

Book of Lore



A SUPPLEMENT FOR **BLUEBEARD'S BRIDE** THE TABLETOP RPG

BOOK OF LORE



CREDITS

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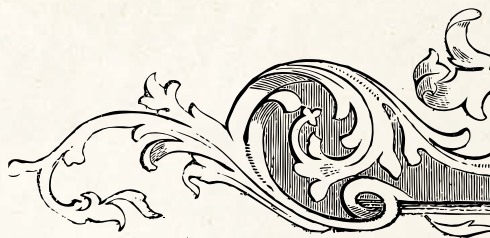


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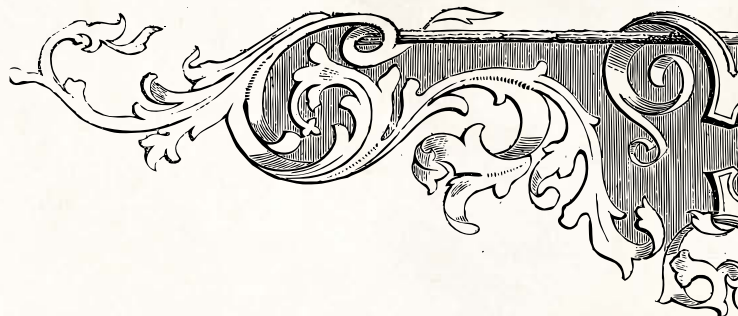


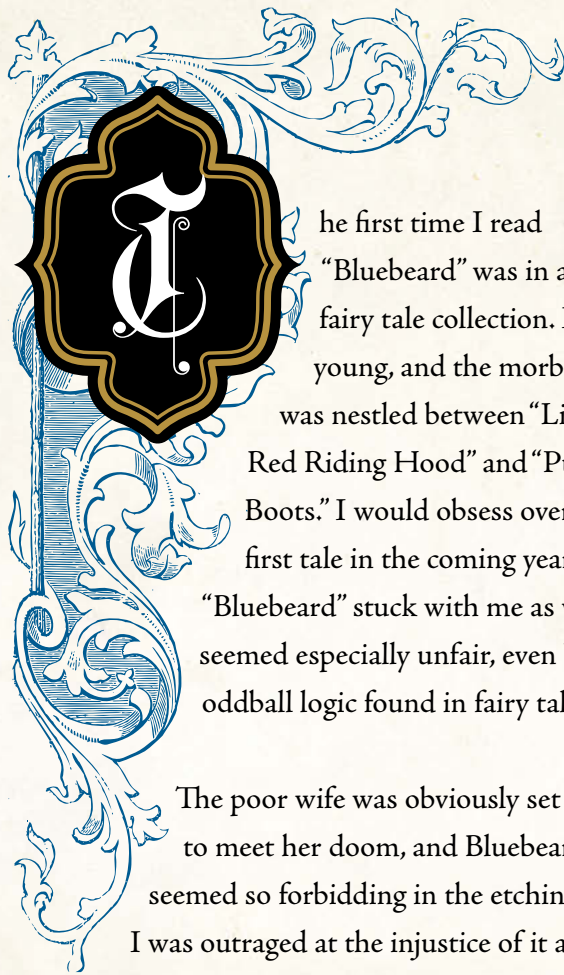




INTRODUCTION:

Her Many Faces





The first time I read “Bluebeard” was in a fairy tale collection. I was young, and the morbid tale was nestled between “Little Red Riding Hood” and “Puss in Boots.” I would obsess over the first tale in the coming years, but “Bluebeard” stuck with me as well. It seemed especially unfair, even by the oddball logic found in fairy tales.

The poor wife was obviously set up to meet her doom, and Bluebeard seemed so forbidding in the etchings. I was outraged at the injustice of it all, but my younger self also wondered how the Bride could be so stupid as to fall for such a trap. Much like you might yell at the screen in a horror movie—warning drunken teenagers away from a dark basement—I wanted to shake the Bride and ask her, “Why did you go in? What did you think would happen?”



But as I read more versions of the tale, I saw how cleverly Bluebeard's trap had been constructed, bound up in social conventions and gender assumptions, and I began to see the warning in it. I saw that Perrault's version of the story has only fragments of the Bride in it at all. We know very little of her, not even her name. Sometimes she has a sister named Anne or brothers, and always a mother and an unmentioned or deceased father. It might be said that she was pretty, or curious about the world, but often she is simply the Bride. Anonymous and vulnerable.

She could be any of us.

Modern retellings of the story fight against the Bride as a blank slate, bestowing a name or a specific setting on the protagonist. Sometimes modern tales even focus on the Bride's history or family, while others focus on Bluebeard himself.

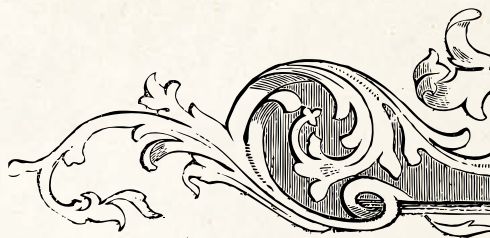
The version of the tale presented here spends its time with the Bride. We follow her around Bluebeard's house, and see the mansion through her eyes; we find what Bluebeard has to offer in marriage and in death. And at the end, the book asks you to make a choice for the Bride. I hope you make the right one.

The Bride may not yet be named, but this is *her story*...

Sarah Richardson
Lead Developer for **BLUEBEARD'S BRIDE**

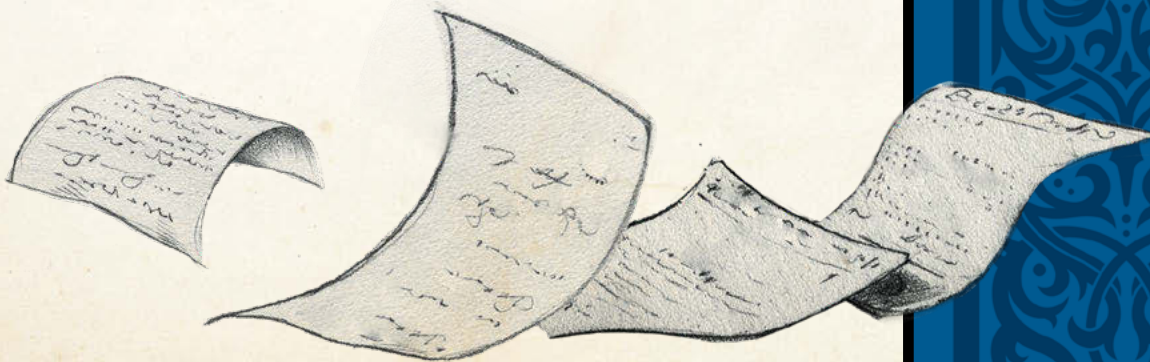
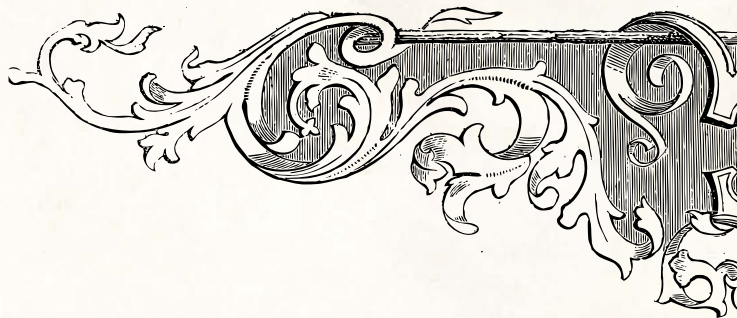


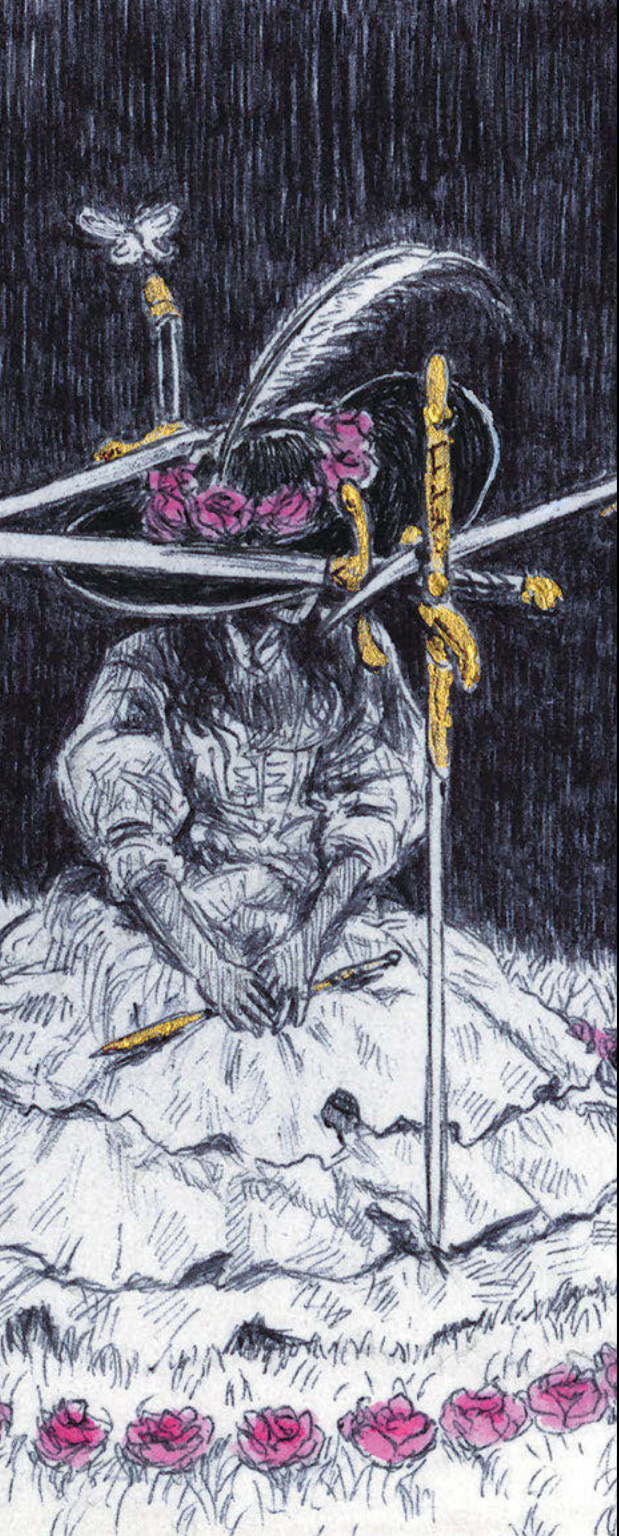




CHAPTER ONE:

Lovers Are Wed





In a village on the edge of nowhere and everywhere lived a woman with good breeding but little money.

She lived in a small cottage covered in roses in the summer, along with her two daughters.

The elder daughter was fair to behold, with black hair and dark skin, but she had few suitors; the men in their village were put off by her curiosity. The younger daughter was plainer, with light brown hair, but quicker to laugh. She was too young for suitors, but only just.

One fine fall day, a lord visited the village. It was rumored he was a widower many times over. Many whispered that his wives had all mysteriously disappeared. The lord was known to everyone as Bluebeard, for although the hair on his head was dark and streaked with grey, his beard was a deep and unmistakable blue.



A blue beard is strange, but few would argue that a blue beard alone would make a man repugnant. However, for all of Bluebeard's finery, manners, or appraising gaze, his beard was impossible to ignore—its dismal color familiar only to those who find the molted feathers of a bird long since dead. The entangled, chaotic blue monstrosity upon his chin smelled faintly of sulfur, a foulness birthed in the deepest fires of hell. Bluebeard was much disliked in town.

The lord went to the cottage covered with dying roses and asked for the elder daughter's hand in marriage. She refused him. The village agreed in their gossip that, for once, the elder daughter was a sensible woman for her choice.

That night, the elder daughter spoke to her younger sister of Bluebeard's proposal. "Anne," the elder sister mused. "Am I wrong to so swiftly reject the lord?"

"No, sister, no." Anne shook her head. "And these words are born not of my fear for losing you, but from a deep feeling in my soul. There is something not right about him. Remember the tales we heard of all his other brides. Where have they all gone?"

"You are right, my love. It is strange that such tales should swirl around him without any refutation. The color of his beard is a sign—he is marked by some darker force." The elder sister ran the strands of her sister's soft brown locks through her fingers, weaving them between her digits, braiding them.

“...and the rumors,” Anne added.

