

INNER DEMONS

GLORIA
OLIVER



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Gloria Oliver



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Inner Demons

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First Printing 2014, Second Revised Printing 2019

Cover Art and Design Copyright Charles Bernard

Dimension Palace Publishing



ISBN: 978-1-7339511-3-5 (Print/Trade)
ISBN: 978-1-7339511-4-2 (Electronic/Multiple Formats)
ISBN: 978-1-7395511-5-9 (Electronic/Epub)

Smashwords Edition

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DEDICATION

To all the awesome folks responsible for the show "Supernatural." My very first obsession.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also by Gloria Oliver](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 60](#)

[Chapter 65](#)

[Subscribe](#)

[About the Author](#)

[The Price of Mercy Sample](#)

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Flush Fiction

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To the folks at Mundania Press – thank you for having faith. It was sad to see you go. You will not be forgotten.



“Getting a little excited, are we?” I couldn’t keep the grin out of my voice as I kicked off my shoes and dug my toes into the carpet and stretched. Getting home in the evenings was one of the best perks of the day. Switching the phone to my other hand, I picked up my low heeled pumps and stepped into the bedroom.

“Yes. No? Mostly I’m totally stressing out! Richie is useless at this stuff. He’s got no idea that Peach, Taffeta Peach, and Candy Peach aren’t *in any* way the same color.” Debbie sighed from the other end of the line. “Honestly, he could try a little harder. We’ll only get married once.”

I didn’t have any idea what the differences between those colors were either but figured it wasn’t the time to say so. I tucked the shoes away in the closet and grabbed a pair of gray sweat pants and an old Beatles t-shirt, feeling the day slide off my shoulders as I changed. “You’ve known he’s been color impaired for years, love won’t change that. Or have you forgotten his color choices for the college mixer two years ago?” Drifting to the kitchen, I pulled down my favorite cup, chipped handle and all, and filled it with water and stuck it in the microwave to heat.

A stifled giggle came from the other end of the line. “What a disaster! That won’t ever be happening again on my watch.”

“I should hope not.” Grinning, I brought out my tea colander and opened the cabinet to pick the flavor of the evening. Blueberry Cheesecake Tea seemed just the thing.

“We’re still on for this weekend, right?” A slight note of insecurity bled through.

I worked hard not to smile. Though I usually wasn’t much into fashion or agonizing over what cake flavoring would please most people, I’d do almost anything for Debbie. “Of course, looking forward to it.”

“I love you, Tam.”

“I love you, too. But don’t tell Richie, he’ll get jealous.”

Debbie laughed. “It’s a secret. Pick you up at nine.”

I hung up just as the microwave dinged. Pulling out the mug, I put it on a tray with everything else needed, and went to the living room, looking forward to stretching out on my gray couch and sipping my tea.

I’d just set the tray down when I noticed an odd smell...like rotten eggs. I half turned, then...

A pair of headlights was coming right for me.

I froze, my breath catching at my throat, my brain refusing to accept the impossible change.

The car swerved at the last moment, and time slowed around me as a flush of adrenaline hit my system. The blare of a pressed horn crashed into my ears.

The dark blue Oldsmobile missed me by mere inches, the glow of streetlights reflecting from its sides. Humid wind whipped over me, trying to drag me along in the car's wake. The stench from the exhaust coiled about me, and I spun around to watch the trailing red tail lights.

"Lunatic!" An arm shot out the window, the middle finger held up as an extra commentary on the near miss.

The car never even slowed.

This was real.

Other pairs of headlights bore down my way. Fear spiked through me, yelling at me to get the hell out of there. I tripped when I took my first panicked step, the shoes on my feet feeling strange and awkward. I glanced down and saw I was wearing white boots with six-inch heels. Worse, I was also wearing a dark sequined dress that only covered a small part of my upper thighs.

I wasn't a prude, but I had taste, dammit, and this get up just wasn't me. I stumbled toward the sidewalk to my right, only too aware of the traffic heading toward me.

I almost collapsed once I made it, the high heels messing with my center of gravity. A Shell gas station and a combination KFC/Taco Bell sat in front of me. The location didn't look familiar, though, at the moment, nothing did.

How did I get here?

Panic nibbled at the back of my mind, confusion clouding everything.

