



“Be a place where the dragonflies play?”

I nodded my head.

“That a euphemism?”

Shook it.

Another drag and a *tap tap* of ash into an opal bowl she’d picked for an ashtray. She eyed me suspiciously.

“How?”

This was almost too easy.

“You just have to imagine real hard,” I told her. “Sustain an image in your mind. Make it your world, make it *real*.”

I saw the hesitation. Granted, it sounds like bullshit.

“You have a gift, my dear. One that many would cut or be cut for... But I understand, it’s your decision.” I got up, pretending to leave. “There are others I can ask. I thank you for your time...”

*Three, two...*

“Wait!” Oh just look at those eyes. So round. So *needy*.

I buried my satisfaction in what I hoped looked like a humbled bowing of my head.

“And in exchange...” I could hear her desperation. It was stringy, stretched, like melted bitumen at the mercy of gravity. To have dangled her so near the edge of despair had been cruel. And totally effective. “You’ll give me what I want?” She looked so hopeful.

I slipped my lips aside to reveal pearly whites and nodded. Yes, I’d give her what she thought she wanted.

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‘Where I come from is of no importance. I have many names and many jobs. Some might be called unpleasant, but I pay no heed to these things – there’s no sense in attaching a label of pleasant or unpleasant, cruel or humane, not where my work is concerned. A job must be done, regardless of moral attribution. Think of me as a facilitator, and one of great prowess at that.

But I digress. Back to *her*. She was a perfect conduit, a shining example of a pure, creative mind. I had little doubt she’d be able to sustain the dreamscape.

She had no idea what she was, of course. They seldom do.

I suppose you'd call her an angel, given your lack of understanding of these matters, but she's more like a god. Her species are the original creators. Older than time and twice as powerful.

They fall to Earth periodically, each trying to understand humanity through the human experience: love, hate, fucking, queuing, coffee... And nearly all of them don't remember a damn thing about who they really are. They just drop down here and stumble blind through this shitstorm like the rest of us. Once more, I digress.

These creators, they're perfect to borrow for a little dreaming – it's in their nature to create. They can't resist. It feels... *right*. Hop inside their skulls and as long as their minds don't wander, you can have a day, a month, a whatever of *whatever* you want. Think of it like VR, only much more realistic and fully interactive.

A few decades back, some of the guys and I decided to treat ourselves to some *leisure time*. I convinced this star to create a beauty of a world – sand dunes lapped by crystal waters, wind that gathered the scent of rain and jasmine and spun them, just the right amount, through swaying trees whose boughs were filled with all manner of exotic fruits, ancient and extinct and juicily begging to be plucked. There were vintage ambrosias from our lands in fine-carved carafes of moonstone and sapphire, and forgotten worlds held in dishes of pure diamond. And we *partied*. In fact, we managed to keep that party going in its perpetual sunset for a thousand days... until the star's mind blew out.

Again, digressing. Maybe I'm getting old.

#

'I like to start my stars off with a job that satisfies all those niggling questions. *Yes*, you're doing right, it says. *Yes*, this is a service to humanity. *Yes*, trust Mister Malik to look after you... And if *I* get paid in the process, well, a service paid for *always* feels better, more solid for the recipient, right? And a demon's gotta eat.

The first gig we worked together was a breeze. Dying kid's family wanting a last hooray together before he snuffed it. Peachy. And I could see my star getting comfortable with the idea that I wasn't such a bad guy and I would, by all accounts, give her what she wanted.

"Now," she said when the work was done. "Now will you let me forget?"

How little she knew. Or rather, she knew just the wrong amount.

I could've told her. The things she sees when her eyes are closed – things that make no sense – come from different times, different lives. From when she's descended before. From when she was creating. And if she'd remember *just a little more*, she'd be free.

But that wouldn't pay the bills, so I said, "Yes. I'll help you forget. I'll give you context and boundaries, fists and flight and smoke and adoration. I'll let you forget everything in worlds of your own making. I'll find you people that need your gift. I'll help you create your every desire and their every need. You'll lose those troublesome fragments of shadow and nightmare, the itchings that scratch at your mind and tug at your heart. I'll let you play and wander and dance.

"With me, you can let your true nature out. Dream for me and those dreams will be your freedom. Dream for me and *forget*."

So she stayed a while longer. And in the downtime between gigs, I'd be on the hunt for another of her kind... Maybe this time one a little less fixated on details and more all-over with the vulnerability. I just hoped I could find another before she figured out who she really was. Because she'd get herself one day. And it'd be one day soon.

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But today's not that day! Tonight, we feast! I've got a real good gig here – a great big fat payday for *me, me, me*.

So I get her, my angel, my star, my creator. We head to this guy's apartment. Why it always has to be a seedy, velvet-covered scrim-dimmed shithole I'll never know. (Seriously, money doesn't seem to have an effect; it's like shitbags need the décor to match how their shitty souls are.) We get there, my star already half-cut on mead and a little dash of something I've slipped in her drink, and, well...

The guy is *nuts*. Real, money-killed-brain-cells, bat-shit nut-job. The kinda guy you know would fuck a horse if left alone in a field.

He's requested a foray in a galaxy-cattle-themed whorehouse with a full range of firearms. (A fairly run-of-the-mill request but certainly no dying-child-in-wheelchair gig like she's been used to.) And he's asked to meet the star.

Trust me, if he hadn't shoved an inordinately large amount of money under my nose, I wouldn't have agreed. But he did. So... Here we are. Only, the client doesn't seem to understand that the star isn't part of the merchandise.

“There’ll be a cornucopia of whores in the world we’re making you. Wait a minute and you’ll be there.”

