Reverence and Deliverance

The year is 1887. I write this as a diary so that you, my dear reader, know I truly was afraid for my life on many occasions, but I managed to pull away. To be free. And share my memories of this descent into hell and madness with you. The choice is yours when you reach the final pages. If you seek to pull away or take the biggest step of your life.

Eleanor B

Silentium est aureum. For ten years the words echoed through my mind, a constant whisper in the silence of my thoughts. Silence is golden, indeed, but it is not the kind of silence I once imagined. No. It is the silence that envelops you, a cold void that fills the spaces where nothing should be. That silence, the one Yh'guath I had never fully understood.

I write this as a warning, but I know it will not be enough. There are those among us, among people just like you, who crave the knowledge I possess. Who would sacrifice everything for the power that lies within these pages? I was such a person. And I paid the price. Twice.

You may think you understand what I mean when I speak of power, but you do not. The power you seek is not one of fame or riches, though those things will come. No. It is the power that comes from knowing. The power that comes from seeing what should remain unseen. The price is steep, and though I have turned away, the path remains open for you, should you choose to follow.

In these pages, you will find what I found. What I found ten years ago.

You will find what was offered to me. The key to the future you seek lies here if you dare to unlock it. But heed this warning: once you open the door, you cannot close it. I know this now, though I was too blind to understand it when the door was first cracked open before me.

Silentium est aureum. The silence you hear now is not the peaceful silence of ignorance. No, it is the silence that awaits you on the other side.

You may think you understand the price. But do you truly know it? There may be a way out early. There may be a way out toward the end. But ultimately, once you surrender everything, you will have everything. Yet, once you make the choice, the clock begins to tick.

But here lies the true question: once you have tasted what you desire, will you possess the strength of will to turn your back on your maker? Your master?

Let’s begin.

April 3rd. 1887. A hint of a new future.

I can scarcely describe the weight of the silence that surrounds me now. The quiet in my room feels like a pressing force, the air thick with boredom and writer's block. It has been nearly a month since I received that letter from Annabelle. She is a childhood friend who now lives in southwest London near the Thames. I currently live in northwest London near the smog. We try our best to meet once a month to rekindle our friendship.

The envelope that arrived was so finely crafted, its wax seal embossed with intricate designs I could scarcely make out. Inside, her words, like silk, beckoned me into a world unknown, one I had dismissed as nothing more than whispered gossip among the disillusioned. They were aural delusions. Yet here I am, unable to resist the curiosity of what lay unwritten between the lines. This type of stationary was not her usual brown envelope and smudged ink.

She was always different. Always chasing something more than what the world around her could offer. It was not until our last meeting that she confessed her true ambition to me. She had always dreamed of becoming a renowned pianist, one whose name would live beyond the veil of time.

We met at our favourite coffee shop on The Strand, and I remember scoffing at her words. She told me that she was about to become rich, not just well off, but very rich.

'You know,' she said, her voice barely a whisper, 'there are tales of a man... one who can grant such desires if one is willing to pay the price.'

Her words lingered in my mind long after I had left her, as though they were not spoken by human lips at all but were the murmurings of something far older and darker. But Annabelle was no fool, and neither was I. She was too clever to fall prey to such superstition. Yet, just over a month later, when we met again, her transformation was undeniable.

The woman who greeted me was unrecognizable. Gone was the frail, somewhat pitiful soul I had once known. In her place stood a woman whose beauty glowed as though she had been touched by something otherworldly. She moved with the grace of a dancer, and her fingers, when they brushed mine, hummed with a quiet power. But it was in her eyes, the sharp gleam that flickered just beneath the surface, that I saw the truth. Then it hit me even harder when she showed me her contract. She was signed up to a major orchestra and had a wealthy patron personally sponsoring her.

‘How did you do it?’ I asked, jealousy creeping into my voice despite myself. ‘How have you achieved all this in such a short time?’ The last time we met, you… well, you and I were struggling to buy anything.’

She smiled, but the smile was tight as if something within her was strained. ‘I had a… conversation with someone,’ she replied, her tone dismissive. But I could see the hesitation, the lingering doubt in her voice. ‘I can help you if you wish. I will ask him to meet you.’

‘Who?’ I asked.

‘Mister Alistair Devlin.’

And so, it began.

Only hours after we concluded our luncheon, I could not rid myself of the thought of meeting him, of feeling the power that flows through his veins. What would it be like to be more than what I am? To have wealth, fame, influence, all of it, at my fingertips. But I know this, there must be a price. And Annabelle's eyes, as she spoke of him, told me that the price would be far higher than I could ever imagine. Yet here I am, uncertain but drawn, and now I must make the decision. Will I succumb to the temptation, or will I walk away? There is still time. What was I thinking? I feel the weight of the unknown pressing down on me, but I do not know for how much longer I will be able to resist.

May 12th. The Lingering Name

The days slip by like the turning of an old clock, each tick growing louder in my mind. I can no longer ignore the quiet pull that gnaws at my soul. It is as though something no, someone, has latched onto my very heart, slowly drawing me towards an abyss I do not fully understand. I had hoped, perhaps foolishly, that the unsettling feelings would pass. But as time stretches on, I find myself closer to the brink than I ever imagined. The thought of Annabelle's invitation to meet him, the man who holds the key to everything she, and I, have ever dreamed of, has stayed with me. Her words echo in my thoughts, replaying over and over in the hushed hours of the night: ‘I will ask him to meet you.’

I can no longer say I am uncertain. I have written twice to Anabelle, stressing the urge to meet him, to learn from him, it’s too strong to resist. Each day brings me closer to my desires, and yet, I know that something waits on the other side, something I cannot yet comprehend. I concentrate on my job in the printing company, yet I find myself haunted by a name. His name lingers in my thoughts. This job is dull. I desire more.

I had heard nothing of him before Annabelle spoke his name, and yet it feels as though I have always known it. Known him. But that is just a daft notion. As well as working in a publishing house I write short stories for newspapers and magazines in my spare time. Perhaps it is the writer in me yearning for more.

Every moment since I heard his name, and what he had seemingly bestowed upon Anabelle, my dreams are now filled with glimpses of a tall man, his figure tall and commanding. Immaculately dressed, with a vision of wealth and power, he stands before me with an unspoken promise in his eyes. And yet, his presence, though alluring, chills me to my core. Again, she had never described him but who the hell wants to meet an ugly, short, fat and balding stranger?

I find myself drawn to thoughts of him in the quiet hours when the world sleeps. I hear his name even in the rustling of the leaves, in the shadows of the passing clouds. In my waking hours, my hands tremble at the thought of what may come if I meet him. But even more, I wonder what price will be demanded.

May 18th. Rapture.

After receiving her letter on the 15th, we met once more at our favourite coffee shop. She told me, with a look that bordered on both desperation and fear, that he would meet me soon. She had told him everything she knew about me. But then she let slip a faint warning. 'Be careful what you wish for.' But how could I be careful when all I've ever wanted is within my grasp? If it means giving up something, perhaps my soul, my essence, I wonder if that price would be too high for me to pay. I wonder if there is anything I would not sacrifice.

I cannot escape the gnawing need to meet him. And in my heart, I know it is only a matter of time before I take the step. I could, nay, should, give up hope of wild fantasies. But I yearn to depart this dreary existence.

May 25th. Hope.

The next time I encountered his name it was in the library, on the margin of a book that had no author, only a title that has since slipped from my mind. A scrawled signature, half-erased, the ink sinking into the yellowed paper as though the parchment itself had tried to forget. A. Devlin.

The second was at a company gathering, the kind where conversation is meaningless, but the silences speak volumes. A man, drunk on something stronger than wine, had let slip the syllables with a laugh that did not reach his eyes. The laughter died on his lips the moment he saw my interest. He turned pale, his fingers tightening around his glass until the knuckles blanched.

‘Forget that name,’ he murmured, his voice brittle as glass. ‘It isn’t meant for people like you.’

People like me. As if he already knew what road I was on.

By the third time, I was listening and looking for it. It came in pieces. Hints in old newsprints that my company published, in ledgers with pages missing, in the stories of those who once had wealth and power but no longer did. And then, with a little digging and the help of a colleague in accounts, I found the estate.

Eldermoor Hall.

The house that does not appear in many records yet stands as if it has always been there. The address is known to a few but visited by even fewer. And I… I, who had never sought this path, was beginning to feel as though I had already stepped too close.

Before I closed my notebook, the lingering scent of burnt paper clung to the air. And I am certain I was alone, and the windows closed.

June 23rd. The Dark Temptation.

It is almost too much to bear. Anabelle, once a mere girl with her fingers fumbling on the piano, now commands the attention of every room she enters. Her name graces the top of every concert program. Her music whispers through the homes of the elite, reaching the ears of those I can only dream of impressing. And yet… what have I accomplished? A handful of rejection letters and empty pages. My heart aches with frustration, but what burns deeper still is the envy that curls around my thoughts. How does one woman achieve so much in such a short time, while I remain stuck in the shadow of obscurity?

The answer, I fear, lies with him. The Man. Alistair Devlin. She speaks of him only in vague terms, of a meeting with someone who holds the power to shape destinies, to lift one from mediocrity to greatness. It is as though she cannot bear to talk about him with any clarity. She avoids specifics, but I know she’s hiding something. How could she not? The way she deflects questions, the guarded manner in which she speaks of him. It all speaks of a pact, a deal made in the darkness of unspoken promises.

My thoughts were preoccupied with the pages I could never seem to fill. But now, as the months pass and my own words remain stagnant, I am filled with an insatiable need to understand. To find him. To ask him in person. To make the same bargain Anabelle has made, if only I, too, could

taste that success, that recognition, that fame. I cannot be content with the life of a scribbler and a dreamer. I am no longer willing to wait for a world that may never notice me. The world will come to me, just as it came to her. I will take that step. I will meet him. I wrote to Anabelle again today and her reply was swift.

“Do *NOT* go to Eldermoor Hall. They will not let you enter the grounds without an invitation.”

June 30th. No hope.

I write this entry with trembling hands. For I know that once I walk through this door, I may never return. But even as fear rises in me, it is drowned by an overwhelming desire for what lies beyond. Fame. Fortune. My name is known far and wide. I hope if, and when we meet, he will find me a student capable of his greatness. If he can teach her piano in a month, and me the ability to lay down a perfect page of prose in a single draft. What other talents does he possess? Can he teach acting, singing, and science?

July 23rd. Renewed Faith.

It had been a month since my last letter from Anabelle. I had written to her weekly at her new address in Maidenhead, Berkshire, desperate to hear the word of Mr Devlin and her new successes. I had read about her in the Times newspaper, and a few lesser tabloids, so I cut out the articles to add to my scrapbook. Then the letter arrived.

The envelope was thick, the paper was heavy with an elegant cream hue, the seal an intricate wax mark I had come to recognize in my recent correspondence with her. I gently sliced it open, my heart racing with anticipation, yet my hands trembled. The letter inside was short but unmistakably hers.

"Dearest Eleanor,

I trust this finds you well and not growing too weary of waiting. The changes I’ve undergone are, I think, beyond anything I could have expected. I am to meet Mr Devlin again a week from now, and he has promised to give me a small part in an upcoming performance, one of my compositions, no less. How extraordinary. Yet, I must be honest with you. There is still much that I cannot tell you about his methods. I do not know if I should be grateful or fearful of what he has given me.

I shall arrange for you to come to my home in Maidenhead, Berkshire. I am certain he will entertain a meeting with you. Be ready to travel on the 30th. Take the day off if you have to or call

in sick. Pack an overnight bag. It's happening. But I warn you, Eleanor, what you seek may not be what you expect.

Yours always,

Anabelle."

I stared at the letter for a moment, feeling a mixture of exhilaration and dread. I had not only received a glimpse into her success but also a whisper of what I had so longed for, an introduction to the man behind her transformation. I could scarcely believe it. My hand hovered over the paper, considering the choice before me. To follow her advice and meet Mr Devlin… or to retreat to the safety of my own life, a life which, though unremarkable, had at least allowed me some semblance of control. But the seed of envy that had sprouted months ago, when Anabelle first spoke of him, had only grown stronger. What was it about this man, this mysterious Mr Devlin, that had changed her so completely? Was it truly just talent, or something darker?

I gathered my thoughts, clasped the letter to my chest, and made my decision. I would go.

The days that followed were a blur of preparations. I had written to Anabelle, confirming my intent to meet Mr Devlin, and she had replied with a sense of urgency, instructing me to travel at once. The anticipation in her letter, her words tinged with something unspoken, only fueled my desire to go. I packed my bags with a mix of nervousness and excitement, unsure of what awaited me but certain of one thing: I had to know.

30th July. Oh my gosh.

The journey via train on the Great Western Railway to Berkshire was long and dusty. I then took a hansom cab through winding and unfamiliar roads to her home. The entire way I clutched my resolve as tightly as the small valise at my side. When the carriage finally pulled up to the gates of her new home, a sprawling estate that seemed to stretch endlessly toward the horizon, I was taken aback. Anabelle had always been somewhat modest in her tastes, but this… this was something else. One minute in an apartment in London, the next… this.

The house loomed before me, its stone walls ivy-clad, the windows darkened with curtains that gave the place an air of secrecy. It was magnificent, yet eerily so. The grandeur seemed too deliberate, too perfect, as though it had been built for someone other than the woman I had once known. As I approached the front door, the heavy brass knocker seemed to gleam under the overcast sky, casting a glint of foreboding light. I hesitated for a moment, wondering what

Anabelle might have truly become, or perhaps what she had agreed to in exchange for such opulence. But then, a voice called from within.

‘Miss Eleanor, I presume?’

I turned to see a tall figure standing at the door, a manservant with an impeccable uniform. His expression was unreadable, but his presence seemed to immediately set the tone. He stepped aside and gestured for me to enter.

‘Please, Miss Eleanor, we’ve been expecting you.’

He took my coat and bags with a nod and a smile, ushering me inside. The hallway was long and lined with portraits and paintings of people I didn’t recognize, their eyes following me as I passed. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was being watched, not by the portraits, but by something else. I glanced around, but no one else appeared.

I was led through the house to a sitting room where Anabelle sat by the fire, a book resting in her hands. The flickering light illuminated her features, but there was something different about her. She no longer had the wild look of someone striving for success. No, she had the calm demeanour of a woman who had already achieved her dreams.

When she saw me, her face broke into a smile, but it was faint, not quite as warm as I had remembered. She stood and embraced me, but there was an odd hesitation in her touch, a distance that hadn’t been there before.

‘Eleanor,’ she said softly, ‘I’m so glad you could come.’

"Anabelle,’ I replied, trying to mask the unease in my voice, ‘I hardly recognize you. What… what is all this?’

Her eyes flickered toward the window, briefly. I thought I saw something darker pass behind them. Then, with a delicate sigh, she spoke again.

‘I knew you would come, eventually. You always were the one to follow the path the furthest. But be warned, Eleanor. The man you are about to meet is not like anyone you have known.’

My heart skipped a beat, ‘Mr Devlin?’

Anabelle nodded, ‘Yes. But… it is not simply his teaching that you should be wary of. It is the price. What he offers is not freely given. And once you make the choice, there is no turning back.’

I swallowed hard, a mix of fear and desire clashing within me. 'What is it he offers, Anabelle? What is it you've received from him?'

She hesitated the words weighing on her. 'Everything,' she whispered. 'And nothing. Success, fame, the ability to do... whatever I wish. But at a cost, I cannot yet fully understand. Eleanor, I've come to see him as both saviour and... something far darker.'

My mind raced. This was exactly what I had been waiting for, hoping for. A glimpse of the life I had always dreamed of. Yet hearing it from Anabelle, seeing the conflict in her eyes, brought a cold chill to my bones. 'Where is he?' I asked, almost breathlessly. 'I want to meet him.'

I remember her eyes softened with concern, but she nodded and stood. 'I will take you to him directly. But remember, once you cross that threshold, there is no return. He will charm you, and enthrall you. Encapsulate you. You will never be the same, Eleanor.'

I nodded, unable to speak. My heart was pounding in my chest, each step toward the door feeling like it would either lead to salvation or damnation.

As we walked through the brightly lit corridors of the house, I noticed the atmosphere grow colder, the walls closing in, as though the very air in the house was thick with something ancient, something that did not belong.

Finally, we reached a small, nondescript door at the end of the hall. Anabelle paused, turning to look at me one last time. Her expression was unreadable, but I could see the shadows of doubt in her eyes.

'Are you sure, Eleanor?' she asked softly.

I took a deep breath and nodded. 'Yes. I have come this far. I will not turn back now.'

She pushed open the door, revealing a small, dimly lit study. A fire crackled in the hearth. And there, standing by the desk, was Mr Devlin.

As I stepped into the study, I couldn't shake the feeling that I had crossed some invisible line, a threshold beyond which I would never be the same. The fire's glow danced along the dark wood of the room, casting fleeting shadows that seemed to move on their own. Mr Devlin was nothing like what I had imagined him to be. There was something more to him, a presence that filled the room with an almost tangible weight. His sharp, calculating gaze swept over me as I entered, his lips curling into the slightest smile.

'Miss Eleanor,' he greeted, his voice smooth and measured, 'It is a pleasure to meet you.'

I nodded, still finding myself unnerved by the atmosphere in the room, and by his very presence. The strongest feeling I had about him was revulsion. His breath was a mixture of damp ash and a hint of coal. Anabelle had stepped aside, retreating to a chair by the fire. She did not speak, but her eyes lingered on me, full of meaning.

Mr Devlin turned toward the windows, and with a casual wave of his hand, the air in the room seemed to shift. He gestured toward the windows on either side, his voice soft, almost too casual. 'Look outside, Miss Eleanor.'

