush and mountain lilies gave way to the stink of poverty and worse, a sulfuric stench belching from the chasmic Ravine. The familiar sight greeted him next: steep staircases winding their way through jumbled rows of small, square dwellings layered on top of each other in honeycomb clusters. A life where the floor of one dwelling was very likely the roof of another, while its own roof helped to form the streets of the level above.

Decrepit and dirty; forgotten places filled with forgettable people.

Once, a neighborhood Reuben called home.

Though it had been a while since he snuck down to the Hollows himself, unveiled and in common attire. The few people out at this hour were soot-smudged, hollow-faced, and raggedly clothed. Likely just returning from their thankless work in the Ravine. Most lowered their gazes—but the few who didn't passed Reuben with open, disbelieving stares.

In this case, Reuben didn't need any music to know these looks had more to do with the silk chiffon and beads adorning his body than any self-righteous piety.

Perhaps for that reason, he found them much harder to ignore.

To his relief, the woman stopped soon after, glancing around before she ducked into the next arched cave entrance. Reuben squinted into the dark as he took a few careful steps after her.

He smelled the animals stalled in the carved-out room before his eyes adjusted to see them: three swine, a mule, a chicken coop. But Reuben had no time to further assess the sight before his guide lit a waiting lantern and approached a wooden door at the back.

Behind it lay a narrow room with a bed, tiny window, and cooking area; on a table, Reuben noted strange playing cards left abandoned in a haphazard pattern. But they passed all of it by, this time through an open doorway into an even smaller space filled with storage shelves and crates.

Reuben's delicate sleeve caught on the scratchy side of one crate, nearly ripping it as he gingerly edged through the walkway. "Is this a, uh . . . short detour, of some kind?" he asked while carefully pulling himself free.

Her continued silence felt more ominous, this time.

At the back of the dark storage room, the woman stopped. Tall wooden shelves stood against the limestone wall in front of them, littered with sealed boxes and items draped in cloth which Reuben



couldn't identify further in this dim. He did spot the concealed button on the furniture's side which his guide reached to press—but took a surprised step backward as the shelves made a groaning, clicking sound, and slowly parted straight down the middle.

Behind them, an innocuous wooden door awaited.

And Reuben's mind chose *now* to remind him of all the superstition surrounding what might still infest the deepest parts of the Hollows, where the city's half-collapsed catacombs remained: criminals, devilcrafters, and various monsters of the corrupted, undead, and bloodthirsty variety. Most of it was false—but not all.

Just how private did this customer need to be? And, most worrisome, *why*?

Reuben didn't like any of his guesses.

As the woman moved forward, he had to ask, "Is it much further?"

She at least acknowledged this question with a shake of her head, gesturing at the door as she opened it and stepped aside.

Reuben stiffened. "Not much further at all," he recovered with a forced laugh, peering hesitantly into the candlelit room beyond.

But hesitation wouldn't do—it wasn't what anyone paid a whore for.

So Reuben took off his veil, tied it to dangle from the side of his beaded belt, and smoothed down his hair. Nothing more, before he made his next few strides slow but confident walking into the unknown.

This room was better lit and far larger than the rooms before it. Cream and cobalt-dyed curtains draped over its tall limestone walls, the space outfitted not with more storage or the usual cluttered necessities of an impoverished family, but simple, sturdy oak furniture.

And there, writing at a candlelit desk positioned across from a large bed, sat a man.

The quill he held paused over the parchment, his posture stiffening as he half-turned to face Reuben. Who put on his prettiest, demurest of smiles in response. Reuben immediately set aside his surveillance of the room in favor of his new client's features and demeanor, profiling who exactly he would be entertaining tonight.

Dark, shoulder-length hair, round ears, and a standard but pale complexion gave the man the appearance of a full-blooded human, from Reuben's very limited experience—full humans were so uncommon in this city of mixed elvish, dwarvish, infernal, and even orkish descent, that Reuben only had Isolde to compare the man with. By that life span, the slight lines on this client's forehead and around his mouth would mark at least three decades of life, though the purplish circles under his dark green eyes betrayed another mark of age.

"Welcome, saer," he said in a low tone that carried a similar weariness, giving Reuben a formal nod as he set down his quill.

Unlike the pristine furnishings around him, he wore an old leather coat with a high collar, its bottom edges scuffed with mud. A large metal scabbard peeked from its length, as if he hadn't found either the time or interest in removing his sword belt before sitting to write. Thick shoulders and scarred hands promised he knew how to use the weapon. A stiff mouth and hard expression promised that he had used it, more times than he could count.

