

Sick World

Part I: Awakening

by
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The beast sank into pleasure
There, it found serenity and a truth that lay beyond its understanding

Andrew Blake – Sick World

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Prologue

From the very dawn of consciousness, a dark veil is woven around the soul—a silent threat nesting within the depths of existence. You are born bearing the seed of an unknown transgression, rooted deep in the foundations of the self. Yet, the true eruption, the revelation of the sleeping beast, is sealed by a fatal act: a sin so heavy it fractures the brittle crust of human nature and unleashes the creature in all its terrifying majesty.

Whether a legacy of a shadowed past or the consequence of an unthinkable breach of sacred boundaries, a beast finds sanctuary within you: an ever-expanding shadow threatening to swallow the light. It waits patiently, like a creature of the night coiled in the most hidden corners of the soul—an ethereal phantom that avoids notice and shuns revelation, yet lurks ever-watchful, with eyes that pierce the dark. Days that flow like centuries and months that pile into years of feigned serenity pass upon the surface of life; however, in the bowels of being, the machinery of monstrosity is slowly primed, ready to ignite.

It cannot remain dormant forever, condemned to non-existence. It waits patiently for the slightest crack in the defenses of reason, for that vulnerable moment when the light of consciousness wanes and the shadows thicken like menacing tentacles, so that it may finally surface and reveal its true, gruesome form.

And when the moment arrives, when the shackles of repression break with a violent, liberating momentum, reason shatters like crystal falling onto hard ground. Savage, primal instincts seize control, overwhelming every vestige of humanity. Familiar reality becomes distorted, transforming into a nightmarish labyrinth where moral codes collapse, and the sense of right and wrong fades into a pale, distant memory.

Then, the beast wedged within your heart emerges as the undisputed sovereign. It dictates every action, it makes every decision, it carves the path toward destruction. You are nothing but the wretched host, a hollow shell subjugated to its perverted appetites. Your only mission is to sate its insatiable hunger, to offer sacrifices upon the bloodthirsty altar of its monstrous nature, committing acts so unthinkable they shall haunt your existence forever.

Chapter 1

In the Beginning was the Beast

The scalpel approaches slowly and agonizingly, like a predator poised to devour the genitals of the defenseless man. The victim, roughly fifty years old, is bound tightly on his back, naked upon a surgical table; he is of average height, overweight, with graying temples. His sparse front teeth, combined with coarse facial features shrouded by a thick beard, create the deceptive impression of a primitive human—a figure clawed from the depths of prehistory, a Neanderthal lost in an era where he does not belong. Yet, this initial impression is subverted by the hairless body, the soft skin, the manicured nails, and the meticulously trimmed hair, all revealing a man devoted to grooming and perfection.

“What are you doing?” the man shrieked. “Do you know who I am? Don’t you dare. You’ll regret this, you fucking bitch! No, no... Why are you doing this to me? What have I done to you? Please, have mercy. I have two young children. I’ll give you anything you want.”

An enigmatic and threatening figure stands directly over him. The full-body black suit enveloping the form and the mask covering the head conceal every possible hint of identity. The figure wears surgical gloves and nylon shoe covers, identical to those used by surgeons. From appearance alone, one cannot discern if this is a man or a woman, a human or some other incomprehensible being that has trapped its victim in this living nightmare. Only a faint suspicion of breasts hints at a possible female nature.

“Is it possible she’s a woman?”

The thought flashes through the man’s mind like lightning as a paradoxical sense of terror overwhelms him. He is at the mercy of a ruthless creature, and though he ignores its identity, a certainty spreads within him like a shadow regarding the reason he has been led to this dark basement.

Despite the harrowing pleas tearing through the air and the desperate entreaties pouring from the man’s mouth, the uncanny being remains unmoved and indifferent, focused on the painful act about to follow. In reality, what is happening bears little resemblance to a medical procedure. There is no anesthesia, the space is no operating theater, no Hippocratic Oath binds the perpetrator, and, naturally, the consent of the individual undergoing this “care” is non-existent.

The dark figure, a surgical scalpel glinting in its right hand, immobilizes the victim’s genitals with the left. It pulls them with force, revealing a small, hidden tattoo in the shape of a Crescent. After a momentary pause, the decision is made: the incision will begin from that very spot.

Sobs of supplication, heart-wrenching cries for help, and immediately following, screams pierce the air as the steel blade carves the skin in the sensitive area. However, no

sound can penetrate the thick, concrete walls of the isolated basement. No one in the outside world can hear a thing. And no one can suspect the unimaginable acts unfolding within.

The cold steel sinks into the flesh. The first blood makes its appearance, initially forming thin red lines on the skin before spreading across the surgical table. Then, it flows through the grooves and collects in the drainage basin. The victim struggles to resist, but the straps restraining his naked body to the table leave him no room for movement. He is doomed; he knows it well, and there is nothing he can do about it.

The movements of the alleged surgeon are slow, almost ritualistic, as if mastering time itself, unbothered by haste. The scalpel sinks deeper and deeper, and blood now stains everything around. Yet, the largest amount ends up, ironically, on the victim and the victimizer. Nothing troubles the figure; nothing distracts its devotion. The absolute focus, the methodical nature, and the frozen composure with which this heinous act is executed testify to a series of repetitions—a plan carried out with morbid precision. Nothing has been left to chance; everything has been meticulously foreseen.

In one hand, the figure grips the surgical scalpel, while in the other now hangs the penis just removed from the castrated man. It is raised slowly, brought to the level of the victim's eyes. Then, it is moved closer and closer to his face. He, with a gaze full of horror, turns his head and clamps his eyelids shut, denying himself the sight of the bloody piece of flesh. His capacity for screaming has finally been exhausted.

Terror and fear, two sides of the same conceptual coin, are kindred emotions inextricably linked to the perception of a threat. While fear stems from the recognition of a specific danger, real or potential, terror represents the climax—its most extreme and paralyzing manifestation. The only certainty is that at this moment, the unfortunate man is experiencing these emotions in their most intense form, faced with a threat that is anything but ambiguous.

Horror, agony, and finally the mercy of unconsciousness. The cries and screams fall silent, while from the background, a subtle melody by Johann Strauss II slowly emerges. The perpetrator murmurs tender words, stroking the man's forehead affectionately:

“Did you finish so soon, baby?”

The soft female voice, a brief whispered parenthesis, is lost in the abyss of the victim's fainting spell.

Her movements are no longer ritualistic, but much faster and sharper. She leaves the scalpel on the auxiliary rolling tray beside her and takes from there a large glass jar, half-filled with a light green liquid. She submerges the severed member into the liquid, and a metal cap immediately seals the contents. She places the jar on the counter slightly behind her. Her attention turns to the bleeding. She stitches the skin, administers injections, sets up an IV, and connects a vital signs monitor. She checks the device, and when satisfied that all is well, she leans slightly over the man and monologues again in a whisper, almost amorously, into his ear:

“There now, sleep my love, rest. Tomorrow a difficult day awaits you.”

Then, without the slightest haste, she heads toward the back wall. A discrete click is heard, and the entire space is flooded with light.

The basement, a vast open space, is now bathed in light from large fluorescent ceiling fixtures. Previously, only the central area with the surgical table was lit. Now, however, all the lights have been turned on, transforming the dark basement into a stark white chamber.

The side walls and the floor, clad in white tiles, create a sense of absolute cleanliness, almost sterilization. On the ceiling, besides the lights and ventilation grilles, an electric hoist-crane with pulleys dominates the space directly above the surgical table. Behind the surgical table, a small kitchen is visible. The sink, faucet, and cabinets, though well-maintained, evoke faded memories—whispers of another era, perhaps the seventies or eighties. Conversely, the refrigerator and washing machine, placed to the left and right of the kitchen, testify to a clearly more modern construction.