I followed his motion, my gaze falling to the view. I was not prepared for what I saw. Outside one window, I could make out a sprawling manor, its towers reaching toward the sky, set atop a hill overlooking a pristine lake. The sun reflected off the water, giving it an ethereal, almost dreamlike quality.

Beyond the second window, another mansion loomed, though this one was far more modern, sleek, symmetrical, and set against a background of lush, manicured gardens. The grandeur of it nearly took my breath away.

'Do you see them?' he asked, his voice a soft murmur in the background. 'Each of these homes belongs to one of my clients. People much like yourself and Anabelle, once. They have been able to purchase such estates thanks to the wealth and success I've afforded them.'

I felt a pang of envy. There were dozens more of these homes, all visible from where I stood. They were perched atop hills, peaking through woodland, overlooking lakes, their windows glistening with wealth and power. Flags with coast of arms flapped in the wind. Mansions gleamed like jewels in the distance, their imposing silhouettes cutting through the mist.

'And the home you are in now is...'

'Anabelle's,' I whispered, though I hadn't meant to speak aloud.

He turned his gaze toward me, and the smile on his lips deepened, though there was no warmth in it. 'Yes,' he said, 'And my home is also not far from here. All of these... mine to give, and theirs to take, should they choose to walk the path I've set before them.'

I swallowed, the weight of his words sinking in. I came here with so many hopes and desires. I had dreamed of success, fame, and wealth... but, this was something entirely different. The idea that he could grant such things with a mere word, a simple contract, left me with both longing and uneasy.

‘But before you make your decision, Miss Eleanor,’ he continued, his tone now almost jovial, ‘I would like to have a brief conversation. Ten minutes, if you don’t mind. I will take that time to better understand your desires, your wants, your needs, and then, I will decide if I can be of service to you and you… to me.’

I stood there, rooted to the spot, unsure of what to say. His presence was so commanding, his words so measured, that I found it hard to speak. I glanced toward Anabelle, but she simply sat in her chair, her face unreadable.

Mr Devlin took a step closer, and I couldn’t help but notice how the room seemed to grow colder, and darker, the flickering firelight no longer providing any comfort.

‘Shall we sit, Miss Eleanor?’ he asked, his gaze never leaving mine.

I nodded and slowly moved toward the chair he gestured to, my heart pounding in my chest. As I sat, the seconds seemed to stretch, the weight of the moment pressing down on me. I had been offered a chance, a way to fulfil my deepest desires, but I felt as though I was standing on the edge of something far more dangerous than I had anticipated.

‘Tell me,’ he began, his voice low and inviting, ‘what is it that you truly want, Miss Eleanor?’

I could feel the weight of his question hanging in the air, thick and suffocating. His voice, though calm, seemed to reach deep into my heart, pulling out all the desires I had kept hidden, all the dreams I had clung to, all the longings I had never dared to speak aloud. What did I want?

I opened my mouth, but for a long moment, no words came. I could hear the clock ticking softly in the corner of the room, the rhythmic sound echoing in my ears like a countdown, and the fire crackling, the flames twisting in unnatural shapes, casting shadows that danced around the room.

I looked to Anabelle for guidance, but her eyes were lowered now, her lips pressed together in a way that told me she was no longer fully in this moment. She was waiting, as I was, for something to happen, for some unseen force to take hold.

Mr Devlin’s eyes never left me, his sharp gaze never wavering, as though he could see right through me, through every part of me I had buried deep inside. There was something in his look, something ancient and patient as if he had all the time in the world to wait for me to speak, to break. I swallowed, trying to collect myself. ‘I want,’ I started, but my voice was almost a whisper. I cleared my throat and tried again. ‘I want to be a writer, Mr Devlin. A famous one. One whose name is spoken in every home, whose books are read by all.’

His lips curled upward at the edges, as if he had known this was coming, ‘And why do you desire such things, Miss Eleanor? Fame. Wealth. Recognition?’ He tilted his head, his dark eyes glinting like polished obsidian. ‘What will you do with it once you have it?’

The room seemed to grow colder with every word, as though the shadows were moving in closer, tightening around me. I felt myself shiver, but I refused to look away. ‘I –' I began again, but the words died in my throat. What would I do with it all? What could I do? I hadn’t thought that far ahead. ‘I suppose,’ I said, my voice shaking ever so slightly, ‘I want to prove that I am capable of more than the world has deemed me. I want… to leave a legacy. To be remembered long after I'm gone. I wish to gain wealth and fortune as Anabelle has.’

Mr Devlin’s smile grew wider, but there was no warmth in it. Only something colder, darker. ‘And is that all, Miss Eleanor? Or is there something more? Something deeper?’

I hesitated, and at that moment, the room seemed to close even tighter still. My chest felt heavy with the weight of his questions, and yet, I knew I had to answer. I had to reveal the truth of my desires, even if it scared me to do so. I looked up at him, meeting his gaze directly, and the words spilt out before I could stop them. ‘I want to be perfect. In every way. I want to write without effort. To create prose as effortlessly as Anabelle plays the piano. I want to be as good as she is. To know that I am worthy of the same recognition. I want to be… admired.’

A low, almost inaudible chuckle escaped Mr Devlin’s lips. The sound sent a chill down my spine, and I could feel a tremor run through me.

‘Ah,’ he murmured, his voice low and smooth. ‘Now we are getting somewhere, Miss Eleanor.’

For a moment, I thought he might say more, but instead, he simply waved a hand toward the windows again, his eyes lingering on me for a beat longer than necessary. The air in the room grew thick with anticipation, and I felt the oppressive weight of something ancient and unfathomable pressing in on me.

‘You see, Miss Eleanor,’ he said, his voice drawing me in with a hypnotic cadence, ‘desire is a dangerous thing. It consumes us and drives us to do things we would not normally consider. And once you surrender to it… once you place yourself in my hands, you cannot turn back. But… if you are willing, if you are truly ready, I can give you everything you seek.’

The fire flickered, casting strange shadows across his face, making his features appear even sharper, more otherworldly. For the first time, I noticed the faintest glimmer of something else in his eyes. Something dark and endless.

‘However,’ he added, his voice now carrying an edge of finality, ‘I will not make a decision yet. I will take my time, Miss Eleanor. I need to be certain you are worthy of what I can offer.’

The words struck me like a cold slap. I wanted to protest, to beg him to make the offer now, but something held me back. Politeness perhaps? Manners?

‘I will write to you soon, once I have decided,’ he concluded, his tone turning businesslike, as though this were a mere formality. ‘For now, I suggest you enjoy your time here, Miss Eleanor. Think about your desires. What you truly want. Refine your list of wants.’

For a long moment, I could not move. I had walked into this room full of hopes and dreams, but now I wondered if I had made a terrible mistake. ‘I will await your decision, Mr Devlin. Thank you,’ I said, my voice barely a whisper.

He nodded once, his smile still there, though it now seemed more like an afterthought than a friendly gesture. ‘You will know when the time comes, Miss Eleanor,’ he said softly.

And with that, he stepped away, leaving me to stare at the hills and scenery once more. The homes of his clients now seemed more like prisons than palaces. But at this point in my life, I didn’t care. I wanted what they had, what Anabelle had.

Alistair’s voice drifted through the room like smoke, smooth and unhurried. ‘Each of those homes,’ he continued, his tone now as easy as though we were discussing the weather, ‘was earned through nothing more than the focused attention of the mind. One by a man who could capture the future in mechanical form, another by a philosopher whose thoughts could bend the very fabric of society, and the last by a painter who, if one were to believe the rumours, could make even the heavens weep with his brush.’ He paused, his eyes locking onto mine. ‘My clients,’ he said, that word carrying weight as if it were a secret, ‘are not mere men or women of the world. They are now its architects. And each of them has made their dreams flesh, simply by walking the path I offer.’

I tried to breathe evenly, but his words seemed to settle into my bones, leaving me with a strange sense of disquiet. This *is* what I think it is.

He turned toward me, his gaze becoming sharper. ‘Now, my dear, what of you? What is it that you desire most? I have listened to the whispers of your soul. You’ve been a writer of the finest prose, but I sense something darker burns beneath the surface.’ A smile curled at the corner of his lips. ‘I wish to understand your true wants. You have heard of my reputation, yes? I am not known for giving lightly. But once you step into my circle, your wishes are as good as granted.’

A small shiver ran through me, and I could not suppress the unease rising like bile in my throat. He was not just speaking to me. He was speaking through me as if he had known all along the desires, I had hidden even from myself. Yes, I had more wants and desires.

He stepped closer now. He knelt before me. His presence was a weight I could not ignore. 'Let us talk,' he said, his voice barely above a whisper, as though the room itself held its breath. 'You will tell me your heart's desire, and I will give you the gift you seek. Or perhaps more than you can even imagine. But first, I must understand you. And then, once I have weighed you, I will, in a month, make my decision.'

I could not move. I could not speak. His eyes never left mine, and I felt as if he were pulling my very thoughts from me, studying each one like an intricate puzzle.

'Ten minutes,' he continued, his voice smooth, confident. 'Just ten minutes, Eleanor and I will decide if I shall write to you soon.'

I opened my mouth, but no words came. He had taken them, I thought. He had taken my words, and my thoughts, and now, I was nothing more than a piece of his grand design.

He smiled again, but there was nothing warm about it. 'Take your time, of course,' he said, almost like a mockery of kindness. 'After all, what is a moment for someone who has all the time in the world? I shall speak with Anabelle in private for a moment outside and return directly.'

I left Anabelle's home shortly after. I loved her as a true friend but the thought of discussing what had transpired needed solace for me to truly understand.

I don't recall the journey to the station or the train back to London. The streets and towns passed in a blur, as if I were no longer in control of my senses, my thoughts clouded by the unsettling presence of Mr Devlin. My mind raced, each moment of our meeting replaying it all in agonizing detail. I couldn't shake the weight of his gaze, nor the strange, almost hypnotic effect he had upon me. His breath, that sickening stench of ash and burned flesh, lingered in my nostrils, despite the distance between us now.

The further I moved from Anabelle's estate, the more I felt the pull of something invisible, something darker that seemed to reach out for me. I tried to push it from my mind, to focus on the here and now, but the thought of him lingered, like smoke in the air. How could I describe it? I knew not to trust him, yet there was a part of me that desperately wanted to. A part that yearned for success, the fame that I'd longed for all my life. Could he truly give me that?

July 31st Back home.

I awoke the next morning in my small apartment in London, yet the room felt unfamiliar as if I had awoken in a different world. I could still feel the echo of his presence, like a shadow cast upon my soul. My mind drifted to Anabelle's transformation, to her sudden rise to fame. Was it possible that Mr Devlin held the secret to greatness? And if so, would I be foolish to reject the offer he might extend to me?

As I sat at my desk, the pen in my trembling hand, I knew that I stood on the precipice of a decision that could change the course of my life forever. There was no turning back once I stepped through that door. I had heard the whispers of a contract, the price that would be demanded. But for the first time in my life, I felt the allure of something greater than my self-doubt. I had to know more. I had to take the risk.

August 30th. Confirmation.

I had waited for a month. Well, many months now. My heart is restless with uncertainty. The days dragged on, each one heavier than the last. I spent hours staring at the pages I had written, the ink smudged with my unease. I had even drafted a letter to my manager at the printing company, contemplating whether I should hand it in. Resign, perhaps, if the letter I so longed for did come. I found myself rehearsing the words in my mind, trying to prepare for a future that felt as if it were slipping through my fingers. One part of me felt that this was all nonsense... but the other part of me had seen the evidence of Anabelle's success. It had to be true.

Then, it arrived.

It was a letter from Anabelle. The handwriting was elegant, as always, and my fingers trembled slightly as I opened it. I read it over and over, the words sinking into my chest like a promise:

"He likes you. All my love, A."

The message was short, and yet, in its serving, it held everything I needed to hear. He liked me. That was what I had wanted. That was what I had hoped for. Yet, despite the warmth of her words, an unspoken chill lingered. What did it truly mean that he "liked" me? Was it mere politeness, or was there something more? I couldn't shake the feeling that I was standing at the edge of a precipice, waiting for something far darker than I could understand.

I remember distinctly, as I left my apartment, heading off to work, another letter arrived. This time, it was from him. The handwriting was meticulous, the ink perfectly formed as if he had taken great care in every stroke.

“My dear Eleanor,

I received your address through Anabelle. I trust you are well. I will have a carriage sent to you this Friday. Your presence is required at Eldermoor Hall, my estate in Maidenhead, Berkshire. I will, of course, cover the rent for your London apartment for the month you will be staying with me. Pack as much as you can, for you will be away for no less than a month. You will find your transport awaiting you on the 2nd of September at 9 am. I trust you will arrive with anticipation.

Yours sincerely,

A. Devlin.”

The weight of his words settled heavily in my chest. I had my answer now, and with it came a strange sense of clarity. I had been chosen. And there was no turning back. I placed the letter into my purse as I headed off to work. My thoughts were of the resignation letter and my apartment. My humble belongings, my simple life, were soon to be left behind. For the first time in my life, I felt the stirring of true excitement. This was my chance. This was my moment.

But as I packed my things that night, a small voice whispered in the back of my mind. What would I lose to gain what I wanted so badly?

And was I willing to pay the price? I decided yes, for now.

September 2nd. My arrival at Eldermoor Hall.

A most peculiar thing happened this morning. I stepped out of my apartment building fifteen minutes early. I placed my two suitcases by the curb. The clouds threatened rain so I had my umbrella with me. Half a dozen Hansom cabs were dotted along my street. None of them looked particularly elegant or regal. Just the usual grot and piles of horse manure everywhere. The people I lived with on the street were jumping into or out of the cabs. Nothing out of the ordinary. Then my gaze caught sight of a proper carriage. A stagecoach to be exact. Two almost identical women sat in the driver’s box. One holding the reigns and pulling the two horses to a halt in the middle of the street. They both wore matching pure white cloaks with hoods pulled up. They were both strikingly handsome with brown eyes, almost masculine jawlines and flowing blonde hair. Normally such a sight would have incited hollers of admiration from some, and derision from those trying to get past. Yet they seemed to avoid both. One of them gently waved me over with

a smile. As I approached the driver leant down handing me an envelope with my name on the front. There was no time to open it since the other lady had already collected my luggage and placed it inside. I climbed aboard, shutting the door and we immediately turned around heading west. I was in awe. They did not speak a word to me for the entire journey.

The carriage ride was long and the road winding, but as we neared Eldermoor Hall, the sight that greeted me almost made my heart stop. There it was, rising against the Berkshire hills like a sentinel of old, its stone façade weathered by centuries but still imposing. Three stories tall, its spires rising above the sprawling grounds, where peacocks strutted proudly across the manicured lawns and vegetable plots. The letter from Mr Devlin, who now asked me to call him Alistair, stated the estate had been standing for over four hundred years, passed down through countless generations, and yet, there was something timeless about its grandeur. Idyllic, serene, perfect.

The housekeeper, also a beautiful woman like the two in the carriage and clad in the purest white dress and shawl, greeted me. She had soft eyes. She also didn't speak but led me through long corridors draped in murals, my steps muffled by lush carpets. I couldn't help but feel the weight of the house on me, as if every stone was watching, every shadow whispering. The women here, though, were like any other servants: calm, polite, efficient. They all moved with a kind of quiet grace, but I noticed something odd in their eyes, a reverence, or perhaps devotion, that unnerved me slightly. There were no men among the staff. Not even one. And while my mind drifted to thoughts of Anabelle, I pushed them aside, telling myself it was nothing, after all, they were only women in service to the master of the house.

I need not worry, I reassured myself. Anabelle had spoken of these women with no discomfort. There had been no mention of their devotion to him in anything more than a professional sense.

Yet it was hard not to feel the question linger, unspoken. Did Anabelle give herself to him? Was that the price for her success, her fame? But no. I found my mind at ease again when I remembered something important, these women were not like those tales I had heard of, of brides bound to dark forces. They were only staff, after all. They would not be touched by him in the way I had feared. So, I dismissed it all. I would learn everything in due time. For now, I am here to study, to grow, to write.

Alistair did not greet me in person upon my arrival, but instead sent a note informing me that I would begin my studies immediately. He apologized, stating that he had to leave unexpectedly but would return with all haste. The first of my tasks was no surprise, two large tomes, ancient

and heavy, filled with strange symbols, intricate diagrams, and texts that I could barely make sense of. Their pages, though, seemed to ripple with something… alive, something that shifted and rearranged as I read them. It wasn't a mere illusion. I could see the words move as if they had a life of their own. I remember feeling a bit seasick. These were grimoires. Ancient texts of a magical nature.

For three days I poured over the books, every moment an exercise in concentration. The women were kind, offering tea and small comforts between my studies. They spoke little, but I noticed their eyes, always watching, always waiting. Still, they treated me with respect, and I felt nothing untoward from them. I could not help but wonder, though, what drew them to this place.

My room in the hall was perfect and clean. I truly enjoyed my first few days here.

I had not handed in my notice to my manager but felt I would post it after a week here.

September 5th. Finally, the long wait is over.

On the fourth day, as I sat at the study desk, my eyes tired from reading, I was called to Alistair's study by the housekeeper. So far, I still haven't had the chance to learn any of their names.

He was seated by the fire, his hands steepled before him in thought. He wore a jet-black suit, wine-red tie and shirt. 'You've made excellent progress,' he said, his voice smooth and confident, like silk gliding over a polished stone. 'But now comes the true test, Miss Eleanor.' He rose with an outstretched hand. I recall it was warm and firm. A Test? It had only been three full days since I had arrived, and already a test.