“...and the rumors,” the elder sister agreed. She decidedly placed Bluebeard out of her thoughts. There would be other more suitable suitors, eventually.



Weeks later, the elder daughter happily strolled towards the village with a parcel under her arm. Within days of the dismissed proposal, the lord had become a remote memory in her mind, a strange disruption in a life of contented repetition. It was a beautiful, sunny day. A cool summer breeze flowed in from the east. Birds sang. She smiled up at the trees, enjoying her midday walk.

“**WHERE ARE YOU OFF TO ON SUCH A FINE DAY?**” a voice called out to her. The voice was deep and heavy, and she felt her shoulders stoop beneath it. The once happy sun now glared down upon her. Sweat beaded in the small of her back, and the cloth stuck to her skin. The birds stopped.

The maiden turned to see Bluebeard sitting like a sultan atop a great steed. The horse was the color of coal just before it is set alight, an oily black so deep it shined sapphire in the sun. On the great beast’s head was a golden bridle affixed with small flowers, swords, and stags. If not for the occasional movement of the beast’s chest, the elder sister would have thought it a statue for its perfection.

“My mother asked me to bring a parcel into town for her.” She motioned towards the village. “I must deliver it without delay.”

“IT SEEMS WE’RE HEADED TO THE SAME PLACE. MAY I ESCORT YOU?”

Not wishing to be seen as rude or improper, she conceded to his request. Bluebeard dismounted to walk next to the young woman. The great beast walked alongside. She quickened her pace, hoping to end the unpleasant engagement before it could begin, but Bluebeard easily kept time with her strides.

Nary a wind came to carry the sweat from her brow, but the young woman was sure most of her discomfort came from the silence building between them. She imagined the lord felt the sting of her rejection, and this weight must be the burden of his embarrassment. He had offered her much with his proposal: wealth, a home, a family.

She decided to break the silence.

“I have spied your house a few times when visiting my brothers afar. It is a fine home with beautiful gardens.”

“BEAUTIFUL, YES,” Bluebeard said, “BUT EMPTY.”

“My lord...”

"I KNOW WHAT YOU WISH TO SAY NEXT, BUT YOU NEEDN'T. I SHOULD OFFER MY APOLOGIES. I'VE SEEN YOU A FEW TIMES, AS YOU MY HOME, AND WISHED TO KNOW YOU. IN MY HASTE, I'D FORGOTTEN MY MANNERS. I WOULD VERY MUCH LIKE TO SHOW YOU WHO I AM."

Startled, she turned to Bluebeard. The kindness of his words tugged at her kind heart, but again her focus was drawn to his beard—the cerulean serpent upon his chin so very hard to ignore. Swallowing her fear, the woman pressed on with a new question.

"You are a wealthy and learned man." She hesitated, afraid of causing offense, but curiosity overwhelmed her caution. "I must ask, what interests you in a simple woman such as myself? There are many beauties greater, and wits keener."

"YOU ARE AN INQUISITIVE ONE, AREN'T YOU? IS MY INTEREST NOT ENOUGH?"

The woman's cheeks flushed red with shame. It did seem as if she always needed more. To explore. To know. To see for herself. For all her beauty, it was curiosity that was her strongest trait, something not to be praised in a maiden.

"No, it is enough," the maiden conceded. Or at least it should be... his query caused her to doubt her own needs.

So the two walked into the village together, through the tree-lined path dotted with wild flowers, the final scent of summer drifting in their direction. Bluebeard knew the names of each flower, tree, and bird that called out in the midday sun.

"A HUNTER MUST KNOW THE WILDS."



In the village, the maiden delivered her parcel to the postman, as Bluebeard tended to his horse outside.

"A strange fellow," the postman remarked.

"Indeed," she replied, distracted by the form Bluebeard cut through the cloudy glass of the window. Through the pane, his features partially obscured, the man's beard struck her as more grey than blue.

How very strange the tricks light can play on the eyes.



Bluebeard's figure was that of a man who was often outdoors, hunting and riding. Her thoughts wandered under his clothes to the curve of his calf, the chiseled flatness of his chest, and through all the deft manners by which a hunter could use his body. A blush rose to her cheeks at this forward thought.

"I've heard he's had many wives before. All who've died of various ailments."

"Strange," she murmured, straining to view more of the lord through the window. The postman's interruption did not deter her gaze.

She focused back on the postman as Bluebeard strode behind the horse. The postman continued, "By all accounts a fine lord, with many riches. Yet, something about his visage is alien to me. Terrifying and sickening." The postman gave the woman's fears life, breathing them into the world with each syllable.

"He does speak kindly," the maiden suggested, a small fear in her stomach making her wonder if somehow the lord could hear her, even through a closed window.

"Yes, but there is a wickedness behind his smile.."

"...as if each word must consume the one before it. Hungry. Insatiable." She clutched at her lips. *What was she thinking to speak so to a man?*

"Exactly," the postman concluded, passing the woman a receipt.



Bluebeard walked the elder sister home, requesting her hospitality and a rest before continuing through the stifling heat back to his mansion. She, her mother, and her younger sister hurriedly prepared what little they had to offer.

He stayed for hours, regaling the women with tales of far-off lands and the strange and wondrous sights they held. The elder sister dutifully poured wine, and brought fruit, nuts, and cheeses arranged in an attractive manner. She closed the shutters to shelter him from the heat of the sun and opened them again to invite in the evening breeze after the sun dipped towards the horizon.

As the world slipped into nighttime, Bluebeard announced his departure and thanked the women for their kindness. In the darkness, he rode his steed away.

The three women slumped upon their lilac divan. The mother stroked her elder daughter's back and the elder's arms fell across her younger sister, embracing her.

"His beard, is it truly blue?" Anne questioned.

"Seems more grey to me," the mother remarked.

"Is it not transformed?" the elder sister asked. "As if by some strange magik, it now appears to me other than it was before. His skin is fairer now, his eyes keener."



"Nay," the mother laughed. "The strange magik you see is not witchcraft, but affection. Such emotion can change a man. And when you know what is within, you see a person in a different light."

"For all the affection I feel for others, I am no fairer for it," Anne sighed. Their mother smiled at Anne, savoring the vanishing moment of innocence.

"A change," the elder sister said, wondering what could change a man's beard from blue to grey. Was it a trick of the light? Was her mother wrong about witchcraft? There was something different about Bluebeard.

"Yes, a change. Love can bring such a change in a man. Not fickle like women folk, but loyal, steady. And what wealth he could bring to the family."

Through the night the elder sister thought on her mother's words. On duty, loyalty, wealth. On transformation. The thought of Bluebeard was intoxicating, but she could not discern if that was sickening or bewitching.

The next day, Bluebeard came and again requested her hand in marriage. The elder sister looked carefully at his beard. She thought it looked like a dark shade of grey, and so she agreed. She would become his Bride.



Bluebeard and his Bride were married in the chapel of his mansion. A small, round stone building, it stood only one floor high, dwarfed by the mansion to which it was attached. Set into the walls were stained glass windows latticed in blue and gold. Each one depicted the Holy Spirit, wreathed in the glorious light of day and shining down into the small room.

White lilies lined the pews, releasing the sweet scent of innocence as the villagers packed the seats. Every person she knew came to see the Bride wed, curious of the mysteries Bluebeard had in his mansion. However, in the bright light of the modest chapel, it seemed to most that the woman was keenly lucky, having made a good choice for her husband. No matter what the rumors said.

Standing in a halo of light, the Bride listened as Bluebeard recited his vows. She focused on his eyes, ancient and worn. Within the heavenly illumination they did not seem so terribly wicked. Her gaze trailed down his nose, to his lips, and then his chin. And, the Bride was very sure, his beard was grey, not blue.

Then came time for her vows and, as she recited them, her groom tilted his head, revealing a strange tint of azure in his beard. Thoughts of his other wives flooded into the Bride's mind. She pushed them away, but they lingered.

One of Bluebeard's former brides was said to come from a far-off land, a place of summer and heat all year round. *How lonely she must have been in this small chapel*, the Bride thought. Its simple walls unable to stave off the call of home. How strange the land must have seemed to her in winter. A white blanket muffling the world, quieting it.

...but perhaps his former bride enjoyed the stillness snow brought.

Heat was quick, hectic, forceful. Snow was relenting, slow, soft. The mansion could have been her escape. Within the holy walls of the chapel the woman from a far-off land would have found safety in the Lord. Perfect in her piousness, spending long hours praying with her husband.

While many would attribute the small size of the chapel and the girth of the mansion to Bluebeard's ego, the former bride would have found it endearing. Her husband understood God did not want a flashy show of faith. He did not want wealth and riches. He did not want dramatics wrought of iron and stone to call to the heavens. What the Lord wanted was loyalty.

Bluebeard understood this above everyone else.

Yes, the Bride thought, the former bride must have been happy here. Never wishing to return to her homeland. Pious. Perfect. And...absent.

She faded away, the Bride thought, surely in some tragic yet romantic end.

The Bride's thoughts snapped back to reality when the last words of her vows were spoken, "...till death us do part."


Before she could react, Bluebeard pulled her towards him. Wrapping one arm around her waist and holding the other behind her head, he kissed the Bride. She felt the sting of her husband's beard on her chin. The prickle of coarse hair against soft skin. Two hungry lips against two yielding.

Bells rang out from the chapel and Bluebeard pulled away from his Bride. Together they walked from the chapel, and the Bride wondered—is this happiness? Is this how his bride from the summer country felt?

No matter. She was the Bride now. There were no others.



After the wedding, Bluebeard hosted a luxurious party for the town in the grand ballroom of his home, a show of his wealth and power.



Before the guests arrived, Bluebeard blindfolded his Bride and led her to the ballroom. He chuckled as he guided her cautious steps. When he removed the blindfold, the Bride could not stop herself from gasping at its splendor.

Chandeliers hung low on ceilings decorated with hundreds of tiny lights. They danced like faeries, casting a sumptuous glow over the vases of indigo roses, lilies, tulips, and carnations. Strings of paper, glass, and ivory feather garlands hung across the room, twinkling stars playing amongst the steady faery light. Silver plates of fruit, cakes, and cured meats crowded the tables. Pastries were stacked atop one another, filled with cream, dusted with sugar crystals, and they filled the room with a faintly sweet scent.

Bluebeard kissed her cheek and excused himself to speak with the arriving guests.

Quickly the Bride found her sister and the two women explored the ballroom. Giggling, each sister took a crystal goblet of wine from a silent servant, fawning over expertly painted landscapes, all seemingly drawn by the same hand. *Maybe one of his former wives*, the Bride mused to herself before swallowing another gulp of wine and allowing her sister to pull her onto the dance floor.

The two women twirled and waltzed into the night. Neighbors came up to wish the Bride well. Some came to apologize for the cruel words they had spoken about her fine husband. Others came to secure a place in the Bride's heart, in hope a woman of wealth might remember them when they came calling later.

Yet, the Bride embraced them all with grace. She was too happy dancing in her beautiful dress with her sister to hold them any ill will.



At the end of the night, Bluebeard's hand fell on the Bride's shoulder. "MAY I STEP IN?" he asked.

Giggling from wine and filled with joy, Anne curtsied and hugged her older sister. "Do not let this dashing man keep you from me forever." She wandered into the crowd, her voice trailing off as the chaos of the party enveloped her.

Bluebeard swept the Bride into his arms and led her onto the dance floor, pushing through the thinning crowd of townsfolk. The heavy scent of tobacco on her husband's coat made her nauseous.

Too much wine. Too much dancing. Bluebeard held her tight. Their dance began.



“Please stop,” the Bride muttered, fearing she would be ill. But the music rose around them, cloaking her words in jarring notes, each instrument conspiring to cancel out her sad voice. Bluebeard held her tighter. Their dance continued.

Whipping from one side to the next, wine angry in her stomach, the sights of the ballroom blurred. In lucid moments, the Bride caught glimpses of her haggard reflection in the ballroom’s mirrored columns. She wondered if he danced with his other brides in such a manner. Bluebeard held her tighter.

One former bride was said to have come from just two villages away, a woman of no importance, but a with great talent for painting when she met Bluebeard. How taken she must have been by the sights of her party. She would have drunk and eaten her fill and more, reveling that all this wealth was now hers.

The music would have sounded strange, formal, unlike the notes she was used to from home. But she would dance. Clumsy at first, then attempting to be more refined. A sheep dancing under the moon with a wolf, desperately trying to show her husband how beautiful she was. In her own way.