Handsome, but in an unkempt sort of way—much more importantly, still a potential danger.

Reuben heard the door shut behind him, cutting off his final chance to turn around and never find out.

For now Reuben didn't move any closer. Only bowed low, idly running fingers through the curls that fell down his chest. "The pleasure is *certainly* mine," he said, glancing up through his eyelashes. "But please—no need for any formalities with me. They call me Reubielocks, or Reubie if you'd like, my good saer."

“Reubie,” the man repeated slowly, as if testing the word in his mouth. Then gave Reuben a stiff smile. “I am rusty in formalities myself.”

His dark eyes traveled up and down Reuben’s person with a sharp scrutiny. Whatever he saw—past an elvish whore draped in a lewd ensemble of sheer finery, Reuben thought—he seemed to have little opinion of, one way or the other.

“Call me Everic,” he finished, before standing and shrugging off the long, dirty coat to be draped over his chair.

The gesture calmed Reuben. He always privately felt it a more comfortable experience, when his customers somewhat matched his own state of dress or undress.

Time would tell if that equality continued for the rest of the night, of course.

Now that he was standing Reuben assessed the likely-human further: just a little taller than him, but built like a soldier. If true, Reuben wondered which part of Sazzera’s military this Everic had fought for, and if it was still his profession. Nothing but a few skirmishes had occurred in the past few decades, mostly with raiders along the coast. But given the last century of watching the far-off empire of Loethia expand again across the heartlands, Sazzeran soldiers were trained as if that could always change.

Besides that, Everic stood strangely . . . stiff. As if the man had mastered how to breathe without moving a muscle.

Luckily, Reuben was well-practiced in relaxing people. He set his violin case by the door and approached, stopping only a pace away from Everic to trace a finger along the top of his chair. “*Everic*. It’s been a long time since I was called for out of my own chambers like this,” he murmured, playing at vulnerability now. “I’m afraid I may need some . . . guidance, to best be of service to you, saer.”

Reuben watched to see how his words affected the man, though

Everic's expression changed frustratingly little.

"And I thank you for coming." His words stayed short and formal—as if giving a report, not conversing with a prostitute—as he continued, "I appreciate this is not an area of the city most would care to venture down."

Not relaxed yet, by any means, but Reuben would never discourage a client's gratitude. He took a small step closer, grinning more freely as he gestured about them. "On the contrary, it's a cozy little oasis you have down here. I admit, when your servant brought me—"

"—friend," the man corrected.

Reuben kept smiling. "Of course, saer, forgive me—when your *friend* led me into the Hollows . . . well, I didn't know what to imagine. Maybe a quick tryst in a back alley, if I was lucky, or an assassination if I wasn't," he chuckled. When Everic didn't so much as smile in response, Reuben swallowed hard and hurried on, nodding at the room and furnishings, "But I daresay, save the lack of natural light, this place seems far more comfortable than my own bedchamber."

Instead of softening at the compliment, his client tensed—specifically right when Reuben's eyes swept over the desk as he spoke. Everic reacted without subtlety, gathering up the half-written parchment and tucking it under some books while asking, "Do prostitutes *often* fear assassination attempts in this city?"

A private customer indeed. But luckily for this man, Reuben had neither aspirations nor stupidity enough to pry into his clients' lives.

He waved a dismissive hand, leaning against the chair and angling his body—both to direct his gaze away from the desk and to show his form off better as he took a calculated step forward, baring a leg through the high slit of his silk dress.

Reuben had grown especially good at spotting the telltale signs of lust over the last few decades. The human paused at the display with small, yet undeniable signs of it: slightly wider eyes before his gaze

flicked away; a small tick to his jaw.

“Oh, nothing so dramatic,” Reuben said, meanwhile. Almost assured now that he had found himself a touch-starved recluse with an inheritance to waste, not another powerful, controlling sadist. “Just the occasional client with enemies. You don’t live such an exciting life, do you, Everic?”

An uncommon amount of satisfaction filled Reuben, when his words finally cracked a true half-smile on Everic’s stern face. “Me?” Everic said in a dry voice. “Oh, I try to be as boring as possible.”

Reuben’s smile widened. “Then again, what is life without a bit of danger?” he quipped in return. “Too often I’m the most titillating factor in someone’s life. It’s always a nice change of pace, to be the mundane thing.”