On the left wall of the kitchen, a low piece of furniture houses a turntable, while directly above it sits a shelf full of records. In front of the turntable, a brown leather armchair and a small table form a peculiar nook. A tall floor lamp behind the armchair completes the set. This strange composition refers to the aesthetics of the sixties, in stark contrast to the atmosphere of the rest of the space. In the upper corner of the wall stands a wooden wardrobe, while in the lower corner, three rows of shelves are filled with various small items.

On the right wall, opposite the kitchen, a large white workbench dominates the center, flanked by two rows of floating shelves. To its left, an imposing iron cabinet, tall and sturdy, extends the full height of the wall, reaching the ceiling. To the right of the bench, built-in, is a fairly large cremation furnace.

The basement has one entrance: a massive iron door on the south wall, directly opposite the kitchen. Its heavy construction, with a sturdy handle and a circular security lock, isolates it completely from the rest of the space, resembling a vault more than a simple entrance. On its left side, six small closed-circuit monitors remain silent, while beneath them, a red button, protected by a plastic cover, waits. Though currently deactivated, it is clear they are there for a specific reason. Every detail in this isolated basement seems to have its own dark purpose for existing.

Right next to the door stands a breathtaking motorcycle, imposing like a wild beast in wait: the 2015 Ducati Multistrada 1200 Black. The black finish dominates every detail, from the frame and suspension to the engine and rims, granting it a rugged and muscular appearance. The front end stands out with its large LED headlight and dual daytime running lights. Without a doubt, this two-wheeler is an ideal choice not only for riders seeking a comfortable and safe ride but also for those wishing to move at their limits, facing any challenge found in their path.

The woman scans the space with her gaze for a few seconds and immediately begins her work. She starts by cleaning the blood from the victim first, then from the surgical table. Next, she empties the collection basin into the sink, washes it meticulously, and places it back under the table. The rolling cart follows, and then the floor. Throughout the cleaning, her movements are slow, steady, and full of internal discipline, precluding any haste or deviation from the ultimate goal. She leaves the kitchen area and the sink for last. Having completed these, she inspects the space thoroughly. With the exception of the mutilated body of the man on the surgical table, nothing betrays what transpired moments earlier in this isolated basement.

Once she is certain no loose ends remain, she approaches the switch again and turns off most of the lights, leaving only those illuminating the surgical table. The basement plunges back into darkness. She removes the mask, the gloves, the nylon shoe covers, and the bodysuit. The gloves and shoe covers end up in the trash bin, while she places the suit and mask in the washing machine and starts the wash cycle immediately. Her final move is to put on a pair of gray rubber slippers waiting for her next to the machine.

She goes to the refrigerator, opens the door, and takes out a cold beer. For a moment, she presses it gently against her right cheek. Then, with a slow and steady pace, she heads toward the leather armchair. On her way, she passes by the illuminated surgical table, and as the white light falls upon her naked body, a shapely silhouette emerges from the shadows. Her skin, white and flawless, is devoid of any visible mark or tattoo. Despite her slender build, a hidden strength is discernible—an athletic body sculpted into a harmonious assembly of muscles and curves. She continues with a steady gait, defying the darkness, appearing to know the space perfectly.

She approaches the leather armchair and, with a soft movement, lets her body sink into the plush seat. She stretches her left hand back in a blind search accompanied by a slight lift of her torso. Her fingers meet the small switch of the lamp. A characteristic click is heard, and a faint light spreads over her and the immediate area around her. On the surface of the small table, a pack of cigarettes, a matchbox, an empty ashtray, and a black mobile phone stand out.

She opens the beer, closes her eyes, and surrenders to the characteristic effervescence of the drink in the aluminum can. Then, she brings the cool metal gently to her lips. With a discrete tilt of her head, she lets the refreshing drink flow into her mouth. She turns up the music slightly. Afterwards, she lights a cigarette and, with slow, almost languid movements, lets the slippers slide from her feet to the floor. She pulls her legs up and, with her body now in a familiar fetal position, surrenders further into the embrace of the armchair.

The woman immersed in the armchair, smoke veiling her naked body under the half-light. The unconscious man, motionless on the surgical table. And between them, a dark, vast void. Only a strange composition—the sensual melancholy of a Manet meeting the

sharp, cynical lines of a Lichtenstein—could capture the atmosphere of this dark, isolated space.

She lets a second gulp roll down her throat, her gaze fixed on the body upon the surgical table. A faint smile forms on her lips, whispering softly for the third time:

“To us, my love. To the moments we shall live, until death do us part.”

The beer can was empty. A second cigarette followed the first, and the time for departure arrived. She puts her slippers back on, rises from the armchair, and turns off the music. With her right hand, she grabs the phone and the empty beer can from the table, while with her left, she switches off the lamp.

Just before reaching the small kitchen, she tosses the empty can into the bin and approaches the surgical table. She activates her phone, and the flash momentarily illuminates the victim. She checks the photo she just took, locks the phone, and holds it in her left hand.

She returns to the kitchen. She stands silently before the sink. Her right hand begins to methodically rotate the two faucets. Left, then right—an alternating motion, as if unlocking the secret combination of a safe. After a moment, she stops. A faint click is heard, and she takes a step back. The process is complete.

And then, the kitchen begins to transform. The cabinets, as if obeying an invisible command, split in two, revealing a dark void. The sink rises slowly, as if yielding its place to something else unknown. And finally, the familiar tiled wall opens in the middle, revealing a secret entrance.

Before vanishing inside, her hand touches a switch. The cold lights over the surgical table go out, plunging the hall into darkness. Now, the only source of light comes from the depths of the secret entrance, beckoning her inside.

The entrance leads to a small anteroom. Directly opposite the secret passage, a large metal elevator dominates—an old construction that nonetheless retains its sturdiness and durability. On the side walls, left and right, two doors are visible. As soon as she steps into the anteroom, she presses a red button on the right wall, and the entrance behind her begins to close with a muffled thud. Upon the completion of the process and the hermetic sealing, her gaze turns to the left door. She opens it, revealing yet another dark space.

With a nervous click of the switch, the somber void retreats to reveal a spacious room. Directly across from the door sits a wooden desk with three drawers on its right side. A laptop, a mouse, a pencil holder, and scattered papers cover its surface. At the edge of the desk, a large glass ashtray, a pack of cigarettes, and a lighter are visible. A large corkboard, deep red in color, occupies almost the entire wall behind the desk. On it, pinned with small tacks, are newspaper clippings and photographs of personal moments, all sharing a common subject: Lieutenant David O’Neil. The scene is completed by a black leather swivel chair.

On the wall to the right of the desk is a metal bookshelf with four shelves, where cardboard boxes full of files are placed. On the opposite wall stands an identical metal bookshelf, yet with entirely different contents. On its shelves are diligently arranged two black motorcycle helmets, a sniper rifle with a silencer, a light machine gun with a night vision scope, two pistols with magazines, a crossbow, a tranquilizer dart gun, various hunting knives, a camera, two digital cameras, a remote audio enhancement device, and other electronic gadgets reminiscent of spy film gear. Finally, next to the door is a large wooden wardrobe.

With a silent step, the woman proceeds toward the desk. She places her phone on the surface and sits in the armchair. Without delay, she powers on the computer. Then, she opens the first drawer, takes a cable, and connects one end to the computer and the other to the phone. A digital bridge now links the two devices. The file transfer from the phone to the computer begins and is completed in less than five seconds. All four photographs are now stored on the computer's hard drive.