At the end of the night the former bride would have fallen ill. She would have drunk too deep, consumed too much. She would have embarrassed Bluebeard, forced him to make excuses for an artist’s weakness.

No matter. She was the Bride now. There were no others.



Eventually, the world stopped spinning and the Bride found the cool night air on a balcony. Her lungs thrummed painfully in her chest. She fought to control the contents of her stomach. Grabbing the cold stone balustrade, she steadied herself and gazed up at the stars. The painfully familiar scent of cigar smoke drifted past and reminded the Bride her groom stood behind her.

“You lost me for a moment,” the Bride said smiling, releasing the railing and righting herself.

“I’D LIKE TO KNOW WHERE YOUR MIND DRIFTED OFF TO.”

The chill of the night air danced against her skin. Goosebumps climbed her arm to the soft puffed sleeves of her wedding gown. How could he know she mused on his other wives? How could he know?

“To thoughts of our life together, of course.” The Bride smiled and placed her hand on his chest. She would comfort him. She knew the way.

“NOT A LITTLE FARTHER AFIELD?”

“No, right here, with you.”

Bluebeard stepped back from his Bride and let her hand fall to her side. His features were a mask of impenetrable stone, his emotions hidden and silent.

“COME, OUR GUESTS HAVE LEFT. LET ME SHOW YOU MY HOME.”

Bluebeard produced a heavy ring of keys from his pocket. Immediately, the Bride knew that each key was unique, special. There were skeleton keys with ruby eyes, others with small blue jays, or rings, or vines, or roses, or spikes.

And a steel key, tiny and plain, out of place among this fantastical collection.

Heavy ring in hand, Bluebeard corrected himself. “AND OF COURSE YOUR HOME.”

The Bride linked her arm in his.

“Till death us do part.”



The ballroom was dark, candles snuffed, plates cleaned. Guests who stayed past their welcome had been sent home, accompanied by a servant with a torch. Instruments lay silent on the stage, and the punch bowl had been thoroughly cleaned by the greedy villagers wanting a taste of finery.

“SILVER AND GOLD. MY INSTRUMENTS AND MY HOUNDS. DRESSES OF SILK, PINS, SCARVES, PERFUMES.” Bluebeard flipped through keys as he spoke, each word punctuated by a clink. “ROOMS UPON ROOMS, EACH MORE WONDERFUL THAN THE LAST. EVERYTHING YOU WISH, MY WIFE, IS YOURS.”

The Bride’s head swam with Bluebeard’s promises. She was so tired after the events of the day. Did he lead every bride down these staircases? Did he work his way through each key while leading her through his mansion?

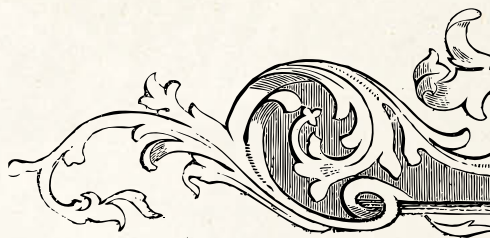
Supposedly one bride was wealthier than Bluebeard. Such a fine lady would have been accustomed to such parties. But at the end of the night, with the heavy ring of keys in hand, she too would be weary. Tired. Scared.

She would not have been prepared for what came next. A wife’s duty to her husband, a foreign fruit no well-reared woman would have tasted.

Would he have been gentle? Would he have been kind? As his form moved into hers, would she have seen the hair of his beard turn blue in the dim light of lust? Trapped in the inferno of hunger, unable to escape its conflagration. Was such a lady of refined upbringing and education scared of her wedding night?

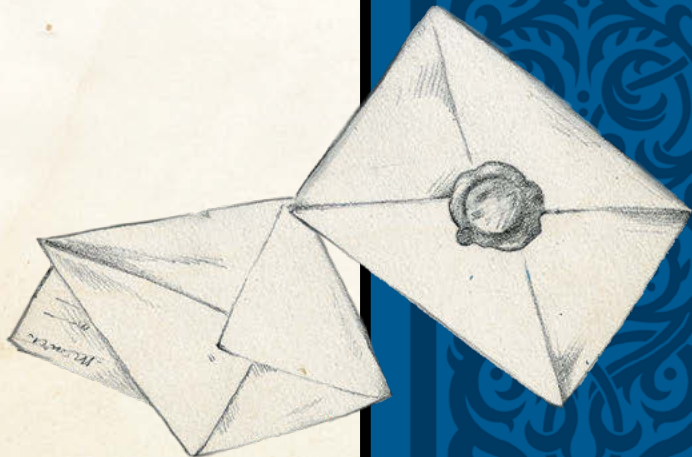
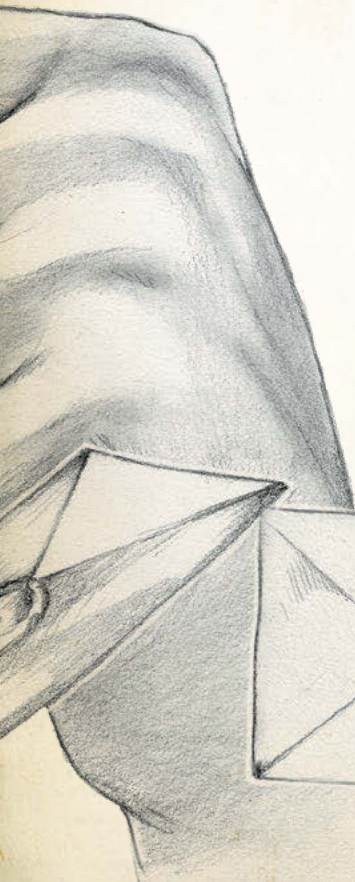
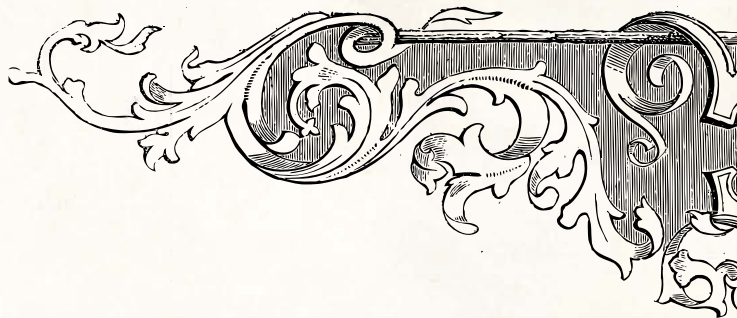
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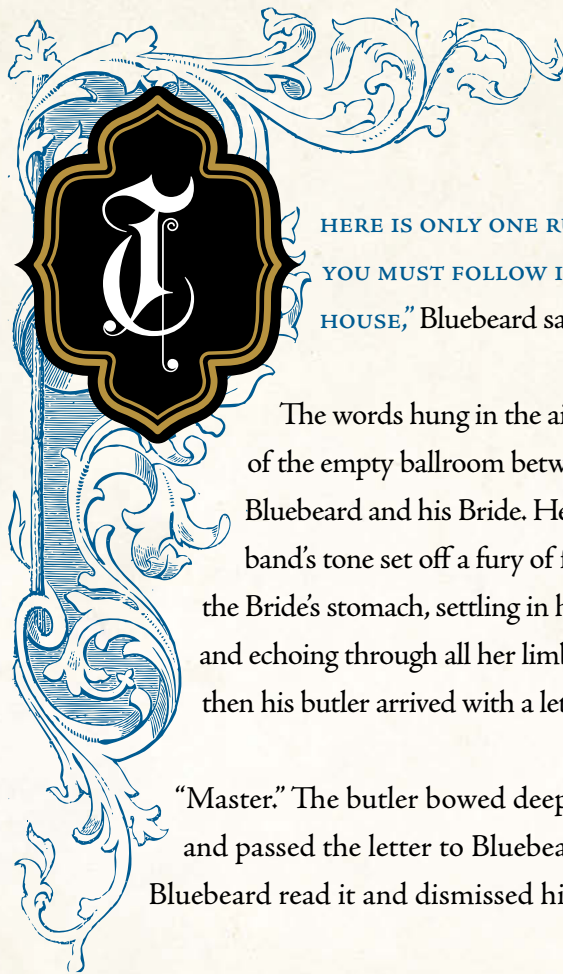




CHAPTER TWO:

Temptation & Curiosity





HERE IS ONLY ONE RULE
YOU MUST FOLLOW IN THIS
HOUSE,” Bluebeard said.

The words hung in the air
of the empty ballroom between
Bluebeard and his Bride. Her hus-
band’s tone set off a fury of fear in
the Bride’s stomach, settling in her jaw
and echoing through all her limbs. Just
then his butler arrived with a letter.

“Master.” The butler bowed deep,
and passed the letter to Bluebeard.
Bluebeard read it and dismissed him.

“I AM SORRY, MY BRIDE, BUT I MUST AWAY
THIS VERY NIGHT TO SETTLE AN URGENT
MATTER, A BUSINESS DEAL I’VE MADE.”
Bluebeard paused and caressed a stray hair
away from the Bride’s face. “I HOPE YOU
WON’T THINK POORLY OF ME TO LEAVE YOU
SO ON OUR WEDDING NIGHT.”



The Bride shook her head in relief; her wedding night had been put off for a time. A moment to catch her footing would do her well—everything in the house was so new, she stumbled from one situation to the next.

Bluebeard donned his jacket, hat, scarf, and fine leather gloves, all brought for him by a servant who seemed to emerge from the shadows with everything already in hand. She worried for a moment that he had planned his departure.

“Wait!” the Bride exclaimed. Her relief was washed away by a nagging feeling in her gut, a premonition of pain and danger to come. “The rule I must follow?”

Turning back with a sly smile, Bluebeard took the key ring from the Bride, and held up the simple steel key. His gaze lingered on the key for a moment, then shifted suddenly to meet the Bride’s eyes. He spoke slowly.

“THE ONLY RULE YOU MUST FOLLOW IS SIMPLE. ALL THAT IS HERE IS YOURS. BUT NEVER, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, MAY YOU ENTER THE ROOM WHICH THIS KEY OPENS.”

He handed the keys back to the Bride, the small, steel key rejoining its brethren and vanishing into the mass of metal, bone, and jewels. And yet the weight of the steel key pulled at the Bride as she watched her husband depart.





Once alone, the Bride was struck by the size of Bluebeard's abode. She was but a small thing in a labyrinth of dark closets and locked doors. With no guide and no light to show her the way. No instructions but these keys.

Suddenly she was keenly aware of her own state. Her ribs ached from a too-tight corset. The weight of her dress hung around her legs like a net, layers of tulle, satin, and lace anchoring her to the ground. Blood pooled in her tired feet, straining her fine silk shoes embroidered with tiny white doves. There was nothing her body wanted more than to undress, wash, and sleep.

Unfortunately, her body and mind were at odds. Bluebeard had given her free rein of the house except for one room, and she had no idea where the room was or what it contained. Did Bluebeard think it best not to tell her, knowing her curious nature? Or perhaps, because he knew her so well, he did not tell her on purpose? Was this a test? Was this all an act?

There were so many possibilities and none of them fit the mysterious truth clawing at the back of her mind. She called out, sure a servant could provide more information. They would know more about their master's home.

Her cries were left unanswered. Her demands unfulfilled.

Swallowing a scream of frustration, the Bride could not will herself to move. She was mired in the mystery of the steel key and forbidden room. The lights lining the hallway were low; somewhere in the shadowy foyer there was a soft ticking. The noise was not steady like a clock, predictably counting time, but rather like a beat of a heart. Three beats, a pause, and three more.

One. Two. Three. The Bride counted to herself; on the third beat she would move. One. Two. Three.

Her body refused to lurch forward.

In this vacant house, cold and exhausted, she stood atop a windswept cliff. Below her were the cold briny depths of the ocean, behind her a way to safety. From the moment she met Bluebeard, the Bride had advanced on that edge. Now, toes inching over the precipice, she could not take the plunge.

One. Two. Three.

Within the waters she saw all the answers to the questions she had been asking. Behind her, blissful ignorance. Which was better?

The Bride had to know, the temptation was too great. Her mind raced.

Seeking. Longing. Begging.

“Enough!” She allowed herself no more than a whisper, a hushed promise.

Her left foot stepped forward, then the right, and soon she was running down the hall. The Bride mustered her courage and plunged into the murky depths of the ocean until the fear hit her—she did not know how to swim. So instead the Bride ran, the fear of the unknown the only thing chasing her down the hallway.

