

Never come to Hellfire House without wearing a mask.

It was one of the rare rules in a joint without any. The only rule the master of the club did not mind following. He blended in with the sea of suits and white masks that arrived every other night, switching appearances from crowd to crowd. A bartender one moment, a dealer at the card tables the next.

Only his face remained the same, half-masked and haunting. Like a prince who relished the bloody crown on his head, and the ghosts that came with it. A face almost hardened by beauty, though glints of youth ran deep beneath soft black eyes. It always shocked new guests, to see him. The master of the House was rumored to be a dragon of a man. A monster. A magician who had no mercy for fools.

Only those who dared slur the word *boy* in his face understood how true those rumors were.

To the rest, he played the devil on all shoulders, leading patrons to his bar and game tables, guiding them toward his enchanted smoke lounge to drown in curated memories. The warmth of first love, the heady rush of triumph, the immense joy of dreams come true. The master kept a selection of sensations, and one hit of the pipes delivered magic the people came crawling to his house to taste.

They had no idea the show that was in store for them.

The master of the House sipped his short glass of scarlet whiskey in peace, tapping along the wide black strip over his brass knuckles. He'd long since manipulated his attire, sitting casually at a card table and savoring the mayhem. Raucous cheers erupted from the next table as dice rolled out across the surface. Smiling Hellfire girls in black blazers and masks of lace

denied patrons begging for a dance. Loudest of all, the dealer's crisp shuffling of the black cards with teeth-white numbers before she doled out hands to players at the table.

"No, no more," one moaned. "I can't."

"Sure you can, chap." A young man in a white thorn-edged mask cheerfully pressed him back in his seat. "We can't leave. Haven't even finished your drink, yet."

His drunken friend's mouth puckered under another gulp. "Think it's true, the drink? *Magician's Blood*, the menu said."

"Think you have power, now?" Thorn Mask laughed, leaning back to appraise the club. "Here, you take your magic where you can get it. You wear a mask. You flip a card, smoke a memory. Or you look up . . . at her."

The master's fingers tightened around his glass, just as the lights dimmed. Dancers cleared the floor under the hush of music, shifting from smooth, steady beats to a racing rhythm loud as thunderous applause.

Right on cue.

The band's worth of instruments he'd charmed for the night started up a wild entry tune of drums, the thick trill of trumpets. Chatter ceased and backs straightened as a beam of light speared toward the ceiling. A panel slid open over the dance floor.

And the chandelier descended.

Strings of crystals dangled along tiered rims of rose gold, cutting sharply into a jewel-set swing where a masked showgirl sat. A throne of glittering jewels, casting luminous lace across the walls and the ground and the audience taking her in. Her brown skin glowed against her corset, red as her gem-studded mask. Arms stretched out, she crossed and extended her legs in

smooth lines all the way down, until her heels touched the lacquered black dancefloor. With the hint of a smile, she rose from her throne and stalked forward, thrusting a hand up with a snap.

Darkness engulfed the room.

Hoots and hollers rang at the drop of the beat, before a glimmer of her form reappeared in the shadows. The room pulsed at her command, matching the spike of heartbeats the master sensed throughout the club.

The smirk on his lips matched the girl's as she arched her back to the raw stretch of the melody. She thrived under the attention, like a wildflower under the sun. A star finding the night.

His star.

"I'll be damned." The drunk at the card table breathed in awe, as the girl's palms began brightening with a molten glow. "Nothing like an academy girl."

"Worth the trip, right?" His friend clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"I didn't know they could be magicians like . . . *this*."

The master smothered a dark scoff under a sip of whiskey. The girl showed off good tricks—improvised and bettered from his basic crowd-pleasers. Treating the ceiling like a sky and showering comets from it, casting an elaborate shadow show of dancing shades over the floor, shifting every candlelight in the room to different colors to the beat of the music.

But always the performer, she preferred to be front and center. Teasing her power just enough to make the audience want more of her magic, more of her.

He wet his lips as flames shot from her hands, arcing over her head and around her body. The fire's melody bent to her every movement, and she gave everything to it. If she wasn't careful, she'd overexert herself like she did most nights, never knowing when to stop. How to pull back.

Careful never was her strongest suit.

Sparks fell before her, sizzling on the ground. Unafraid, she sauntered down her stage of flames with slow swaying hips and a firelit smile.

“Magicians like this are best kept a secret,” Thorn Mask went on. “And besides, the work is far too scandalous for a lady. Only clubs will take them.”

“What a shame. Imagine going up against the likes of her at the competition.”

The master paused, drawing his gaze back to his glass.