I slowly turned where I stood and spotted a freeway with an overpass on my right. Across the blacktop street was a bank and several grassy lots set back from the curb. The street sign said Beechnut Street. That rang a bell—could I still be in Houston? Just thinking it gave me hope. At the moment, though, it wouldn't have surprised me to find out I was on another planet entirely.

Chilled, I rubbed my arms, even as a bead of sweat ran down my neck. A small purse on a long chain strap smacked against my thigh. I brought it close, never having seen it before, and opened it. Wads of loose cash lay inside, as well as a tube of lipstick and a set of keys hanging off a skull keychain. There was no driver's license or other type of ID. No cell phone, either. I couldn't tell if the purse was even actually mine. Yet the shape of one of the keys looked familiar. I was pretty sure it belonged to my apartment.

It looked like I had cash, what I hoped was my key, and I was possibly in my city. This meant I could get back home to things I knew.

Home—yes, getting home sounded excellent right now.

Taking a deep breath, I felt slightly more in control. Yes, home, I needed to get myself home. That was a plan, something to aim for. I half walked, half waddled toward the KFC/Taco Bell, hoping to find a pay phone or beg to borrow someone's cell. I'd never worn such tall heels. They tried to sink into the grass as I cut across the strip to the parking lot. As I neared the bank of glass windows advertising value meals and combo platters, I spotted my reflection and came to a complete stop.

The image that mirrored my movements was and wasn't me. I had screaming platinum blonde hair. Straight and startling in its color, it dropped down to my shoulders. It couldn't be real. No matter how many straighteners I used on my hair, it'd never been that cooperative. A shaking hand with platinum, luminescent nail polish rose up to touch the hair. After a quick inspection, I realized it was a wig. Though I wasn't considered that dark-skinned, especially when compared to the rest of my family, out here, my face and eyes seemed to suck out the light,

especially with my face being framed by the platinum hairpiece, my eyes shaded with glittering eye shadow and lips with matching lipstick. The black and way too short sequined dress showed stripes of startling white and matched the tall-heeled white boots that rose up to my knees. I wasn't sure if I looked more like a hooker out of a cheap 60's cop show, an extra out of an old Soul Train rerun, or some exotic alien in a B-movie showing on the Syfy Channel. Either way, it wasn't me.

I swayed where I stood, the surreal feeling of it all making me dizzy. I leaned against the glass door, no longer trusting my legs. How did I come to be dressed like this or be at this place? I liked to have fun as much as anyone, but I wasn't a raving party girl. Some might even call me boring since my idea of a good time typically consisted of staying at home dressed in my sweats, curled up on the couch with a good book. So why?

Darkness prickled at the edges of my vision, so I scrunched down and placed my head between my knees while trying to force my breathing to slow, sure I was close to hyperventilating. The accountant in me whispered that all numbers added up, even if you didn't have every bit of data. All you had to do was find them. What came in always had to balance what came out, even though it might not look like it. I just needed to hold it together long enough to find all the pieces—then everything would make sense. Everything.

But to do that, I needed to keep it together—I needed to stick to my plan of getting home. My breathing slowed, and that in turn brought down the hammering in my heart.

Feeling slightly calmer, I gingerly stood up.

The night air pressed in around me, hot and sticky with humidity, not the usual norm for April. But with Texas, you just never knew. The odd thought, however, helped ground me.

I reached out for the handle on the glass door and then went inside to try to borrow a phone and get back to things I knew.





The pimple-faced kid behind the counter ogled me as I came up trying to keep my balance on the boots' high heels. You'd think he'd never seen a psychedelically dressed black woman before. The thought made me giggle, which only served to scare me. I was losing it.

"What's the street address here?"

"Uh, 9836 Beechnut."

Then the hard part. "And the city?"

That got me a raised brow. "Houston, of course."

The wave of relief at hearing I was still in my home city made me weak at the knees. "Do you have a pay phone?"

Instead of answering he pointed back toward the bathrooms. He was no longer ogling but stared at me to determine if I was about to cause trouble.

"Thanks." I put as much heartfelt gratitude as I could to try to ease his suspicions, already having had more than my fill of weirdness for one night. "I'll have a medium Coke, please."

The ten I put on the counter seemed to alleviate his worries more than my smile had. As long as he gave me some change for the phone, I didn't care.

I took the empty cup and my money and made the call. The cab showed up less than twenty minutes later.