The Bride stopped in her tracks right before slamming into another woman. Startled, the Bride stared at her for a moment, swallowing her terror, and scanning the woman’s face for any features she might recognize. The woman was about her age and was wearing a neatly pressed maid’s uniform.

A name, she remembered a name. “Maryam,” the Bride exclaimed breathlessly, “did you not hear when I called for someone not minutes ago?”

“Yes, I did, mistress, so I came as quickly as I could. My apologies. How may I assist you?”

The Bride paused, having completely forgotten the hundreds of questions, which just a moment ago so easily flowed through her mind. She needed to know more, but only one question remained.

“This key,” the Bride held up the simple steel key, “*to which door does it belong?*”

Maryam moved her hand to the Bride's and caressed it, helping to support the weight of the key ring. "I couldn't tell you, mistress. I have never seen a key like that before. Are you sure it belongs on that ring?"

The maid's hand trailed down the Bride's wrist and rested on her waist. The Bride could feel the soft warmth of her touch, beckoning her to rest, urging her to cast off the troubles of the day in favor of the comforts of the night.

"Come, let us get you to bed. How tired you must be from your long day."

The Bride looked directly into the maid's eyes, dark brown and kind. In the pale light of the hallway Maryam's tanned skin took on an unearthly glow, like a small fire lit just beneath the surface of amber wood. She wore her hair off her shoulders, but plainly styled and elegant.

Maryam's hair reminded the Bride of her sister's locks, of home. Anne had just departed, but the distance felt much greater. The Bride knew that things would never be the same between them, never be as easy. A small sliver of grief moved to grab at the Bride's heart. Marriage meant so many things would change...

The maid moved closer, and brushed a stray hair from the Bride's collarbone, two gentle fingers stroking flesh. Caught in her thoughts of home, the Bride allowed herself to enjoy the maid's familiarity. Her touch. Her closeness.

“And we must prepare you for your wedding night.” Maryam tightened her grip on her mistress’s waist. “My master will want you to be fresh and *ready*.”

Maryam’s sharp grip snapped the Bride back to reality. In a moment of need, the maid’s touch had first seemed innocent and comforting. Now it seemed to grasp at her with something more than servitude. Something more like...lust.

“No,” the Bride said, pushing Maryam away and taking a step back. “The lord has left for the evening. He had business that required his attention. He left me in charge, and I wish to tour my new home. *Alone*.”

The Bride hoped her firm tone was enough. She feared it was not.

“As you wish, mistress.” Maryam retreated into the darkness, her grasping needs falling away like a fire fading to embers at the end of a cold night. But her eyes stayed on the Bride, her lips wetted with a tongue that seemed unwilling to fully constrain itself. The Bride watched her go, until there was only silence.



The Bride feared she was once again frozen. It was the ticking that awoke her, the click that was ever present in the back of her mind. She would find the clock, device, or whatever it was and remove it post haste, before it drove her mad.

She pushed forward into the foyer. Her eyes scurried over tables, past chairs, to shadows that turned out to be potted plants. She stood for ages in front of a large grandfather clock only to find her suspicions of it were misplaced. The elderly contraption ticked away in perfect time, a rhythm marred only by the three count that the Bride suspected might all be in her mind.

No, she was a woman of good sensibilities. The ticking must come from one of the many rooms in this house. The sound seemed to follow her no matter where she went. Perhaps the ticking came from the room. The room she was forbidden from entering. Was this sound all part of her husband's test? Or was it some cruel joke he was playing on her?

Why would Bluebeard not explain anything more about the room? How dire could the consequences be if she disobeyed him? What kind of house has only one rule to follow? Only one edict to be obeyed?

It suddenly occurred to her that Bluebeard had not forbidden her from looking for the room. Perhaps she would look through a few rooms—they were now hers too, after all—and if she happened to pass by the door that fit the simple steel key, she could decide then whether or not she would honor his command.

Leaving the old grandfather clock to count away the hours, the Bride walked towards the two grand doors at the end of the hall.

On the left door a silver comedy mask protruded from the heavy oak. Worn lines of laughter traced down its face to an empty smile. Two hollow eyes curved in joy, leered at the Bride as if there were a joke being told she didn't understand. On the right, three silver tears ran down the cheek of a tragedy mask. Its face was twisted into a painful grimace, wounded by the joke so joyfully celebrated by its twin to the left. The Bride sympathized.

It seemed to the Bride that in the right light, just from the corner of her eye, the two masks appeared much like her husband. Emoting, but empty. Promising some feeling, showing a tear to the world, but with hollow eyes. The Bride shook her head. What a cruel creature she was to entertain those thoughts.

Pulling up the ring of keys, the Bride flipped one over another searching for the key to this door. A simple steel key. A skull and sword. A running hare.

Two masks, one laughing and the other crying. Yes, this must be it.

She put the key into the lock...



don't

.AND SHE OPENED THE DOOR.



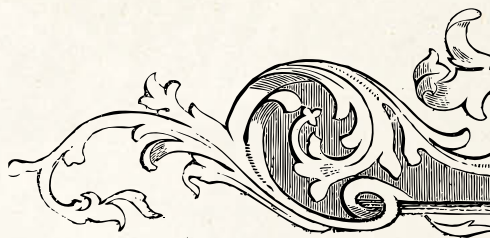
Handwritten notes on a piece of paper, including the name "Diana" and other illegible text.



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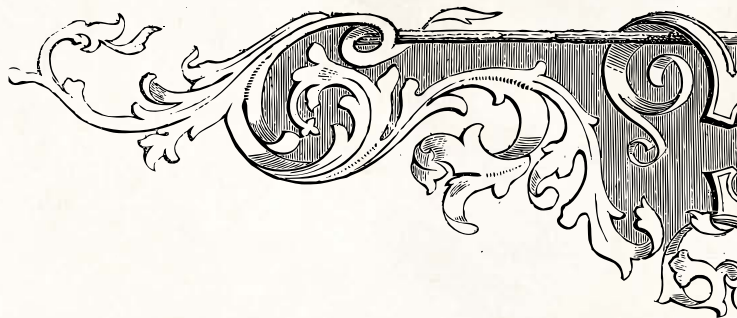
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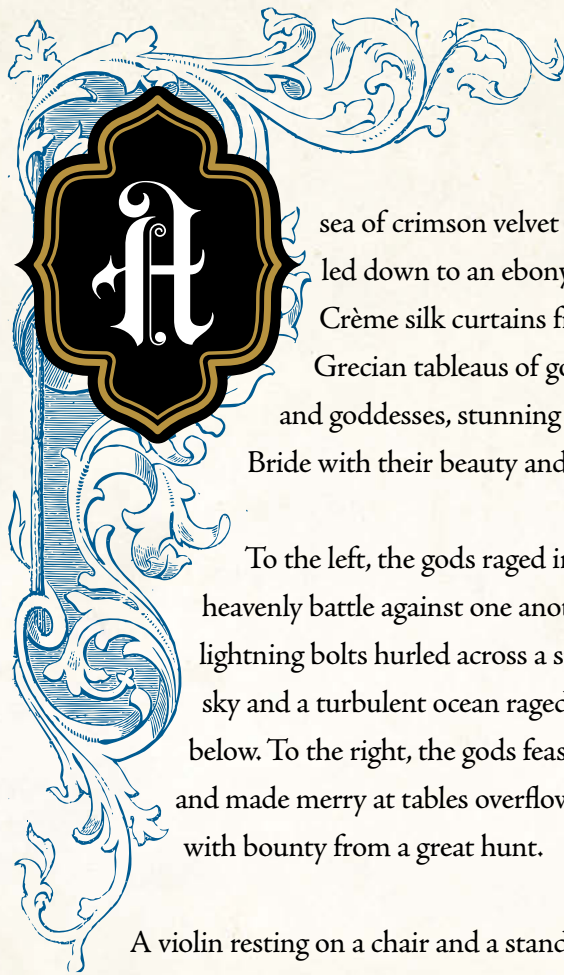
Handwritten notes on a piece of paper, including the name "Diana" and other illegible text.



CHAPTER THREE:

The First Room





A sea of crimson velvet seats
led down to an ebony stage.
Crème silk curtains framed
Grecian tableaux of gods
and goddesses, stunning the
Bride with their beauty and grace.

To the left, the gods raged in a
heavenly battle against one another as
lightning bolts hurled across a stormy
sky and a turbulent ocean raged
below. To the right, the gods feasted
and made merry at tables overflowing
with bounty from a great hunt.

A violin resting on a chair and a stand with
sheet music stood at the center of the stage.

The Bride took in the grand theater; the scent
of lacquered wood filled her nose, bringing
with it a feeling of familiarity. Her grandfather
had often played violin in a place such as this, a
chamber of private performance.



By the time she was old enough to remember him, her grandfather had retired and spent most of his time at home. His greatest joy was spending hours playing his fiddle for the Bride and her sister, entertaining family instead of his employers.

The two girls danced to his music until they fell to the floor. Even then, both only took a moment to catch their breath before one stood up, dragging her sister up with her. Then she and Anne would repeat the process.

When she gave her grandfather his final kiss goodbye, she smelt the soft scent of lacquered wood on his cheek. The scent of music. Of home. Sweet memories brought a smile to the Bride's lips as she walked down the stairs toward the stage.

The Bride sat in the chair, carefully picking up the violin and bow. Before her was a piece entitled "Fatima," sheet music written on what looked like an ancient piece of parchment. Behind the yellowing page was a new sheet, a continuation of the last song...but the Bride's name was written at the top of the page.

The Bride stared at the sheet music, puzzled by what she had found, unsure of what questions it ought even inspire. Strong black notes danced across the sheet. Her grandfather had instilled in her some limited musical prowess, but if she were to understand what was on the pages before her, she must play.

With no metronome to keep time, the Bride paused.



Longing. Stalking. Seeking.

At the start of the three beats, which followed her from one room to the next, she took up the violin and began to play.

Notes poured from the violin, reverberating off the walls of the theater and filling the air with music. The instrument, once a foreign thing in her hands, quickly felt as if it were a piece of the Bride, the bow flitting this way and that to the relentless beat of the silent three count that echoed in the Bride's ears.

The song began with airy breathless notes, each tagging onto the last as its final echoes left the instrument's body. A summer's day, a chase, a chance meeting. Doubt bloomed in the Bride's heart, playing the notes of love in a piece named after another woman.

As quickly as doubt crept into her mind, the music changed, the notes on the page revealing new truths. The melody slowed, as the Bride drew the bow lightly across the instrument's strings. A shallow cry resonated from the violin.

A ceremony, an exchange, a vow.

With that slow crawl, the music's texture became complexly outlandish. Each part of the composition circling the other like two predators. Empty notes followed by voracious violence, music composed to be a perfect contradiction.

At the center of the storm, buffeted from one sound to the next, the Bride's fingers moved to form the notes from the page. Her grandfather's lessons, his careful instructions laid out over years, flooded back to her as her hands forced the violin to give up what secrets it possessed. What it knew about this woman.

This music was not what it seemed. It demanded more than she was able to give. She yearned for the next movement, the veiled notes forcing her onwards, as if she were witness to something secret, forbidden.

Three sharp notes finalized the movement.



The song named for the Bride was more unsure. It stopped and started without purpose, a cloying dalliance without depth or nuance. More a peasant's tune than a real sonata. Her eyes trailed a few notes further to see more of the same.

Then a line further, still more of the same.

Fatima's melody was filled with highs and lows; the Bride's song was a flat line.

Everything she felt inside, the raging turmoil, changes in mood, buried emotions, was strangely absent. Given voice, her song was an empty, simple tune.

If Bluebeard had written this music, what a dull thing she must appear to him. One basic note after the next, monotonously plodding forward into oblivion. The complete opposite of Fatima. A woman who was surely complex, filled with highs and lows, possessed of a surfeit of feeling found in women much better than the Bride.

Fatima would surely be tall, with sharp eyes and a natural curve to the hip that could bear many children when the time was right. Playing music came naturally to her, her swift fingers moving from one string to the next in perfect harmony. Taught by the best tutors money could buy, Fatima was strong, sure of herself. So much like Bluebeard. So little like the Bride.

Suddenly, something dark moved in the corner of the Bride's eye. The bow screeched across the strings of the violin—almost against her will — sending squealing notes into the air. A curious silence filled the room.

Wind caught at the bottom of the stage's curtains, a gust of air from nowhere in particular. No sooner did the Bride turn to see the movement, than she felt a soft touch teasing across the back of her neck.

She spun around, but there was nothing behind her. Slowly, the Bride shifted her attention back to the curtains and inched closer, her knuckles pressed white against the neck of her violin.

