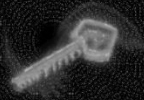


**even the brainless would know to continue on**

*for all know that*

**the closet clerk's caducity**



*cannot be cast away*

2



*and it's more*

**good luck for the bad-mannered traveler**

*from 78741251*

A bell began to toll somewhere.

I paused to listen, and idly wondered where it was coming from, but quickly bypassed my curiosity and got back to walking. It was just a bell, and with all things considered, it didn't seem all that important.

The mansion was unlike anywhere I had been before. Although I saw the occasional pearly balcony or alcove furnished with fancy tables and chairs, it was mostly just a hallway--an endless line of crowded doors that covered every inch of wall for as far as I could see. And they were all jammed shut. None would open.

How was I here? I couldn't remember coming here, or where here even was. And, actually, when I stopped to think on it more presently, I couldn't remember anything else either.

"Hello?"

I tested my voice. It was deep and with a drawl.

Who was I?

I remembered... a light. I was in a blinding light.

It carried me away.

From a place with thick air. Muggy, terrible air.

But where?

Had I been with a great many souls just like me, cramped into a really tight space?

Or was I alone? Maybe I was among others, but with none like me at all.

I couldn't remember. All I remembered was the light.

The light carried me here and dropped me free.

It left me in an empty, dust-laden room. The door was open, leading out to this hallway. I meandered out and down the hall, pulling a door handle every so often, only ever met by the same shake and rattle.

I checked a hundred doors. I checked a thousand doors.

Door after door. Deep mahogany panels, white painted trim, and a polished, golden knob. Over and over.

I pulled another handle just for the fun of it. I knew it wouldn't open, but what was the harm in trying? It shook in place, stuck to the frame.

Just as I turned to continue, a transparent head emerged from the door and hovered before me.

I stopped. It was a girl--or, well, it was a girl's transparent head--with a young face and curly white hair. Her neck ended in a thick carpet of curling, writhing worms that I couldn't look away from.

They squirmed like centipede legs and were odd in a way that took me a moment to place: eventually, I realized--with a bit of horror--that they were grasping little arms, each no longer than a finger.

We stared at each other for a moment, listening to the soft echo of the faraway bell. And then she spoke in a jittering, singsong voice.

"Why--you--why are you... what did you? How?"

I had no idea what she was saying.

"W-What?"

She wavered and grew solid, and then her voice became clear.

"How have you come to the closet?"

"What? The closet?" I asked.

She didn't respond. Her eyes went glazy and she suddenly flew forward, into me and through my stomach, out of my back, and up to the ceiling, where she began circling the hallway chandeliers.

"You, traveler, you do not know." She called down to me. "We are clerkless. I am clerkless. Oh, why would Boden look upon such failed frailty now? Of course, he would not. I am but derelict. I am but filth."

Her voice hung on the dull wind, elongated like an echo.

There was a dull wind.

Why was there wind inside a mansion?

She began to weep softly. I spoke without thinking, just trying to make her feel better.

"Hey, you're not filth, I don't--"

The hairs on my neck stood on end, and she spun in the air to face me, apparently angered by my attempt.

"What would you know?" She yelled. "You don't know! Where are you from, anyway? You don't know anything!"

"Uh, true. I don't really know--" I began, but she ignored me.

She drifted on the wind, flying a few feet above my head, and then slowly spun down until she faced me again, wearing a much calmer expression.

"But look at you... you. You." She whispered.

"Me?"

"Yes. You. It could be. Listen. Listen to me. I have... you may be..."

She looked up at the ceiling, and then back at me.

"May I bend your ear, traveler?"

"Uh, yeah. Sure. I don't have anything going on."

"We need help. Our Clerk walked away. She disappeared into the oh-wid. The chancellor heard the news, and went straight off and hanged himself. With him gone, the duty lies on me to replace the Clerk and fill the closet slat. I was to, and I promised to. Merely my being was enough to seal that promise. I made an oath: the slat would be warm for the calling. But I have erred. I have caused the tolling of the bell too soon... do you hear it?"

She paused, and I did hear it. The tolling bell. It was still far away, echoing through the hall.

"Yes. I hear it."

"The bell tolls, yet the closet slat is clerkless. Do you understand?"

I took a minute to try and process what she was saying, but I just couldn't. I didn't want to anger her again, but this wasn't making sense.

"No. I don't. What's the closet? And why does it need a Clerk?"

She frowned.

"And they call me brainless. Of all the rustic flateyes to shamle in, my luck would carry forth the dimmest, gandering, wandering fool. Dyeus does test me. Your lopsided feet are currently standing in the closet foyer, traveler. How could you come here and not know? We are there, only a door away."

"Alright." I smiled. "Noted. What is it?"

"The closet is... a backdoor from all the worlds in the oh-wid. It acts as a counterweight. The Clerk sits on the slat and holds the balance. Yet my mistake has ruined us all--I have not only looked upon, but I have grasped, the one thing I was never meant to see. And now the bell tolls. And the closet is broken."