The Yellow Cab added to my sense of ease, the bright cars a familiar part of the Houston landscape. The driver didn't bat an eye at my 'loud' appearance, for which I was grateful. I gave him my address, and we got underway.

My eyes stung as we came within sight of my apartment complex. I'd never been so happy to see anything in my life. I paid the driver and then just stood at the security gate staring at the white clubhouse with its dark red Spanish tiled roof. I managed to make it to the clunky keypad without falling on my face and slipped inside the complex.

My steps echoed eerily into the dark as I followed the sidewalk amidst the manicured trees and lawn toward building 4C. My eager steps slowed as I got close. Growing dread bubbled up past my previous elation.

I came to a stop five steps from my apartment door.

My last memories, before finding myself on that dark street alone, were of the apartment. So whatever had happened to me had started here. There was nothing to say it couldn't happen again.

My arms and legs broke out in goosebumps.

The red door with its silver 102 below the peephole, the tiled entryway covered by the dark wood underside of the stairs leading to the apartment above—it had always been a welcomed sight. Yet for reasons I couldn't name, it now seemed alien and menacing. I shifted from one foot to the other, rubbing my arms with my hands while staring at it, feeling cold though the night was warm.

I'd never been one to back down, though—not with the pushers trying to hook us on drugs in middle school, not with the racists that harassed me in high school, or even the few prejudiced college students or teachers at Rice. I hadn't run from any of that then, and I wouldn't start doing it now. Nothing was going to stop me from going into my own apartment. There might be answers there.

Yet those last few steps ended up being harder to manage than anything I'd done before. Dread and fear mingled inside me, throwing warnings at me, yelling at me not to do this, that I'd be sorry, and I didn't understand why. My throat clogged up tight.

Concentrating on keeping my breathing steady, I took the last step to the door. The spot between my shoulder blades twinged. I glanced behind me, but there was no one there. I reached for the key in the small handbag and felt my fear double as I saw the skull keychain again. It wasn't me, it wasn't mine. My hand shook as I inserted the key into the lock and turned it.

The euphoria because it worked lasted less than a moment, for an open door meant I could go inside. It was the last thing I really wanted to do.

I pushed the door open but didn't go in. The twinge between my shoulders grew painful. The interior of the apartment was dark. Taking a deep breath and holding it, I reached past the threshold and flicked on the interior hall light.

I exhaled with one long breath of relief as the light showed me nothing but the familiar. The space before me was still the same white, gray, and red tile of the foyer, the plush gray carpet filling the hall. I could even see the edge of my comfy couch just where it should be. Chiding myself for my bizarre apprehension, I took a tentative step inside.

Nothing changed. Everything looked exactly as it should.

I closed the door behind me and locked it.

Never taking my gaze off the hallway before me, I unzipped the uncomfortable boots and took them off. I held onto one of them, twisted around with the spiked heel in front in case I needed an impromptu weapon. Though I knew this was home and everything seemed fine, that heavy sense of dread was still clamped tight to my chest. I inched forward, listening for anything untoward.

My hand went around the corner and switched on the kitchen lights. Brightness flooded the room and bled out into the living room over the open counter.

I spotted a red flowing lava lamp on the coffee table. A shiver ran down my back. I didn't own a lava lamp. Had someone broken in here while I'd been gone? Steering away from the thought, I quickly moved around the room and switched on every light then surveyed the place again. The twinge grew into a yank between my shoulders as I noticed other little changes.

Food stains on my gray couch. Water rings on my polished coffee table. Dust on the picture frames and floor corners.

Dust...

I'd only been gone for a few hours...why would there be dust? I shied away from the question, sure I wouldn't like the answer and instead moved from room to room turning on more and more lights.

At my bedroom, I swayed at the doorway, my chest so tight I couldn't breathe. The room was nothing like I'd left it. Gone were the off-white, comforting, textured walls. Instead, it was currently painted in blood red with a black crackle overlay. A metallic black four-poster bed with red satin sheets and comforter had replaced my maple sleigh style bed. A huge flat screen TV took up a chunk of one wall where I'd had several oil landscapes. Video recording equipment sat beneath it, as well as standing lights. New shelving on the walls held more lava lamps of different colors and an assortment of accouterments that only belonged in X-rated or gothic films.

I stepped back, shaking my head in denial. This couldn't be my apartment. That wasn't my room.