Which was an outright lie. Truly, Reuben didn’t mind pretending interest when all a client had to talk about was the most recent tax increase, or another low-born parlor party, or their petty familial drama, even if it grew dull.

Clients with dangerous lives tended to be . . . well, *dangerous*. Speaking of powerful, murderous sadists: an old customer of his named Waron had once been attacked right in the midst of their appointment, after Reuben had already taken volaris and laid tied to the bedposts. Luckily, Waron was quick to overpower the would-be-assassin. But instead of calling for bordello security, he’d taken out his large, dark-metale blade, repeatedly stabbed her abdomen with it, then stalked out without another word. Leaving Reuben tied there with her gutted body on the floor until Isolde checked on him hours later—after the wound from the woman’s belly bled out a necrotic black ichor that ate into the flooring.

It was the only time Reuben had seen a dead body since his mother’s, though it didn’t feature in his nightmares half as often as other, worse experiences with Waron.

Reuben blinked now, realizing they'd fallen into silence a few moments longer than he meant to allow. "Have I run my mouth long enough?" he said with a small laugh. Then toned his voice into something velvet-soft, stepping closer and reaching to stroke a hand down Everic's remarkably-still chest. "Is there something else you'd rather it was busy with?"

Everic's face hardened, his ribcage finally moving around a sharp inhale. "Did you not read the letter?" he asked, taking a step back. Reuben's hand was left hovering in the air between them.

Reuben let his arm drop, swallowing down a bolt of frustration. He guessed this appointment wouldn't be easy, of course—but he still couldn't see the full shape of its difficulties.

"Oh, was that meant for *my* eyes, then?" he said, carefully toning his voice with worry and hesitance. "My apologies, saer, if I come unprepared—"

"And Bev explained nothing further on the walk down?" Everic pressed.

Reuben tried not to grimace. "Bev, was it? I didn't have the pleasure. Was she the one meant to give instruction?"

He wasn't aware the infernal woman could or liked to speak *at all*, frankly, though he kept that part to himself.

"You're completely uninformed, then," Everic scoffed, pacing to his desk and back with clear frustration of his own—though at least no limbs had started swinging yet.

Reuben blew out a slow, silent breath and tried again to entreat, "Whatever error has been made, saer, I take full responsibility," regardless of his complete ignorance. Reuben wondered if he *was* partially to blame, if Bev's silence was her recompense for his initial disregard of her. "I would wish to rectify it now, if only you'd allow—"

"Stop, just—stop. Please sit, and I will explain," Everic interrupted yet again, though the rudeness was counterbalanced somewhat by the

“*please*” and the fact he’d only slightly raised his voice, not shouted.

Then Reuben saw where Everic was pointing to sit, and his entire body relaxed.

He made sure to flash Everic a sweet smile as he obeyed and walked towards the bed. The mattress was soft but firm under him when he sat, clearly of the same high quality as the rest of the furnishings. Reuben found himself wondering further at this man’s current circumstances to have such riches on hand, and yet hide himself away in the most impoverished level of Sazzera.

Reuben abandoned his idle musing, however, upon realizing his customer still hadn’t joined him. Instead, Everic had approached the door, and now pulled out a key from an inner coat pocket—turning it in the lock with a decisive *click*.

For the first time since entering the room, Reuben felt true unease. “Worried about an interruption all the way down here?” he said around a hesitant laugh.

The human didn’t tense up before making an attack, at least. And why would anyone pay 500 cantergold upfront just to get Reuben here and kill him? No whore was so valuable as that, he tried to comfort himself.

Then again, Reuben hadn’t been stupid enough to hope this Everic would pay such a price only for sex. He would likely need to drink the bottle of voleris during this appointment after all, if the mere explanation of Everic’s desires was expected to send him running.

For now, he only gripped the bedsheets and pasted on a smile. “No need to worry, saer. I’m all bought and paid for, whatever you should desire,” he pointed out—even whilst eyeing where he’d placed his violin case near the door, the best conduit for the few strong, defensive spells crowdcraft could offer.

Everic ran a hand through his dark hair, messing it further. He muttered to himself, just loud enough for Reuben’s pointed ears to

catch, “This had better *work*, Jophiel.”

Then Reuben’s stomach flooded with an ice-cold dread.