She paused and looked up at the ceiling again.

"What'd you grab?"

She turned back and her carpet of worm-like arms parted. A blue clenched fist grew down from the center of her neck, and then an arm, which bent forward and hung before me. The fingers slowly unfurled, revealing a shining hunk of metal.

It was a white ring attached to a small white rod, lined by jagged teeth.

“A key?” I asked. “You grabbed a key?”

“Not any key. The key to caducity.”

She paused in a dramatic way, like maybe the key to caducity held a lot of meaning to her.

“And what is caducity?”

She sighed, “Infirmity. Age and the steps to death. Madness.”

“Infirmity? Weakness?”

“Right. Dyeus has learned you a bit, at least.”

“Why is there a key to that?”

She looked puzzled, cocking to one side.

“How would it stay locked without a key? A lock requires a key.”

“Yeah, but what are you locking?”

“The balance.” Her voice grew frustrated. “The keys lock the balance of all things. Caducity locks the balance of the mind. It keeps the madness alive, and the sane in check.”

“What? Why would you want to keep madness alive?”

She was growing angry again, and began to raise her voice.

“What worth is sanity if all is sane? Don’t be a fool. It is required. Sanity becomes corrupted. Madness becomes corrupted. Together, they maintain balance. Do you know anything?”

“No, I really don’t. Sorry. So, you grabbed the key.”

“Yes. I hold the key, and now I am the Clerk, at least partly. I have not taken up the others, but I have caused the tolling of the bell, all the same. And a brainless cannot be Clerk. We cannot! I have thrown the balance away. The oh-wid is smearing, staining. I have sullied Boden’s work.”

She began to softly cry again.

“Alright. I think I understand. Kind of. I think. But how am I supposed to help you?”

She met my eyes.



“Take it from me. Take the key from my hand.”

“Take it? You can’t just give it to me?”

“I want you to have it. But I can’t know how the hand will react. Just reach out and try to grab the key.”

“Why?”

“If you can grab it, then you will save the oh-wid. The stains won’t be erased, but it won’t smear any further. Please, try. Please. Take the key.”

She was desperate, pleading me.

I took a step back.

What the hell did I get myself into?

**I grabbed the key**



the the the

the the the key

I grabbed

I grabbed

the key

my fingers curled around cold metal

and teeth bit into my skin

I felt it

I grabbed the key

but when I looked down at my hands,

so foggy and cracked by the passing of time,

the key

seemed so far away.

I felt it slip from my palm.

It fell,

from the sky, so massive, twisting through cavernous space,

until it landed, shaking the earth, resounding like a heavy, tolling bell,

onto a key ring overhanging a mountain.

And then it was all so small, and only shrinking, only getting smaller--

I was back in the closet foyer, surrounded by doors, facing the young girl's disembodied head.

"Well?" She looked eager.

"Well, what?"

"Did you see it?"

"I saw the key. It was far away, and it fell onto a key ring."

"Oh, good. You have done it. We are saved. Thank you, travel--ah, Clerk. Thank you, Clerk. Now, quickly, to the slat."

"Okay, but wait--what does this mean for me? Act like I don't understand any of this shit at all."

She shook back and forth, "No. No. There is no time for this. We must go to the slat. We must collect the keys. You must, and then you will know. But first... what do I call you?"

She paused expectedly.

"I have no idea." I said.

"What? You do not know yourself?"

"Uh... no. Not at all. But wait--"

"Then we must speak with the Recollector. You need to know. The keys need you to know."

"Listen to me, god dammit!" I snapped. "I don't know that I want to do this. I don't think--"

"Quickly. Follow me."

She wasn't listening at all, and began away, hovering down the hall.

I called after her, "Listen, lady, can't we just talk about this?"

She was flying quick--faster than I could walk. She bobbed down the hall and rounded a wide curve, and then I couldn't see her anymore.

God dammit.

I looked behind, down the twisting hallway. There was nothing for me there. I sighed.

**I had no choice. I followed her**

through the straight,  
the winding,  
the wide curve of a hall,  
moving past mahogany doors  
and past mahogany doors  
and past mahogany doors  
and past mahogany doors.

Until, with so many hours gone, I saw one that wasn't mahogany, just ahead at the end of the hall.

It was red. Deep red, like a cherry stain.

The floating head girl was waiting in front of it.

"Where have you been?" She scolded me.

"Jesus fucking Christ, lady. I can't fly. I had to walk, okay? It takes a god damned minute."

"What? What is Jesus fucking Christ?" Her voice wrestled with the words as she spoke.

I paused. I said those words, but I had no idea what they meant.

"I... I don't know."

"Intriguing. Come. The Recollector will know."

The red door popped open and she quickly flew inside.

And then she screamed louder than anything I had ever heard, shaking the air around me.