In the sharp light of the stage, the black curtains were made of deep shadows. They moved and swayed, hissing as they scraped against the floor. Hovering just an inch above the floor, the bottom of the curtains revealed the tips of a pair of shoes, which quickly stepped back into the shadows the moment light hit upon them.

“Hello?” the Bride stammered, her tone as unsure as the notes written on the page behind her.

The lights flickered on the stage, leaving her in darkness for a heart-stopping moment.

She held out the bow in front of her like a weapon, moving towards the curtains and pushing them to the side. The bow edged into the darkness of the shadows that pressed against the weight of the heavy velvet curtains. Taking a deep breath for courage, the Bride dipped her head into the darkness.

A great shove pushed the Bride into the curtains. The bow ripped from her hands, burning a deep, thin score in her palm. She heard swift footsteps.



“Play,” a female voice hissed at her.

The Bride spun around, immersed in the murky ink of the curtains which now fully engulfed her. She dropped the violin and frantically struck out with the bow, desperately searching for a way out from this velvet prison.

“Play!” the voice demanded.

A small sliver of light shone from underneath the bottom of the curtain, disrupted only by the shadow of a pacing figure. The Bride’s heart raced. Fear took hold of her throat, choking the words she wished to scream into existence. She needed to be out of this darkness. She needed to be away from whatever was on the other side of this foul drapery.

Crouching down, the Bride slipped her hands under the curtain and lifted.

A burning brand whipped across her digits, and then another, and another.

The voice’s tone was shrill, crazed. “Play! Play! Play!” it shrieked.

Screaming in fear, the Bride dropped the curtain and clutched her hands to her chest. The shadow ceased pacing and the shrieking faded to a dark laughter. The Bride’s entire body shook, her teeth clattered, her arms locked to her chest vibrating with such a ferocity they knocked against her chin.

The shadow stepped forward, husky breaths falling against the velvet curtain.

Fear broke the Bride's paralysis. With one great heave she pulled the heavy curtain up and over her. Blinded by the lights of the stage she stumbled forward and felt the lash of the bow hiss past her back and through her skirts.

Knocking over the music stand, the Bride wrestled against the weight of her dress as the pages of sheet music scattered across the stage. She could just make out the name Fatima on the falling sheets, just before she staggered down the stage stairs and toward the door she used to enter this accursed room.

The Bride did not dare look back. She grabbed up her dress and raced away from the stage, the curtain, the sheet music. Footsteps pounded behind her, matching her movements step for step, but then one beat faster. Laughter nipped at the Bride's heels until she finally reached the double doors.

Then, silence.

Daring a single glance before she slipped through the doors, the Bride saw an empty theater, a violin atop a lone chair in front of a stand with sheet music.

What strange phantom had she discovered within this house? Was it the ghost of one of Bluebeard's brides? What a wretched soul the woman must have been. So madly sure of herself, a bully gnashing her teeth against the world.

Could a creature born with such menace live in a place even after she was gone? Passing into the realm of death, but clutching the last remnants of life to stay somehow connected. Part of the invisible web connecting all things for all eternity. And what would such a terrible creature have to do, but ruin the lives of those still living?

No. This bride, this Fatima, was all in her mind. She could not be real.

Exhaustion was the only culprit haunting the Bride. In desperate need of sleep, she could not trust what she saw, for many things dark and dangerous live in the shadows of a weary mind.

Kissing the pain from her fingers, the Bride continued down the hallway. Under the watch of faded family portraits leering down at her from past centuries, she wandered the halls back towards the foyer. The door her husband spoke of could not be down here, out in the open for anyone to find.

The Bride suddenly began to worry that she had already seen too much, more than Bluebeard would have wanted, more than she could stand in a single evening. Perhaps this was why she imagined such a woman as Fatima.

No matter. She was the Bride now. There were no other brides.



The Bride wandered. The sensible thing would have been to walk up the stairs, towards what she could only assume were sleeping quarters, but a large pearl set into one of the doors caught the Bride's eye.

The size of a marble and ashen in color, the pearl was completely surrounded by an intricate bronze shell. The handiwork on these two intertwined marvels was so delicate, it seemed like one could simply pluck the pearl from its home like picking a strawberry from a field.

The sculpture refused to give way to the Bride's gentle tugging. She produced the key ring from her pocket and flipped through the keys. A simple steel key. A cat pawing at a ball of wool. A small worn sigil. A series of jewels set in stone.

A shell with soft ridges matching the door. Yes, this must be it.

With the key hovering above the lock, the Bride hesitated.

Would the phantom from the last room follow her into the next? Having lived with the feeling of dread from the moment Bluebeard left the house, the Bride felt she could no longer trust her judgment. She feared she was not prepared for what she might find on the other side of such a door.

Yet, if she could no longer trust her judgment, surely the woman was a figment of her imagination and the only logical choice was to open another door. If only to prove to herself she was still in control of her faculties. To show herself that she was not afraid of the shadows and the dark, nor of sheet music and velvet curtains.

There was no reason to be afraid of things that were not there.

For a moment, the Bride thought of her sister, Anne. She would urge caution, surely. She would ask the Bride to sleep, to rest before seeing more. Before doing more in this house that was hers and yet not quite hers.

The sound of a servant's voice calling for her broke the Bride from her reverie. It was Maryam, likely searching the house for her now that the hour had gotten late. The Bride had no interest in confronting the maid once again.

She found the key again, the shell affixed to a cylinder of cold metal.

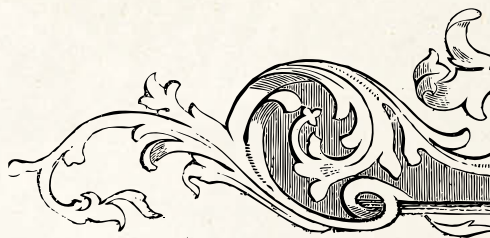
The brass key easily slid into the lock...



Don't

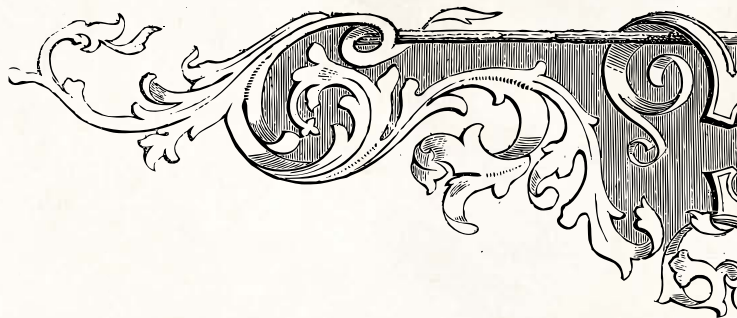
.AND SHE OPENED THE DOOR.





CHAPTER FOUR:

The Second Room





chill crept up the Bride's arms as the shelled door swung open to reveal a set of stone stairs. The Bride's curiosity aflame, she slowly worked her way down the steps, hitching her dress up enough to avoid tripping as she descended.

The stairs turned to carved rock, and just as the Bride felt that she must soon find herself outside the mansion, she came upon a secluded room at the base of the long staircase. She heard the soft swoosh of water as she began to suspect she was beneath the estate.

Half of the room appeared as a small cave; hanging from its rocky roof were multitudes of small, colorful glass jars strung together with cords of glass beads. Each jar housed a single flickering candle, collectively illuminating the rocky room with shimmering light.



Beneath the grotto was a small swimming pool. Diffused watery reflections played on forest green walls of the other half of the room. Murals with gold leaf depicted all manner of aquatic beasts like koi, dolphins, and mermaids.

A statue of the Birth of Venus rested at the back of the cave. Rather than covering herself in modesty, the statue's hands stretched out, water from her open veins pouring into the pool below. Foam formed around the shell from turbulence, making it appear as if her heavenly shell floated above the water.

A few lounge chairs with colorful pillows sat next to the pool. A cloud of lilac and frankincense smoke wafted up from a bowl on a glass-topped table. A small ember of incense flickered left and right, flirting with the edge of the bowl.

The cool waters of the pool were so very inviting. The Bride sat at its edge and kicked off her shoes to bathe her weary feet. No violins here. No stage. Safety.



Dipping her toes into the water sent cool relief over her fragile digits. The edge of her heel stung as it hit the water from where her shoe rubbed against it one too many times. Throughout the night, a blister had formed and popped, leaving a sore wound on her heel. The water bit at the raw flesh.



The Bride closed her eyes and slumped back onto the ground, her head cushioned by a plump navy pillow. The steady sounds of water trickling from the fountain soothed her and the Bride felt blood that had pooled in her feet circulate back to the rest of her body. She felt each muscle and joint slowly, hesitantly, relax.

And yet...pain at the Bride's heel clawed at her thoughts. Despite the quiet beauty in the grotto, it was something that would not let her rest. With each pulse of dull pain, pins and needles crawled up her legs.

She wiggled her toes to let the water play through them, licking over her pinky and between her big toe. Again she felt the biting sensation at the back of her foot. The Bride sighed. There was nothing for it. Despite the wonderful feel of the cool water, she would have to draw up her feet if she wanted to truly relax.

But when she pulled her foot from the water, something tugged back, holding her foot in place. Her eyes flung open in shock and she braced her hands against the richly tiled floor, trying with all her might to pull her foot from the water. Teeth clenched, muscles strained, the Bride was held fast.

The more she tried, the more violently water splashed from her movements. Her skirts soaked up the water, the pins and needles in her legs turning to clawing spiders scratching at her. With a cry of frustration the Bride sat up, squinting through the water on her face to see what it was that resisted her.

A delicate hand wrapped around the back of her heel. Between two plump lips, a pink tongue ran hungrily over her toes. Two bright blue eyes looked up at the Bride. The figure smiled.

In shock, the Bride slipped and fell, plunging into the waters below.

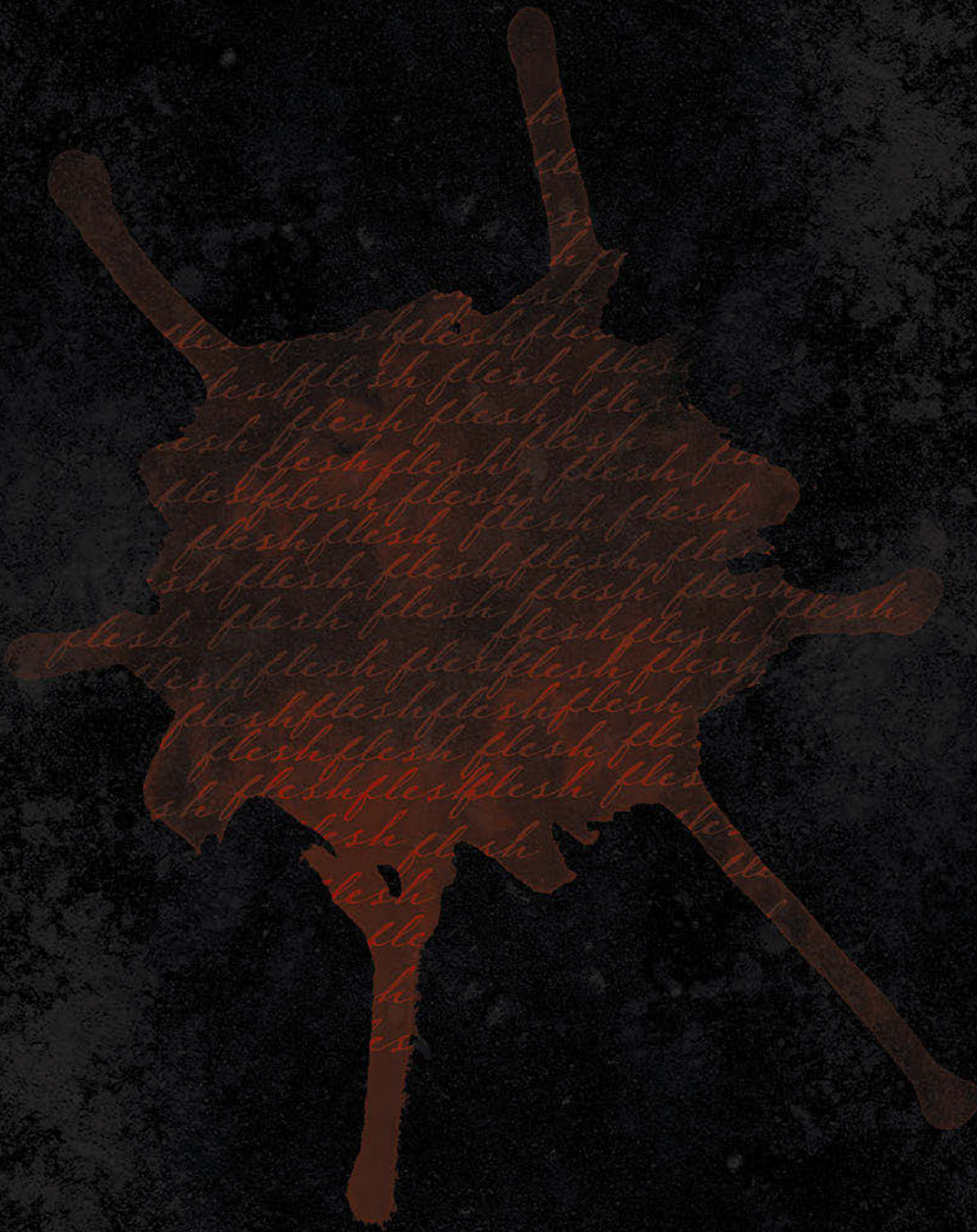


The Bride's skirts flew up over her head, a large white cloud flowing around her in clear blue waters, weighing her down. She thrust her clothing away, frantically searching for the woman she just saw. Bubbles escaped her lips as she tried to hold her breath. Time slowed to a crawl as the water swirled and pulsed.