Reuben prided himself in reading people and their intentions well, particularly when his music could assist. But whenever he *didn’t* pick a customer out from the crowd himself, their true intent was harder to parse. At hearing that name, one instance in particular took over—a painful, too-vivid memory drowning his senses, tightening like a chain around his lungs, holding his entire mind hostage:

*“My closest friends call me Jophiel,” the voice whispered, smooth as silk in his ear—later sharp and menacing as it spoke in an arcane-laced tongue, while her body rocked above him—ignoring his protests, pinning his arms, binding his tongue as a strange, searing magic spasmed through his body—*

“You’re with her,” Reuben gasped, jumping to his feet.

There were worse things than Waron out there. Especially if *she* was back in the city.

And apparently one night of torment hadn’t been enough. It wasn’t a common name, but beyond that Reuben had no justification as to why he knew it was *the* Jophiel he’d once met.

But the insidious presence in the crowd tonight . . . it had to have been hers.

Reuben was breathing too fast, too disoriented by the awful flashbacks to manage a few lyrics of the complicated *Charming Words* spell and get himself out of here. Humming a quick *Friendship* tune would be easier, even in his panic. But that spell didn’t last longer than a few minutes, and people tended to be *angrier* once a charm faded. Singing it to a strong, armed man—who could easily run him down before he made it back to the main ring, much less the bordello—was a laughable idea.

Reuben could channel longer-lasting magic through his violin, and with much more skill . . . but Everic stood in the way for now—looking uneasy, yet unsurprised at Reuben’s abrupt reaction. “You



know Jophiel,” he replied.

So Everic knew there was a connection. Had this just been some elaborate plot to allow her to use Reuben for her devilcraft again? If so, why *him*?

“I don’t,” said Reuben whilst he edged along the side of the bed, angling his steps slowly towards the locked door. “And I’m sorry, but I don’t *want* to get to know her, saer. Our one evening together was quite enough—you seem like a fine person, but I’d rather have nothing to do with her or her friends, so—so I think it best I leave now, saer, and just get your money returned to you—”

“I’m not her friend,” Everic cut in.

Reuben should have kept entreating. “Who are you, then?” he shot back instead. It was hard to remember the last time he’d spoken so harshly; Reuben’s own ears rang with the grating, shrill sound. “It was her at the bordello tonight, I’m sure—why bring me all the way here?”

“This has nothing to do with her,” Everic pressed instead of answering.

Reuben let out a shaky scoff of disbelief. “*Zaldus wept*,” he cursed, “if she thinks she can send someone else to finish the job—”

“Wait. Just listen a moment,” Everic interrupted yet again, taking a step forward.

Reuben instinctively moved backward, and swallowed down a wince as his back hit the bedpost. As a proficient crowdrafter, he knew better than most how much trust it cost to listen—how much power simple words could weave.

And yet Everic didn’t launch into an explanation, or worse, an incantation. He just stood there in silence, until Reuben realized it had been an actual request.

“Fine . . . then *explain*.”

The human didn’t seem to be thrown off by Reuben’s drastic shift in

demeanor. Everic just sighed, “Thank you.” His shoulders stayed stiff, his spine straight—but the lines on his face softened somewhat, as he took a breath and started, “My name is Everic Payne, and I arrived quite recently in the city. While I’ve known Jophiel for many years, she would not be involved in this agreement between you and I; she only recommended I hire you. I don’t know what transpired between you two before, but I promise this is nothing personal. Nothing . . . intimate,” and he gestured at Reuben’s whole person.

Reuben was not assured. Sex, he could easily provide. Other intimacies, his persona had been painstakingly crafted for. But unwittingly playing part in a dark rite that sent his body into a minute-long seizure—would *that* count as intimate to this man?

“What plans have you, then?” he demanded. “Does my willingness factor at all into them?”

If Everic side-stepped the question, Reuben now readied himself to sing the *Charming Words* spell, reciting the first lines in his head: *Mellifluous, diaphanous / Illustrious, euphonious*.

For all that Reuben had been reduced to a simple whore for coin, he wasn’t like his mother in every respect. He wouldn’t go through the pain of that night ever again—no matter how much gold was thrown at him.

Everic looked upset by the question, however. “Your willingness is *required*,” he answered with a deep frown.

Despite it all, Reuben still sensed none of the dark malice he had earlier this night. He even found himself begrudgingly starting to calm, hoping Everic might be agreeable enough to let him go.

Or at least, right up until Everic spoke the next words.

“I don’t want your body . . . well, not in that sense, anyway.” His eyes, suddenly so dark the irises seemed to match the pupils, flickered to Reuben’s neck. “Just your blood.”