Turning around, I gazed at my home office. Before I could think about what I was doing, I stepped inside, the familiarity of the room making it that much easier to ignore the other.

The computer was on, a screen saver of running half naked nuns flashing on the screen. I leaped forward and hit the mouse to make it go away. Popups for AIM messages were all over the screen. The login was for someone called ChocolateLover. I scanned a few of them thinking they might hold a clue. I quickly regretted it.

Requests for sex talks. Queries as to when ChocolateLover would be on tonight. Demands she give in to their fantasies. Some even offered money or goods if she'd only meet with them in person.

Grabbing the mouse, I frantically closed all the rest of the boxes, having had enough. Then I moved the cursor down to the corner for the system date. My eyes grew wider and wider until I thought they'd pop out of my head. The computer said it was Friday, July 23rd.

I let go of the mouse as if it'd bit me. No, it was April, April 15th! It couldn't possibly be July. This was all a joke. A sick twisted joke.

I grabbed the mouse again and double-clicked the icon to pull up my browser. I clicked the Favorites folder and then the link to the US Time website. The screen pulled up showing the time, day, and date—July 23rd.

No... No...

My knees quivered. Then I fell down to the carpet, my hands shaking, my brain numb.

This couldn't be happening. This couldn't be right!

Someone had to know what was going on. Someone had to be able to help me. Debbie! The thought of my best friend gave me a jolt and I could think straight again. Debbie would have some idea, some clue.

Despite the tiny voice in the back of my head saying that was unlikely, it was still something to cling to. I rose shakily to my feet and stumbled back out to the kitchen. I hadn't seen a trace of my iPhone, but I'd kept the landline after setting up DSL so I could use that instead.

The phone had changed from a non-descript cordless to a giant set of red lips. Trying not to think about it, I picked up the top.

I punched in Debbie's number, heart racing, ideas popping up one after the other as to what might have happened and being dismissed just as quickly. Lost Time. I'd heard the term but couldn't remember if it related to aliens or mental conditions or what. Aliens, that was an even more remote possibility. This wasn't the X-Files. Aliens made great TV but didn't hold up to reality. Split personalities though, schizophrenia, those were real things, documented, studied. But I wasn't mental. I would have noticed something before this, wouldn't I?

The phone started ringing on the other end and I forced my thoughts to still. I held my breath as the other end picked up. Tears prickled the corner of my eyes as I heard the familiar voice.

“Hello?” She sounded hesitant, and that’s when I realized I’d never called her from the landline before. My name didn’t show on her cell phone, only the number.

“Debbie, thank God. I’m so glad to hear your voice!”

There was only silence from the other end. It’d been three months, (oh god, three months!) maybe she didn’t recognize my voice? “Debbie?”

“Who is this?” The question was hard, cold. I didn’t understand it.

“It’s Tamara. Listen, something weird is going—”

The phone went dead. She’d hung up on me... I pulled the phone from my ear and stared at it, dread chomping at me from the inside.

I redialed. The phone rang three times then went to voicemail. I didn’t leave a message, just disconnected and tried again. Why wouldn’t she pick up? My sense of dread jumped up a couple of more notches. By the third time, I was desperate. “Debbie, please! I don’t understand. I need your help! Something weird is going on. My apartment, my clothes, the time. Look, I, I don’t get any of this, but if I, if I somehow did something to offend you... I can come over if you don’t want to talk on the phone. You’re my best friend, and I really need your help.”

I hung up and stared at the phone, willing her to call me back. But as the minutes ticked away, the certainty that she wouldn’t grew inside me. Yet why would I think that?

The lip phone shrilled out, making me jump though I’d hoped for a call.

Caller ID on the answering machine flashed Debbie’s number. I felt a shot of hope. It didn’t last long.

“*If?* You say *if* you did something to offend me?” Her breathing was fast and heavy. “Don’t you dare get within a hundred feet of my house! If I see you, I’ll shoot you dead!”

She was mad, more than mad, furious. I’d known Debbie since we hooked up as lab partners in college. As all friends do, we’d had some fights on occasion but never had she sounded so full of rage. “Debbie, I... I don’t understand. What happened?”

There was a harsh laugh on the other end of the line. It was full of bitterness, and thorns, and wasn’t anything I’d ever heard from her before. “Okay, I’ll play.” Another bark of a laugh. “Richie. You remember Richie, my fiancé, don’t you, bitch?”