'I expect you to recall what you have read,' he continued, his eyes gleaming. 'The pages in those grimoires are more than mere words. They are the key to understanding everything that lies ahead. If you are to succeed, you must know them as you know your name.'

I shivered. The pages had felt alive, yes, but I had not considered the weight of their true meaning. I had assumed they were mere words, symbols with arcane knowledge meant to challenge the mind. But as he spoke, I felt a coldness creep through me, the realization dawning slowly and unsettlingly. That was no mere study session. There was something far more dangerous lurking within those pages. I understood Latin well enough but some of the script was indecipherable. He gestured to the shelves beside the fireplace. Books lined the walls, but the ones he pointed to were unlike any I had seen before. I could see their spines were marked with strange, intricate designs, symbols and sigils that I had seen etched into the margins of the tomes I had been

reading. A sudden chill ran through me as I realized… these were not books one should merely skim. They were texts that would require my soul to understand.

'Let us begin,' he said, placing three small books on the desk then sat back in his chair. His eyes flickered over to me, the faintest glimmer of something darker in them. 'I will test your knowledge of what you've read. You may begin whenever you're ready.'

I took a seat before the fireplace, the crackle of the flames louder than before. The dark red leather covers were gnarled and cracked. I opened the first grimoire. The symbols seemed to pulse, beckoning me to trace their meaning, but I could not yet grasp the depths of what I had read. I was sure of one thing only: this was no ordinary education. These books, this house, these women, they were all part of something far larger, something far darker than I could have ever imagined. And as I began my test, a heavy weight settled on me. The words on the pages seemed to move faster now, more urgently, and I found myself struggling to keep up. The further I read, the more I felt the pull of something unseen, something that was not just within the pages but within me. I then detected a faint scent of incense, flowers mixed with spices and perhaps something more… earthy. For a moment, the room was silent except for the fire and the steady tick of a longcase clock in the corner. The three books lay before me, their worn pages gleaming dully under the lamplight. Their spines bore no title, no indication of what knowledge they contained. I hesitated, running my fingers lightly over the roughened edges. They felt warm.

'The mind fights against what it does not understand,' Alistair murmured. 'But the gifted learn to let go. Tell me, Eleanor… what do you *see*?"

I looked down at the book I had been reading. The words no longer sat still on the page. They slithered, rippling across the parchment, like ink dropped in water. I tried to fix my gaze on a single sentence, but the moment I did, the letters twisted away, reforming into something else entirely. The incense lingered in the air, blending sweet florals with something richer, something that coiled at the edges of my awareness. It was not unpleasant, yet it stirred an unease deep within me. Then, suddenly, the words settled. Not all of them, only a single line remained still, anchoring itself to the page as if it had been waiting for me to see it. I swallowed.

'Read it aloud,' he instructed.

The words… I *could* read them, but I did not know what they meant. Their structure was strange, familiar yet foreign, like echoes of a language I had once known in another life. My mouth felt dry. I hesitated.

'Read it,' he repeated, and though his tone was gentle, there was something firm beneath it.

I drew in a breath and spoke the words aloud.

The air in the room shifted again, subtly, imperceptibly. Like a ripple across the surface of a still lake. The fire in the hearth flared, just for a moment, as if a breath of wind had passed through the chimney.

Then the words on the page vanished. Every letter, every inked symbol faded into the parchment, leaving behind nothing but a blank sheet.

Mr Devlin smiled at me, 'Well done.'

I'll never forget those chills.

September 6th. Deep confusion. The Descent Begins.

I was beginning to lose track of time. Mornings dissolved into evenings with the turn of a page. The oil lamps burned low before I realized night had fallen, and when I retired to my chamber, sleep was uneasy and fragmented, filled with whispers that did not cease even when I opened my eyes. Yet I did not dream. That was the oddest thing. The words had begun to linger. Not just in my thoughts, but somewhere deeper, curling into the folds of my mind like ivy seeking purchase on a crumbling wall. When Alistair questioned me, I no longer had to struggle for the answers. They were simply there. Not as memories, not as lessons recalled, but as truths I had always known.

That evening, after my latest test, I hesitated before closing the final tome, 'This one was different,' I admitted, my voice quieter than I had intended.

Alistair regarded me across his desk, fingers steepled, his expression unreadable. 'How so?'

I searched for the words, but they came too quickly. 'I did not read about The Frost Veil Invocation. And yet, when you asked, I knew the procedure. The words, the sequence, even the scent of the burning herbs. I could feel the heat of the flames in my palms, and ice all around, as if I had performed it myself. But I haven't. I know I haven't. You know I haven't.'

A slow smile dashed across his lips, 'Haven't you?'

'Of course not.' I looked down at my hands, fingers twitching involuntarily. I could almost feel the rough parchment between them, the grit of ground resin beneath my nails. A sensation as vivid as the present moment. It made no sense. None of it did.

He rose and moved towards the window, glancing out at the darkened landscape. His reflection in the glass was strangely distorted, the firelight twisting his features into something I dared not name. ‘The mind is a vessel, Eleanor. And yours is open.’ He turned back to me, his gaze sharp as the edge of a blade. ‘Shall we see what else you are capable of?'

I nodded before I realized I had done so.

Alistair’s smile deepened. He motioned for me to follow him, and I obeyed without question.

He led me through a corridor I had not yet explored, the air was thick with the scent of wax and old wood. The lamps along the walls gave only enough light and with each step, I felt a strange pressure on my chest. It was not fear. Not entirely. At last, we reached a door. Not an ornate one like the others in Eldermoor Hall, but a simple wooden slab, darkened with age. No handle. No keyhole. Alistair placed his palm flat against it. At once, a sound like the exhale of a great beast issued forth from beyond, and the door creaked inward.

‘After you,’ he said.

I hesitated. Only for a moment. Then stepped inside. The room was vast, lined with shelves that reached the vaulted ceiling, crammed with books that smelled of damp pages and something more acrid, something I could not name. A great, circular wooden table sat in the centre, two single chairs waiting. A fire burned low in the hearth, though I had not seen anyone light it. The door closed behind me. I did not turn to see if Alistair had followed. I already knew he had.

‘Again, you have done well, Eleanor,’ he murmured, moving to the table. ‘You are learning faster than I anticipated.’

I took my seat. There was a book before me. Larger than any I had seen thus far, its cover blackened as if it had once been caught in a fire.

‘Tonight, we begin something new,’ he said.

I swallowed. The pressure in my chest tightened. ‘What is this book?’ I asked.

Alistair took his seat opposite me. He did not answer my question. Instead, he placed his fingertips upon the top of the cover and said, ‘Read.’

I lowered my gaze to the book.

The symbols on the cover did not twist, trying to avoid my gaze as they often did. They stared right back at me. Yet I felt them move behind my eyes. And as my lips parted to speak the first word aloud, the fire in the hearth roared to life. I could not stop myself. As my tongue shaped the first

syllable, a tremor lanced through my bones. The symbols did not merely exist upon the cover, they breathed, they pulsed, and they waited. And I, in my folly, gave them a voice. The fire surged once more, its flames bending unnaturally. A presence stirred beneath my skin, something vast and ancient, something that had always been there, waiting.

'Ia'thren vel Yh'guath maran'eth... qorrash nai'thul.'

(By the will of the unseen, through the gates of the devourer... the threshold is breached.)

The words spilt from my lips without hesitation, yet they were not my own. The walls of the room seemed warm, but their edges dissolved into a void beyond sight, beyond sense. The book before me no longer seemed a tome of ink and parchment, but a door. A mouth. A thing that had been waiting for me to speak it into waking. And I had. Alistair watched in silence, his expression unreadable.

'Good,' he whispered, 'Continue.'

September 7th. A Door Unlocked.

I woke up before dawn, feverish. My skin burned with an inner heat, though the room was cool. My bedclothes were damp with sweat, and my pulse raced though I could not recall any nightmare to warrant such a state. Nor any dream. A candle still flickered upon my dressing table, its wax pooling in thick rivulets down the brass holder. I must have forgotten to snuff it out before retiring. Or had I retired at all?

The moment I blinked away the fog of sleep, words, strange, curling, inky shapes, danced at the edges of my vision. Not written before me, nor hovering like the remnants of a dream, but lodged somewhere deeper. In my mind. As though I had always known them. The meanings arrived first, swift and absolute, before the words themselves could take form. It unsettled me. I sat up, pressing the heels of my hands against my temples, willing the sensation away. The words did not obey. They whispered instead, shifting and reforming my mind. The doors of perception are now unlocked. And the corridors beyond them stretch forever. Somehow, I knew it was the words that had leapt from the pages and covers that were thinking these thoughts, not me. A knock at my chamber door made me start. 'Come,' I called, surprised by the hoarseness of my voice.

A servant entered; her eyes downcast as she carried a silver tray to my bedside. Tea, dark and steaming. Bread, fresh and warm. It smelled of honey. My stomach lurched with an empty hunger. 'He wishes to see you after breakfast,' the woman stated before departing.

I nodded, unable to speak as I stared at the tray. My hands trembled slightly as I reached for the cup. The tea's scent was richer than any I had smelled before. The bread, was golden and soft, as though baked in some hidden, sunlit kitchen where only the finest grains and sweetest nectar were used. It should have been comforting. It was not. For a moment, I was certain the words in my mind were not my own. I dressed in silence. The corridors of Eldermoor Hall felt narrower than before, though they had not changed. The air was thick and pungent with incense and spices. I descended the great staircase, my footsteps hushed against the runner, my pulse loud in my ears. The doors to the study were already open.

He was waiting.

Alistair stood beside the great walnut desk, where more books had been arranged in a neat row. Their bindings gleamed in the firelight, and I knew, without reading the titles, that these volumes were older, darker. Malevolent with their personalities.

'You are ready for the next step,' he said, his voice smooth, certain. 'Come, Eleanor. Let us begin.'

September 7th. Second diary entry – The Binding Begins

The very air in Eldermoor Hall has grown heavier with each passing day. It presses upon me like a weight I can no longer ignore. I have never been so aware of my own body... each breath, each movement, like a thing to be scrutinized by the ancient walls around me. Even the servants, the nearly silent women in white who pass through the hallways, seem to exude a strange energy. Their eyes, once soft, have become unreadable. They no longer speak as they once did, and I now see the way they move with purpose, as though driven by something... more. Or is it my perception of them? Are the new voices in my head tainting my view of the world? Are they showing me as things are? Or making me jaded in some imperceivable way?

Alistair's presence, too, has begun to change. He is not like other men. I have always known this, but now it feels as though his very being is tethered to something beyond this world. Something far darker. Far darker than merely dropping a few rose petals in a bottle of water and calling it a potion.

Alistair led me to a room on the third floor. The door was carved with intricate symbolic shapes that twisted and spiralled like the fates of those who had entered before me. Was it odd to think that? I had no choice but to follow him inside. The room was large, its walls lined with towering shelves filled with books and scrolls. But this was not a library like the others. The air was even thicker with the scent of incense and dried herbs, acrid and sharp, not at all like the honeyed

sweetness I had smelled before. And the floor, beneath the fine Persian rugs, was laid with tiles of black stone. They drank the warmth from the room, from my skin. At the far end of the space, beneath an arched window, stood a large, ornate chair. It was empty for now, but I had no doubt it would soon have a purpose.

'Sit,' Alistair commanded, his voice calm, yet carrying weight.

I did not hesitate. The chair creaked as I lowered myself into it, the black velvet cushions cool against my back. His eyes never left mine, and the intensity in them was almost palpable. I could feel the words in my mind stir again, swirling like a storm just beneath the surface of my thoughts. But I could not focus on them. Not now. Not with him watching.

'You have proven yourself quite capable of understanding the written word,' he said, his voice soothing, 'but there is more to knowledge than that. Knowledge can be a thing of power. And with power comes the need for control. Knowledge alone is not enough. A wise man once said knowledge is power. I disagree. *Applied* knowledge is power. A scholar marooned on an island with nothing but his wits is no better off than a fool. What use is wisdom if it cannot be wielded? But most importantly, yes, you might be a genius at applied mathematics or art or philosophy, but you have no way of applying those teachings. So essentially if you're him, you're as thick as the next man.'

My throat was dry, and the words he spoke made utter sense. Resonating with something deep and ancient. A part of me wanted to resist. But another part, the part that had been growing stronger since I first arrived at Eldermoor Hall, urged me to listen. Alistair moved to the far wall and reached for a strange, dark object. A long, curved knife, its blade gleaming faintly in the low light. The hilt was intricately designed with silver inlays, and as he held it in his hand, I could see that the metal seemed to shift and shimmer, as if alive. My breath caught in my throat. 'What is this?' I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

He smiled, and it was not a kind smile. 'A tool,' he said simply, 'For some, it's a weapon. For us, it's both. For those who wish to make the final sacrifice… It's a saviour. A blessing in disguise. Do you understand my logic?'

'I do,' I replied with frantic nodding. His gaze never faltered.

'The path you tread with me *is* one of darkness, Eleanor. There is no turning back.' He moved closer, his steps soundless on the stone floor. 'You have been prepared for this,' he said, his voice low and hypnotic. 'The words you read, the rituals you perform, are all part of the design. Every

book, and every lesson so far, has led to this moment. It is, of course, not the final step but merely a hint, perhaps an indication of your willingness.'

His voice was like velvet, curling around my senses, drowning out everything else. He placed the knife handle in my trembling hand, its weight heavier than I had expected.

'You must offer something of yourself,' he continued, his words filling the room, filling me. 'Only then can you truly understand what you have begun.'

I could feel my heart racing. My hand, still holding the knife, trembled. What have I agreed to?

The words from the books, those strange, shifting words, rushed forward, flooding my mind into a torrent. I could see them now as if they were painted upon the air. Symbols, strange and ancient, swirling and pulsing with a life of their own. The language was not something I could understand fully, yet somehow, I knew its meaning. It was calling me. What perplexed me the most was that I still had thoughts of Anabelle, my dear friend, doing what I have done... and have yet to do.

'Cut,' Alistair whispered, his breath warm against my ear. 'Release the power you have inside you.'

The First Sacrifice.

I hesitated but the blade seemed to edge toward my hand. The moment it touched my skin the world seemed to blur and fracture. My mind spun with old thoughts... something forgotten. But not my thoughts. The moment the blade pierced my flesh, a rush of cold flooded my body, as though the very essence of Eldermoor Hall was flowing into me. It was not pain, but a burning awareness, a heightened sense of everything. Every sound in the room became amplified, the creaking of the wood in the chair, the settling of the stone at my feet, the soft rustling of the servants outside the door, even the whispering of my breath. And beneath it all, I could hear something else, a distant, low humming, like the pulse of the earth itself, a rhythm that seemed to match my heartbeat.

Alistair watched me closely, his eyes gleaming with something predatory, something ancient. I had become aware of the ritual I was performing, *The Frost Veil Invocation*, but it felt like something I had no control over. The words on the pages, those words that had moved in my mind, that had shaped my thoughts, were now inside me. They were woven into the very fabric of my being, twisting and turning with each breath I took. I should have been afraid. But I was not. Instead, there was a strange sense of exhilaration, a sense of belonging that I had never felt before. I had always been a stranger to the world, always searching for something, someone who

could show me the way. But now… now I felt as though I had finally found my place. My purpose. The blood, my blood, poured steadily in rivulets from the wound in my palm, and yet, I felt no weakness, no fatigue. It was as if my body had grown stronger, more attuned to the ancient magic that pulsed through this house. I was becoming something else, something more. Someone else yet greater.

Alistair stepped closer, and I could see the satisfaction in his eyes. 'You are ready,' he murmured, his voice calm. 'You have crossed the threshold. The path is now clear before you.'

The symbols in the air, the ones that had once only whispered to me in the corners of my mind, now seemed to press in on me, enclosing me. I could see them more clearly now. The language was familiar, yet impossible to comprehend. But somehow, I understood. The words no longer felt alien. They felt like a part of me.

Alistair raised his right hand, and the temperature in the room rose dramatically. The peacock feathers in the nearby vase trembled as if they too felt the shift in the air. The shadows in the corners of the room seemed to grow deeper, and darker, reaching toward me, whispering promises of power and knowledge beyond human understanding as they slithered across the floor. I felt utter dread. Eventually, the shadows were not shadows anymore. They snaked across the black stone floor approaching me. They reached the small puddle of blood between my feet and… and they were absorbed. Absorbing each other. Before I had a chance to react… He moved behind me, his fingers brushing the nape of my neck as he spoke.

'You will take what is offered to you, Eleanor. This is the way of things. To truly know something, you must give of yourself. You must surrender, body and soul, to what lies beyond. For the gifts you desire.'

My mind reeled, but I did not pull away. I was so close. Closer than I had ever been to the truth. And now, I realized, the truth was not something that could be understood by the mind alone. It had to be experienced. It had to be embraced. Body, mind and soul.

His breath was hot against my ear now. '

'The knowledge you seek… the power you desire… is not without cost.'

He stepped away, his presence still felt as if it were next to me.

'But you have already paid a small price. Your blood is now part of this house. Part of me. And in turn, you shall be granted the knowledge you crave. Albeit, not yet secured. That comes later.'

I had no idea what this would mean, what kind of price I had truly paid. And I still had to. But I knew this: I had crossed a line from which there was no return. And though a part of me, a small, distant part, longed for escape, the rest of me, the darker part, reveled in it. In that moment, as the words of the ritual danced in my mind, I felt the undeniable pull of the darkness that surrounded me. The pull of Eldermoor Hall. The pull of Alistair Devlin. And I knew, I knew, that I would never leave.