He backs off but the star gets a little shaky. Wants out. She’s corroded. Exhausted. But... Once again, my persuasive skills soothe the situation. She preps. We hop inside her skull, and we can feel the sun on our skin, smell perfume and gunmetal and cunt. There are rivers of blood-red wine coursing through valleys bright with dandelions etched from solid gold, women grazing and writhing and oblivious in an oak-fenced pen beside the brothel... and I’m focusing so intently on these details so I don’t have to eye the truly dreadful set up this schmuck has got us to create. While we’re inside the whorehouse, I pretty much keep my eyes skyward and on the shining patent leather of my boots and nowhere in between.

For the client, at least, it’s perfect, and it’s all going oh so well... until it’s not.

My star starts losing it halfway through.

And I don’t blame her. The whole thing is the wrong side of perverse. It’s the monstrous side of deviance. And the client, King Asshole of Asshole Land is thoroughly enjoying himself in a way even I find off-putting. My angel’s mind starts to buck and hee-haw and try to throw us out of there. Chains drip from walls, AKs and blades turn to mulch in the client’s hands, and pretty soon the star’s mind is sufficiently warped that the ground is now made of cowhide and the air unbreathable, being composed as it is of two-thirds blood. The last third I’ll leave to your imagination.

It’s all I can do to get us out in one piece.

Once we’re back, gasping like reeled fish on the client’s shitty white leather couch, he starts yapping about lawsuits and refunds, but I say he’d gotten his product – duration was never guaranteed.

Then the star pipes up. “I’m a creator,” she says. *Man, she’s bombed*, I think. *Maybe a little less acid in her mead next time.*

“Yeah, honey, you’re a goddamn creator.” I turn back to the client. “Look,” I say, “you got what you wanted. You asked for a playground, I gave you a playground. You know anyone else who can offer you quality this good?”

My star’s voice cuts through the client’s response. “I’ve made *worlds*,” she says. “Actual *worlds*, with more people and species than you have neurons and...”

*Oh shit.*

“And you’ve got me here as some kind of *theme park*, selling rides to *shitheads*.” Out of the corner of my eye, I see the client flinch as she jabs a thumb in his direction.

“Now sweetheart, I can see you’re not feeling so hot, how about a lie-down?”

She clutches her head like she’s trying to stop the contents from spilling onto the rug.

Then it’s like time slows for her.

For the first time since I’d met her, she seems to take in her hands, her skin, the world around, seeing it all, *really* seeing it, in all its shitty glory.

This is not good.

“You’ve had me so wrapped up,” she says, regaining momentum, “creating experiences for *assholes* that I forgot what I can really do. What I’m *made* to do.”

*Oh, gods.*

“I have the *infinite* power to *create*, motherfuckers. I-” she throws her arms into air that she and her kind probably exhaled from their own sweet lips long before I even knew the word *exploitation* and points at the client again. “I made all of this. *I made you*,” she says.

“Bitch!” he says.

*Oh, buddy.*

“Servants don’t address me with pointed finger. You’re here to serve. You’re here to do my will.” He strides toward her, muscles already tensed for a backhand across her face. “You’re here to do as I sa-”

It’s like something bursts. The star’s face lights with a jolt and a huge grin *zings* across it. She summons blue orbs to her fingertips and flicks them carelessly around the room. Her movements are quick, practised. And we’re *so fucked*.

“Ha!” she laughs, and it sounds like a hailstorm of diamonds. “I don’t have to do *anything*.”

The client’s flesh begins to deconstruct, falling from his bones like disintegrating pixels. He tries a look of shock before his face dissolves.

“I,” she proclaims, “am a fucking *god*.” The swagger flexes and uncoils in her limbs. “You have misused my sisters and I for-” and here she appears to check her memory bank. *Shit*. Her eyes pop when the results come in. “A really fucking long time, Malik. What the fuck?”

I'm on the back foot. What can I do but wheedle and plead like the asshole I am?

"Babes... honey... sugar... I was trying to *help*. Surely you can see that? And, well, everybody needs to make a living."

"Bullshit! We've got better things to do than create worlds for your pleasure. To make your *pathetic* fantasies come true."

It's not just her fingertips that are glowing now; it's her whole being. She's radiating this ghoulish blue that must highlight the panic around my eyes in an extremely unflattering way.

I try to run. I try to hide. I try to cry. But there's nothing you can do when someone with absolute power over the world and its atoms wants you dead. Or not dead. If they want your molecules chilled to arctic temperatures, you're their popsicle.

She even froze my tears and let the ice cut my eyes.

But this isn't a pity party. It's just... *boy*, I had not seen a fuck-up this big coming.'

#

I rest my voice, my tale told and still, miserably, unchanged.

There's silence for a time – how long exactly I can't tell you; time here bears little resemblance to Earth time – and then this voice pipes up. It's my voice. Only it's coming from a version of me that's barely the age of my toenail. And I want to give myself a slap for that gormless fucking look on my face.

'So, she trapped you here to make an example of you?'

'Yeah, kid. I'm your own personal cautionary tale,' I say, knowing full well (being a few rounds into this) that I can't just slit his throat and exit the game. *Like you wouldn't believe*.

But he would believe. I could tell him, right now, and he'd be all *holy shit*. But it's not enough. I've tried – more than a few times.

This world I'm in... It's purgatory. Penance. Punishment.

My star (is it weird I still think of her as *mine*?) made me this sweet little pocket of atoms all of my very own, and in it I'm stuck until I manage to persuade a younger version of myself not to make the same mistakes I did. And guess what? They do. *I do*.

I have to watch myself doing the same things – the things that landed me here – *over and over*.

*Penance.*

It's a great plan. Fucking great plan.

But I gotta tell ya, I might as well make myself comfortable because I don't think a lot of us know how to change.

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