The woman swam around her in languid motions, like a shark circling its prey.

She whispered, "Look what fate consumed me below. My love he did abide. Look what happened years ago. His sin he could not hide. So I saw he was a beast, and he took from me what mattered least." The woman's whisper echoed through the water, impossibly clear to the Bride's waterlogged ears.

At this, the woman swam into a shaft a sunlight piercing the water, and the Bride saw her as she truly was. She saw her clearly. She saw her true.



The woman's head moved from side to side, and the light revealed bone stripped bare of most of its flesh. She ran her tongue over what was left of her rotten lips, and a sickly green pus oozed from three gills cut into her neck. One of her breasts was rotted away, revealing the empty cavity of the woman's chest.

The flesh remaining on the woman's legs was sewn together. Both her feet were broken, pulled to either side and flayed outward to form a makeshift fin. Whoever mutilated this woman took great pains to sculpt her flesh, the string artfully binding her flesh through tiny pricks poking through her decayed skin.


Sickly, black strands of her hair floated from her wicked head like ink in the water. They formed long black tendrils that poked and prodded at the Bride.

The woman smiled. And grew closer.



The Bride's mind could hold no other thought than a crushing need for escape, for air and light and freedom. She struggled towards the surface and smacked away a braid of hair attempting to wrap around her wrist—but as soon as she did, three more appeared. They grabbed onto her.

As the Bride was pulled further downwards, the woman swam closer.



In her hand she held a small lock of hair, pointed and shining in the water like a knife. Grabbing the Bride's ankle, the woman stabbed the sharp point of her hair through the Bride's calf and pulled it through.

A red cloud of blood seeped from the wound into the water and the Bride cried out in pain. Water flooded into her mouth, her throat, the little air left in her lungs replaced by water.

The corpse paid no heed to the Bride's pain and moved to her other leg, poking it with a skeletal finger, searching for the perfect place to string her legs together. Reaching down, the Bride grabbed the strand of hair sewn to her calf and tore it out. Eyes wide with fear, she stared at the dark clump in her hand.

Agony poured from her leg, but it was a mere sigh of ennui compared to the dread screaming through the Bride's mind.

Who could have done this to this sad creature? Who?

Unable to process more than this single terrifying question, the Bride felt the shadows of death clouding her peripheral vision. With every moment she spent underwater, her body slowly gave in to oblivion. Summoning the last of her strength, the Bride slammed her foot against the skull of the corpse focused on sewing up the Bride's legs.

A dull crack shot through the water. Lifting up her foot again, she stomped downwards with all her might, feeling the corpse's skull give way and her foot crush into soft brain matter. The tendrils around the Bride's hands loosened and she clawed her way to the surface of the water.



Her body slammed against the cold tile floor. Her chest heaved, her lungs desperately gasping for air. For a moment, the Bride's entire body seized and then, arching her back, she expelled the contents of her lungs, then her stomach.

And again. And again.

Prying open her eyes squeezed tight from heaving, the Bride saw a mess of watery hair and teeth mixed with blood lying below her. The Bride let out a small yelp. So did the mass of hair. Two rotting lips kissing their way to the surface wheezed, "Please..."

She screamed and backed away from the mass of flesh and bone.

"Let me perfect you, he showed me how."

Tiny hairs slithered towards the Bride. They caressed her toenails, searching for soft flesh to tie and bind. Gagging in revulsion, the Bride crawled faster towards the stairs, her wet hands slapping against the frigid floor. The hairs crept up her leg, pricking the back of her knees, worming into her navel. The Bride, wet and alone, wrenched the hairs off her cold skin and began to climb.

She was sure that she heard something following her, heard a thing climbing the rocky steps as they transitioned to stone stairs. She was sure she was not alone, sure that she had yet to escape. Finally, she reached the door.



The Bride's bare feet slapped against the dark, hardwood floor as she ran from the door. Cold, tired, wet, and shivering, she searched for a room that was open. Something familiar, anything bright, clear, and inviting. Safety.

She found nothing.

Perhaps that was a wretched kindness from the terrible house. The weight of using another key was too much to take. The discoveries behind each door too great a burden to bear. She was much better off in the hallway. Yet she was afraid of someone finding her here, in such a state, despite all she had been through. Who would understand?

The Bride fell to the ground, hugging her knees to her chest. Water dripped from her clothing, pooling around her feet. Her hair hung loose around her face, curled and plastered upon her forehead. Shuddering from the frigid cold permeating this house, the Bride tried to summon a modicum of warmth into her bones.

Thinking back on the terrible woman in the water, the Bride wanted to pull all her hair from her head. Was it the woman's silken locks that signed her death sentence? Ethereal, otherworldly, inspiration for Bluebeard to ply with his dark arts?

Even if it was not Bluebeard who had hurt that woman, it was his mansion, his domain. How could she live here, when it seemed the house itself wanted her dead?

No matter. She was the Bride, now. There were no other brides.



The shivers running down her spine became so violent and intense that her entire body convulsed. She had to move, find warmth, lock herself away so no one could find her. She wouldn't die out here in the hall.

Limping past door after door, the Bride was struck by indecision. Each choice she made since she decided to look for the forbidden door was worse than the last. She could barely guess what grim fate would befall her in the next room.

The wound on her leg throbbed, and she left a blood trail behind her. The agony in her calf would not allow her to walk. The Bride turned to her left and placed her hand on the door next to her. This was as far as she could go.

The wood of the door was invitingly warm, as if it heard her silent pleas between the sound of her teeth clattering down the hallway. Its simple gold handle was shaped like a feather and at the base of its stem was a keyhole.

The Bride's better sense told her to first look through the hole, see what horrors lay on the other side before she entered. But, in the end, would that actually let her escape her fate? Would that be enough to satisfy?

Flipping through the keys she looked for the door's mate. A simple steel key. A dog's paw. A thin melting candle. A rocky stone smoothed by sandpaper.

A golden key with two perfectly formed feathers. Yes, this must be it.

She slid the key into the lock...



DON'T
DON'T
DON'T

.AND SHE OPENED THE DOOR.



Mary
Brown

Mrs. Van
Dusen
Danden
Duke

to my
best
friend

Mary
Brown

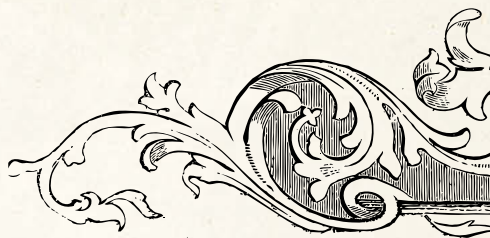
Mary
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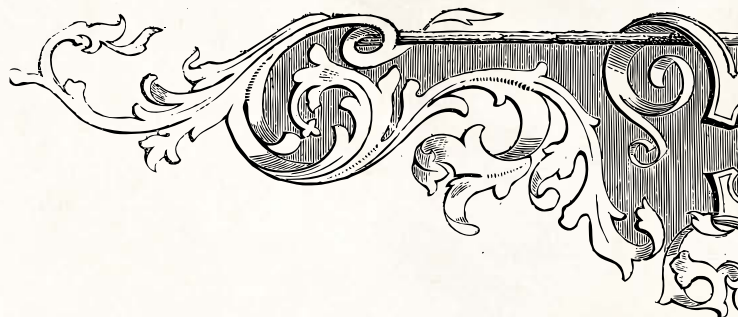
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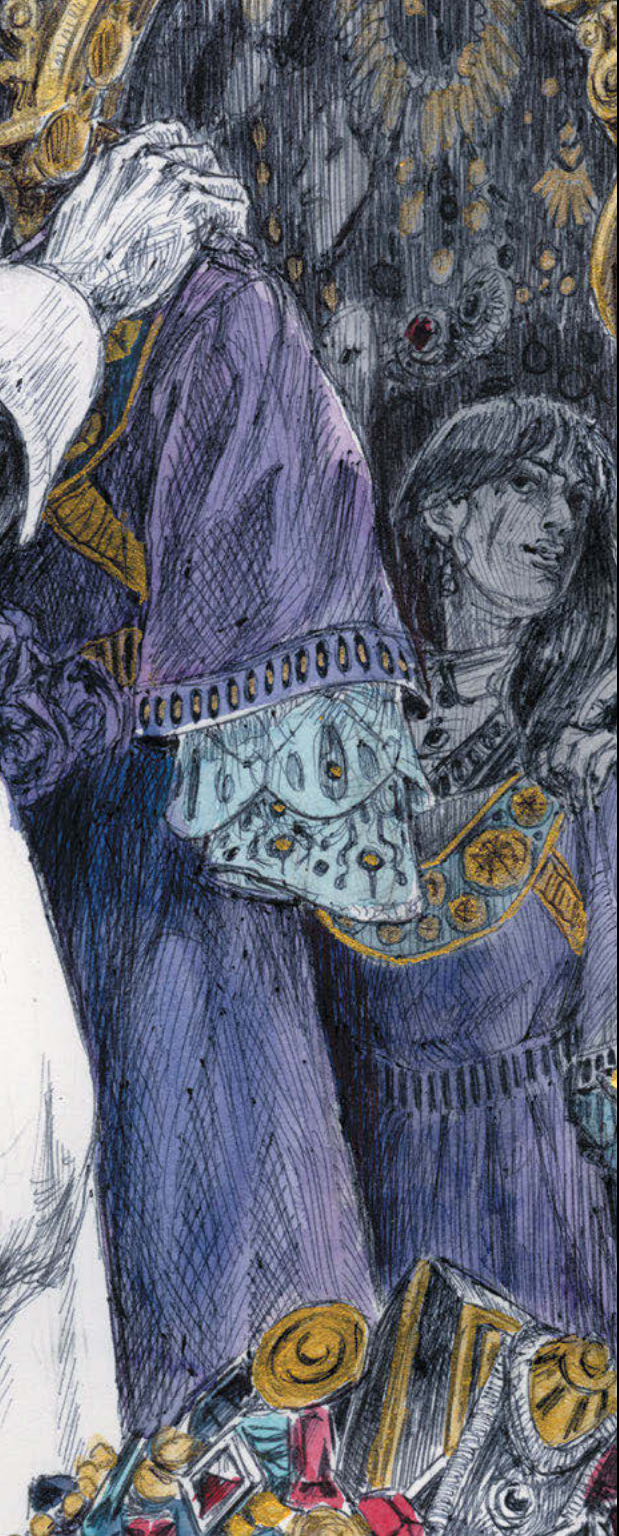




CHAPTER FIVE:

The Third Room





An azure ribbon, tied to the inside handle, fell to the ground. Instinctively, the Bride picked up the end, her gaze following the satin arc cutting through the space of the intimate room set before her. A dressing room, most likely.

The ribbon was tied to various points in the room. Sitting next to each anchor point was a small scroll bearing her husband's seal. The chamber was still and silent, the sounds from outside dampened, floral perfumes and talcum powder a stark olfactory contrast to the viscera of the grotto. Flickering candelabras dripping with crystals sat atop small tables covered in ivory pots of oils, perfumes, and powders.

Anne would love this room, the Bride thought. Ribbons and lace. Kindness. Safety.