“Not this again. That flyer was nothing but a joke.” Thorn Mask slapped the table with a groaning laugh. “A prank.”

The drunk sloppily patted around his coat, pulling from his breast pocket a dirty, scrunched ball of paper. “It’s real. They’re all over the academies, in Deque and New Crown and—”

“A *prank*,” repeated Thorn Mask, unfolding the flyer anyway. “It has to be. No one’s been to that city in ages, it would never open itself to such games.”

“That makes it all the more interesting, don’t you think?” As another roar of cheers erupted around them, the friend sipped his drink smugly. “Imagine if she entered, the city might implode.”

“Right. As if that would *ever* happen.” Thorn Mask leered. “Competition would eat a creature like her alive.”

“Because she’s . . . ?”

With an impish lift of his brow, the man in the thorny mask flicked the flyer off the table and returned to his forgotten spread of cards. “Let’s get on with the game, shall we?”

Before he could gesture at the dealer, the master suddenly appeared at their table, snatching the young man's wrist in a biting grip. The man yelped as the force knocked over his drink, and sent a stream of hidden cards spilling out from his sleeves.

"What's this?" The master bent toward the ground and picked up a couple, entirely too calm. "Cheating in *my* house?"

The man froze, recognition dawning at the brass knuckles alone. "Where did you—I-I mean," he sputtered, patting frantically at his sleeve. "That's impossible. Those aren't mine, I swear."

"Then where did they come from?"

Sweat dripped from his temple, his face paler than the white of his mask. "I emptied my pockets at the door. Honest."

*Honest.* That was the best he could do? The master almost laughed.

"You want to know the price cheaters pay in my joint?" His question offered no mercy. Only deliverance, served on ice. "Memories."

"No, please!" The man's lip trembled. "I didn't, I-I'll do whatever you want!"

"This *is* what I want." The master rose from the table with the jerk of his wrist. The cheat flew to the ground in a gasp as he gripped at the invisible chain-like weight around his neck. Sharp, staccato breaths followed the master as he dragged his prisoner toward the smoke dens.

The man screamed, but no one heard him. No one saw, no one cared. All eyes fell on the star of the show as she searched for a dance partner to join her. The drunken friend, noticing nothing amiss, raised his half-full glass of Magician's Blood to his lips before waving his hand high like the others. The man thrashed harder, only to feel his cries smothered and deeper in his throat. His form, invisible at the sweep of the master's hand.

With a disdainful glance, the master chuckled. “You’re only making this more difficult for yourself. One memory won’t kill you.”

At once, he paused. The lights blinked around them, the air grown still. Dim and hazy, as though locked in a dream.

He thought nothing of it until he caught the movements of the patrons—their arms raised and waving slowly, increment by increment. Their cheers dulled and stretched into low, gravelly roars, as if the sound were wading through heavier air. Against time itself.

“Where do you think *you’re* going?”

The sound of her voice slithered around him, stopping the master in his tracks. The man quieted. Sweat soaked his pale face, his chest heaving. The showgirl stood in their path, every stare in the room still locked on the spotlight floor where she’d been. As though she’d never left.

Impressive.

Her red corset glinted as she cocked her hip and pointed at the man on the floor. “I choose him.”

She could never let things be easy.

“Kallia,” he growled, warning.

She smiled. “Jack.”

“Pick another. He’s a cheater.”

Her lips pursed into a dubious line. “Then let me teach him a lesson. He’ll no doubt prefer it more.” She swung a leg over the man’s prone form so she stood directly above him. Invitation dripped from the crook of her fingers. “The music calls, darling. Let’s have ourselves a grand time.”

The man's terror turned swiftly into awe, and he looked at her as if ready to kiss the ground she walked on. As soon as he took her beckoning hand, the room resumed its lively rhythm—a song snapped back in full swing. The cheers and hollers returned to their normal speed, exploding in delight as patrons found their lovely entertainer in their midst, her chosen dance partner in tow.

She bypassed the master, pressing a casual hand on his chest to move him. It lingered, he noticed. Unafraid, unlike most. Their gazes locked for a moment, their masked faces inches apart.

No one ever dared to get this close. To him, to her.

Only each other.

At the next round of cheers and whistles, she pushed him away, smug as a cat. Tugging the man close behind her, she sent fires onto the ground that illuminated her path and warded others from trying to follow them to the stage. Never once looking back at the master, even as he watched on after her.

His fist tightened, full of the cards from his earlier trick. They disappeared into mist, having served their purpose. Along with the flyer he managed to grab.

He didn't even bother giving it a read. It died in the fire caged by his palm. Tendrils of smoke rose between his brass knuckles, and when he opened his fingers, nothing but ash fell to the ground.