She opens the first photograph, and the castrated man appears on the basement surgical table. She closes it and moves to the next. In the second photo, a man, roughly 35 years old with short dark hair and an athletic build, lies on his back on dirt ground that resembles a forest. Despite his condition, a gray suit, white shirt, and black tie are visible. The bullet hole on the left side of his forehead, the bleeding, and the empty, deathly stare leave no room for doubt: the individual has been shot and is no longer alive. The second photo closes, and the third comes to the fore.

Paradoxically, it reproduces exactly the same macabre scene. Only the man's face and body posture differ. Again, a man aged about 35, lying on his back on the same ground, in a blue suit. The bullet hole and the amount of blood, identical to the previous photo, indicate they were shot in exactly the same manner. The same deathly stare and, naturally, the same total lack of life is evident. Then, she goes to the last photograph. She opens it, and the sight of the image is far more chilling and heinous than the previous three.

For the third time, a corpse lies on the same ground. However, the similarities with the previous cases end here. The victim is a young woman with a shapely body and short, blonde bobbed hair. Her nakedness and the marks on her body indicate a martyr's death. Her face, distorted by blows, makes any attempt at identification impossible. Scattered knife wounds cover nearly the entire surface of her body. From the abdominal area up to above the chest, a significant amount of skin has been removed, forming a crescent shape. A significant detail is the absence of any drop of blood, a fact stating that the unfortunate woman took her last breath elsewhere, quite some time ago. She closes the window with the last photograph, selects all the images, and moves them to a folder named "Peter Levinston."

The file transfer is completed instantly, in less than a second. Immediately after, she connects to the Tor network, a web browser that ensures user anonymity. She types a website address, hits "Enter," and is taken to the desired page. There, a username and

password are requested. In the username field, she types “Heriyur,” while eight asterisks appear in the password field. With a click on “Login,” she is taken to a page providing anonymous communication. Among the profiles appearing on the screen, she searches for a specific individual and, after a few seconds, locates him. The profile name is “Abaddon.” She double-clicks the profile, opening a dialog box that requests a password again. This time, six asterisks appear. She hits “Enter” and begins a private chat with that person.

Initially, she sends the four photographs she just saved on the computer. Then, she types a message:

“Everything is fine. I have the Senator.”

She waits with her gaze fixed on the black computer screen. The cursor blinks. After a while, it begins to move to the right, leaving behind letters which very quickly form meaningful words. Within a few seconds, the sentence has appeared:

“Perfect! Once again, you did wonderfully. Talk to you soon, Heriyur.”

That was it. The woman closes the page and shuts down the computer. She leaves the phone on the desk and plugs it into the power. She rises from the chair and heads toward the exit. Before leaving, she turns off the light by pressing the switch. Whatever she had to do in that room is now finished. The door closes behind her, and she is back in the anteroom. She goes quickly to the opposite door and opens it.

A vast bathroom, with bright to excessive lighting, spreads before her. In the space, a toilet, a sink, and a spacious shower cabin are visible. The toilet and sink, along with their cabinets, betray their age, in contrast to the modern appearance of the shower cabin.

Before stepping into the shower, she takes off the gray slippers and leaves them next to a pair of black rubber slippers already there. She begins the meticulous cleaning process. Not so much for blood—as with the suit, gloves, and mask, there isn't a trace on her—but for the minute amount of the victim's genetic material that could have adhered to her skin. She successively uses different brushes, depending on the area of her body.

Once she finishes cleaning, she exits the shower. She puts on the black slippers and stands motionless before the sink. Above it, on the wall, a large mirror is mounted. She slowly raises her head, and her gaze meets the gaze of the girl appearing in the reflection. Time freezes for a long while as the woman and her image stand entirely still, as if hypnotized by their mutual stare.

Two thousand years ago, Aristotle in *Magna Moralia* expressed the view that it is impossible to see oneself without a mirror. Years later, Seneca added that mirrors were invented so that man might know himself. However, recent research in cognitive psychology and neuroscience argues that people often tend to slightly distort or even completely warp the image of themselves they encounter in the mirror.

Thus, no one can say with certainty what truly holds, nor know what the young woman beholds at this moment. What image emerges from the depths of the mirror, and what dance of thoughts begins to swirl in her mind? The answer remains hidden in the

depths of the human soul, an eternal question echoing silently in the abyss of our very existence.

If a third party could behold the image appearing, they would see Amelia Ripley, a woman of thirty years and average height. Her skin is smooth and pale, with a perfect, almost porcelain texture, discreetly interrupted by a rosy hue on her cheeks. Her large, bright brown eyes captivate with a magical shade and a particular expressiveness that exudes a mysterious allure. Long eyelashes frame her gaze, adding depth and a sense of determination. Well-shaped, slightly arched eyebrows harmoniously complete the look, intensifying the expressiveness of her eyes. Her lips—soft, rosy, and naturally shaped—are enticing yet accessible. Her short, dyed dark black hair creates a sharp contrast with her light skin, highlighting her facial features, drawing attention to her expressive eyes and delicate cheekbones. A small detail is the “evil eye” shaped earring in her left ear. Overall, Amelia's face is a harmonious combination of fine lines, expressive eyes, natural radiance, and soft curves. It exudes simultaneously a sense of innocence, fragility, ethereal beauty, and dark mystery. Yet, what captivates most is her otherworldly gaze, deep and absorbed in the mirror's reflection.

Her eyelids close, and after a few seconds, they open again. A nervous, spasmodic movement follows, similar to the one we make when waking abruptly from a nightmare. Her gaze and facial expression have now changed. Calm and serenity have returned. Whatever emotions and thoughts existed moments ago have now vanished. She begins to move.

She extends her right hand and feels the soft texture of the towel hanging next to the steaming mirror. She carefully dries her damp skin and wet hair. She leaves the bathroom steam behind and heads toward the silver elevator door. But she stops halfway down the corridor. She has forgotten something. She returns to the bathroom, changes her slippers, exits, and with determination presses the red button. A muffled noise is heard, and a section of the wall begins to open.

She forgot the jar with the genitals. She opens the refrigerator and places it on the third shelf, next to a similar jar containing four thumbs. She closes the door and heads toward the exit again. She enters the shower and repeats the cleaning process. After finishing, she exits the bathroom and enters the elevator. Inside, there are two white buttons, one below the other. She presses the top button, and the elevator begins its ascent. After a few seconds, it stops. Another small anteroom appears.

On the side wall are nine small closed-circuit television monitors. With the turn of a switch, the monitors activate, displaying the interior of a house. She checks them meticulously. Then, she presses a small red button, similar to the one at the previous entrance. Immediately, the wall begins to open, revealing yet another basement.

Its interior is flooded by the silent presence of old furniture, covered by a thin veil of dust. A solitary ceiling light barely dispels the thick darkness. The furniture, heterogeneous

in style and era, testifies to past decades: tall chairs with ornate arms, tables with graceful curves, and sofas with worn, soft covers. In a shadowy corner, a silent piano stands, its strings long since mute. In the basement, shadows dominate, revealing the rough texture of rotted wood and the heavy, damp smell of mold. It is a space forgotten by time, a silent guardian of stories that will never be heard.

Immediately upon entering, she heads toward an imposing, old wooden pendulum clock, firmly positioned on the central column. She carefully opens the front door and methodically adjusts the hands. A discreet click, like the whisper of a secret being revealed, marks the change. Immediately after, the wall behind her seals silently as a large, old boiler moves slowly to the right.

Observing the wall, no one could imagine the secret discreetly hidden on its other side. Correspondingly, looking at Amelia, no one—absolutely no one—could suspect the horrific acts she committed moments earlier. Two worlds diligently hidden, one behind stone and the other behind an impenetrable gaze, conspire in the same silent concealment.