It wasn’t anger. It was hate, pure unadulterated hate and it was aimed at me. I almost dropped the phone at the realization. How long had this been building inside her? How long had she been waiting for an opportunity to vent her rage? “Y-yes?”

“And June first, June first rings a bell, doesn’t it?”

Oh no, I’d missed the wedding. Debbie had talked of nothing for months except being a June bride. I was supposed to be her maid of honor. Was that where all of this was coming from? Deep from inside me a whisper said ‘no.’ I was cold all over. “Yes.”

“And I bet you remember the night you went to see him, too. The one where you got him drunk. And gave him pills. Where you had sex with him?” Again the bitter laugh rang in my ears. Numbness crawled up my arm and spread all over me. I’d done what?

“How you then brought him to my house at three in the morning and left him on my doorstep naked and bombed out of his mind for me to find? Is any of that ringing any *bells* for you?”

No, it wasn’t. But what was worse was the fact I didn’t doubt her in the least. As if I already knew it was true. Which made no sense at all. I would have never done something like this to her, never. Yet seemingly I had.

Disgust and horror swelled up my throat. “Debbie, I...”

“Just die, *bitch*, and never, ever call me again!”

The line went dead, but I barely noticed. I slid to the floor, the phone falling from my hand.





I don't know how long I just sat there and stared at nothing, the unhooked phone bleating at me in protest. But at some point, I crawled to the doorway and used the doorjamb to drag myself back up onto shaking legs.

Stumbling into the bathroom, I closed and locked the door as if the flimsy prefab could hold the awful world at bay.

I stripped, kicking the alien clothes and thong underwear into a corner, throwing the platinum wig after them. Avoiding my reflection, I turned on the shower and climbed inside while it was warming up. Goosebumps flared over my skin. Reaching for the soap, I cringed as I saw that had changed as well. Rather than the simple soap dish and hooked bottles for shampoo and conditioner, there was a shelved contrivance. My bar of Oil of Olay was gone, replaced by some brand I didn't recognize and which smelled of musk. There were at least six brands of hair products as well as small flasks of oils and perfumes. A vibrator sat at attention in the corner of the highest shelf.

Turning away, I stepped under the stream of water, a shiver wracking through me. My home, my whole life, had been violated. But why? How? If only I could understand what was happening.

I scrubbed my face, my hair, every last inch of me. I kept staring at the drain thinking I would see something coming off of me, something to explain why everything had changed, but there was nothing.

Shivering as the water eventually turned cold, I shut off the shower and stepped out. I flinched as I reached for a towel, only now noticing their blood red color. Pushing myself, I took it anyway and used it rather than drip everywhere. Wrapped in it, I stared only at the carpet as I returned back to that awful bedroom to search for some clothes.

Opening drawer after drawer I just grew more and more disgusted. I'd always believed in having certain lacy items in reserve for special dates, but what I found bordered on the ridiculous, and so many of them looked to have been used as regular wear: thongs with the barest strings, crotchless panties, edible underwear, bras so sheer they left nothing to the imagination. There were even a few items I possessed no idea what they were or how anyone would wear them. I tore through the drawers' contents, dumping the things on the floor as I grew more and more desperate to find something, anything close to normal.

Fighting back tears, I turned to the closet, already sure my search there would fare no better but refusing to give up. On one side I was surprised to find all my work jackets, slacks, skirts and blouses intact. Yet all my casual wear was gone, replaced by other things. As I shied away from

leather items and slick black and white plastic get-ups, I noticed a box half hidden in the back. Not daring to hope, I pounced on it. The word ‘useless’ had been written on the side in my handwriting. I’d never seen it before.

Opening it flooded me with instant comfort. I’d found my non-work clothes—some of them, anyway. At the moment that didn’t matter, I was just thrilled to find something I knew without a doubt belonged to me, the ‘me’ I’d known all my life, not whatever or whoever I’d been for the last three months.

Because that really was the only explanation, wasn’t it? That I’d been someone else. Despite the fact it still made no sense whatsoever.

But I couldn’t deal with that, not at the moment. It was hard enough just swallowing the fact I’d somehow lost three months of my life. The likelihood I might be insane would have to wait.