September 10th. The Uplifting Descent.

Each day, the rituals grew darker, and more elaborate, until I was certain I could no longer tell where the words in the books ended, and my thoughts began. They filled me. Everything I had ever wanted, every knowledge, every craving that had festered within me since childhood seemed to collide and swirl around and within me.

He gave me more books. Ancient Greek wisdom, Pythagoras, Plato, and the arcane philosophers whose names I could barely pronounce. Egyptian tomes on life and death. They were all written in languages that I had never seen before, and yet they became as familiar as my name as I read, as though the letters themselves were etched into the fabric of my very soul.

Alistair did not ask for much in return. Only that I read, and read, and read. And after that, practice, practice, practice. He urged me to absorb the great works of Shakespeare, and Chaucer, the classics that every well-educated person was expected to know. He placed them before me with the subtle insistence of a master instructing an apprentice. He did not speak much of the future, only that knowledge would come to those who sought it relentlessly. I think I absorbed, possibly by osmosis, an entire twenty-five-volume encyclopedia in a day.

But the most terrifying part was the promise of the rewards to come. Every night I went to bed, my mind was filled with images of things I could not name, of places I had never seen, and of people whose faces seemed so familiar yet remained elusively distant. And deviant. These weren't dreams but my mind processed the new voices in my head and what they knew, what they could teach me and what they also wanted me, or us, to learn. To absorb. I woke each morning feeling as though I had lived another life, as though the knowledge of the universe itself was buried deep inside me, waiting to be unearthed.

Alistair asked for nothing more than my devotion. Each book, each passage, and each word that I read was another step deeper into the labyrinth that was Eldermoor Hall, into the very heart of his domain.

Yet, despite the strange comfort that came from this knowledge, despite the strange satisfaction in learning the ancient rites, I felt an unease creeping at the edges of my mind. A gnawing sensation, as though I were standing on the edge of a precipice, gazing down into a pit I could not name. I was so close. I could feel it in every fibre of my being. Knowledge, power, wealth, fame, influence. It was within my grasp, closer than I had ever dreamed. And yet… I hesitated. A single thread of doubt remained, still hanging in the air. What if this was too much? What if I lost myself?

But Alistair, ever the enigma, continued to watch me with that unsettling smile, as though he could read my thoughts, as though he knew what I was truly seeking. And each test he set before me seemed more difficult than the last.

When I finished reading the final page of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, he called me to him.

'I trust you have absorbed it all, Eleanor?' he asked, his voice low, almost musical.

I nodded, though my mind was spinning with all the information I had taken in. 'Yes, Master Devlin. Err, Alistair, I… I believe I have.'

His eyes glittered, 'Then it is time for you to show me what you have learned. I will not have you falter, Eleanor. You will write your work now, one complete novel in a single day. No rest. No hesitation. The only things you will have to aid you will be food, for strength, wine for inspiration and water for completeness. If you fail, then you will know the consequences.'

I was terrified. The prospect of writing a novel in a single day, with the knowledge I had consumed, felt impossible, yet… something was thrilling in the challenge. A strange excitement gripped me. I had become something I did not fully understand, something that could not be undone. But I was growing.

With the fire crackling eerily I sat before the walnut desk and began to write. The words flowed from me like ink, as if I were no longer fully in control. My hand moved with an urgency I could not explain. It was as if the very act of writing had become a ritual, each stroke of the pen bringing me closer to something far darker, something far more powerful than I could comprehend. I did not know if the words were mine or those of the new voices in my head. Perhaps I am now a vessel to the powers beyond. And then, as the hours passed, I heard the voice of Alistair, cold and distant, 'I trust you have the strength to finish what you have begun, Eleanor.'

I remember shouting at him, ‘Leave me be… I’m busy.’

I felt a surge of fear, but also of something else… something thrilling. I was teetering on the edge of a precipice I could not return from. This was what I desired to be. And I was thrilled at my progress. Servants came and went, brought me food and drink, added more logs to the fire, replaced candles as they burned down, brought me stacks of fresh paper and even brought me boxes of ink cartridges for my fountain pen. I barely acknowledged them as my hand became a blur of motion.

The dim light of the room flickered against the curling pages of my manuscript as I slumped over the desk, exhausted. My fingers, still clutching the fountain pen, had long since gone stiff. The fire crackled low, its warmth barely keeping the chill at bay. I fell asleep as I wrote the words, *The End*… but something in me knew it was only the beginning.

September 11th. The next steps.

I had no memory of what time I fell asleep, but the sensation of gentle fingers on my shoulder woke me. I blinked, my head groggy and heavy, to see Alistair standing next to me, his expression a mixture of amusement and something deeper. His dark eyes took me in, dishevelled, ink stains smudged on my fingers, my hair unkempt, three empty bottles of wine by my chair and someone had even placed a blanket over my shoulders and back.

‘You've been working tirelessly,’ he said softly, almost tenderly, ‘But I believe you have reached the end of your strength for now.’

I nodded, too tired to protest. The words on the pages had blurred together, a jumbled mess in my mind, and I could feel the exhaustion dragging me down like an anchor. But, looking at the left-hand side of the desk I saw the evidence of my trial. The stack of paper was deep. With quiet grace, Alistair collected the sheets, each one a testament to my feverish writing, now marked with scrawls that almost seemed too pristine. He gently placed them aside, carefully stacking them into neat piles.

‘It’s mid-morning. Go to bed,’ he instructed. ‘Rest for now. I will look over your work. You’ve earned it.’

I stood slowly, a wave of dizziness hitting me, and I made my way to bed with the help of one of the servants. My limbs felt like lead as I collapsed onto the cool sheets. My mind swirled, wanting to write more, but the exhaustion was overwhelming, and I drifted off, the sounds of Alistair’s

movements in the room fading into the distance as he placed a blanket over me and closed the door.

I remember the rest of that day well. Usually when I pen a story for the tabloids or magazines, and then go to bed my mind always shouts at me saying, "Hello, you forgot this or that." This time it did not happen. It was as if what I had written was pure gold.

I woke much later, refreshed, but disoriented. The room was dimmer now, the sunlight having waned. The soft murmur of voices drifted from the hall. I could hear Alistair's voice, rich and smooth as usual, but it wasn't the tone he had used when giving instructions. It was light, playful, and… charming. After a few moments, he appeared in the doorway, impeccably dressed in a light grey three-piece suit, a striking contrast to the dullness of the room. He smiled warmly at me.

'I trust you've rested well?' he asked, his soft gaze, more inviting.

I nodded, still disoriented but keenly aware of his presence.

'I thought we'd take a little break from your work,' he continued. 'There's a fine restaurant in town I've been meaning to visit. I rarely leave the estate these days, but tonight…' He raised an eyebrow, a glimmer of something almost mischievous in his expression, 'I believe we could both use a change of scenery.'

I felt a flicker of hesitation, but something about the way he spoke, so assured, so confident, made it impossible to decline.

The restaurant was nothing short of opulent. Its golden chandeliers cast soft light over tables draped in white linen. The tiled floor gleamed beneath our feet as we entered, and the air was filled with the gentle hum of conversation and clinking silverware and glasses.

He seemed at ease here. It was as if the surroundings were bent to his will, and the staff greeted him as though he was a long-lost friend. He moved through the room with a casual grace, charming waiters and waitresses alike, his smile radiant, his laughter smooth as silk.

I watched in awe as he flattered the restaurant's owner, a portly man with a booming laugh, praising his wine selection with such reverence that it left me wondering whether he'd had any part in curating the list himself.

The meal was lavish, rich with flavours that seemed to take on new dimensions under his appreciative gaze. He poured compliments with the same ease he poured wine, turning to me every so often with praise that left me both flustered and flattered.

‘I must say,’ he said, his voice low, ‘your writing reminds me of something between the sharp wit of Wilde and the unflinching honesty of Brontë. There is a strength in your prose, Eleanor, a rawness that cannot be overlooked. You have the potential to write not only what others want to read, but what they need.’

‘I feel they were not one hundred per cent my words…’

‘But they were. Ignore your thoughts for now. You are a genuine writer. Be at peace.’

He even addressed the patrons and staff introducing me as the latest novelist they should all admire and follow. A few people even came over to shake my hand. I could get used to this. I felt my chest swell with pride, my earlier fears of inadequacy slowly melting under his attention.

As the afternoon drew to a close, Alistair leaned back in his chair, his gaze settling on me with a quiet intensity. ‘A well-deserved indulgence,’ he said, smiling. ‘But I think it’s time for something… more.’

He reached into his suit, pulled out a thick wallet, and tossed a large sum onto the table. The staff hurried to pack up our things, their expressions grateful, and as we left the restaurant, Alistair’s charm seemed to have worked its magic. He was the master of his domain, the king of this world of luxury and refinement. What enthralled me more was seeing our coach pull up outside, driven by two of his immaculately dressed servants (wearing white, of course) at the exact moment we stepped outside. Again, I found myself thinking I could get used to this.

Back at the hall, as we stepped out of the carriage, and just as I was about to relax, Alistair’s tone shifted. It was subtle at first, the playful edge fading from his voice.

‘Tomorrow,’ he said, ‘we will return to our learning tasks. But first, I believe a few… rituals are in order. I want you to feel the full weight of the knowledge you’ve acquired, Eleanor. I want you to truly understand the power you’ve unlocked.’

I felt a shiver, a flicker of doubt crossing my mind. But as quickly as it came, it was replaced with something darker, an eagerness I couldn’t quite explain.

‘Are you ready?’ he asked, his voice soft yet commanding. ‘I only ask because the gift you used to write the novel was fleeting, for now. It is not bound to your soul yet. That comes with the final ceremony.’

I nodded, almost absentmindedly, my heart racing in anticipation. It was time to return to the shadows. To the magic. As the carriage rolled away, I wondered just how far I was willing to go for the power he promised.

He led me to the gardens by the east wing. As if he had already planned it, a bonfire had been lit, and champagne sat in an ice bucket on a stone bench along with two glasses. The flames crackled, illuminating the manicured lawns, and the scent of burning wood mixed with the fresh, cool night air and the scent of a freshly cut lawn.

Alistair walked with an air of purpose, guiding me toward the fire. His voice was low and smooth as he spoke, 'A perfect end to an evening,' he murmured, offering me a glass. 'One last indulgence before we return to our work.'

I took the glass, my fingers trembling ever so slightly, my pulse racing with anticipation. The garden around us seemed to pulse with a strange energy, the bonfire's glow flickering unnaturally in the dark, as though it were alive.

As I sipped, the champagne sparkled on my tongue, but it was more than just the taste, something deeper stirred inside me. Alistair's gaze was intense as he watched me, his eyes flicking over me like a predator sizing up its prey.

'Do you feel it?' he asked, his voice, almost a whisper.

The question hung between us, heavy with meaning. I wasn't sure if he was referring to the fire, the champagne, or something darker, the sensation of power swelling inside me. I glanced at him, meeting his gaze for the first time in what felt like forever. His expression was unreadable, yet something about it chilled me. He was waiting for something, waiting for me to feel the pull of the night, the pull of... him. 'Yes,' I whispered, though I wasn't entirely sure what I meant.

He smiled, but it wasn't the smile of a man pleased by a compliment, it was the smile of a man who had just seen his trap spring shut.

'Good,' he said softly, lifting his glass. 'I believe you are beginning to understand.'

We sat in silence, watching the flames leap higher into the air. The world seemed to fall away as the fire burned bright, the light dancing in the dark like a beacon, drawing us both closer.

Alistair spoke again, his voice thick with anticipation, 'Eleanor, do you know what this fire represents?'

I shook my head, though a part of me already suspected the answer.

'It is not just the flames of a bonfire,' he continued, his words slow and deliberate, 'it is the flame of transformation.'

The word hung in the air, heavy and foreboding. I felt a deep, almost instinctive pull toward the fire, it was as if it was calling to me, urging me to step closer, to shed my old self.

He raised his glass again, tipping it slightly in my direction, before taking a sip, 'Soon, Eleanor, you will learn the true nature of transformation,' he said, his gaze never leaving me. 'But for now, let us enjoy the night. You've done well today.'

I could only nod, my senses overwhelmed, as I stared into the fire once more. The word, transformation, echoed in my mind, as though the fire itself were whispering it to me. And for the first time, I didn't feel the usual fear. Instead, I felt something deeper, a longing. A desire to know more, to understand more, to become more. And I knew, deep down, that my life would never be the same.

We retired to the study an hour later. The room had cooled, despite the fire's lingering glow. The shadows seemed thicker than before, the corners of the study stretching into something deeper than mere darkness. Alistair stood beside me, one hand resting lightly on the edge of the desk, watching. Waiting. I inhaled slowly and turned my gaze to the open book before me. The ink on the page curled and twisted as though the words themselves were writhing. I knew this was not my imagination. I had seen it many times before. I felt it. It was time to control it.

I swallowed hard and read aloud:

'Verba permoveantur sicut folia in vento, Scriptum vivat sub mea voluntate. Fiat voluntas mea super paginam.'

(Let the words move like leaves in the wind, Let the writing live beneath my will. Let my will be done upon the page.)

The air thickened. The candle flames bent toward me as though drawn by the force of my voice. A pressure built behind my eyes, a slow, insistent throb. For a moment, I thought I saw the words begin to tremble. I reached for them with my mind, willing them to shift, to bend, to obey... Suddenly, a sharp pain lanced through my skull. A ringing sound, high and thin, filled my ears. I staggered, gripping the edge of the desk. The words blurred, smeared like ink in the rain. The edges of my vision darkened. I gasped. My breath felt thin and distant. Alistair caught me before I could collapse. His hands were steady, his grip unshakable.

'Enough for tonight,' he murmured. There was no disappointment in his tone, no rebuke. Only patience.

I forced myself to straighten, but my limbs were sluggish and heavy. 'I... I nearly had it,' I whispered.

A small smile touched his lips, 'You did well. I saw what you intended. The book is a powerful one.'

He turned his head slightly, as though listening to something beyond my hearing. A soft breeze carried the scent of damp earth and crushed leaves through the open window. Outside, the women continued to tend the gardens beneath the moon, their hands deep in the soil.

'Come,' Alistair said, 'Tomorrow, we celebrate your efforts. Another day in town. A reward is in order.'

I wanted to protest. To insist that I could try again. But as exhaustion pulled at me, as the last of my strength ebbed away, I realized I had no choice but to follow.

September 12th. A shudder from the past.

The morning arrived with golden light spilling through the heavy curtains, and for the first time in days, I woke in a bed rather than slumped over a desk. My body and mind ached from the strain of the previous night. My mind was dull, from pushing too far too fast. But there was no time to dwell on it. The day was for celebration. Alistair had arranged for the carriages to be brought around by midmorning. He had not lied. Today was to be indulgence itself. One carriage for us, another purely for what we would bring back. The three female servants who accompanied us were dressed elegantly, as though they were noblewomen rather than mere staff. But again, in white, even their white umbrellas shaded them from the sun.

Alistair himself was immaculate, as always, a dark figure against the brightness of the morning. As we rode into town, I noticed how heads turned in the street, and how people whispered when they saw him. He was known here. Respected. Or feared. But deep in my mind, I knew he was not known. He was just a figure that exuded wealth and class. People often commented on carriages as they passed them in the streets of London. It was as if it was a magnet for their eyes and attention.

We started with the dressmakers, where bolts of the finest fabric were unfurled before me like offerings. Silk the colour of autumn leaves, deep velvets, lace so fine it might have been spun from spider's silk. Alistair waved away all discussion of cost. He chose a dress for me himself, deep sapphire blue that shimmered when it caught the light.

Then to the jeweller. A pair of delicate earrings, a silver bracelet, a brooch of black pearls. All mine. A final stop at the stationers, where I was presented with a Remington typewriter, its metal gleaming, its keys smooth beneath my fingertips. And a fountain pen of solid gold, absurdly expensive, nestled in a velvet-lined case. I ought to have protested. I didn't.

At midday, we dined in the grandest restaurant in town, a place where only the finest could afford to linger. The staff greeted Alistair as though he were royalty, bowing their heads, and seating us in a private alcove overlooking the street below. The meal was exquisite. Delicate courses, each more indulgent than the last. And then, as I reached for my glass, something caught my eye. A newspaper had been left on the next table, its pages half-folded.

I saw the name before I saw anything else, *Anabelle Blackwell Triumphs in New York*.

The breath left my lungs. I snatched up the paper, my hands tightening around the thin pages as I read. Her latest concert had been a resounding success. The audience had risen to their feet before the final note had even finished. The critics were breathless in their praise. She is unlike anything we have ever seen, one had written. I felt something cold and bitter uncoil in my stomach. The restaurant faded around me, the scent of wine and roasted meats turning sour in my throat.

'Eleanor?' Alistair asked, 'You are troubled?'

I shook my head too quickly, 'No. It's nothing.'

But he did not look away. He studied me as one might study the flames in a fireplace.

Then, without another word, he reached across the table and turned the page of the newspaper over. Hiding her name. Hiding her face. 'She has made her choice,' he said, taking a slow sip of his wine. 'And you have made yours.'

I stared down at the paper. At the space where her face had been. I swallowed. Nodded. But deep inside, something still burned.

I remember asking him that we should depart. To head home. The rest of the afternoon was a blur.

Later that day. A servant's role.

The setting sun casts golden light across the estate from the autumnal leaves of the nearby trees. After returning from town, Alistair granted me the freedom to wander as I pleased. I took to the grounds, my feet crunching over gravel pathways, the scent of damp earth and distant flowers thick in the air. The peacocks showed me some interest but I had no food for them. I found myself near the eastern gardens, where the women of the estate moved between rows of plants, their hands deep in the soil. They worked in near silence, their dresses pristine despite the dirt. It struck me as strange, this tireless devotion, tending the gardens long past the usual hours of labour.