Next to the imposing clock hangs a long white robe, while directly beneath, a pair of soft pink cloth slippers waits patiently. She covers her naked body with the robe. She puts on the pink slippers, leaving the black ones in their place, and climbs the wooden stairs of the basement with slow but steady steps, leading silently into the main house.

Chapter 2

Unpleasant Complications

“Drop the weapon and surrender! You have nowhere to go!” The sharp, commanding orders of the officers met only silence from the perpetrator.

With the police cordon tightening like a noose, the man holding a woman hostage found himself cornered, his gun pressed against her life. The standoff unfolded in the dim, bleak room of a cheap hotel, where a low red light cast an unsettling glow. In the center of the space sat a heart-shaped double bed; its pink, faded sheets and pillows stood as silent witnesses to countless fleeting nights.

In the corner, a television droned on, playing adult films—tales of forbidden pleasures providing an ironic contrast to the tragedy unfolding in the room. The floor was covered in a worn, stained brown carpet. The solitary window, muffled by a thick, heavy red curtain, severed all connection to the outside world, trapping one’s gaze within. On the far side, a simple table flanked by two cheap chairs stood in silence. Upon it, a glass ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts bore witness to the tension and agony weighing on the air. Heavy and stifling, the atmosphere was a morbid cocktail of sweat and smoke that choked every trace of hope. Every object in this room screamed of transience—the ephemeral nature of encounters that bloom and wither here. In such a place, no one stays for more than a few hours. It is a place of secrets, stories that no one would ever want to see the light of day.

The small-framed man held the woman in a vice-like grip. His left arm pinned her down while his right hand pressed a revolver against her temple. He had cocked the hammer; he looked ready to fire. The assailant, roughly forty years old, possessed harsh features: brown hair, dull black eyes, and a thin, scraggly beard. Silver hoops in his ears and numerous tattoos snaking across his skin completed the image.

The victim, a blonde woman in her thirties with long hair that might have been a wig, was provocatively dressed. Her plunging neckline left almost nothing to the imagination, while a miniscule skirt barely covered the essentials. Yet, beneath this flamboyant exterior was an undercover police officer. For months, she had been working as an operative, her current mission—coordinated with her team—aimed at tracking down and capturing a serial killer of sex workers.

After persistent efforts, they had managed to lure the perpetrator, using her as bait. However, the execution of the plan had spiraled out of control.

“I’m innocent!” the man screamed, overcome by desperation, cold sweat drenching his brow. “I didn’t kill those whores. They set me up. I just wanted some fun. You’re all in on it—especially this bitch who played me. I’ll kill the filth; I’ll kill her and anyone else

who comes near me. Come on then, you fucking bastards! Come and see who wants to die first!”

The officers kept a safe distance, knowing the man would not go quietly. Instead, he would likely kill the woman and as many officers as he could before being neutralized.

“Listen to me,” said the trapped officer, her voice a desperate attempt to de-escalate the situation. “They won't hurt you. We can find a solution where no one gets hurt.”

“Shut up, you whore!” he shot back instantly. “This is all your fault. I'll kill you, then I'll fuck your dead cunt, and then I'll kill you again and again.” Her words acted as a catalyst, stoking his rage to a fever pitch.

“No one is fucking anyone today in this room, and more importantly, no one is killing anyone. From here on out, I'm taking over.”

From the dark depths of the room, a voice emerged, forcing every eye to turn toward its source. Slowly, out of the dim shadows, a figure materialized. His hands were raised as he approached with a limp—an excruciatingly slow, agonizing movement.

Around thirty-five years old, tall—well over six feet—the man appeared in a simple grey suit. His face was chiseled with high cheekbones and a decisive jawline. His dark, hollowed eyes, framed by a distant and detached gaze, revealed an enigmatic blend of brown and green. A smooth, slightly prominent forehead gave way to thick brows, while ruffled brown hair topped off his appearance. His gait betrayed a clear physical impairment. In one hand, he clutched a police badge; in the other, a pair of handcuffs.

“Who the fuck are you now?” the perpetrator shrieked, the barrel of the gun pressing more menacingly into the woman's skull.

“I am Lieutenant David O'Neil,” the man replied.

“We don't give a shit what your name is!” the man yelled, leveling the gun at him. “Take one more step and I'll blow your brains out.”

David stopped moving.

The assailant continued: “Get back with the other pricks so I can see you better. If you try any bullshit, I'll take a few of you with me before you put me down.”

“There won't be any 'bullshit,' and no one is putting anyone down. That's why I'm here,” David said, taking a few steps back. He then turned to the other officers in the room: “As I mentioned, the responsibility is now mine. Everyone lower your weapons and move away from the suspect and the hostage.”

“You hear your boss, you fuckers?” the perpetrator shouted at the officers. “Lower the guns like good little bitches.”

Resentment was etched on the officers' faces as they heard their superior's orders. Yet, their respect for the man standing before them compelled silent obedience. Without a word, they lowered their weapons and retreated several paces.

David focused his gaze on the strange pair and then addressed the woman: “Detective, are you alright?”

“I’m holding up, Lieutenant... at least for now.” Her voice was barely audible, a faint murmur betraying absolute exhaustion.

“Shut your trap, you bitch! Don't speak again or I'll splatter your brains.” The man’s words tightened the already strained atmosphere. “Another fucking cop? Weren't the others enough? Now they’re sending cripples? Don't come closer or I’ll put you in a wheelchair for good.”

David retreated slowly once more, fixing his attention on the man. “I am Lieutenant David O’Neil, and I am in charge of negotiations. Every decision will be made by me. For the duration of this hostage situation, I answer to no one: not the commander, not the chief, not even the fucking President. Everything depends on me.”

“Bullshit everything depends on you,” the man spat. “You forgetting who’s holding the fucking gun? I’ll fuck you all up before you can do a thing.”

David, his eyes locked onto the perpetrator's, continued to speak steadily. His voice, slow and clear, created the illusion that only the two of them were in the room: “Listen to me carefully. The decision you make in the next few seconds will define the rest of your life. First, I want to be clear about why I am here. All the other officers are here to arrest you or kill you. I am here only for the hostage. Personally, I don't give a damn about you. Second, I know you won't let her go unless you’re sure you can escape. And third, I am completely unarmed.”

Finishing his sentence, David slowly lifted his jacket and, with visible effort, made a full turn so the man could see he carried no weapon.

“But I didn't do anything! Do you hear me? I’m innocent!” the man cried out, his voice thick with despair. “This is all a lie! A frame-up! I can't go back to prison. I’d rather die than be locked up again.”

His voice trembled, revealing a man on the edge, capable of anything. David softened his tone, seeking to soothe him: “Given your distrust of our judicial system, I won't suggest you surrender and leave your fate to the courts.”

“The fucking lawyers and judges fucked me once already!” the man shouted. “If they catch me again, they’ll bury me inside until I die.”

“That is exactly why I am here,” David said. “My goal is to reach a mutually acceptable solution.”

The calm expression on David’s face began to have a sedative effect on the desperate man.

“Fine then. So what do we do?” The shift in the man’s voice was palpable. He had yielded, making room for a glimmer of hope in his frantic eyes. “Are you just going to let

me and this whore walk out of here like nothing happened? Because I'm not moving an inch alone with all those revolvers ready to empty their magazines into me."

"Everything in its time, no rush," David said, maintaining his tranquil tone. Then, he turned to the remaining officers: "I want all uniformed personnel to leave immediately. The last one out, close and lock the door."

Some showed blatant dissatisfaction, but David's next words brook no argument. In a stern, commanding voice, he added: "What exactly was not understood? Everyone out. Now."