Her head swam from what had just happened, her body in shock, her mouth agape. For all the finery this lady's dressing room had, it could not erase the impressions of the sad sewn corpse from her mind. Lost in the grip of terror the Bride followed the ribbon, dumbly pressing onwards.

The ribbon trailed first to the center, tied to a tiny four-legged table topped by a vase of long-stem roses. The roses exuded the gentle bouquet of summer, and the vase was painted with a blue pastoral scene against white porcelain.

She inhaled the peaceful scent of the roses and picked up the first scroll. Running a nail under the wax seal, she unfurled the aged parchment.

“MY INQUISITIVE BRIDE, MAY THIS OFFER RESPITE FROM THE DAY AND PREPARE YOU FOR THE NIGHT. MOVE TO THE NEXT NOTE.”



Her heartbeat finally slowed to a steady thrum in her chest and the Bride took stock of the room. Every inch of her wanted to explore, yet somehow the ribbon confined her to a path she felt she must take. Everything in this house seemed to have an unspoken rule, a law. Yet she was made to stumble blindly through with no instruction. At least the path the ribbon laid before her made sense.



But Anne would not follow the path, thought the Bride. She would go her own way.

And yet the Bride pushed forward along her prescribed satin road.

The ribbon's next anchor point was tied to a dress form. Draped over it was a golden robe made of lace. The delicate fabric was patterned with thousands of flowers and sparrows. Tiny winged creatures seemed to fly up the long bell-shaped arms of the robe and spiral downwards to the floor. Feathers curled around hearts woven into the lace with tiny bits of sparkling glass.

This second note was stark: "**TAKE OFF YOUR CLOTHES. MOVE TO THE NEXT NOTE.**" The handwriting was steady, controlled, penned by a strong hand.

The Bride was sure it was her husband's script.

Looking down at her soiled wedding dress, the Bride suddenly wished to be free from the garment, from the humiliation she had experienced in it. What she saw in the last room could not have been real. Could it? Her wounds still oozed blood.

Peeling off layers of satin and tulle, pulling at laces, pressing back snaps, the Bride stood naked in the fine room. Her waist bore a thick red stripe from her skirt, her chest white from the corset's tight pinch, her stomach bloated with fear, sadness, and hunger. She was thankful for the loneliness and solitude of the dressing room.

Reaching out for the robe before her, the Bride stopped. It was such a fine, delicate thing. The dress form much smaller than she. This robe was not meant for her.

She took it anyway. And opened another note.

“WASH YOURSELF.”

The ribbon led the Bride to a large basin of water and a towel. Steam curled off the porcelain basin evaporating into the air. Crimson rose petals floated atop the water, rocked from side to side by the steam like tiny boats on an unsteady sea. Next to the basin was a perfumed bar of soap finer than anything that had touched her skin before.

When she plunged the soap into the water, tears welled in her eyes. What a relief it was to clean herself, to wash away what she had done before, the folly of her quest, the quiet rage she felt. The Bride brought the towel to her body, and water ran down her belly and onto the soft carpet beneath her feet.

Overcome by a great wave of exhaustion, by the hot water against cold skin, she swooned. Falling backwards she was caught by something soft behind her. A sofa. A chair. She allowed her weight to rest against it, to sink into the relief of not collapsing, not embarrassing herself again.

Then again, what did she have to be embarrassed of? She was alone in this room.

The Bride breathed a sigh of relief. She tilted her head to the side and studied the subtle stripes of the wallpaper. The steam from the bath poured into the room, covering it, obscuring it. The lights from the candelabras dimmed to a soft glow and each bottle of perfume wore tiny droplets of condensation.

The Bride felt something slide against her ankle. Wary of the last room she looked down, but saw nothing but steam from the basin. Her imagination was getting away from her, the Bride decided. For her sanity she needed to relax.

Moments later the Bride felt the touch again, something smooth and hard that glided up her inner thigh, leaving a trail of water in its wake. A firm grip pulled at the Bride's hair and wrapped itself once, twice in her long locks. Her head was pulled back, and a great heat thrummed at her neck.

She felt like she was floating, like she was dreaming.

There was no panic, no shock at this intimate touch. The Bride kept her eyes closed.

"I could stop this if I wanted to," she said.

"But you don't," a strange voice replied. It was husky, deep, but distinctly female.

"But I don't," the Bride echoed.



Cheeks flushed with life and lust, the Bride followed the ribbon through the parting fog. Free from the pain in her calf, the Bride stared down the curves of her body and saw her wound had disappeared. Knitted together by the magik of this room. Or perhaps, just maybe, it was never there in the first place.

The foggy trail led the Bride to a chaise lounge. Gold silk pillows rested against pink cushions. Upon the seat was a platter with a long handled razor, bearing her husband's monogram. The blade was new, never worn, shining and bright.

The Bride picked up the scroll next to the platter.

"CUT YOURSELF."

The Bride dropped the scroll, allowing it to slowly fall to the ground, cutting a languid path through the fog. What was controlled in the previous notes was here wild and insistent. The curvatures of the *y* sloppily crashed into the *o*, the cross of the *t* slicing through the words. In the humidity of the room the ink had bled through the paper, marking the Bride's clean hands before it fell.

Could this note be written by her husband?



The razor was flush against her wrist. Biting her lip she pressed it into her yielding flesh and a bead of blood formed on its rosy surface. There was a sense of serenity in feeling a pain she was sure she inflicted herself. She enjoyed it.

Was the madness she felt clawing at her mind simply self inflicted? In some dark part of her mind she painted Bluebeard to be a demon, but he was only a man. Sickly beard or no, did what she saw in him condemn him or her?

Could this sad state she was in be due to the illness of being a woman? Cursed to doubt and fear, fret and question, ask, probe, demand. She was filled with questions and there was no relief in sight. Her breath quickened.

Another bead of blood rolled down the side of her wrist and fell to the floor. She watched it fall from her body, free from the feminine trap it was forced to survive in for so long.

“Free yourself,” the deep feminine voice whispered to her once more.

“Cut myself?” the Bride questioned.

“It’s the only way.”

“To be free?”

“To know freedom,” urged the woman.

“Is there a difference?” Once more the Bride doubted.

“Does it matter?”

“I could stop this if I wanted to.”

“But I don’t,” hummed the female voice.

“But I don’t,” the Bride confirmed.



The golden robe just barely covered her breasts and belly, and only when the Bride pulled it tight with one hand. Still, it was better than wearing her soiled dress to bed and who knew where her suitcase was? The door of the dressing room clicked closed behind her and the ring of keys jingled in her hand. Step by step she traveled down the hallway.

She was free now. Free to find her place.

Washed clean by water and blood, the Bride's mission lay clear. She must find the door. She must know. If not what was behind it, then at least where it was. This strange land she found herself in was filled with too many horrors to count. Horrors from without or within.

It was clear now that this path she was on, her plunge into the ocean, was set out long before she entered the house. From the first moment she spied that terrible blue beard and the man who wore it. Was the man she married the twisted figure she first met or the wise grey haired figure she first kissed?

Could he be both? Or neither?

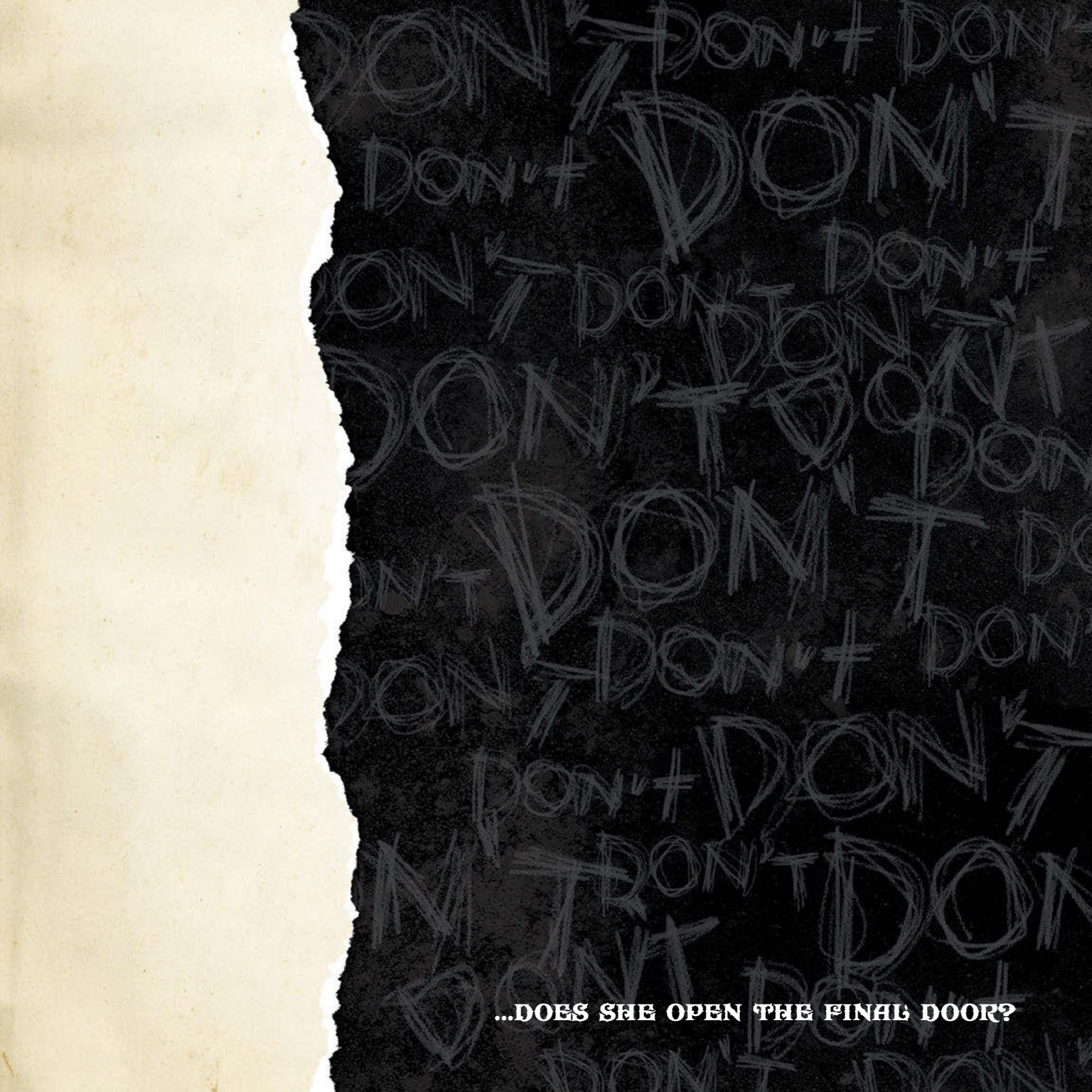
No matter. She was the Bride now. There were no other brides.



Turning the corner, the Bride spied a simple black ash door at the end of the hallway. The type of door that could be opened by a simple steel key. Behind it lay the answers she sought. The sound of her bare feet padded against the floor.

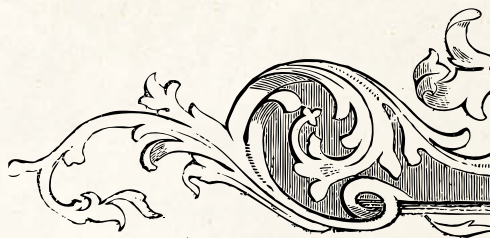
One. Two. Three. Yes, this must be it.

Her nails clacked across the keys. Longing. Stalking. Seeking.