I ran in after her. The room beyond was tiny. It was an antechamber with another red door and only enough room for a small folding chair, which was currently occupied by a corpse.

The body looked horrible--bloody and mangled and shredded into strips.

"Oh, hello." A light, carefree voice spoke.

It came from a shrouded figure leaning against the wall.

"Were you looking for him? I'm sorry, but I couldn't resist. A Recollector? You don't just wander into meals like that."

The figure was a bundle of wrapped up black rags with only a mouth uncovered.

"Who are you?" The girl screamed. "What have you done?"

"Relax, noggin. My name is Abraxas, son of Emperador. They call me the mouth. But I guess I'm also the Recollector now. Pretty neat. Anywho, I'm in a good mood. And I feel kind of sorry for... well, that."

He motioned to the disfigured corpse on the chair.

"I can recall anything he could. And as an offering of goodwill, I'll do it free of charge. So, what would you like to know?"

"I... this is highly unprofessional." The girl looked toward me. "Should we still use him, Clerk? He's a killer."

"Oh, I'm unprofessional?" Abraxas scoffed. "You're a floating head, love. A far cry from the ancient assistants, that's for sure. And this guy... this is your new Clerk? Where'd you get him, 1977?"

She ignored him and kept staring at me.

I didn't know what to say.

"Uh... I mean..." I stammered. "What choice do we have? I need to know, right?"

"Yes. You're right." She turned back to Abraxas. "We need to know the Clerk's past."

"No problem. Lemme get a look at you."

He didn't move, but was suddenly before me, leaning in. And then I saw waves around the edges of my vision.

Purple waves.

Abraxas and the girl fell away, and all I knew were purple waves.

They were in a pool, emanating from the center, coursing along the edges in a wild, violet tempest.

I stared into them. I could see myself staring back. And then I learned.

*My name.*

*My life.*

*My afterlife.*

*My everything.*

*I knew it all.*

**In a fiery instant, my world was mine again,**

*and a fleeting, dissolving moment later,*

*the waves were rolling away,*



and then I was staring at Abraxas' mouth.

His lips moved but his voice lagged behind, "My, my... you're a naughty one, aren't you?"

The purple waves receded completely. I missed them already.

"A fine Clerk, you'll be. That about do it?" He asked.

I nodded. Yeah.

That was everything.

The girl flew to me.

"So, you know yourself now?"

"Yeah. I do."

"Good. To the closet. Come."

She led up to the other door and it popped open, just like before. I followed behind, still mostly numb from Abraxas' recollection.

He called from behind, "Keep an eye on your Clerk, love. He's a biter."

But she wasn't listening.

I knew. Now I knew.

I knew who I was, but not how I got here.

I didn't remember dying. Was this even death at all?

I stepped into the next room.

It was a gargantuan, black auditorium of space with a simple wooden slat bench in the center, lit only by a tiny spotlight.

The girl was bobbing impatiently above the chair.

I approached it and she nodded down.

"Please, have a seat."

I did. It creaked noisily.

And then there were seven keys before me, floating in the dark.

"Yes. Take them up. Take them." Her voice was erratic, and so pleased it was almost in pain.

The keys hovered toward me.

First, a copper one touched my hand. I grabbed it.

“Yes!” She screamed. “More! Take them all!”

And then came a silver key, one of iron, and one of gold. I took them up.

“Clerk, you must continue! More!”

There were three more.

A key of black glass, one of clear glass, and one of wood.

I grabbed them all. My hands were full of keys.

“Oh, Clerk!” She wailed as if climaxing.

I tightened my fingers around them, and then I was staring at the mountain again.

But I felt stronger this time.

I was larger. I looked down at my hands, and though still foggy, they were much closer than before. The tiny keys slipped free from my palms, falling,

and landing on the great ring above the mountain,

one by one,

each resounding with a powerful, ringing peal,

until they were all clasped in place.

And then I was back in the closet.

I felt the heft of the keys on the ring behind me. Not physically, but back there somewhere, far away, hanging over the mountain. It felt good.

“Oh, Clerk...” She was exhausted. “You have done it.”

Would it work?

I knew so much about my new position, but I had a hard time believing it would work.

I reached behind, across the grey valley, toward the mountain and its ring, toward the wooden key, and my fingers curled around it. I lifted it up, and then I was back on the slat, wooden key in hand.

“Wonderful, Clerk. Wonderful. What is your first order?” The girl was beaming.

I pushed the key forward, into an invisible lock, and as I turned it, I felt the thing tug open. Wood was life. The balance of life. I had access to it all, flourishing and growing beneath me. I could see it.

If I was right, then it should be as simple as thinking...

“Clerk?” The girl’s expression changed to worry. “What are you--”

I pulled the key free and she burst into flames, screaming in agony.

I smiled. Yeah. This was going to be something else.

I was the Clerk.

Clerk Eoghan. Nice ring to it.