The atmosphere in the room transformed. Obeying their superior, the officers retreated hesitantly, abandoning the space. The last one locked the door behind him. In the hotel hallway, confusion was written on their faces as they glanced at one another, unable to interpret what had just transpired.

"Is he completely insane?" a young officer whispered. "He stayed in there alone and unarmed? They're both going to die for sure."

"Rest assured, if anyone dies in that room, it will be the perpetrator and no one else."

The words came from Police Chief Paul Anderson, who was in the hallway coordinating the forces. Anderson was a formidable man. Standing nearly six feet seven inches with a massive frame, the marks of his long years in boxing were evident in his physique and movements. His white shirt and thick black sweater over grey trousers emphasized his muscular bulk. Though over sixty, his taut skin hid many of his years. His thick, silvering hair, large mustache, and square glasses gave him an undeniably commanding presence. He was the Chief, and that was clear at first glance.

"Now that David has taken over, we just have to stay calm and wait for the outcome."

Despite his calm, the Chief's words didn't quite convince those in the hall. To an outsider, his certainty might have suggested they were handling a routine incident rather than a critical hostage crisis with a mentally unstable killer.

Inside, David addressed the man tentatively: "Could I sit? My back is killing me, and standing is difficult."

"Do what you want," he replied curtly. "Just don't you dare come near me. You try anything, and you'll both meet your maker."

"Don't worry about that," David assured him. "Remember why I'm here." He began to move slowly to the right, toward the chair by the table.

The transformation in the perpetrator's behavior was now obvious. His confidence had returned; he was in control. The threat of armed officers was gone. In his line of sight were only the Detective and the crippled, unarmed man at a distance. David sat down and placed his badge and handcuffs on the table.

"Eddie," David began, "would you mind if I called you by your first name?"

Eddie shrugged indifferently. “Call me whatever the hell you want. Just tell me what we’re doing.”

“Now, Eddie,” David continued, “in a moment, I’m going to stand up. I’ll move quite far away, giving you space to approach the table. There, you’ll find the handcuffs...”

“You’re fucking crazy!” Eddie started screaming. “You’re an idiot if you think I’m letting you cuff me! I’ll finish you both right now! Is this your great plan to save her? By signing her death warrant?”

“Listen to me first, then decide.” With remarkable poise, David ignored the outburst and continued: “You are going to cuff the Detective, pinning her hands behind her back. I understand your safety is paramount, and the cuffs are your guarantee she won’t react until you decide to free her. In my view, in this situation, you hold the upper hand. Am I wrong? If you don’t want them, no problem, we can continue without them.”

“Sounds interesting,” Eddie muttered, unable to hide his surprise. A ray of hope began to illuminate his mind. For the first time, he thought there was a chance—not just for negotiation, but for escape.

David continued to explain: “I’ll arrange for a special patrol car, equipped with a bulletproof partition between the driver and the rear passengers. You and the Detective will sit in the back, and I will be in the front, driving. We’ll leave, and you’ll dictate the route. No one will follow us. When you decide, we’ll stop wherever you choose. You’ll open the door and leave as fast as you can. I swear on my mother’s soul, no one will dare do a thing. The hostage’s safety is my priority. And if you choose a crowded place to stop, you can be sure I won’t risk innocent lives.”

As David spoke, Eddie absorbed every word with a devotion bordering on worship. David’s phrases painted vivid pictures in Eddie’s mind. The idea of success had taken root. A new reality was born: *Yes, I can do this*. The old roles faded. David was no longer just a cop, but a beacon of salvation.

David then clarified: “In the passenger seat, there will be a shotgun and two revolvers, ready for use if you violate any term of our agreement. Eddie, let me be clear: I am not your friend. I have no positive feelings for you, nor do I trust you in the least. However, circumstances force me to deal with you. If anything happens to the Detective or anyone else, make no mistake: I will execute you in cold blood. I swear it again on my mother’s soul: I will hunt you to the darkest depths of hell. To be fair, I’m telling you now that no officer will move until you release her. But in the days that follow, they will hunt you like a dog. They won’t stop until they bury you. And I’ll be one of them. For now, though, things are as I described. Personally, I give you no more than a twenty percent chance of avoiding capture or death. Still, that’s a decent percentage. Change your name, get plastic surgery, change your gender, hide in a cave... I don’t care. But you get the chance to make that choice tomorrow. Right now, you’re the only one with nothing to lose and all the cards in your hand. It’s up to you. Or am I wrong?”

“Fine,” Eddie said, nodding, still stunned. “Get the car. Don't pull any shit, or I'll kill her in front of you and then it's your turn.”

“One step at a time,” David replied. “Are you going to cuff her, or not?”

“Even though she's shitting herself,” Eddie said, “I'd better tie the bitch up, just in case she gets any ideas.”

“Good,” David said calmly. “I shall stand and step aside, so you have the room to approach the table and apply the handcuffs. Immediately after, I will signal the officers waiting outside to prepare the vehicle. May I stand?”

Eddie confirmed with a nervous jerk of his head. David placed his right palm on the table for support and rose slowly. With small, unstable steps, he backed away until he was nearly against the wall. Eddie and the Detective began to move toward the table. The gun was glued to her head, Eddie's finger dancing on the trigger.

“Well then, Detective,” Eddie said the moment they reached the table, his voice laced with menace. “Now, put the cuffs on—slowly. And watch how you even breathe, if you want to avoid any unpleasant complications.”

The young woman, eyes wide with terror, hesitantly reached out.

David noticed the tremor in her hand. “Detective,” he said firmly. “With very slow movements, pick up the handcuffs. Place one on your left wrist. Then, bring your hand behind your back so Eddie can secure the right. Again, very slowly. We wish to avoid any unpleasant complications.”

Hearing David echo his warning about “unpleasant developments,” Eddie felt a surge of relief and superiority. The power balance had shifted. For the first time, a fleeting smile touched his face.

“Do what the Lieutenant says, doll, and maybe you'll make it out.”

A faint sigh escaped David's lips. Fortunately, Eddie was too far away to notice. The word drifting to his ears was “doll”—not “whore,” not “bitch,” not “slut,” just “doll.” The trap had been masterfully set, and in a few moments, the tragedy would reach its final act. The hard part was over. Now, all that was needed was a little patience.

The detective followed the lieutenant's orders with religious devotion. The first click rang out, followed swiftly by the second. The young woman was now trapped, a captive held fast within that narrow, merciless embrace of steel.

With a sardonic sense of satisfaction, Eddie confirmed that the handcuffs had the detective immobilized. “Perfect,” he muttered to himself, “you're not going anywhere.” He shifted his grip, releasing her from his tight embrace, and clamped his left hand firmly around her upper arm.

“Eddie,” David said, seeing it all unfold according to plan. “Should I tell the officers outside to get the car?”

“Of course,” Eddie replied, his smile widening. “Tell them to hurry up, because I’m losing my patience. Let’s not have any 'unpleasant complications'...”

The certainty that the wheel was turning in his favor led him to relax.

David went to the door. “I am the Lieutenant,” he said emphatically to those outside. “Inform the Chief we are ready. Have them bring the designated vehicle, and notify me the moment it arrives.”

A few seconds of absolute silence followed. Then, a deep, gravelly voice came from the other side. “This is Chief Paul Anderson. I’ll order the vehicle immediately, Lieutenant. Expect it in fifteen to twenty minutes.”

“Thank you, Chief,” David replied. Turning back to the pair, he said: “All that’s left is to wait.”

“I just hope they aren’t late, because I wouldn’t mind finishing you both off right now,” Eddie said, trying to mask his anxiety.

“Don’t stress, Eddie,” David reassured him. “They’re never late in cases like this.”