After dragging out the box from the closet, I put things back where they belonged, kicking or throwing the other stuff toward the tiny trashcan in the corner. Some Hanes for Her and my flannel pajamas worked beautiful magic on my frightened soul. Going to the hall closet, I grabbed one of the extra blankets I kept there and headed for the living room. No way was I spending the night in that metallic four-poster bed.

I wanted, needed normalcy, and of the few rooms I’d braved looking at so far, the living room was the least changed, or unchanged enough I could pretend the rest of it away—for a while.

So I snuggled into the blanket on the couch, leaving all the lights on and stared at the mottled ceiling and wished for sleep to come so I could escape all this.

It was a long time coming...



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gloria Oliver lives in Texas making sure to stay away from rolling tumbleweeds while bowing to the never-ending wishes of her feline and canine masters. She works full time shoveling numbers around for an oil & gas company and squeezes in some writing time when she can.

Her latest novel "Alien Redemption" was released in 2020. This is Gloria's first science fiction novel. It is also her eighth book to see publication. Her previous works have been fantasy, urban fantasy, and young adult fantasy novels. Several contain romantic and mystery elements. Her short stories of speculative fiction can be found in all manner of anthologies, covering things from the fantastic and strange to a Bubba Apocalypse.

"Black Jade" the first book in a historical cozy mystery will be released in 2021.

Gloria is a member in good standing of BroadUniverse though she has yet to make the list for Cat Slaves R Us.

For some free reads, novel related short stories, sample chapters, appearance schedules and more information on her and her works, please drop by and visit her at www.gloriaoliver.com

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Gloria

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The Price of Mercy



CHAPTER 1

I am a fool.

Jarrin sat in his rented coach, waiting in line to enter the gate. The emperor's ballroom glowed softly in the night. Behind it, much farther off, was the palace proper. Nestled in the center of the city, the emperor's domain was like a small kingdom itself. The ballroom was at the farthest edge, a mere drop of all that was there.

More than three-fourths of the funds the baroness gave him were already spent—his reward for services rendered before he was summarily dismissed. Between the coach and his elaborate costume, he was about to make his life very difficult if he didn't succeed tonight.

The baroness's second gift had been an invitation to the ball and, if he dared use it, the possibility of gaining other employment. The problem was, he wasn't even sure he wanted to succeed but hadn't been able to think of another course that didn't involve shame, poverty, or starvation.

The coach crawled through the gate.

Jarrin could just make out some of the guests as they exited their vehicles at the ballroom's entrance. Ladies and gentlemen wearing costumes of all colors, tall wigs and hats, tiaras, necklaces, rings but, most of all, masks to hide their identities, weaving an air of mystery and daring.

When his turn came, he forced himself to wait until the coachman got down and opened the door for him before getting out. With feigned calm, he presented his invitation to the guards then sedately ascended the stairs to the entrance.

On this night, no introductions would be made, everyone seemingly oblivious to the identities of everyone else. A simple veneer, easy to see through in some cases, yet all would pretend to their fullest not to recognize anyone else. And somehow, here, he would have to make himself an opportunity.

A few couples swayed to the music in the cleared middle of the extensive room while others loitered about the heavily laden tables set up against two of the four walls. The steaming food and colorful drinks set out as delicious temptations but a few steps away of those attending.

The light fragrance of roses filled the air from hundreds of scented candles held aloft by a dozen giant chandeliers. Too soon, though, it would be joined by the cloying aromas of heavy perfumes and perspiration.

Jarrin caught a glimpse of himself in one of the tall standing mirrors as he slowly made his way to the floor. Scarlet floor-length cloak, a black embroidered skirted coat with heavy cuffs and matching vest, black knee breeches, tall leather boots, blood-red shirt and cravat, black gloves, and a wide black hat with red feathers—the well-known rendition of the Crimson Lover. His dark hair was tied with a large ribbon and reached a little past his shoulders in back. His dark-blue eyes seemed to leap from the black mask around them. He was sure there would be a

few others posing as the Lover tonight, but none would be as dependent on the message the persona conveyed as he would.

As if he possessed all the time in the world, he strolled the periphery of the room. In truth, now that he was here, he had no idea how to go about his purpose. How did you woo yourself a patron? How did you even choose one? He should have come dressed as a buffoon.