One woman turned, her pale blue eyes meeting mine. She did not speak but smiled and returned to her toiling. I returned to the house before dusk, finding Alistair in the living room, seated at a small table set for two. A late snack had been arranged, along with two glasses of deep red wine that caught the light like blood. He gestured for me to sit.

'I trust the estate has been to your liking?' he said, with a subtle smile.

'It's vast,' I admitted. 'I don't think I've seen even half of it yet.'

'There's time.'

I reached for a wine glass, fingers tightening slightly before I spoke again, 'The women that live here… they aren't mere servants, are they?'

Alistair did not answer immediately. He lifted his glass, swirling the contents, watching the room.

'Please,' I began, my tone soft, 'tell me about the women here. They are so beautiful and serene. I have so many questions but perhaps you can put my mind at ease.'

'The women that live here are not mere servants, they are familiars. Bound to me by… understanding. They are my watchful eyes, day and night. Bodyguards… maybe. Servants? Yes. But they are part and parcel of the world I live in. It's a divine contract we have.'

Something about that phrasing unsettled me. I set my glass down, 'Were they once like me?'

'Every path begins with a single step, Eleanor. Some choose to walk further than others. I believe, no, I am sure you will elevate your presence in this world far higher than them. Of that I am certain.'

‘You mentioned a contract. In the books I have read, and from what I am beginning to understand, I believe that if…’ My voice became but a whisper. ‘I believe that if I am to do what I think I am about to do… I must know the *person* first. Perhaps it is a lower-level demon? They are known as Presidents, yes? And you are an intermediary. Am I correct?’

‘Yes.’

He snapped the word at me, but I felt no fear. I had him on edge, just a fraction. I left the silence between us for a moment, willing him to fill the void.

‘Yes. That is true. For the *gifts* you want and what they can bestow upon you… you must… you have to get to know them. And they, you. If you are not compatible with them there is no bargaining. No contract. You must try another. They, these, for want of a better word Presidents, are fickle. They specialize in their gifts, their talents, their knowledge. But they all fight against each other.’ He lowered his head and took a deep breath, ‘And they don’t act like us mortals of this realm. They play by their own rules. But hear me out, I know you wish to be a great writer, so I have selected just the right demon for you to meet. You must negotiate with him.’

I looked away, focusing on the fields and woodland beyond the windows. I felt that he was angry with me. Was I trying to squirm my way to my goal or was I pricking him with unforgiving pins? Pins that had not itched his subconscious before today? I felt, in my heart that he had heard my words many times before.

Later that day

The humble possessions I had been given paled into insignificance next to the new finery now hanging in my wardrobe and resting on my dressing table. But in the quiet corners of my mind, a question gnawed at me. As the afternoon wore on, the weight of my growing ambition pressed against me. The pursuit of perfection, my own and, dare I say it, Alistair’s vision for me had consumed me. Yet, we were now nearly a third of the way through the month, and I was no closer to understanding the final steps, or what it would cost me to achieve the heights I sought. He mentioned negotiating… I remember going to the library to research and yet nothing leapt from the pages I read. I was frustrated and wandered the place looking for answers.

I found him later that evening, sitting in the drawing room, reading a book and a glass of deep red wine in hand. The fire crackled in the hearth. The women, his familiars, had long since retired to their duties, leaving us alone in the vast, darkened room.

I stood on the threshold, hesitating for only a moment before walking towards him. 'Alistair,' I began, my voice tinged with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension, 'we're nearing the middle of my training, and I… I'm beginning to feel I've only scratched the surface of what you expect of me. I've absorbed what you've shown me. I've read the books and practised the rituals… but I don't understand what comes next.' I sat down with a thump on the chair near the door. 'I've researched the lesser demons but found none of them compatible with me.'

He looked up, his eyes gleaming with an almost imperceptible amusement, as if he had known this question was inevitable.

'Ah Ha!' He shouted, slamming his book shut then gestured for me to sit across from him, his movements smooth, deliberate. 'Ah, Eleanor,' he said, repeating my name a few more times. 'You wish to know the next step in your… transformation? The final piece to the puzzle?'

I nodded, leaning forward slightly, desperate for clarity.

He swirled the wine in his glass before taking a sip, the movement deliberate. 'Perfection, my dear, is not something you can attain simply by reading the words or performing the gestures. No, the next step, indeed, the first step in many ways is a leap. It's all about understanding and embracing the very essence of it. Perfection comes when you stop seeking it and simply become it.'

I frowned, the cryptic nature of his words pulling at the edges of my patience. 'But master, how do I become it? I've done everything you've asked me. As I said, the books, the rituals… the manipulation of the words, the incantations. How can I move beyond this?'

Alistair's smile deepened, a flicker of something darker beneath it. 'You already know more than you think, Eleanor. The two-hundred-page novel you wrote in such a short time. The words you have moved, these simple, delicate things are only a reflection of your will. The true test, the next phase, is about… surrendering yourself to it. Surrendering your will, not to me in any way, but letting the power you've tapped into become you. Only then will you reach the perfection you crave.'

I remember looking around the room for no particular reason, trying to gather my thoughts. The spells, words, languages, or whatever they were, that had burrowed into my brain and body, seemed dormant for now. Perhaps in their nature, they were afraid of him. Yet his words stirred something else inside me, something I couldn't yet name. Perhaps it was fear, perhaps it was something else entirely? I stood up sharply, 'And if I… I surrender?' I asked, a trembling note in my voice, 'What will it cost me?'

He set the glass down, his gaze never leaving mine. ‘What is the cost of perfection, Eleanor? Everything? Your soul, your will, your desires. But I assure you, once you’ve attained it, you will find no greater joy, no greater peace. The world will bend to your will, and you will have the power to shape it however you wish.’

I swallowed hard, the weight of his words pressing against me. It was a price so high, yet I could feel myself inching closer to that precipice. How could I resist when everything I had ever wanted and needed, was within my grasp? ‘And once I do… surrender,’ I whispered, barely able to form the words. ‘What then? What will I become?’

His smile widened, predatory, almost pleased, ‘You become more than you’ve ever imagined, Eleanor. You become… everything you’ve always wanted to be. But it requires trust and faith in the process. I have given you the keys to the door, but you must choose to open it. I cannot do it for you. I cannot force you.’

I sat there, my mind whirling, as the fire danced in the hearth. Alistair’s words hung heavy in the air, each one sinking deeper into my thoughts, shaping my desires, my fears, and my hunger for perfection. The next step was clear, and yet the abyss I teetered on felt as though it might swallow me whole. But perhaps that was what I had wanted all along. I stood up and paced the study, pouring myself a glass of wine. I drank it quickly as I walked then poured myself another. I could feel his gaze upon me all the while. The exquisite wine warmed me. I continued to pace the room and caught sight of Anabelle’s mansion across the valley. Could I ask for more than just being a famous author? If I’m going all in for the price of my soul… why not have a shopping list worth of “gifts” he could bestow upon me? More than material gains? If not just my writing abilities, then what? 'What happens next?' I asked, unable to keep the uncertainty from my tone. 'I feel as if I’m on the edge of something… something bigger than I can comprehend. I’ve done what you’ve asked. I’ve absorbed so much, but I don’t know what comes next. What are the next steps?'

Alistair paused, glancing at me with a gaze that sent a ripple of warmth through me, though his expression remained unreadable. The moment stretched between us. He stepped closer, lowering his voice to a near whisper.

'You’ve been diligent, Eleanor. Much more than I expected. But you’ve only just begun to scratch the surface. Perfection is a journey, not a destination. You have come far, yes, but your true potential still lies ahead. As for the next steps…' He paused, considering his words carefully. 'You will need to continue reading. But not just any texts. There are deeper rituals, and deeper

knowledge that only a few dare to explore. Your mind, already stretched beyond what you believed possible, must now embrace the darker, older arts.'

His words hung in the air like a sweet, intoxicating perfume. But beneath the allure, a warning whispered at the back of my mind. I could almost feel the pull of it, the way he spoke of rituals and ancient knowledge, of deeper things that would change me, that would shape me in ways I could not yet understand. I didn't hesitate. 'I'm ready,' I replied, my voice steady despite the tremor I could feel in my chest.

Alistair's smile was small but satisfied, like a cat that had caught its prey and was now enjoying the game. He clapped his hands with glee, 'We shall begin tomorrow,' he said, his voice reverberating off the walls. 'But for tonight, you are to rest. The journey ahead will not be easy, and I will need you sharp. You've come this far, but the path to true mastery is paved with trials.'

The mention of trials didn't chill me. It empowered me, so I nodded, unwilling to back down now.

'Tomorrow my dear, you will address a demon. Face to face and ask for your desires. It is one that I mentioned before, not his name, but I know him well. No doubt you have seen his face in the grimoires but, alas, his name escapes you. No reading tonight. Relax, have a bath, and do what you will for tomorrow, oh, tomorrow my dear Eleanor, I will see you bathe in the light of darkness.'

Tomorrow would bring new challenges and new revelations, and I had no idea how much farther I was willing to go. But I was already too far in. There was no turning back now. And I relished it.

September 13th. A Dark Baptism.

The next day, before the conjuring ceremony, I presented him with a piece of paper. I thought I was rather cheeky. At the top, it stated, "Eleanor B, Wish List." Beneath that, the paper was blank apart from a vertical list of numbers, one to ten followed by a line - like a blank shopping list.

Alistair looked thoroughly amused. 'Those voices in your head are hungry for more, I see.' He chuckled and for the first time his rigid, handsome demeanour seemed to waver for a second. He raised an eyebrow, his lips curling into that knowing smile of his as he took the piece of paper from my hands. His fingers lingered on it for a moment, his gaze scanning the list, before he looked up at me, his amusement dancing in his dark eyes, 'But what I think you fail to realise, Eleanor, is that it's not the voices that dictate your desires. They are merely reflections of your will. They are bouncing off your soul. The things you crave, the things you think you lack, they were always there. I've only... unlocked them.' He set the list down on the table, his eyes never

leaving mine as he spoke. ‘You wish for more, don’t you? To be more. But be careful. Even in this world of luxury and power, nothing is ever free. Not truly. You want to be perfect, but perfection is an insidious thing. It doesn’t satisfy. It consumes. So, what more is it that you want from me? The truth, now.’ His gaze softened for just a fraction of a second, but his words carried a sharp edge. ‘You’ve tasted what it means to reach for greatness, but the question remains: What will you be willing to sacrifice when it demands more?’

I felt my heart beat a little faster, the question hanging in the air like an unspoken truth. His words cut through the veneer of my ambition, the tantalizing promise of perfection, exposing the darkness that had been lurking just beneath the surface. For a moment, I couldn’t look him in the eye. His presence had always felt suffocating in the most intoxicating way. I swallowed the lump in my throat and finally spoke, my voice softer than I intended, ‘I suspect what it will cost me… but you’ve never said it outright. I… I don’t know if I truly understand the price. I know it’s not sex, love, or my labour. You want my soul, and you shall have it if you give me what I desire. This has gone on too long.’

Alistair stepped back at my outburst. His gaze remained steady, unyielding, but there was something almost pitying in it now. The amusement in his voice had faded, replaced by a tone that suggested something far older, far deeper. ‘You know, you know more than you let on. All of this…' He gestured to the opulence surrounding us, the world he had so carefully crafted around himself, 'has its price. Everything comes with a cost, but you’re already too far in to turn back. We both are. The question isn’t whether you’ll lose your soul, but whether you’re willing to sacrifice it for everything else you crave.’

I stood frozen for a moment, his words echoing in my head. Of course, I had suspected it. This was no gift without a shadow. The perfect life, the perfect writing, the perfect world I had dreamed of… all of it came with a cost, one I had ignored until now, and I could feel the weight of it settling in my bones. But then I met his eyes again, and the uncertainty in me began to fade, replaced by a cold resolve. ‘What happens if I don’t care about the cost anymore?’ I asked, my voice was steady, though I could feel my pulse quicken. The idea, the freedom of it…

Alistair’s lips curled into that same dangerous smile, ‘Then you have already begun to choose your path. But remember, Eleanor, the road you’re on is not one for the faint of heart. And once you walk it, there is no going back. The voices you hear, the desires that burn within you, will only grow stronger. They will never be satisfied until they’ve consumed every part of you.’

I met his gaze again, stepping closer, close enough to kiss him, the weight of his words pressing down on me, but still, I couldn't shake the thrill that surged through me. For the first time, I felt something close to power, something I had never known before. 'I understand,' I said, the words feeling both foreign and familiar in my mouth. 'Then I'll accept it. I'll accept whatever comes. I'm ready.' Anything to shut him up, I thought. He loved the sound of his voice. I wanted to meet this demon and bargain.

Alistair's smile widened, but there was no warmth in it. Only a cold, triumphant gleam in his eyes. 'So, you are. Then let's see how far you're willing to go, my dearest Eleanor. The next step will be one you'll never forget.'

As he spoke those words, the weight of the decision settled on me. It was not just the path I was walking. It was a plunge into something much darker, something deeper than I could have ever imagined. And for the first time, I didn't want to pull away.

In a flash, his countenance changed, 'Ladies,' his voice boomed. 'Prepare the cellar for Eleanor's first proper meeting.'

He turned to face me with a devilish grin, 'Ready?'

I stood firm. 'You have already granted me the gift of writing but, as you say, it is not bound to my soul yet. So, as a test, I would like to try a bargain with this demon. The gift I seek, as part of this bargain, is that of being a true orator. If it grants me this ability, then I shall see your true merits.'

His gaze changed from his usual sternness to one of pure shock. 'Eleanor, you astonish me. I will enjoy this greatly. Let's prepare.'

September 13th. Continued... The ceremony, the bargain. Not the Final Ceremony.

I remember this night more than anything in my entire life. He snatched my wrist and led me through the corridors to a cellar beneath the west wing of Eldermoor Hall. Cold stone walls closed in around me, and the air felt thick with anticipation. The flickering light of oil lanterns and candles suggested warmth, but the dampness of the stone seemed more of an oppressive force.

Alistair stood beside me at the door, his presence as commanding as the dark itself. His face was set, unreadable, but I could sense the tension in him. This was no simple ritual, no mere display of power. It was a moment of reckoning. He wore a black hooded robe, as did I as we stood in the doorway.

I looked around the room, noticing six women from his staff standing at various points around the edges next to stone pillars. They were dressed in long, dark gowns, some purple, others black, one gold. Each held lit black candles that illuminated their faces in a spectral glow. They also each held a book in their other hand as if ready to read an incantation. Their eyes were fixed on Alistair, reverent and unwavering. I knew then that they were not just staff, not just servants, they were part of this, part of the ritual. They had been bound to him long ago, just as I was about to be, in a way. I also had no idea how they had got here so fast.

The air was heavy with the smell of incense, the fragrant smoke swirling around us in a thick veil. The stone altar before us, five feet wide and worn with age, was the only furnishing in the room. It was smooth, cold, and unyielding, a perfect place for a summoning and binding ceremony.

Alistair turned to face me, his expression softening just for a moment, 'Tonight, Eleanor, you will receive a gift. A talent that will elevate you in ways you cannot yet fully understand.'

'Why is there so little furniture in here?' I asked, glancing around the near-empty chamber.

Alistair gave a small, knowing smile, 'They... the entities we call up, can get a bit... feisty if the binding spells do not work. We can't have books and furniture being set alight or destroyed. That causes... complications. Now, remember, you must win the trust of this demon. If you are not compatible there is no gift for you.'

'His name?'

'Not now. Later.'

I nodded, my heart pounding as we stepped into the room. This was what I had been waiting for. The moment I would prove my worth, my sacrifice. I did not doubt that whatever happened next, would change me forever. He led me to the altar, motioning me to stand opposite him.

He raised his arms, and the women followed his lead, taking their places around the edges of the room. The air seemed to grow heavier, and the very stones of the room seemed hollow yet at the same time full of life and death. The women began to walk in a circle, staying at the edges of the room. They read their books, their voices were but a murmur. They were reciting a binding spell.

Alistair began the incantation in Latin, his voice low and powerful, resonating through the cold stone. His words echoed in the chamber, drawing the power from deep within the earth, from the realms beyond. His voice had a deeper bass to it.

'Veni, viri potentis et sagacitatis, dominatores verba et linguae. Luminis verbum, dona mihi voce.'

(Come, powerful beings of wisdom, rulers of words and speech. Grant me the light of speech, the gift of voice.)

The women around the altar repeated the incantation, their voices a soft, eerie chorus, binding the words to the air around us. I felt the presence of something ancient stir in the room, a power, unlike anything I had ever known.

Alistair continued, his voice growing more commanding with each word.

'Da mihi vocem, claritatem mentis, ut verba mea sicut fulgur in aere sint. Fides et persuasio in universum.'

(Give me a voice, the clarity of mind, that my words may strike like lightning in the air. Faith and persuasion to echo throughout the world.)

The air around me grew colder, the temperature in the room dropping as if the very fabric of reality had begun to bend. The shadows lengthened, and I could feel a pressure build in my chest, an almost suffocating weight. Ice began to form on the altar.

Alistair's eyes were locked onto mine, his gaze intense, burning with intent. I could hear the thrum of power, like the beating of a great heart beneath the earth.

'Lingua mea erit potentior quam gladius, veritas meae verba, ventus mihi servit. Hunc donum accipio ut dicere verum, nec ullus obicem mihi resistet.'