After a fleeting moment of awkward silence, David turned back to Eddie. “Mind if I take a seat? My lower back is killing me, and I’m afraid if I stay on my feet much longer, I won’t be able to walk at all.”

Eddie cast a sidelong glance at him. “What’s wrong with your back?” he asked, his tone flavored more by idle curiosity than any genuine concern. “And how on earth do they let you pull a shift with that kind of mobility issue?”

David replied with a bitter note: “I have a bullet lodged in my back, near the spine. Doctors say it’s impossible to remove. That’s why I’m no longer an active Detective, just a negotiator.”

“I see,” Eddie said, with a nod that felt more like a gesture of polite sympathy than one of true understanding. “Alright, sit down. We don’t want any complications. We still have much to do before this is all over.”

Inside Eddie’s mind, the script is already etched in stone. The moment they reach the crowded thoroughfare, the sequence of events will be relentless: first the lieutenant, taken by surprise, then the detective, without a second thought. On his way out, he might choose to leave a trail of dead bystanders—a cruel lesson for those who dare cross him, a raw reminder of his power. But for now, he will play the part of the submissive pupil. He is the good boy, eager to follow every command.

Eddie and the detective pull away from the table, clearing a path for David to approach. The studied precision of Eddie’s movements begins to fail him, replaced by a palpable sense of ease. With a visible effort, David manages to settle into the chair, letting out a long-held sigh of relief.

“Lieutenant, are you alright?” the Detective asked, her voice a mix of anxiety and awkwardness.

“Shut up, you whore!” Eddie’s rage flared. “Who told you to speak? Worry about your own health. Suddenly you’re pining for the Lieutenant? Unless, of course, you’ve got a thing for him. Maybe the whole 'hero saving you' bit gets you off. If so, you have my blessing. When this is over, you can marry him, have his kids and on Fridays when the kids are away at the grandmas', let him fuck you in the ass. But for now, if you speak again, I’ll blow your brains out. Got it, filth?”

Through Eddie’s outburst, David discerned the brittle nature of their apparent calm. He realized then how easily a delicate balance could be shattered at any given moment. “Everything must end now,” he thought. Turning to face them both, he fixed his gaze steadily on Eddie.

“Well,” he said, “since we have come this far, let us wait in silence for the car to arrive. At times like these, silence is indeed golden.”

“Quite right, Officer,” Eddie replied, his gaze snapping instantly to the detective. “Did you hear that, you bitch?” he sneered, pressing the barrel of the gun against her lips. “You’d best not open that pretty little mouth of yours again, unless you’ve got... something else in mind.” The cold bite of metal against her skin was a silent, bone-chilling warning.

“Eddie,” David interjects, his voice straining for a reassuring tone. “Soon, this will all be behind us. There is no need to overcomplicate things.”

“Right again, Lieutenant,” Eddie exclaimed, moving the gun back to her temple. “Yes, soon it will be over. One way or another... soon everything ends.”

“Exactly, Eddie,” David agreed. “Just a little patience.”

Seconds of awkward silence smothered the room. Then, David broke it. “Eddie?” he asked, a hint of nervousness in his voice. “Could I... if you don't mind... light a cigarette? I’ll be careful. I’ll reach into my left jacket pocket very slowly for the pack and the lighter. Do I have your permission?”

“Watch your step, Lieutenant,” Eddie replied sternly. “Don't go and screw everything up now that we're at the finish line. And hand me a cigarette. I hope you're not smoking some cheap brand, because that would really kill the mood. Though, with the salaries they're paying you lot... I can't say my expectations are exactly sky-high.”

“As many as you want, Eddie,” David said, pulling out the pack. As he opened it, a look of surprise crossed his face. “I’m sorry, Eddie. There’s only one left. Seems today isn't your lucky day.”

“What the fuck are you talking about, lucky day?” Eddie snapped. “You forget who has the gun? Put the pack and the lighter on the table.”

David, with a look of slight annoyance, placed the items on the far edge of the table. Eddie and the Detective approached.

“Fine,” Eddie said to the detective. “Now stay put and don't you dare try anything, or you'll live to regret it. Bitterly.”

He let her go, reaching for the pack of cigarettes with his left hand. He flicked it open, only to find a surprise waiting for him. With a loose, mocking drawl, he turned to David: “Well, look at that. It really is the last cigarette. You weren't shitting me after all. And it's my favorite brand, too. I guess my luck's finally starting to turn.”

Every sense and every nerve in Lieutenant David O'Neil's body was on maximum alert. The moment had arrived. The cigarette was already between Eddie's lips. With his left hand, he flicked the lighter. A small flame illuminated his face. He brought it to the tip of the cigarette. The end began to glow, releasing a thin wisp of smoke. Eddie took a deep drag—and suddenly, the world around him blurred. The hand clutching the gun jerked upward. A muffled thud pierced the air.

Eddie Draper was dead.

It had been a choreographed execution. The cigarette contained a powerful hallucinogenic compound. With the first puff, as the smoke entered his system, the effect overwhelmed him. For a brief, critical second, the world vanished for Eddie. Those few seconds were all David needed. The Lieutenant lunged like a predator. His left hand seized the gun hand, forcing it upward. And then, as if by magic, a small .22 caliber revolver appeared from his right sleeve—a weapon reminiscent of Agatha Christie's plots. The cold metal touched Eddie's forehead.

Through the fog in his mind, Eddie managed to whisper one last phrase: “I'm innocent.”

“David pulled the trigger. It was over. Eddie's fate was sealed as his body collapsed to the floor. With a swift movement, the lieutenant managed to steady the detective, who appeared profoundly shaken by this sudden turn of events.”

“Detective, are you okay?” David asked, holding her.

Instead of an answer, she asked one question. “Is he dead?”

“Yes,” David reassured her. “It's over.”

A wave of relief washed over her. She was safe. David hid his weapon and pulled the handcuff key from his pocket.

“Time to free your hands,” he said. “You've suffered enough.” With a gentle click, the cuffs fell away.

In a spontaneous gesture, the Detective's right hand gripped David's left shoulder.

“Chief,” David said softly. “It's safe. You can come in.”

“Enfolded in his arms, the detective struggles to find her footing. Confusion and exhaustion have finally taken their toll. She leans in toward his left ear, her cheek brushing softly against his, and whispers with a tone that borders on the intimate: “Lieutenant, I doubt they heard you.”

A thousand words could have spilled from her lips. Yet, deep down, she yearned for nothing more than his proximity—the simple weight of his presence. Could it be, after all, that Eddie had touched upon a truth?”

“Don't worry, Detective,” he said. “They heard everything, loud and clear.”

David smiled, partly to mask the awkwardness of the moment. He turned his lapel, revealing a discreetly placed microphone. Before the surprise could settle, the door opened. But only one man entered: Chief Paul Anderson. The door clicked shut behind him, sealing the three of them in the room.

“For a moment, you had me worried, David,” Anderson said with a note of satisfaction. “But as always, you did an excellent job.”

With a deliberate motion, he removed a discreet earpiece from his right ear. Throughout the scene, only one man had been privy to what David's microphone had been capturing: Chief Paul Anderson. He had been the sole listener, a silent witness to this peculiar theater, second only to the Detective herself.

Methodically, Anderson pulled a handkerchief from the inner pocket of his blazer. Leaning down, he used the cloth to carefully retrieve the weapon the perpetrator had wielded against the officer moments before. He placed it back into Eddie's lifeless hand. Then, he aimed the gun at the opposite wall and pulled the trigger. This time, the sound was deafening. The bullet tore through the surface, embedding itself deep within the wall. He returned the hand and the weapon to their original position on the floor. With the same handkerchief, he extinguished the still-smoldering cigarette and tucked it into his inner pocket, along with the lighter and the empty pack that had been sitting on the table.