He spotted two of those in short order, although they were the most expensively dressed fools he'd ever seen. Emperor Drusnian, the reunifier of the empire after the Age of Blight, had several representatives as well—his double chins and flaming red hair made him unmistakable. There were several other famous personages portrayed among the partygoers, as well as heroes and villains from pieces of literature—Dullain, Marquis Sablet, the Crooked Man.

The room filled quickly, the noise level rising over the music being woven by a group of twenty men and women on a slightly raised dais in a corner.

At one point, he paused at the sight of a new arrival. His old patron, the baroness, had finally arrived. Her stooped form and calculating eyes gave her identity away easily, especially to one who'd known her so intimately for so long. Still, it was the person at her side who drew most of his attention. It could be none other than his replacement—the baroness's latest protege.

With a hard swallow, Jarrin realized he knew the popinjay. A year younger than him, Rillian was already a coveted performer, an exceptional violinist. They'd seen him perform less than two months ago at a lavish birthday party.

He'd lost track of the baroness during the festivities for a few moments when asked to render a reading. Now he wondered if that was when the wheels began to turn against him. Did Rillian approach her or she him?

He forced himself to turn away as they merged with the crowd. He had other business to attend to.

He'd circled the ballroom twice, the musicians starting in on the fifth or sixth long piece of the evening when he spotted her. She stood by the end of one of the buffet tables, her back against the corner it made with the wall as if to assure herself she couldn't be approached without her knowledge—or perhaps to shield her back. She was short and plump, dressed in layers of lace and silk of the lightest pinks and whites. Her stance was stiff as if she were nervous or excited, and she was looking about as if searching for something. Perhaps that something was him.

Jarrin rubbed his suddenly sweaty palms on his cloak, realizing his moment was here. Proceeding at a calculated leisurely pace, he grabbed a glass of wine from a passing waiter as he approached his possible salvation.

She wore a half-mask made of feathers that curled around her face and matched those pinned to her curled brown hair. Surrounded by white, her dark-brown eyes stood out, and he saw them widen as she noticed his approach and his costume. He didn't let this deter him, knowing he had no choice.

"You seem thirsty, madam, would you care for a glass of wine?" He presented the glass to her with a flourish, as he'd seen the men do in the operettas the baroness liked so much. What he could see of her round face blushed, paled, then blushed again.

"Th-thank you."

She reached to take the glass, and although she tried to avoid it, Jarrin made sure their fingers touched. The lady jerked the glass back, almost spilling the wine. Had he read her wrong after all? He felt uncertainty nibble at him, as it had the last several days, but pressed on. He tried to give her his brightest smile.

She blushed again, shielding her face with the glass as she took a large swallow. As she did, he noticed her finely cut earrings, bracelets, and necklace, half-hidden in feathers. From the baroness, he'd learned something of such things in the last year. Although not overtly large or showy, the cut of the stones and the settings spoke of extreme wealth.

"Is this your first ball?" He couldn't tell her age but thought it might be close to his own. She could have already been married for years and was here looking for fresher entertainment, or even just companionship.

"No...I have attended before."

Jarrin thought he saw her eyes sparkle, as if at a hidden joke. They were large and expressive and made him curious about the face beneath the mask. If all went miraculously well, perhaps he'd get a chance to see it.

"Is it yours?" Her gaze lighted on him, keenly intent.

"I attended last year...as a companion to one of the baronesses." There, he'd said it. With any luck, she would understand the message beneath the words and things might prove easier. From the way she glanced at his costume and at his face, then blushed again and drank more of her wine, he was sure she understood quite clearly.

Much to his chagrin, however, he found his own face heating up as well. He hoped his mask hid from view most of the embarrassment he felt at being what he was.

"I see..." Her voice was tight. She drank the rest of her wine in one gulp but made no move to run off. He hoped it was a good sign.

She grabbed another glass when a waiter waltzed by and drank part of it down. Perhaps she was as nervous as he was. Unlike her, though, he couldn't afford to imbibe, no matter how tempting or helpful he thought it might be. It was amazing how he could feel so totally alone in a room so filled with people.

"Would the lady care to dance?" He half-bowed and held out his hand.

She had opened her mouth to reply when trumpets sounded from across the room. Everyone grew abruptly silent, their attention turning to the golden doors on the far side. While all others could disguise themselves and perhaps for a time forget who they were beneath a thin veneer of anonymity, there would always be the one none would be allowed to forget.

"All hail the mighty Emperor Tremere the Fourth!"