(My tongue shall be mightier than the sword, the truth of my words, the wind shall serve me. I accept this gift to speak the truth, and no obstacle shall stand in my way.)

The ground beneath me seemed to tremble, a low rumble filling the space. A shadow swept across the walls, not cast by the lanterns, but something far darker, far more ancient. I stood still, my heart racing, as I felt the power.

'Voces invisibiles, venite ad me. Hic sermo meus fit potior, impossibile est vincere.'

(Invisible voices, come to me. Here, my speech becomes mightier, it is impossible to be defeated.)

A gust of wind swept through the cellar, though the air around us had been still before. The candles flickered wildly, casting strange shapes on the stone walls. The gowns of the women billowed briefly. I could hear whispers, faint at first, but growing louder, like a chorus of unseen voices.

The moment had come.

The six women stood in a perfect circle, their heads bowed, murmuring words of power under their breath. Their voices intertwined, weaving a hypnotic cadence that sent ripples through the air. Candles flickered violently, casting warped shadows that slithered along the cellar walls.

Alistair brushed his fingers lightly against my wrist, a silent reassurance or a warning, I could not tell. Before us, carved into the stone floor, lay the sigil of the entity he sought. Inside the circle, waiting to be filled, was a single word in Latin, written in blood:

Veni

(Come.)

Alistair lifted his arms, his voice smooth as silk but edged with something ancient, something undeniable.

'Ex tenebris vocamus te, magnum oratorem, cujus verba reges flectunt et populi adorant. Da nobis vocem quæ dominetur, linguam quæ incantet. Da nobis potestatem persuadendi, ut sermo noster fiat lex et voluntas nostra fatum.'

(From the darkness, we call upon you, great orator, whose words bend kings and enthral the masses. Grant us a voice that dominates, a tongue that enchants. Give us the power of persuasion, that our speech may become law and our will, destiny.)

The air grew thick, pressing against my skin like unseen hands. A low vibration hummed beneath my feet. The flames of the candles stretched unnaturally tall, their wicks sputtering as if gasping for air. A scent filled the chamber, rich, intoxicating, and wrong. It smelled of spiced wine and old parchment, of distant rain and burning cedar. And then the shadows moved again. A shape slithered into the circle, rising from nothingness, its form shifting, collapsing, reforming. A figure stood before us, tall, elongated, draped in something that did not billow like cloth but instead shuddered like living ink. Its face was that of a lion, but almost human in many respects. Yet I could feel it looking at me. When it spoke, its voice was not one, but many. Male and female, young and old, overlapping in a symphony of whispers and echoes.

'Quid petis?'

(What do you seek?)

My lips were dry. My hands trembled.

Alistair's voice cut through the suffocating air, 'Dona huic discipulæ donum sermonis. Fac verba ejus aurea, linguam ejus ferream. Sit ipsa vox auctoritas.'

(Gift this disciple the power of speech. Make her words golden, her tongue unbreakable. Let her voice be authority.)

The entity laughed, a sound that coiled around my ribs and squeezed. Before me stood a demon. A President of the Infernal Court. A being of vast, incomprehensible power. His form was ever-shifting, fluid like smoke and ice, his features sharp and unsettling, he was not a being that belonged to this world.

'You seek to bargain, Miss Eleanor?' he purred, his voice cutting through the silence like a blade. 'To see if *we* are compatible?'

I could not meet his eyes. They were like two endless voids, pulling everything into them, swallowing the soul, perhaps my soul. I had come this far. I had already signed away my fate, not completely, but this was the first step of many but to say the words aloud… to bargain here and now, it felt like the final line in a doomed play. Yet I had made my choice. I had come to sell the only thing I had left. My soul. 'I do,' I whispered, though my throat felt tight as if the very act of speaking those words would bind me forever to the darkness I had come to seek.

'You know the terms?' His gaze flickered to Alistar. But there was a sharpness to his voice, a subtle command to it. 'It is not just the soul, but the path you are choosing. Every decision you make from this moment forward will lead you deeper into the abyss.'

The words were final, irreversible. Yet I could not turn back. Not now. Not when I stood on the precipice of everything I had ever wanted, 'I wish to become the greatest writer. A person known worldwide. I wish to be able to write without hesitation, to create worlds of fiction… and to be admired. Is that something you can assist me with?' In the last sentence, I straightened my back and stood confidently.

'That, I can do. It is an insignificant gift for me to bestow, but I realise it is what you wish for at this moment. For now, I will grant you this… power of speech. We will meet again soon to discuss the final contract where I will exchange your soul for the gift of being a famous writer. You will no doubt seek, nay, request further abilities. I can grant many. But to solidify them to your body, mind and soul… they will only become yours permanently when…' He chuckled briefly, 'When Mr Devlin and you come to an accord. When you fully wish to be bound. Agreed?'

'Agreed,' I replied.

It moved toward me. A shadow stretched from its formless mass and reached for my throat. Cold fingers, if they could be called fingers, it was more like a giant paw, brushed my skin, and suddenly, a rush of something vast poured into me. I gasped, eyes widening, body locking in place as words, phrases, languages and histories flooded my mind. A thousand speeches were whispered at once, from emperors to beggars, from revolutionaries to deceivers. Power curled around my vocal cords like an unseen serpent.

The entity withdrew. The candle flames snapped back to their original height. The air lightened. The pressure on my chest lifted, but the echoes of that presence lingered. The women had performed the banishing rite.

I staggered, gripping the altar to steady myself. My breath came in shallow gasps.

Alistair exhaled softly, smiling. 'You have the power now, Eleanor.'

And I knew, without a doubt, that I did.

The power I had asked for, the gift of public speaking, began to fill me, seep into my bones, into my blood. I felt the weight of it press against me, a sensation that made my skin tingle, that made my mind spin. It was as if the very act of speaking had become an art, a weapon, a force that could shape the world around me. I could already feel my posture changing, the way my voice would now command a room, make people listen, make them believe.

Alistair lowered his arms, his voice softening. 'It is done.'

I inhaled sharply, the room still spinning as the echoes of the incantations faded. The women around the altar lowered their arms, the power dissipating like smoke. The candles flickered one last time before settling into stillness.

For a moment, I stood there, trembling, unsure of what had just happened. The world felt sharper, clearer as if the very air around me had changed. I felt a rush of energy, a new sense of confidence surging within me. The weight of Alistair's gaze upon me was heavy, expectant.

'You are no longer the same,' he said, his voice a quiet affirmation. 'You will find that your spoken words have power. True power.'

I nodded, still trying to comprehend the depth of what had just transpired. I had been given a gift, but it was one I knew would come with its consequences.

'Now,' Alistair continued, his eyes glinting with amusement, 'let us see if you can use this gift wisely.'

‘Tomorrow,’ I pleaded. The last few moments seemed to have lasted an eternity. ‘I need rest.’

‘Granted,’ he whispered.

And with that, he followed the women out leaving me to find my way back to my bedroom.

September 14th. The second test

The next morning, the air was thick with expectation. I stood in front of the full-length mirror in my room, admiring the intricate lacework of a new dress I had been gifted. The deep emerald green was a far cry from the simple garments I had worn upon my arrival, and as I turned slowly, I marvelled at how effortlessly the fabric moved with me. It was as if I had become a different woman. More confident, more poised.

Alistair’s voice came from the doorway, breaking my reverie, ’You look exquisite, Eleanor, but today, I have a challenge for you.’

His tone was light, but I could hear the edge of something more serious in it. I turned to face him, his gaze running over me with approval.

‘We’re going to town. There are a few things I need, and I thought it might be a good opportunity for you to show me how far your skills have come.’

I raised an eyebrow, curiosity piqued, ‘Skills?’

‘Ah, yes. Your public speaking,’ he said, his smile widening. ‘You’ve shown remarkable improvement in controlling words on the pages, but now it’s time to put those new talents into action. Today, you will negotiate. You will persuade. You will charm the people you meet.’

A thrill ran through me. This was it. The true test of my abilities, of the influence I had begun to wield. If this gift worked then I knew that what Anabelle had achieved was vis this route, this path. I was charged up and ready.

We set out in two carriages again, one for Alistair and me, the other for the stacks of bags, boxes, and items we were to purchase. Once in town, the sight of Alistair, impeccably dressed, with his entourage trailing behind, commanded attention, but it was my newfound role in this little performance that thrilled me. For the first time, I felt like I belonged to the world he inhabited like I had been given a place at his table.

As we walked toward the first boutique Alistair whispered to me, ‘You must haggle. Negotiate. Convince them to offer us a better deal.’

I instantly felt the weight of every eye in the shop. The staff, elegant and poised, greeted Alistair with practised deference, but it was me they now noticed. Me, in my sparkling new dress, with my newfound confidence radiating like an aura.

Alistair didn't waste any time, 'Eleanor,' he said, voice low and smooth, 'find what you like. Remember, money is no object. But you must obtain a bargain.'

I felt the familiar twinge of excitement, that electric thrill from the night before. This was my chance to prove my abilities, to take the skills Alistair and the demon, had gifted me and show him just how far I had come.

I approached the shopkeeper, a middle-aged man with greying hair and a welcoming smile. But I knew exactly what I had to do. I tilted my head, giving him a friendly yet firm smile in return, aware of the power that had grown within me. I spoke first in the polite tones I had practised in my mind all night.

'A fine selection, sir,' I began, looking over the dresses on display, 'however I do wonder, do you have anything a bit more... exclusive? I'm certain you could offer me something far more suited to my needs.'

The shopkeeper blinked, slightly taken aback by my directness, but he recovered quickly.

'Of course, madam. I am sure we have just the thing for you.'

'No,' I said, my voice firm yet charming, 'I don't need your *just the thing*, I need something that will make a statement.' I gestured to the back of the shop, making it clear I wasn't just interested in a quick sale. 'Something that commands attention, that makes anyone who looks at it stop in their tracks. That's what I'm here for. I think you know exactly what I mean.'

I watched the shopkeeper's eyes narrow with understanding, and he quickly led me to a different section of the store. I knew then that I had him, and when I finally chose my selections, I negotiated not just a discount, but a small bonus thrown in: a silk scarf, a piece of jewellery and at no extra charge. As I made my way back to Alistair, the shopkeeper's eyes still followed me, clearly impressed by my sharp negotiation skills.

Alistair was leaning casually against a column reading a newspaper, his smile more predatory than before, 'Very well done,' he whispered, his voice tinged with approval. 'I knew you had it in you. Now, we shall see how well you fare in other matters.'

Alistair's staff took the items to the second coach as we continued our shopping spree, moving from shop to shop, the rhythm of the day becoming more familiar. Alistair was ever the

gentleman, guiding me with a soft chuckle whenever I succeeded, his praise was both a reward and a challenge.

But it was at the restaurant that he truly tested me. We had dinner at a lavish establishment, and he was once again in his element. He was charming, flirtatious, and expertly persuasive with the waitstaff, but I could tell something had shifted. It wasn't just about the gifts or the clothes anymore. It was about how far I was willing to go, and what I was ready to do to take the next step.

He sat across from me, a glass of wine in hand, 'Eleanor,' he said, his voice quiet but piercing. 'You've done well today. But now, I want to see something else. I want you to talk to them, talk to everyone. Make them listen. Make them believe you are worth listening to.'

I understood immediately. He wasn't testing my charm this time. He wasn't testing my negotiation skills. This time, he wanted me to command attention with words alone. To speak and make everyone in the room hang on my every syllable. I straightened in my seat, my mind racing, but the moment I opened my mouth, everything fell into place. My voice, now more commanding, more persuasive, rang out with authority. I wasn't just speaking anymore; I was captivating them. The waiters, the patrons, even Alistair himself, they were all drawn to me.

Alistair's eyes gleamed with approval as I spoke. But beneath that, I saw something else, a flicker of something darker, more dangerous. I knew, deep down, that my path was being set. I was no longer the uncertain woman who had stepped foot into Eldermoor Hall. I was becoming something else. Something he wanted me to be. And part of me relished it.

September 15th. A new revelation.

The day after the shopping trip, Alistair granted me the afternoon off. He had his business to attend to. Meetings with accountants and lawyers, whatever transactions his wealth required. I didn't question him. There was nothing more he needed to say to me for now. Instead, I found myself drawn to the library once again. A place where books and knowledge beckoned to me like a siren's call. I could feel the pull, the thirst for more, deeper than before. The power Alistair had given me had only whetted my appetite. I needed more. But more than ever I longed to find the name of the demon I was now joined to.

The grand oak doors creaked as I entered, the scent of aged paper filling the air. One of the women, as always, was dusting shelves near the far side of the room, her movements careful and precise. She didn't acknowledge me, but I wasn't expecting her to.

‘Excuse me,’ I called softly, my voice breaking the silence, ‘Can you recommend something… to further my knowledge?’

Without a word, the woman paused for a moment, as though considering my request. She then walked with quiet determination to the opposite side of the room. From the shadows, she retrieved a thick, leather-bound tome, its cover as old and weathered as the walls of Eldermoor Hall itself. She placed it on the walnut desk, open to a page, and I could feel her eyes upon me as I approached.

The book was *The Lesser Key of Solomon*. I recognized it instantly, though I had not seen it here before. The pages were heavy with dark knowledge, the ink scratched onto the parchment in a way that seemed to hum with ancient power. Only this was not a printed version. I had heard that it was five books in total but here, in my hands, was what seemed to be a handwritten version… of five books, all in one. I was aghast.

The woman stepped back, silent as always, and gestured toward the page where her finger rested, pointing to a passage.

Marbas, President of the Infernal Court… A great president of Hell.

I leaned closer, my heart beginning to race, the words jumping off the page. I read on:

Marbas, a demon of Hell, grants various gifts to those who dare ask. The ability to speak with the voice of kings, to heal or harm at will, to grant knowledge in the mechanical arts…

I felt my breath catch in my throat. This was the entity I had encountered in the cellar, his presence lingering in the air like a shadow I couldn’t shake off. His power, his weight, the way he had stood before me during the ritual. The head of a lion. The realization hit me with startling clarity: Marbas. He had granted me the power to speak, to command, to sway, to negotiate. The same power I had so eagerly tested in town just the day before. He was no mere lower-level demon. Alistair had granted me an audience with a true…prince of darkness.

The woman, still standing in the corner, did not indicate that she had noticed my revelation, though I could have sworn she was waiting for it. I lifted my gaze to her, then back to the page, the words started to blur together as a knot of excitement and fear tied itself in my chest.

Marbas had been the one to answer my call in that cellar. I had asked for power, and in return, I had bound myself further into a web I wasn’t sure I could escape. As the last line faded from my sight, I closed the book gently, the sound of the cover thudding softly against the desk. I stood

there, frozen, for a long moment. The woman, still silent, seemed to sense my hesitation and began to dust the shelves once more as if nothing had changed.

But everything had changed. I was no longer just a woman seeking fame. I was entangled in something far more dangerous, and I could feel its tendrils tightening around me.

I now formed a new idea of what I could ask for in the build-up to the final ceremony at the end of the month. I remember Alistair's words, "*It is not bound to your soul yet. That comes with the final ceremony*." But now I have the gift of writing perfectly, the power of mellifluous speech, and I can read the ever-moving texts in the arcane books of summoning, so why not add another to the list? I guess he may appreciate my greed.

September 16th. A new gift.

As I sat alone in the grand library taking my time to explore a few more grimoires. The words of the tomes blurred into a haze, yet I read them with ease. My mind, however, was sharply focused on one singular thought. Ambidexterity. The more I thought of it, the more enticing the idea became. I remembered Alistair's words from the ceremony room, that I had not yet bound the gifts to my soul. *That comes with the final ceremony,* he had said.

My fingers itched to write, to test my accumulating newfound powers. I could already write with perfection, every sentence, every word flowing effortlessly onto the page. The gift of speech, too, had granted me a new edge, a new ability to bend people to my will with a few carefully chosen words. I doubt my gift of speech would work on him though. But what more could I claim? What more could I ask for in the lead-up to the final ceremony? Ambidexterity. It felt like the next logical step. It felt too delectable to resist. What writer wouldn't want the ability to create with both hands? It would be as if I had two minds, two bodies working in unison to give birth to my ideas, to bring them to life twice as fast, twice as elegantly. I let the thought swirl in my mind, imagining what it would be like. Perhaps the gift of ambidexterity would allow me to write even faster, more fluidly, and with a level of precision that few could achieve. It was a power that would make my writing even more perfect.

It felt right.

With an air of quiet certainty, I walked to Alistair's study. The sound of my footsteps echoed down the hallway, and I could feel the weight of my decision pressing against my chest. When I entered, Alistair was sitting at his desk, his face illuminated by the soft glow of candlelight. He looked up from his papers as I approached, his eyes keen and watchful.

‘What is it, Eleanor?’ he asked, his voice as calm as ever. But I could hear the faint undercurrent of curiosity in it.

I hesitated for only a moment, the words teetering on the edge of my tongue, ‘I… I would like to ask for something more. Another gift, if I may.’

He raised an eyebrow but said nothing, waiting.

‘Ambidexterity,’ I said at last, feeling my heart race slightly, ‘I want the ability to write with both hands, perfectly. To make it so that my thoughts can be translated into words at twice the speed, with the same precision and grace.’

Alistair’s lips curled into a small smile, his gaze never leaving me. ‘Ambidexterity?’ he repeated as if savouring the taste of the word. ‘That is a curious request, Eleanor. You’re already gifted with such remarkable abilities. But I see… you wish to push beyond the boundaries of your current gifts.’

I nodded, my pulse quickening, ‘Yes. I want to be more than just a writer, more than someone who can craft words beautifully. I want to control them… faster, sharper, and with absolute mastery.’