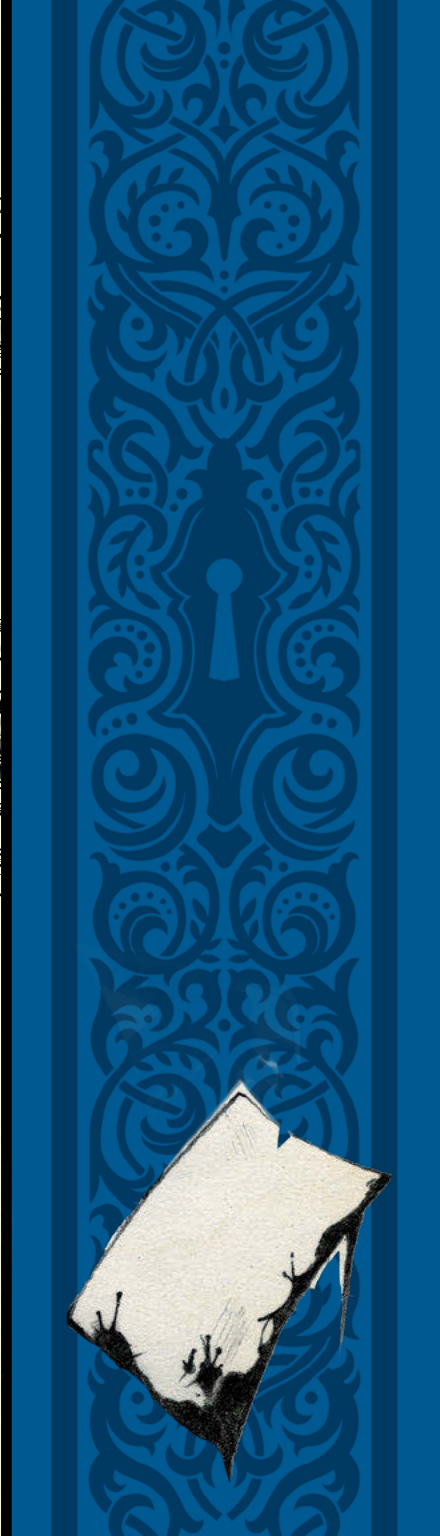
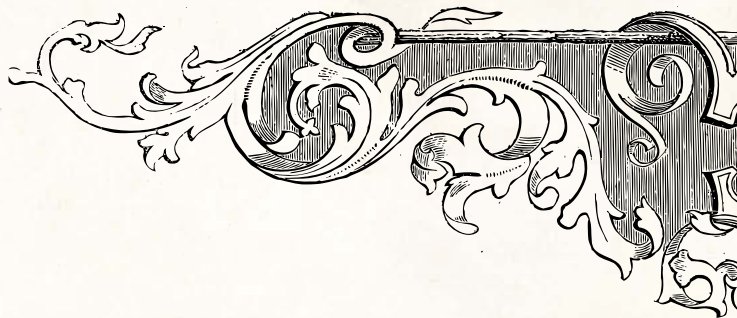
...DOES SHE OPEN THE FINAL DOOR?

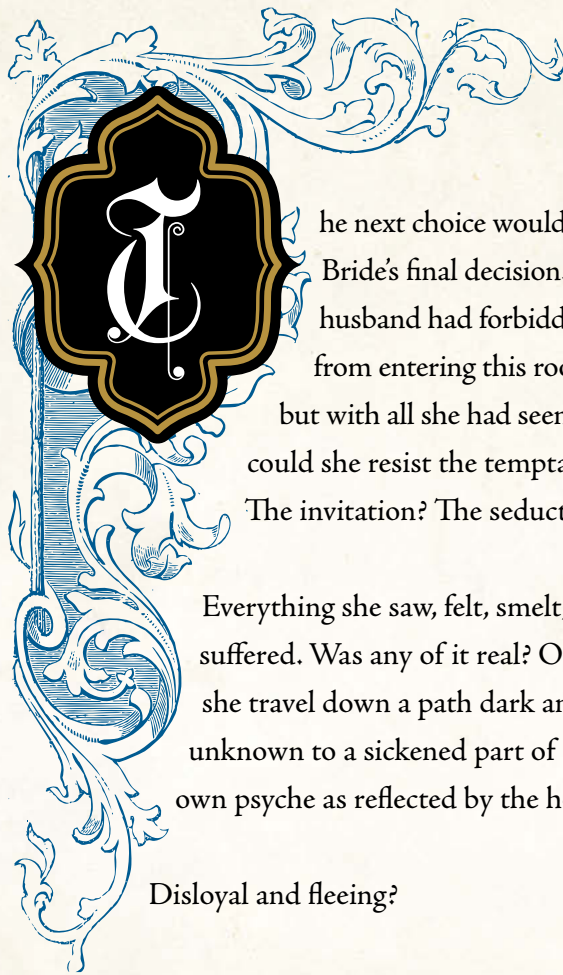




CHAPTER SIX:

A Choice Is Made





The next choice would be the Bride's final decision. Her husband had forbidden her from entering this room, but with all she had seen... could she resist the temptation? The invitation? The seduction?

Everything she saw, felt, smelt, and suffered. Was any of it real? Or did she travel down a path dark and unknown to a sickened part of her own psyche as reflected by the house?

Disloyal and fleeing?

Faithful and sated?

Curious and doomed?

The Bride knew that she was about to reveal something crucial about who she truly was...

IF THE BRIDE IS...

DISLOYAL
TURN TO PAGE 87



FAITHFUL
TURN TO PAGE 90



CURIOUS
TURN TO PAGE 93



CHOOSE WISELY





The Bride Is Disloyal

A cruel hunger ate away at the soul of the Bride's new home. Shadows were deeper here, metal keener, and everywhere she looked signs of her husband's misdeeds were woven into every room. In the dust gathering on the mantle, stuffed into the meat pies in the kitchen, sewn into the fabric of his jackets. It surrounded her.

She would not look in Bluebeard's forbidden room, but she also would not allow herself to be swept up into the cruel hands of fate. Such was not her story.

As the Bride fled her husband's home, the wind whistled through her robe and snarled in her ears. It cut at her, bit her lips, tore at her hair. Through a howling storm the Bride pushed away from the mansion and onwards to the village.

Jagged rocks tore the soft flesh of her feet and the Bride fell with bleeding soles onto the steps of the Town Hall. Despite her pain, she allowed herself a sliver of happiness at her escape.

But the town was not happy to see the Bride.

Placed alone on a chair, surrounded by the folk she once knew so well, she recounted the tale of her husband's cruelty. Bluebeard who had thrown the town such a fine wedding feast. Bluebeard who had showered the Bride's family in finery. Bluebeard who had only spoken kindly of his wife.

Who was the Bride? A pretty face valued at a higher price than she was worth, and now it had gone to her head. A liar spinning tales of a pious man to satisfy her need for attention.

She was a broken woman, clearly a villainess with something to hide. She cast the blame elsewhere to protect herself.

The Bride's story was dissected and questioned at length by the villagers. As they berated her with inquiries, a simple but most tragic thought occurred to her—she had escaped from one cage into another.

For her lies, she was placed into the stockade. When the first stone slammed into her temple, it was the sting of failure which brought the first tear to her eye. The second tear came from humiliation. The third from sorrow. And then came pain. So began her days, each bleeding into one another marked by three tears. Failure. Humiliation. Sorrow.

At one point she was released. Destitute, broken, unclean, and unwanted. Caked in mud and filth. Never once did she fear her husband coming for her.

Bluebeard would not come for her. Not like this.

Finally, she understood a woman's worth.



The Bride Is Faithful

Her fingers traced along the strong brass handle of the final door. The metal was cold to the touch, sending shivers down her spine. Her fingers dug into the brass filigree, touching every bump, sliding into each crevasse.

She knew this door. She had always known this door.

A heady aroma came from the room, the same intoxicating musk her husband wore. It was the scent of dark promises, alien hunger, righteous retribution. The seduction of the unknown called to her. The Bride would not open the door, but she could peek through the keyhole. Just a bit.

Her eye slowly adjusted to the sliver of light. The walls were splattered in red. Five, six, ten, or more bodies slumped over one another. Each a woman bearing the same ring she wore on her finger, and a beautiful gown now stained and torn.

Dead eyes set in horrified expressions stared at her, but the Bride could only pity them. She'd learned her lesson. This is what happened to curious women.

And so the Bride resisted the lure of her husband's final door.

Bluebeard arrived home the very next day. Swept into her husband's firm embrace, the Bride's questions slowly faded from her memory. The faithful man before her was no more a criminal than she was for ever doubting him.

Taking her husband's hand, the Bride allowed him to show her all the delights his great mansion had to offer.

Her first night in the rooms taught her that she had but two choices. She could be swept up in the madness of resistance and suffer for it. Or, she could play to her husband's whims, bend rather than break, live, survive, and possibly thrive.

Thus, the Bride truly became a Wife.

Door by door. Room by room. The couple played and explored, they toyed with agony, drank in the dark humors of love, which only two souls flayed bare before one another can truly understand.

And when Bluebeard became bored of exploring the rooms with his Wife, the two would hunt together. The Wife swallowed her fear, gagged her doubts, and learned to love the chase. The hunt. The kill.

The Wife twisted and contorted to fit her husband.

She lived happily ever after.



The Bride Enters the Room

Opening the door brought tears to the Bride's eyes. Not from sorrow, but from the rank stench assaulting her nostrils. Tears clouded her vision as she stumbled forward, and the Bride tripped over a soft, heavy lump upon the floor. As she fell to the ground, pain shot through her body, crying out through her weary bones.

The wooden floor felt rough against her cheek. Her loosened hair matted with blood from her fall. For a moment the Bride lay on the floor in utter stillness. The silence in the room weighed heavy on her shoulders, pressing her further into the uninviting floorboards. She shivered uncontrollably.

In the cold, accosted by the scent of death, she let the invisible sword hang over her head for one more blessed moment. But when the embrace of ignorance could no longer quiet the feeling of dread welling in her stomach, she opened her eyes to see two cold, lifeless orbs staring back at her.

The shock of her hideous discovery was enough to cause the Bride to scream, but the sorrow written upon the dead woman's face was drawn with such ferocity, the Bride could only pity the poor creature. Gazing into the woman's eyes was like peering into the depths of a broken heart.

The Bride's reached out for the corpse's hand, one last kindness, an embrace for the dead. As she grasped the woman's hand in her own, she felt a ring. Her fingertips just barely touched the crest etched into the ring and the Bride knew.

It was identical to the wedding ring she wore on her finger.

The Bride screamed. In agony, in rage, in sorrow. She was one among many. She was only a bride. There were others.

And so Bluebeard found the Bride, wrapped around the body of the woman who came before her, in a room filled with many others just like them. The Bride's lips quivered; her eyes bulged from her face. Raspy sighs came from her lips, her throat so swollen in terror it refused to let her scream.

“WHAT WAS THE ONE THING I ASKED OF YOU?” Bluebeard asked as he pried his Bride off the corpse. “WHAT ONE THING?”

A heavy weight fell on her chest. Minutes passed. Hours.

Locked in her terror, the Bride felt every moment and, with each new terrible sensation, the pain only truth can bring.

Finally, she was the perfect bride. Already feeling a familiar hunger in his gut, Bluebeard laid her corpse next to the other women he had previously laid to rest in his forbidden room.

It was time to find a new wife.



WHAT ENDING WILL YOU CHOOSE?

A beautiful wedding. A room full of corpses. A terrible choice.

The **BOOK OF LORE** bloodies the hands of its reader, demanding they choose the terrible fate that befalls Bluebeard's Bride.

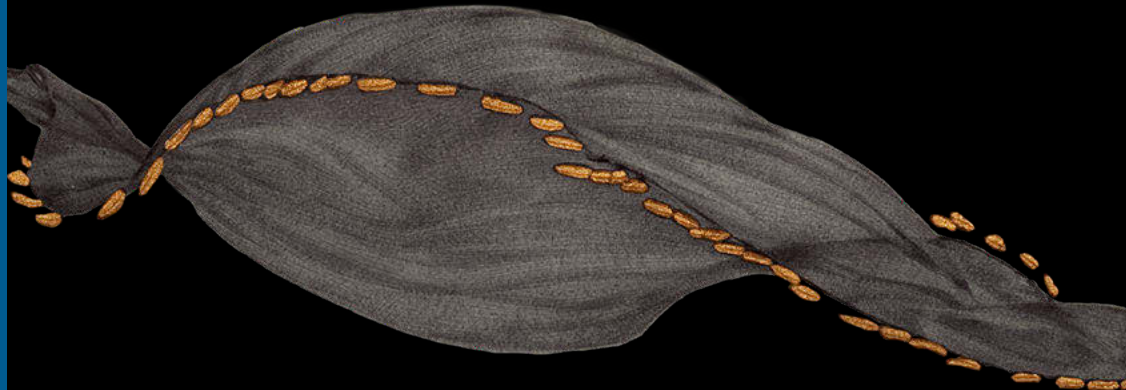
Between the shuddersome pages of this dark fairy tale is an enticing retelling of the classic story that is every bit as horrific as playing the Bluebeard's Bride. Give in to terror as the Bride makes her way through the glamorous mansion, knowing that when she stands before the final room, you will decide whether she opens that fateful door. Choose wisely...

The **BOOK OF LORE** is a supplement for **BLUEBEARD'S BRIDE**, an investigatory horror tabletop roleplaying game for 3-5 people, based on the Bluebeard fairy tale.



POWERED BY THE
APOCALYPSE

Rating: Adults Only



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