He turned his gaze to the Detective and, in a stern voice, declared: “Detective, when I entered this room, the suspect was still alive. There was an exchange of gunfire. He fired first, and the Lieutenant responded in self-defense. That is what I expect to see in the report.”

“Of course, Chief,” the Detective replied instantly, her grip on David's arm never faltering.

What other answer could she possibly give? Anderson's command was sharp and absolute. The ease with which the Chief had moved, combined with David's stillness—bordering on apathy—revealed only one thing: they had done this before, and not just once. Moreover, the man beside her had just become her savior. How could she object? As for Eddie... he was one nightmare less in this world. The outcome was, undeniably, the best possible one.

Anderson addressed them both: “It's over now.” Then, with a look of admiration toward David, he added: “David, once again, excellent work. I'm truly proud.”

He moved swiftly toward the door, swung it open, and barked instructions to the officers waiting outside: “It's finished. Call forensics and medical personnel. The Detective needs attention. No one else enters. The rest of you, back to your posts.” With these laconic

but decisive words, the Chief signaled the end of the hostage situation. Now, protocol would take over.

A few seconds of silence followed before a slow, gradual entry into the room began. Two paramedics were the first to cross the threshold, immediately approaching the perpetrator's lifeless form to pronounce him dead. Then, their attention turned to the Detective.

"Are you hurting anywhere?" they asked as they helped her sit on the bed. "Any injuries?"

"No, I'm fine, I wasn't hit," she assured them. However, her eyes, fixed steadily on David, took on a playful glint as she remarked to the medics: "But I think the Lieutenant over there might have a bit of a problem with his back."

Before the paramedics could even direct a question his way, David smiled at the Detective and said meaningfully: "You know, Detective, the surface of things is often deceptive. There is always a hidden side, a different truth waiting to be revealed."

At that moment, two men entered with a stretcher. "Ma'am, you'll need to lie down for the ambulance transport."

"I assure you, I'm perfectly fine," she said.

"We're sorry, but this is standard procedure," the men explained.

"Understood, just a moment." With a lightning-fast movement, the Detective rose from the bed, approached David, and gave him a tender kiss on the left cheek, whispering: "Thank you so much, Lieutenant." Then, she headed to the stretcher, lay down, and told the medics: "I'm all yours."

The medics lifted the stretcher and departed. Forensics officers appeared, carrying their equipment. David continued to watch the Detective as she left. To mask the awkwardness her gesture had caused him, he turned to the forensics team.

"Shall I hand over the weapon?" he asked, pulling the .22 from his jacket pocket. He let it drop into a bag held by an officer. Then, he reached out, took his badge from the table, tucked it into his inner pocket, and asked the remaining officers: "Am I clear to go, if you don't need anything else from me?"

"Of course, Lieutenant," Anderson said in a voice that left no room for doubt. "We'll pick this up at the station. I expect the detailed report as soon as possible. Once it's ready, I want it on my desk immediately."

"Yes, Chief," David replied. The brief look the two men exchanged was loaded with subtext, betraying a relationship far deeper than that of superior and subordinate. Having received the Chief's leave, David began to move toward the exit. Suddenly, he stopped and turned back to his superior. "Chief, could I have a word for a second?"

"Of course, Lieutenant," Anderson said, stepping closer.

The two men drew away from the group, seeking a corner where their words would remain strictly between them.

“Chief?” David asked. “Is it him, without a doubt?”

“There is no doubt,” Anderson replied instantly, his certainty unshakable. “He is the Crescent Killer.”

“But, Chief, are we absolutely sure?” David repeated, unconvinced. “He didn't use violence on the Detective. He may have shouted and cursed, but he didn't physically attack her. He could have, but he didn't.”

“David,” the Chief insisted firmly. “Every piece of evidence we've gathered converges on him. The only thing missing was his confession.” He paused for a beat and asked suggestively: “But even if it isn't him... does it even matter anymore?”

“I suppose you're right, Chief,” David muttered, a sense of profound futility coloring his words.

Anderson paused. Then, in a low but meaningful voice, he said: “David, please... do not include those thoughts in the report.”

In the room, the curtain had finally fallen. With a discreet nod to the Chief, the Lieutenant signaled the end. He stepped out into the narrow hallway, following an invisible line that led to the hotel's internal staircase. He took the first step down and paused. Reaching into his right jacket pocket, he pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. The flame brought the cigarette to life, and the first wave of smoke filled his lungs. The exhale was a brief breath of relief before he continued his slow, measured descent down the hotel's wooden stairs.

Chapter 3

An Ensouled Image

In the vast hall, the hearth's flame dances vibrantly, bathing the grand, carved wooden door in a flickering glow. Shadows, shifting incessantly in the play of the fire, breathe life into its engravings. Fantastical figures—like fleeting, swirling ghosts—unfold tales of kings and sorcerers, knights and dragons across the intricate grain of the wood. The room's unearthly silence is punctured by three resolute knocks upon the door.

A thunderous voice, heavy with severity, echoes from within: "Who is it?"

From beyond the threshold, a voice equally resonant replies: "It is Robert, sir." The voice trembles slightly, as if offering a preemptive apology, signaling clear submission. "Forgive the intrusion, but an urgent matter has arisen that requires your attention."

"Enter, Robert," the same voice calls from the depths of the room. "For such an interruption, I presume the matter is grave."

The heavy brass handle gives way, followed by the sharp *click* of a lock cutting through the silence. The wooden expanse begins to move, and a chorus of creaks—like whispers of time from ancient hinges—fills the air. Through the opening, a small silhouette emerges.

His short, bright hair, in stark contrast to the austerity of his black tuxedo, white shirt, and spotless bowtie, makes the newcomer appear like a creature plucked from the pages of a grim Brothers Grimm fairy tale. Yet reality belies this first impression: he is a man of average height, whose petite frame only serves to emphasize the door's grandeur, creating a playful illusion.

As the man walks across the marble floor toward the hearth, the illusion of immense scale intensifies. The hall feels vast in every dimension, its height vanishing into the dim firelight, rendering the ceiling nearly invisible. The side walls are lost in the gloom, leaving one to wonder if windows even exist—perhaps they are hermetically sealed, or perhaps the night's darkness has simply invaded to become one with the interior. Only the warm glow of the fireplace and the circular pools of light from two lamps grant the room life. The fireplace itself—a majestic, arched structure clad in marble and crowned by an imposing coat of arms—bolsters the sense of a space built for titans, for mythical beings of a bygone era; an impression that merely betrays human vanity and hubris.

The warm breath of the hearth gently brushes the young man's face as he stands a breath away from it. His movement is sharp, a turn of military precision that leaves the warmth behind. His gaze meets two seats for which the word "armchairs" seems inadequate. They are more like two thrones, placed facing each other at an equal distance from the fire. Two seats of power, crafted not for a king and queen, but for two equal sovereigns.

Tall floor lamps tower over each chair. Small side tables hold silver trays, each bearing the instruments of a ritual of indulgence: an ashtray, a cigar case, a cutter, a gold lighter, and a crystal glass. Within the glass, an amber spirit with a heady aroma—a costly brandy, as evidenced by its hue and fragrance—shimmers. The arrangement of these objects dictates a strict, geometric harmony.