He stood slowly, his tall frame casting a long shadow across the room. His eyes studied me, weighing my request. ‘You’re ambitious, Eleanor. But remember, each gift comes at a cost. A piece of your soul.’ His voice softened as he stepped closer, ‘Are you sure this is what you truly want? To bind another gift to your soul?’

I didn’t hesitate, ‘Yes, master.’

Alistair chuckled, a sound rich with approval and something darker beneath, ‘Very well. Let us see if the same demon will grant you this gift. But understand, Eleanor… once bound, there is no turning back. You will carry it with you always.’

‘I understand,’ I said, the weight of my words settling deep within me, ‘After the final ceremony.’

His smile widened, and with a slow, deliberate motion, he reached for a leather-bound book on the shelf. The book was thick, ancient, and worn, with gold lettering on the spine that glimmered faintly in the candlelight.

‘Tomorrow, then,’ he said, turning the pages slowly, ‘we shall begin the next ritual. But for tonight, rest. Tomorrow, you will have your answer.’

September 17th. The ambidexterity ceremony.

The air in the cellar had grown heavy once again. The flickering lamps and candlelight cast elongated shadows on the stone walls, and the familiar presence of the women in their dark, flowing gowns stood watch. The altar was cleared now, the traces of the first ritual still lingering in the cool, damp air. Alistair stood before me, his eyes glinting with that same curious intensity. He knew what I wanted, even before I spoke. 'Eleanor, we will recite the same summoning incantation as before, yet you must ask... humbly since it is only a short time since your last request.'

'I understand and I've thought about it,' I said, my voice steady despite the nervous pulse in my chest. 'I wish to ask for more, another gift. I am resolute. I want the ability to be ambidextrous.'

The words felt strange, almost silly on my tongue, but as I spoke them, they took root deep in my mind. I could see it now, writing with both hands in perfect symmetry, the flow of my thoughts seamlessly transcribed, as if there was no limit to what I could accomplish.

Alistair studied me with quiet amusement, his fingers gently tracing a shape on the altar. For a long moment, he did not speak. The air was thick with silence, but it was a comfortable silence, one that held the weight of unspoken understanding.

'You've grown bold, Eleanor,' he finally said, his voice low and almost teasing. 'But the path you walk is a treacherous one. You ask for more. A dangerous hunger to fill.'

'I am not afraid of the price,' I said, my voice firm, but inside, my pulse quickened. 'I know what I seek. You gave me the gift of perfect writing, the ability to speak with the power of an orator. I want to go further. I want more.'

His lips curled into a smile, 'Ambidexterity. A simple enough request, but with it comes a twist. There is always a price for even the smallest gifts. A second nature. A new aspect of yourself, entwined with your soul.'

I swallowed, the weight of his words sinking in. This was no simple boon. This would change me. 'I understand,' I whispered. 'But it's not bound to my soul yet. Not until the final ceremony.'

He nodded, almost as if he had been waiting for this admission. 'Indeed. And yet, once you have claimed it, in the final ceremony, that is, you will bear it for all eternity. Are you prepared for that?'

A rush of heat surged through me, but my resolve did not waver, 'I am.'

With a flick of his hand, Alistair summoned the women, their movements as synchronized and fluid as before. They circled the altar, chanting in a low, rhythmic cadence, their voices a haunting lullaby to the unseen forces we were calling upon. The power in the room swelled, the atmosphere thick with expectation.

He recited a new Latin incantation, and it was repeated by the women as they circled. His hands raised, his voice smooth as silk yet carrying the weight of ages. The six women resumed their positions, their black candles burning with a steady, unwavering flame. The air thickened once more, and the scent of burning resin and myrrh coiled through the chamber like unseen serpents. Alistair's voice echoed through the chamber, low and commanding:

"Ex tenebris vocamus te, Marbas, Praeses Inferni, dominus sapientiae et formæ. Audi vocem nostram, magne artifex mutationis, qui potest donare perfectionem et aequalitatem dextræ ac sinistræ."
(From the darkness, we call upon you, Marbas, President of the Infernal Court, lord of wisdom and form. Hear our voice, great artificer of change, who can bestow perfection and equality between right and left.)

The women murmured the words beneath their breath, repeating the invocation, their voices weaving into a hypnotic cadence.

'Marbas, qui format corpus et mentem, qui secretorum est dominus, qui potest hominem in omnem artem perficere—te invocamus!'
(Marbas, who shapes both body and mind, who is master of secrets, who can perfect a man in all arts, we summon you!)

A sudden gust of wind spiralled through the chamber, though no door had opened. The shadows upon the walls rippled and bent, shivering in unnatural patterns. A scent filled the air, not of decay or sulphur, but of something ancient, metallic, charged with static.

Alistair continued, his voice deepening, resonating through the cold stone:

'Da huic discipulæ donum aequalitatis. Utraque manus eius fiat una, utraque manus eius scribat, operetur, vivat sicut unum. Tolle defectum, tolle inaequalitatem. Fac eam completam.'

(Give this disciple the gift of equality. Let both her hands be as one, let both write, work, and live as one. Remove imperfection, remove imbalance. Make her whole.)

The air pressed down upon me, thick and suffocating. The stone beneath my feet vibrated with an unseen force. Then the shadows pooled together, folding into a shape, something vast yet contained, shifting and reforming as if it were never truly bound to a single form. The figure that emerged him, Marbas. And when it spoke, its voice was neither kind nor cruel, but precise, analytical, layered with echoes of a thousand voices.

'Tu vocasti, et ego veni. Dic desiderium tuum.'
(You have called, and I have come. Speak your desire.)

Alistair turned to me expectantly. My heart thundered. I swallowed. 'Grant me the gift of ambidexterity,' I said, my voice steadier than I felt. 'Let me wield both hands as one, let neither be weak nor untrained. Make me whole in this way.'

Marbas tilted his head, considering. Then, slowly, he extended a shadowed limb. It did not move as flesh would, but like ink poured over glass, sliding, reforming. A clawed fingertip, black as obsidian, hovered just above my left hand.

'Accipisne hoc donum, cum omnibus quæ sequuntur?'
(Do you accept this gift, with all that follows?)

I hesitated. Something about the way he said it made my breath hitch, but I had come too far now. 'I accept,' I whispered.

The moment the words left my lips, the clawed hand pressed to my skin, and a searing, ice-hot sensation shot through my veins. My muscles locked. My bones felt as though they were shifting, rearranging, burning with the knowledge they should never have possessed. My vision swam, and my mind flooded with the sensation of control over both hands as if an unseen force had severed some hidden limitation that I had never known was there.

And then it was done.

Marbas withdrew. The room was still. The women around us had stopped chanting. The shadows slithered back into the corners where they belonged. And yet... I could still feel the lingering presence of the entity, watching, and waiting.

Alistair exhaled softly, a satisfied smile tugging at the corner of his lips. 'You are changed, Eleanor. Your hands now belong to you in equal measure.'

I flexed my fingers, first my right, then my left. No hesitation. No weakness. No imbalance. I could feel the difference. The power settled into my bones like it had always been there, waiting.

‘Yes, master,’ I murmured. ‘I am changed.’ And just like that, I had it. A gift. A new power. The ability to write with both hands, to create with perfect symmetry.

As the darkness receded and the presence of Marbas withdrew, I stood there, breathless and trembling once more, feeling the weight of my new gift settling into my soul.

Alistair's voice broke the silence, ‘You have what you asked for, Eleanor. But remember… the final ceremony awaits.’

I nodded, my body still tingling with the aftereffects of the ritual, but already, I could feel the gnawing hunger for more, the ever-present desire for power that I could not ignore.

September 18th. A show for my master.

I spent much of last night and the early hours of this morning testing my new gift. Writing with both hands, creating perfect symmetry, I could barely contain my excitement. I had to show Alistair. The woman had brought me a blackboard and chalk as I requested, and now, I stood proudly next to the blank surface, feeling the weight of the ritual's power settle deeper into my being. I wiped away the previous writing, leaving the slate pristine, waiting for Alistair’s arrival.

He entered the room, his presence unmistakable even before I saw him. I turned with a smile, hardly able to hold in my excitement. I felt a symphony of classical music boom at the back of my mind. If I recall correctly, it was Beethoven’s Symphony Number Five. ‘Good morning,’ I said, my voice betraying none of the giddiness swirling inside me.

Alistair raised an eyebrow, his usual calm demeanour undisturbed, ‘What is it you wish to show me, Eleanor?’

‘Take a seat,’ I instructed, gesturing to the chair opposite the blackboard.

He sat down, his eyes narrowing in curiosity as he studied me. I took a deep breath and positioned myself in front of the board. With both hands, I gripped the chalk and began to write, moving smoothly and deliberately, one hand mirroring the other. In perfect unison, the sentences I wrote appeared on the board: one with my left hand, the other with my right. It was everything I had expected, everything I had asked for. I finished the two lines with ease and stepped back, waiting for his response.

Alistair leaned forward, studying the writing, a small smile curling at the corners of his lips, ‘That’s what we expected. Bravo, dear.’

I could hardly keep my excitement in check. 'Wait, there's more,' I said, barely able to contain the anticipation bubbling up inside me.

His amusement faltered slightly, replaced with a flicker of intrigue. He remained silent as I placed my hands back on the board. This time, I began to write again. I had practised this many times last night and this morning. My left hand moved as it always did, writing forwards, left to right. My right hand followed suit, but writing in reverse, right to left. The lines of chalk twisted and danced, meeting perfectly in the middle of the board, as if the two hands were two halves of the same thought, creating one long perfect sentence.

Alistair's jaw dropped, his usual composure faltering for the briefest of moments. He sat there, staring at the blackboard, his eyes wide with disbelief. Slowly, he clapped, his hands making a soft, appreciative sound, 'Impressive,' he murmured, still caught in the spectacle of what I had just done.

I grinned, feeling the rush of power surge through me, 'But there's more,' I said, my voice light and giddy with excitement. Then, I followed this up by writing two completely different sentences with each hand at the same time, one in a language I barely recognized, the other in perfect English. The contrast between the two was startling, yet there was an effortless rhythm to it. Each hand moved in tandem, a symphony of thought and action.

I turned back to the board, this time with an entirely different intention. I gripped the chalk in both hands and began to write in a careful, deliberate script. The words formed in a graceful, flowing pattern, but this time, the words were upside down, and the words themselves were Latin. I didn't need to hesitate or think twice. The words came easily, almost naturally, as if they were already imprinted on my mind.

Alistair's eyes widened as he watched, his earlier amusement replaced by a mixture of awe and something else, something darker, perhaps. He didn't speak for several long moments, the only sound in the room was the faint scratch of chalk against the board as I continued to scribble.

Finally, he spoke, his voice quieter than before, 'What are you doing, Eleanor?'

I finished the final word and stood back, admiring my work. The incantation in Latin seemed to pulse with energy, the letters forming a strange harmony that sent a shiver down my spine. 'Isn't it beautiful?' I whispered, unable to contain the thrill that bubbled up inside me, 'I can write in two languages, backwards and forwards, and even upside down. It's… perfect.'

Alistair didn't answer right away. His eyes scanned the words, his expression unreadable. After a moment, he stood, stepping closer to the board. He didn't touch it, but his gaze lingered on the Latin script, his mind working through what I had just revealed.

'I didn't expect this,' he said, the words heavy with meaning. 'You have truly outdone yourself, my dear.'

My heart fluttered in my chest. For a moment, I almost felt as though I were floating above the ground, intoxicated by the power I had unlocked. But I knew this wasn't the end. No, this was just the beginning.

September 18th. Continued. My gift to Alistair.

Later that day I had a few hours free between lessons so I summoned four of his servants to my room, ready to ask them where I could find a gift for Alistair. The question hovered on my lips for a moment, but then I stopped myself. The stupidity of it hit me instantly. They were not there to answer my questions even though they seemed mute. I'd hardly heard them speak anywhere except inside the summoning chamber or rarely given instructions to me from Alaistair. Come to think of it I had never heard them chat to each other. Odd.

When I asked, one of the women, the tallest among them, stepped forward. She didn't say a word, but instead, placed a hand on my forehead, then over my heart. The movement was slow, deliberate, almost ritualistic. My gaze followed her hand, and a shiver ran through me as the meaning became clear. It was silent communication, a message. The gift should come from within me. From my thoughts, my own heart. I didn't need to buy or acquire anything. I needed to offer something personal, something that truly belonged to me.

I took a breath, feeling the weight of her unspoken words settle over me. What could I give him? The locket around my neck? It was a cherished memento from my past, but it didn't feel like enough. No, I needed something that matched the magnitude of what I had already received. Something greater. I asked one of the servants to take me to the finest jewellers in town where I hoped to purchase the perfect gift.

A few hours later I held the small vial of blood carefully in my hands, the liquid inside still fresh and glistening in the dim light. It felt heavier than I expected, its weight a reminder of the depth of what I was offering. I placed it into a red velvet jewellery box and placed it on the dressing table in my room. Then I took a writing pad from the top drawer, along with my new gold fountain pen, and began to write instructions for him. I truly believed the addition of a little spell, locking the box, would excite him and prove that I was truly mastering the arts. I waited patiently in his study,

ready for my next lesson. I had time to spare before our 6 pm start so I amused myself by looking at the art and artefacts he had dotted around.

As punctual as ever he arrived as the grandfather clock struck six. With a steady hand, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the small box. The vial within, sealed with a delicate silver cap, was attached to a fine chain, and I had ensured it was engraved with the letters "E B" - my initials, but now they felt like a mark of something far more. A bond, a commitment. 'I have a gift for you, master.'

'Oh, I'm intrigued.'

'A gift for you for the gifts you have bestowed upon me. I've given you something intimate, Alistair,' I said softly, placing the box in his palm. His fingers closed around it immediately, and for a moment, we simply stood there in silence. The air was thick with anticipation as if we were standing at the precipice of something darker, more binding than we had ever dared before.

'It won't open,' he said with a brief chuckle.

'It's a locking spell of my creation.' I then handed him the instructions.

He read aloud, 'Aperiam tibi mando. Hoc est enim verum donum discipuli mei Alienorae. Veritatis quaerendum aperiam quaerat et.'

(I command thee open. For this is a true gift from my disciple Eleanor. I must speak the truth to the question she asks, and it will open.)

He was stumped. 'Question?' His eyebrow raised as if it were about to push his hairline up an inch.

I took a deep breath and asked, 'After the final ceremony, am I bound to the powers of darkness until the day I die or is there a means of escape, should I choose it?'

He hesitated, his pause dragging out for longer than I had hoped for. He began to look tense and for a second his hand gripped tighter to the box. I half expected him to burst into a fit of rage. Perhaps sprout horns and black leathery wings. Then he calmed himself.

'There is a way out,' he huffed, 'But I can only reveal it to you after the final ceremony.'

The box in his hands popped open.

‘You spoke the truth. My blood…’ I continued, my voice unwavering despite the fluttering in my chest. ‘It binds me to you. As long as you keep this, you’ll always have a part of me with you, etched into you, engraved into your soul. As the gifts you helped me attain are bonded to mine.’

Alistair’s eyes never left the vial, his lips curling into a small smile as he studied the engraving, ‘E B,’ he murmured, his fingers caressing the smooth surface of the pendant. ‘I see. A symbol of your devotion, your submission.’

I nodded, my gaze unwavering, ‘It’s yours now. And I’m yours.’

‘My dear, I am enthralled. Overwhelmed.’ He brushed a tear from his left eye with a handkerchief. ‘You have excelled yourself. I accept your gift wholeheartedly. With this you have, you have… I’m lost for words. No other student has ever bestowed upon me such a gift.’

He sat down, wiping sweat from his brow. He sat there, still absorbed in the vial, his fingers tracing the engraved letters as if they held some cryptic meaning that had yet to fully unfold. The moment stretched on, thick with unspoken understanding, and I could feel the weight of the choice hanging over me.

The weight of the blood in the vial felt lighter now, as if its power was no longer solely mine but shared between us, bound by the unspoken contract that we had both sealed. But there was more to it… always more.

I watched him closely, his expression shifting between pleasure and contemplation, the quiet crackle of tension building in the room. I could almost hear the gears turning behind his eyes as he processed the implications of what had just happened.

‘It’s a truly selfless act, in many ways. Is that all, Eleanor?’ he asked, a slight edge of humour in his voice, but his eyes were dark, almost predatory now, ‘Or is there more still to come?’

I met his gaze steadily. I hadn’t spoken the final words yet. The truth of the matter lingered between us, unvoiced. He knew as much as I did that this was only the beginning. The question I had asked, the one that made the box open, had been nothing more than a test, a way of proving my control. But the real game had just begun. ‘I do not wish to be bound to darkness forever,’ I said quietly, ‘I want to live, to escape, to be free of it. But that would mean… more souls for you.’

He smiled then, the sharpness of his teeth briefly visible as he leaned forward, placing the box back on the table, ‘And so the true task begins, Eleanor. Your gift to me, your loyalty, has been sealed. But now, as I said… you will find a way to ensure our pact remains in place.’ He leaned

back in his chair, a cold satisfaction in his eyes. 'And perhaps one day, you will come to understand the true cost of your gifts.'

I turned my back to him, staring at the window that looked out over the sprawling estate. The weight of the vial now rested heavy in my mind, and the subtle pull of darkness gnawed at the edges of my thoughts. Would I eventually give in? Would I eventually become the very thing I desired? And would I find a way to escape? For now, I had only one answer. I would keep moving forward, no matter what. The choices I made were mine alone. And I would write them down one word at a time. I walked to his desk, my hand hovering over a fountain pen, waiting for the first words to spill onto the page. After a brief moment, I wrote, Silentium est aureum.

