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A Sapphire Gown

The vast hall echoed with the sounds of laughter and music, bathing the house with an almost palpable aura of benevolence and goodwill. The walls gleamed with a bright and cheerful attitude, dutifully complementing the string quartet that extracted soothing melodies from the finely-tuned instruments; It was a beautiful scene. The room was filled with ladies and gentlemen who waltzed hand in hand, swaying gently to the rhythm that the string players established. The music itself seemed to make the crystals in the overhanging chandelier twinkle, like the stars above in the clear night sky. The reflected light danced off of the silver cauldrons that contained plentiful amounts of the finest food money could buy. It was a lavish dinner, and the guests could not help but express their gratitude to their host who had spent many a dime for their enjoyment.

The host, a well-to do man in his thirties who was unusually successful for his age, beheld the picturesque spectacle from an ornamented balcony overlooking the hall with a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction; his hard work had payed off. The elegantly festive atmosphere was all that he dreamed it would be, a testament to his excellent poise and carefully crafted demeanor. His physique was razor sharp, from his pointed nose to his sharp fingernails. The pointed, defined appearance of his body was essentially an outward physical representation of his sharpness of mind, a mind that was often cold and calculating yet could conjure up acts of hearty charisma and authentic generosity in times like the present. His relatively early success

was largely due to this dual nature of his mind, for he could transition from a warm and welcoming attitude that invited business to a harsh and threatening one that demanded it be ended, often in his favor. The steely gaze that he wore when conducting more serious affairs was nowhere to be found this evening, however. The man's charming side was the one that was present tonight, and he looked again out over the scene with an inviting gaze. The man slowly sipped red wine from a silver chalice, savoring the drink as he would a summer sunset. He had spent a fortune on the night, but to him it was no matter. The gratefulness of the guests and beauty of the moment made up for what expense he had made, as he had not attained a level of such tranquility and satisfaction in what seemed like many months. For a night, at least, he could get away from what had plagued him for a great deal of his life, a complication that made him unpredictable at times and potentially impossible to converse with. It seemed to have been amplified by the rigors of his work, a good cause he deemed for this celebration to occur. Without the stress of working unpleasant and uncooperative people, his condition would be able to rest at ease in the cellars of his conscience.

"The party is fabulous, but I still think that another platter of the caviar would have suited the guests nicely," he heard someone next to him say.

"I cannot say I agree with that idea," he responded. "It is a tiresome food after a while, and I have already spent quite a good deal of money on the five that I purchased."

He turned to confront the man who had spoken to him, but a look around revealed that there was no one standing on the balcony save himself. The guests were mingling politely about on the grand curved staircase that descended from the balcony, or dancing on the main floor, and

not one could have spoken the words with the volume and ease that he had so distinctly heard not a moment before.

The man was bothered, but only slightly, as episodes such as this occurred from time to time. He disregarded it and returned to feasting his eye upon the extravagant hall- until a woman in a brilliant sapphire gown endowed with jewels of lapis caught his eye. She was clearly an experienced dancer; her footwork and confident nature told of this. As he caught a glimpse of her eyes, he detected the same exemplary knowledge that her dancing displayed, as they were sparkling with a fierce intelligence, like those of a falcon's.

“Quite a spectacle, is she not?”

“Yes indeed, I should busy myself in making her acquaintance,” he responded. “Do you have any idea who she is?” Again, the man had been conversing with someone who was not there, a voice that was merely taunting him. The proximity of the incidents had him concerned, but there had been more grievous episodes before, so he cast them aside. His focus returned to searching for the brilliant blue dancer, and he scoured the floor for the elegant sapphire gown that she wore. It was not near the table of food, nor was under the crystal chandelier. It was absent from the grand staircase, and he certainly would have noticed if it had stood upon the balcony. She was not in any nook or cranny that he could see, and with her disappearance came the fleeing of his calm and composure. He began frantically searching around the hall, leaving his perch upon the balcony for the hectic mass of the floor. He asked every man and woman if they had seen her sparkling gown wander into any of the adjacent rooms, receiving nothing but confused looks in return.

The growing discords in his chest tightened and constricted his breathing.

“She is striking,” the voice said again.

In his mind, the flowing melodies performed by the string quartet were muddled and transformed into something grotesque and strident, a conglomeration of unnecessary panic and simmering irrationality.

“Such a woman is a like gem.”

The chandelier no longer twinkled. Instead, it cast a grim shadow over the hall, inhaling the light that had once pranced so joyfully off of its crystals.

“You are nothing compared to such a woman.”

The once-beautiful silver cauldrons became tarnished and dull, as if years had gone by, leaving nothing but empty bowls of despair.

“She is more valuable than any of the trinkets in this hall.”

The party guests had disappeared.

“A fleeting hope, nothing more than that.”

Not one of them remained, and there was certainly no sapphire gown to be found.

“You can’t possibly think she would stay.”

The man, breathing rapidly and darting his eyes about the hall, ascended the grand staircase that he had so proudly looked over before. He staggered to the edge of the balcony, and gripped the banister with a grip like that of a metal chain. He bent over, exhaling rapidly, his vision blurred. Looking up, he stared with a hollow gaze upon an empty hall, devoid of activity, of light, of hope. The room was dark, the gown, gone.

A hobbled figure leaned on the banister of the decrepit balcony. He possessed a hunched back and an overweight figure, his bones struggling to hold his lopsided body. His face was colorless, deformed, and sagging. His eyes were gray and bloodshot, and a broken nose extended horrifically from his oblong face. The man's fingers were bent and twisted, as if injured attempting to break free from a dungeon. His knees were weak and tiresome, struggling to hold the heavy mass above it. A mere shadow of his former self, the man spoke aloud, hoping a soul would hear his words.