Now, beyond the inanimate objects, the man perceives two human presences. In the left chair, a figure remains immersed in reading, detached from his surroundings, his only discernible features being his shock of white hair and white beard. In the right chair, conversely, another elderly man has paused his reading and turned his gaze toward their visitor. His own white hair and well-groomed beard stand out immediately. With a motion of his right hand, he reveals piercing blue eyes as he removes his round spectacles. Despite the wrinkles etched upon his face, his skin retains a remarkable freshness. He is dressed in a white shirt, a dark red tie, a black jacket, and a burgundy scarf, while a gold watch and a large ring on his left hand complete his elegant attire.

“Robert, what has happened?” the old man began, his voice laced with curiosity. “What is so urgent that it cannot wait until tomorrow’s council?”

“Sir,” Robert replied solemnly, “only moments ago, our contact in the police informed us of serious developments in the Eddie Draper case.”

“Was he arrested?” the old man repeated, concern painting his features.

“He was killed in a skirmish with the police,” Robert answered in a low, meaningful voice.

“Excellent, it could not have been better.” A broad smile illuminated the old man’s face. “Thank you, Robert. Go, you are dismissed for the rest of the evening.”

His command, however, met no response. Robert remained motionless—a detail that did not escape the speaker’s notice. “Robert? What is it? Is there something else?”

“Sir...” Robert’s voice was low and fraught with anxiety. “Department Head Andrew Brown just informed us... Peter Levingston is missing.”

“Missing? What do you mean?” Joy gave way to an expression of intense alarm. “When exactly did you learn of this?”

“Five minutes ago. He notified us that Levingston’s handlers failed to make the scheduled evening report.”

The elderly man glanced at his watch, his face hardening with worry. “The report is at eight in the evening. It is now two-forty-seven. Over six whole hours have passed, and he only just informed you?”

“I am deeply sorry, sir,” Robert said, visibly shaken. “The Department Head acted according to protocol and established procedure for a loss of communication with an ‘angel,’ but unfortunately, he was unable to locate them.”

“My God!” the old man exclaimed, his irritation now boiling over as his voice rose. “Peter Levingston is still a vulnerable angel. And worse, the bill is to be introduced to the Senate in three days. The protocol is clear: the Department Head has a three-hour window to restore communication before informing his superiors.” With great effort, he reined in his composure. “Have Andrew Brown report here immediately. We want a detailed report, now.”

“Sir,” Robert said hesitantly, “he is in New York. I shall request he take the first available flight.”

“What?” A wave of fury washed over the old man like water overflowing a glass. His initial irritation had turned into uncontrollable rage. His composure had evaporated completely, and his voice, unrestrained, filled the room. “What the hell is he doing in New York?”

“The information we have suggests that Levingston and his men were last seen there,” Robert replied calmly.

“But what business does Levingston have in New York?” The old man’s voice tore through the air as his fist struck the arm of the chair with force. “The orders were clear. No movement without authorization until the Draper case was closed. Tell him to send all data immediately and bring Brown to Washington. An emergency meeting in two hours for a full briefing. Gather everything you can find. Start an immediate investigation into the phone records of Brown, Levingston, and the handlers for at least the last three days. Notify everyone. And when I say everyone, I mean literally everyone.”

“Understood, sir,” Robert replied with a slight bow.

The old man continued in a stern tone: “As soon as Andrew Brown arrives in Washington, he is to report here at once.”

“Yes, sir,” Robert repeated.

“And Robert...” The old man’s voice lowered, maintaining its severity. “Ensure he does not travel alone from New York. He is to be escorted. No more surprises.”

“Understood, sir,” Robert said, making a deeper bow before turning and retreating quickly from the room.

The moment the door closed with a muffled thud, the other white-haired gentleman in the left chair gently set his book on the side table. With a slow motion, he removed his glasses and placed them beside the book. He then turned his gaze to the man sitting beside him. Had Robert not just left the room, the sight that followed would not have caused him the slightest surprise. It was something he had witnessed many times.

Yet that first time he stood before them, his surprise had not been a mere fleeting sensation. A profound awe and wonder had overwhelmed him, leaving him speechless and stunned. And what normal person would have reacted differently?

The man on the left was a living, chilling recreation of the one on the right. They were not merely identical in appearance; it was as if they were the same existence, doubled. Every detail—from the facial expression and the fold of the clothes to the body, the eyes, the hair, and the beard—was identical. Even the clothing, reproduced with meticulous precision down to the knot of the tie, was exactly the same. The watch, the glasses, and the ring were also perfect replicas.

However, a closer look revealed a detail that sent a shiver down the spine: a subtle but essential reversal. The parting of the hair, the hand on which they wore their jewelry, even the way their shoelaces were tied, created a powerful sense of mirroring.

One was not a faithful copy of the other, but something far more profound. When their gazes met, they did not behold a mere duplicate, but a living, breathing representation of themselves. It was as if they stood before a mirror where the returning image was as real as they were.

And it was not just them. A more careful glance at the surrounding space revealed an even stranger sight. The hall seemed as if it had been sliced in two, with one half mirroring the other. The imposing fireplace with its great arch, the arrangement of the plush armchairs, the lamps standing like silent sentinels, the small tables and the objects adorning their surfaces—everything obeyed an irrational, obsessive pattern of reflection. It was as if someone had taken the world and folded it in half, creating a perfect, yet haunting, idol of the original.

In a cool voice, the man in the left chair sought to soothe his companion. “Henry,” he said calmly, “anger rarely leads to sound decisions. On the contrary, it often triggers impulsive actions and errors.”

“You are right, Eric, but we cannot ignore the gravity of the events we have just heard,” Henry countered, visibly agitated.

Eric, though he had feigned devotion to the pages of his book, had in reality followed every word and every minute detail of the conversation between the other two men with sharpened hearing.

“Let us wait to see the course of events and react with prudence,” Eric replied, maintaining his calm. “Our information is sparse at the moment, and any conclusion would be precarious.”

“Eric, does it not seem at least strange to you? Eddie Draper’s killing by the police on the same day Peter Levingston vanishes? And just before the bill is debated in the Senate?” Henry asked, filled with suspicion.

“With the weight of the responsibilities we shoulder and the significance of what is at stake, we do not have the luxury of believing in coincidences. And we certainly shall leave nothing to chance,” Eric replied firmly, adding: “However, haste in decisions can prove catastrophic without a full picture. One thing is certain, though: something significant is happening.”

“I cannot understand how they dared defy orders,” Henry muttered, lost in thought.

An imperceptible shadow of a smile, resembling more of an ironic smirk, spread across Eric’s features. “My dear,” he said, his voice carrying a hint of nostalgia, “let us reflect on the countless times we ourselves defied mandates and clear logic in the years of our youth. Human nature is such that passions often prevail. Nevertheless, I cannot but agree that what has occurred exceeds all limits, and an act of making an example is required. For now, however, and for the next two hours, our fate is entwined with waiting.”

Eric withdrew his gaze from Henry and sank into the soft embrace of the chair, focusing on the warm flame of the hearth. He then took his exquisite cigar and, with a sharp movement of the cutter, removed the tip. After lighting the cigar and inhaling its aroma with pleasure, he let the smoke dance in the air and turned again to Henry. “I would suggest we enjoy the comforting company of our cigars, the warm taste of the brandy, and the deafening silence of this space. I have a strong premonition that the gates of hell will soon swing open, and it will be a long time before we find such an oasis of calm again.”

Henry, with a nervous nod of agreement, lit his own cigar, adding a new column of smoke to the quiet atmosphere. In his comfortable chair, his gaze fixed on the playful flame.

Two silent figures, lost in the labyrinth of their thoughts. How ironic this apparent peace would seem, had they known the grim future that awaits them. Their next meeting in this space will not be a moment of relaxation, but a bloody game of death, where one will fiercely seek the annihilation of the other. Neither will manage to walk out of that door alive. Both will seal their end, committing for a second time the biblical sin of fratricide.