The words felt heavier than ever before.

Then I realized… the darkness of the contract. He is a man, here on earth, and seemingly his only purpose is to be a conduit for human souls from here to the netherworld. He's a warlock or perhaps a demon himself. What if he and I performed the final ceremony and he refused to tell me of the loophole, the back door? I would be truly damned.

September 20th. I feel the end is near.

One afternoon, as we sat in the garden by the west wing, the thought of Anabelle weighed on my mind. The last time I had seen her, she had been radiant, full of life, caught up in the whirlwind of her newfound success. And yet, a small part of me, the part that had once burned with envy, now ached to see her, to measure the distance between us with my own eyes. I set down my book and turned to Alistair, 'May I visit Anabelle, please?'

His expression did not change, but something in his posture stiffened. He shut his book with deliberate slowness, placing a bookmark on his page and setting it aside before leaning back in his chair, 'Not until the end of the month,' he said simply.

The final ceremony. Of course. I opened my mouth to argue but hesitated. There was an unspoken weight in his words, something immovable. Still, I pressed, 'I won't be gone long. Just an afternoon –'

'No.' His voice was calm, but there was an edge to it, like a finely honed blade. 'Strictly speaking, you are not allowed off the estate without my permission.'

The finality of his statement sent a ripple of unease through me, 'I didn't realise –'

‘When you left the other day to go to the jewellers,’ he continued, as though I had not spoken, ‘it was fortunate you asked one of my servants to take you. Had you gone alone, without a protector, for want of a better word, I would have been furious with you.’

A slow dread crept over me. Furious. The word sat heavy in my chest. I had never seen Alistair truly angry before, and I had no desire to.

‘Thankfully,’ he added, his tone softening just enough to be unnerving, ‘it is in your nature to be polite. That was your saving grace on that day.’

There was something deeply unsettling about the way he said it. As though my courtesy had unknowingly saved me from something I hadn’t even known was a danger, ‘I understand.’

‘Good,’ He leaned forward again, retrieving his book, dismissing the subject entirely. ‘Now, shall we return to our lesson?’

I nodded, but the moment lingered in my mind long after, ‘But surely I can write to her?’

‘Of that, there is no issue. Please, feel free to. I’ll get one of the servants to mail it when you are done.’

I thanked him and continued to read Codex Tenebris, The Codex of Darkness.

September 20th. The final ceremony:

The day had arrived. The chamber was prepared. The small stone altar stood at the centre, its ancient surface reflecting the flickering candlelight. Around it, ten women, or should I say familiars, moved silently into place, forming a perfect circle. Their cloaks, deep violet and black, shimmered with embroidered sigils, golden symbols of power and devotion. Their faces were hidden beneath their hoods, yet I could feel their presence, their eyes unseen but watching.

Alistair stood at the head of the altar, robed in gleaming gold, a stark contrast to my garment. My cloak was white, though it was far from a symbol of purity or a wedding gown. Black-stitched symbols adorned it, each one carefully embroidered by unseen hands, each one humming with quiet power. My heart beating steadily, and my mind was clear. I was ready.

Alistair lifted his hands, and the chanting began.

‘Marbas, princeps vetustatis, Ex tenebris vocamus te, Per flammam et umbram iter tuum, Per sanguinem et pactum iter nostrum. In nomine potentiae, appare coram nobis!’

(Marbas, ancient prince, From the darkness, we call to you, By flame and shadow, your path is made, By blood and pact, our path is sealed. In the name of power, appear before us!)

The flames in the chamber surged, casting wild shadows against the stone walls. The air thickened, a pressure settling over my chest like unseen hands pressing down. And then, he was there.

Marbas.

A towering figure of shifting form, his features flickering between leonine and human, eyes smouldering like embers buried deep in a dying fire. The very air around him hummed with raw energy. He regarded us, then let out a low, amused growl.

'You have called, and I have answered.'

I stepped forward, unflinching, 'I give myself willingly. The gifts you have bestowed upon me thus far and the truth that I will have them always. For that, I offer my soul.'

His sharp teeth glinted in the dim light, 'So be it.'

From the air itself, a parchment appeared in his clawed hand. Thick, ancient, the edges curling with age. The script upon it did not shift as I had expected. The letters firm. He extended it toward me.

Alistair motioned to the altar. There, resting upon the grey stone surface, was my gold fountain pen. The very one I had used to write my first contracts, my first spells. A fitting instrument for the final stroke. I lifted it with steady fingers. My name flowed onto the page, the ink sinking into the parchment, like blood into soil.

Marbas took the contract back, examining it for the briefest of moments before giving a slow, pleased nod, 'See you soon.'

And then he was gone.

The air that had been heavy with his presence lifted. The flickering flames steadied. A lingering scent of sulfur burned at the back of my throat.

Alistair did not hesitate. His voice rose once more, leading the others into the dismissal rite.

'Exaudi nos, dominator abyssorum, Ex mandato nostro, recede nunc, Iter tuum clauditur, nomen tuum silet, In umbris mane, ultra hanc vocem!'

(Hear us, ruler of the abyss, By our command, depart now, Your path is closed, your name is silent, Remain in the shadows, beyond this voice!')

A gust of wind, though no windows were open, swept through the chamber. The flames flickered once, then burned low and steady. It was done. I was bound. But I did not yet know the true weight of my chains.

September 23rd. Leaving Eldermoor Hall.

I walked to the front door, the weight of the moment heavy in my chest. A carriage stood waiting and Alistair stood at its open door, a stack of envelopes in his hand, each one addressed to me in Anabelle's unmistakable handwriting. He handed them to me without a word.

'I don't understand,' I said, looking from the letters to him, 'Why did you keep these from me?'

He gave me a look that was equal parts amusement and disdain, 'It's part of the necessity of secrecy,' he said flatly. 'The letters you sent to her were delivered as promised. I'm sure she read them, ever concerned for your well-being.' He continued, 'You are free to visit her now. Two of my servants will accompany you to London to ensure your apartment is just as you left it. If your landlord has done anything... out of line, they are instructed to deal with him accordingly. If all is well, they will let me know. If not, they will bring you back here for a short stay.'

I couldn't help but bow my head, 'Thank you, master.'

As the carriage pulled away, I opened the first letter. Anabelle's words brought a rush of warmth, reminding me of the life I had left behind. I couldn't help but smile as we passed her mansion on the hill as we departed Maidenhead. The road ahead felt oddly clear, but a part of me knew it was only the calm before the storm.

The Next Ten Years – up to 1897

I had everything I'd ever dreamed of. My name is on the lips of critics and fans, my books gracing the shelves of the most prestigious libraries and retailers alike. The world adored me, and I drank deeply from the cup of fame. I had wealth, influence, the mastery of my craft. Yet, as the years wore on, something gnawed at me. At first, I couldn't place it, a subtle unease that clung to the edges of my mind, always just out of reach. But as the months passed, it grew clearer. Success didn't feel as fulfilling as it should have. There was an emptiness beneath it, a hollow place I couldn't fill, no matter how many accolades I received. I began to hear things, whispers that seemed to echo from deep within my thoughts. I started seeing patterns in the way certain events

unfolded, odd coincidences, like pieces of a puzzle I couldn't solve. Most disturbingly of all, I felt a constant pull toward Eldermoor Hall, as though the estate were a magnetic force I couldn't escape, even though I'd sworn I would never return.

It wasn't a coincidence. I know that now. Alistair visited me once a year, always on my birthday. He would arrive with a cryptic smile as if he knew something I didn't. He said little, but his presence lingered long after he left, a silent reminder of the bargain I had made. At first, I had told myself it was just an annual ritual, a gesture of civility from a man of his stature and my maker. But the visits had become something more. They felt like reminders, warnings that I had yet to fully understand. Yet I had fulfilled my part of the bargain.

The more I achieved, the stronger the pull. Something had been set in motion that I couldn't stop, something beyond my control. I had the success I wanted, but I was beginning to feel the price in ways I hadn't before. The whispers were louder now, harder to ignore, and Eldermoor's dark pull was a temptation I couldn't outrun.

October 31st 1897 - The Tremor in My Soul.

It started quietly, like a small shift in the air, something I couldn't put my finger on. I had been working late, the familiar rhythm of my pens on paper grounding me, yet there was something off... an undercurrent, a strange tension that seemed to hum beneath the surface. It was as if I wasn't alone in the room anymore.

I woke suddenly from a dream I couldn't remember, my heart racing, sweat clinging to my skin as though I had run a marathon. The room was still, suffocatingly so, and yet something lingered in the air... a presence that was not mine. It felt as if the walls themselves were whispering to me, but when I tried to listen, the words slipped away like smoke. I reached for my journal as if it could offer comfort, but what I found inside made my blood run cold. There, written in my hand, was a phrase I had no recollection of writing. It was simple, chilling:

"The key is hidden beneath the ashes."

I stared at the words, a sickening realization creeping in. It wasn't just the words that unsettled me, it was the name that followed them. Alistair. I had never written his name before. He had never been more than a passing thought, a shadow in the back of my mind. But now his name was on the page, inked in a script that was unmistakably mine. I couldn't explain how it got there, but the connection was undeniable.

I had been warned, no, guided, in ways I hadn't fully understood. This wasn't a mere coincidence. This was a message. As I sat there in the dim light of my candle, the realization struck with brutal clarity: Alistair was more than just a figure in my past. He was here, now, in ways I could never have anticipated. His influence was creeping into every corner of my life, and I didn't know how to stop it.

November 2nd. Returning to Eldermoor Hall

It had been years. Ten years since I left Eldermoor Hall, I promised myself I would never return. And yet, here I was, standing at the gates once more. The estate loomed before me. Its sprawling grounds were as glorious as ever. The peacocks roamed freely, and the female servants, dressed in white as always, moved about their duties with quiet efficiency. One of them waved to me from a row of beehives and jogged over as I waited at the gate.

Approaching she took off her beekeeping hood and shook out her blonde hair. Without saying a word, she unlocked the side gate and ushered me over the threshold with a loving hug. I crunched my way up the gravel driveway as more servants waved hello.

I had come back not for answers, but because something within me knew that I had no choice. The vial of blood I gave Alistair had a spell on it. It had turned out to be more than just a relic of my past. It was a key, an object of power that now seemed to pulse with a faint, unnatural energy. It was almost like a cosmic alarm that had called me here. I hoped Alistair was okay.

Alistair greeted me at the front door, holding the red velvet case with the vial inside. It had been crushed and black scorch marks had tarnished the fabric.

'One of my new trainees,' Alistair began, a slight tremor to his voice. 'An accident. How did you know to come? It only happened last night.'

He handed me the box. I opened it and picked up the fragments, convinced they were useless, but now I knew better. The blood had coagulated long ago. I had come to find what remained of the life I had abandoned, to seek out what lay beyond the pages I had written.

He stood in the centre of the library as though nothing had changed. His appearance, as immaculate as ever, seemed untouched by the years. He looked exactly as he had the last time I saw him, a man whose agelessness made the passing of time irrelevant. He was a figure carved from stone, an entity that existed beyond the bounds of normal human life. And I, well, I had aged, just enough for the difference to matter.

The realization struck me like a bolt of lightning: I was no longer just a woman who had strayed too far. I am a part of this place now. Whatever had drawn me back, whatever influence Alistair held over me, was far deeper and darker than I could have imagined.

I could feel it, something settling around me, as though the years I'd spent away were suddenly nothing more than a dream. I could feel the weight of time lifting as if the very earth beneath my feet had recognized my return and set everything back in place. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end, and I knew that Eldermoor Hall was not a place where time was governed by human rules. It had its rhythm, its own strange, cruel sense of permanence.

Alistair's unblinking gaze met mine, and a small smile curled on his lips as if he knew exactly what I was thinking. The chill in the air deepened. I had come back for answers, but I had a sinking feeling I was about to uncover far more than I had bargained for.

'You wish to return to normality, don't you,' he said, 'I see it in your eyes. Let me guess. The first five years were a laugh riot. The next two were banal at best. The last three years were repetitive. Even with my annual visits to brighten your day.' He chuckled, 'Well?'

I stammered at first but found the words, 'Yes, master. I seek an audience with…Him.'

He gave a gentle bow, 'Stay here tonight. I'll prepare a room for you. I would give you your old room but the last trainee, well, let's just say he tried to practice the wrong spell at the wrong time without supervision and…' he shuddered. 'The servants are still finding pieces of him in the cracks.'

I stifled a laugh but bowed back. 'I'll happily stay, master. And The Nullification Covenant? When can we proceed?'

'Midnight tomorrow.'

Inwardly I prayed it would allow me freedom. But I fully understood who that prayer would go to. And he was the Lord of Lies.

November 3rd. The Nullification Covenant

I attended The Nullification Covenant as instructed. The summoning room had changed significantly. Dried blood and scorch marks marred every surface, left and right, above and below. The ceremony was long, and I felt like I was on trial. Marbas poured his scorn upon me and Alistair equally. I left the room a dishevelled wreck and not entirely free.

Marbas had commanded me to write. But not just any story, my story, the one that had shaped me, had shaped this life. Yet there was one crucial command I could never ignore: never, under any circumstances, should it be published. It wasn't a warning, it was a curse, a chain wrapped around my soul. But at least I had my mortal soul back. Mostly. And, with some guilty pleasure, I was allowed to keep what I had left. My home. My wealth. My luxury.

However, as I say, I did not have my souls entirely back. I was not one hundred percent free. There was still a part of my soul on a notary from Marbas.

When I returned home the following day, I drank heavily, pondering the immortal words soon to come, the very ones I had lived through with Alistair. The diary began as instructed: a simple reflection of the path I had taken to Eldermoor Hall, and my experiences there. But from the first stroke of the pen, I knew there was no turning back. I felt as if I had let down my master, and his master too.

Each entry felt like an anchor, pulling me deeper into the abyss. As the days turned to weeks, and weeks into months, I could feel the weight of the words. A weight that no longer felt human. The story, this diary, it had become something else, something far beyond me. A record of everything I had gained and everything I was about to lose. A diary, yes, but one that would never see the light of day. Its pages were stained with my fears, my regrets, and the dark, inescapable truth of the pact I had made.

You are reading it now.

I tried to stop. I tried to burn the pages, tear them to pieces, and scatter the remnants in the wind. But always, always, they found their way back to me. It was as if the book, the diary, had a life of its own, an insidious, unbreakable grip that only tightened with time. And now, I realized, the words were not just my own. They were an offering, a key to unlocking something darker. Designed to pull others like you into the same spiral of fate I had once stood upon. The cryptic foreshadowing, the unsettling details in the margins… they were all there. They are all here.

And then, the visitors came. Alistair, ever watchful, sent them. Those who had been marked, those with the right potential. I would meet them, and tell them of this diary, just as Anabelle had once lured me to Alistair. They would find the manuscript, drawn by some unseen force. I would watch them read. I could see the exact moment it clicked. The moment they understood and knew that they were no longer in control. The moment their fate became sealed, as mine had. They were ready. And I would set up a meeting here, in my home, where you are now.

I am watching you read this. I can see every emotion on your face as you turn the pages, forever pulled by the need to have your passion fulfilled. Your face lights up with a strange, knowing look. You are so eager, so sure that you are about to uncover something extraordinary. But I know. I know that you may be about to lose. Your life will never be the same. The words are doing their work. Their magic.

I have guided another soul to the edge of the abyss. And there is no turning back.

You feel the pull, don't you? Hoping you can get out of it, as I did. But trust me when I say, that The Lord of Lies has probably changed the rules by now. But go on... give it a try.

The final warning

You stand at the threshold, on the very cusp of knowing. Every secret in these pages, every step you have taken lead to this moment. If you wish to grasp the power that others only dream of, then the door is now open to you. Do not be fooled into turning away. The key to the future you seek lies here, within these words. Take it. But know this, once you cross this line, there is no return. If you desire the knowledge, the power, the glory, then the price is already paid. The question is, will you claim what is yours, or leave it to rot in the dark?

Choose carefully. The abyss calls.

Addendum by Alistair Devlin.

My name is not Alistair Devlin, however, my initials are the same. You will not find me, I will find you through the network of familiars who embrace my vision. We hope you enjoyed this diary penned by my wonderful friend Eleanor B. If you wish to join us and attain what you desire just wait patiently. Your thoughts will reach out to us. I will reach out in return.

Yours faithfully,

A. D.

The Binding of the Vault Unseen

The spell I used to seal the red velvet box:

"By the dust of ages and the breath of the forgotten, I seal thee."

Incantation:

‘Yh’guath var’thok, ekthar ulnoth q’resh.

(By chains of shadow, by a whisper of death. Thy maw be closed, thy will be still, No hand nor eye shall break this seal.)

Instructions:

Speak the words over the box while tracing an inverted sigil upon its surface. Drip a single drop of ink (or blood, for permanence) upon the lock. Press both palms flat against the lid and exhale slowly. The box is now bound. Only the speaker may undo it with the reversal incantation.

To Unlock:

‘Q’resh ulnoth ekthar var’thok Yh’guath.’

The Rhyming Spell for the Transfer of Souls:

Whispered winds, and blood so cold,

In the darkness deep, the tale is told.

A soul to give, a soul to take,

One must stand, the other must break.

In shadows cast, the price is paid,

The pact is sealed, no soul can fade.

With fire and flame, the door shall close,

But not for you, until the debt grows.

To take the deal, to give the curse,

A soul must wander, even worse.

The cycle spins, the price must fall,

For only one can break the call.

Blood for blood, and life for life,

The contract stays, with endless strife.

But find another, one to claim,

And pass the curse, to end the flame.