“They are relentless. Each morning I wake to the sound of their cries, each night I struggle to sleep because they whisper ghastly things in my ear. I know they come. The potency of their words startles me; they speak truths that had lain dormant inside of me for many years with an ease that makes them seem like trivial remarks. How can this be? I have not spoken to anyone in a countless amount of time, and yet their voices call to me from around the corner of every corridor, crisp like a chilling winter breeze.”

“You are to blame,” a voice calls out. “You are haunted because of your cruel ways.”

The man froze. They had returned. For many years they lurked about his conscience, haunting his soul and ripping to pieces the shrouds he had used to cover the blackest pits of his being. He was like a subject in some arcane and obscene experiment, a rodent subject to endless torture.

However, his suffering was not decided by fate. One by one, his deeds had accumulated, his sorrows over his monstrous practices manifesting themselves as creatures in his mind, attacking and driving him to the brink of insanity. He could not escape; the confines of the rotten

house forbode him from escaping his sickly self. The man returned to battle the demons once more, though no victory was in sight.

“I was pursuing what was best! One cannot expect to rent land and be exempt from payment!” he retorted.

“The destitute, the famished, the ostracized. Those were your tenants.”

“A tenant is a tenant.”

“You exacted harsh prices upon them when you became dissatisfied with the life that you led.”

“They could leave!” he cried. The man rose and advanced towards the corridor that the voices called from.

“You threatened their very lives should they if elected to leave.”

“Punishment is necessary.” He continued down the corridor, pained by the words and his misshapen figure. “I had wronged, I was punished. They wronged me, I would punish them.” The man’s thoughts became cluttered, as memories of bullying other landowners blended with the images of horrified faces of those who he controlled. As he stumbled down the corridor, it became dimmer and dimmer, the voices growing louder and louder.

“Your money came from extortion. The extravagant parties were funded by terror.”

“Terror? The very thing that I am burdened with every waking moment? It creeps around my spine like a rat, it pricks my heart like a knife, it contorts my thoughts into jumbled masses. They did not know terror. I know terror.”

The man continued down the empty corridor, hoping to find who spoke. He had been beset by these voices for decades. He was driven by every mangled fiber of his being to them, to refute them, to end the terror.

“You have driven me to the edge, I was once a proud man.”

“Your pride came at the expense of those you controlled.”

“I could walk the countryside without fear. Now I am trapped inside my mansion, my home, my corridor, where the stale air meets the blackened walls and inebriates my head. I cannot think with hope, with anything but fear and desperation. You mock me.”

“You will end yourself. The woman you saw drove you to the edge. You saw that you would never have anyone to call you own, never have someone who would utter the words of love. This knowledge grew and grew. You knew you were a despicable man.”

“I cannot live with it. I will find out who you are, what you are, and I will end you. It is not I that will be ended, but you.” His steps became more uncertain, his voice wavering as he spoke.

“I am close now!” he cried.

“Quite a spectacle, was she not?”

“I will exact my revenge!”

“She was striking.”

“Your mockery will be your end!” His voice quavered like the sails of a doomed ship heading into a massive maelstrom. The corridor was now almost completely black, but the man began to make out the shape of a door at the corridor’s end.

“Such a woman was like a gem.” The voice was deafening.

“I see where you hide!”

“You are nothing compared to such a woman.” The door came closer.

“You are nothing compared to those you terrified,” it said again. The door was closer still, its shadowy form growing more distinct.

“You are nothing.” Ten feet.

“You are nothing.” Five feet.

“You are nothing.”

“I have found your dungeon!” One foot.

The man attacked the door with all of his might, shaking it violently and waging a cry that resounded off of the corridor walls. His frenzy weakened him, but the door still stood.

“You are nothing.” He clawed at it ferociously, and beat his fists with brutish strength.

“You are nothing.” He rattled the door to its hinges, nearly splintering it in two.

“You are--”

The man burst through the door, shouting with a bestial fury that betrayed his humanity. It exploded under the immense rage and vengefulness, and its pieces were scattered throughout the chamber it revealed. It was a hexagonal chamber, its ceilings reached to heights unimaginable. Its walls were black, but not like the gloomy ominous black that coated the walls of the hall in the mansion. This black was piercing, deadly, truthful as the night. It was a black that did not absorb light, but reflected light, like the obsidian of a hidden volcano. In the center of the hexagonal chamber stood a large rectangular frame. The man hobbled towards it, determined to find who lay behind it, calling to him for many years.

“At last I will end you,” he growled. “Whoever has cursed me will certainly never speak another word.” As he said this, he reached the frame and clasped onto it, forcefully spinning it around. The man gazed into the frame, which contained a harrowingly beautiful mirror. In it, he saw himself as the younger man, who looked sharp and intelligent, a man accustomed to being in control.

“You are nothing,” the younger man said.

The hunched back man keeled over. His vision blurred. The obsidian walls seemed to close in on him. The floor was harsh, cold. His breath was becoming short, he could not think clearly. He began to cough violently, in long, painful fits. Crawling to the doorway, the man noticed something lying on the floor. He inched across the frigid, dead floor to discover what it was. As he came nearer, he was able to see what lay there: a sparkling sapphire gown. He gathered all of the strength he had left, and pulled himself to the gown, slowly and torturously. The man’s cough continued, making it impossible to breath, and his arms could scarcely pull him. Yet he continued to inch forward. Ten inches. Five inches. He could not breath, his arms were useless. Four inches. He could hardly see, his back was screaming in agony. Three inches. He began coughing blood, his vision all but gone. Two inches. His hand outstretched, almost to the brilliant blue fabric. One inch. His breath stopped, his vision gone. The man let out a final scream, and collapsed, his hand just centimeters away from the gown.