The golden doors opened, and the emperor and his entourage swept into the room, a small dais and grand chair carried by servants behind them. Tremere was a short, stocky man dressed in tastefully cut rags of purple, gold, and silver. Jarrin was pretty sure his costume was meant to be that of the Wandering Beggar. Resteel had been a mighty monarch brought low, bereft of everything he held dear through his own foolishness. It was said he then wandered the world, seeking to atone for his unbecoming deeds and regain favor with Melak, the Crafter of All, by crying the virtues of the True Way to any who would listen. A rather interesting choice for a man in the emperor's position. Especially since he was himself the living avatar of Melak.

The empire had seen better days in ages past but was still prosperous at this time, at peace. He caught a glimpse of the heir apparent, who wore a much more colorful and less reserved costume than his father's. He also spotted the prince's much younger brother and two sisters. He thought there was supposed to be a third daughter but couldn't remember if she was currently at court or not, having been married off several years ago. One of those two, then, would be the one betrothed to Crevail, a duke in the far provinces. From the gossip around the baroness, the emperor heartily approved of the unusual match.

“Welcome, friends and patriots! Please indulge yourselves this evening. Leave all your cares behind. We of the imperial house will carry your burdens for you.” The emperor made a rolling gesture with his hand, and the musicians began playing again, the waiters once more making their rounds.

Jarrin turned to his prospective employer and found her staring intently at the emperor, her lips pressed into a thin line.

“Madam?”

The young woman blinked and looked away, then brought the glass of wine to her lips and drank it all. When she turned to him, her gaze was veiled, and a not so very convincing smile was plastered on her lips.

“You offered me a dance. I would very much like to accept, but not here. It is getting uncomfortably warm, don’t you think?” She took his hand in a strong grip, her chest rising and falling rapidly. “It will be much cooler and more private in the gardens.”

She turned away, and not wanting to offend her, he had no choice but to follow as she set her empty glass on the table and hurried along the wall. She led him outside through the first of the open glass doors, out into the imperial gardens that surrounded the ballroom.

It was, indeed, cooler there, the night breeze caressing them as the darkness swallowed them whole. Jarrin worried about colliding with trees or bushes in their continued haste, but the lady led him without mishap. Finally, out of sight of the open doors, she slowed to a stop.

Melak’s Eye floated above them, giving a semblance of light as Jarrin’s gaze adjusted. She’d brought them to a small open area with a cozy gazebo in the middle. Still holding his hand a little too tightly, she drew him into the dark interior. The heavy scent of roses and violets perfumed the air, a whisper of the music being played indoors teasing their ears.

He stood quietly as the young woman turned around to face him, waiting to take his cue from her. He felt his nervousness rising, knowing his testing was almost upon him and still wishing there were some other way.

“We can dance here.”

Her voice was low, guarded as if she expected an objection. Instead, Jarrin raised the hand she already held and slipped his other around her waist, leading her into a slow waltz.

She was stiff in his arms at first, but as they rocked gently to the barely heard music and he asked for nothing else, he felt her gradually begin to relax. After a time, she sighed, as if letting the rest of her tension go. A moment later, she stepped in closer and hesitantly placed her head against his shoulder.

He found he liked the sensation of her leaning against him, the smell of her scented hair close to his face. The baroness never danced, feeling it was something only for the young.

They stayed that way through several pieces as if neither one were eager to go further. Jarrin felt a little puzzled at this but wouldn’t look at his own reasons for holding back. As for her, he knew naught of her and so possessed nothing on which to base her reluctance. Perhaps something as simple as being held was normally denied her. It might be something he would learn about with time.

Eventually, they migrated to one of the benches of the gazebo. He took off his hat as he sat and waited patiently. She wouldn’t look at him, but when he took her hand in his, she didn’t resist. He caressed her fingers softly then worked his way up her arm, enjoying the feel of her skin. She shivered at his touch, but still she did or said nothing.

Although it shamed him, he was enjoying himself. For once, he was the instigator, not just reacting to a command, even if he possessed no more choice in the matter now than then. It was still different.

When he kissed her shoulder, tasting her, she gave a little gasp, yet she didn't resist when he gently turned her face toward him. Hesitating only a moment, he leaned forward and touched her warm lips with his own. A moment later, he felt them soften as she surrendered to him. It seemed the baroness had taught him well after all.



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