

It's a gloomy day when Ezra gets the first letter. The clouds hung oppressively low in the sky. The morning air carried with it a chill that persisted from the early hours and refused to die.

It's from his old friend, Mahlon Desdemona. He hasn't heard from him in years. Though once as close as brothers, they drifted apart when Ezra decided to move west, where the bustle of city life provided him an escape from the quiet monotony of the countryside.

The letter was filled with pleasantries and fond reminiscences but came attached with a request to visit his family's estate, for he had a favour he dared not ask of anyone else. Anyone else and Ezra might've tossed the letter into the fire to use as kindling to stave off the morning chill. But this was his old friend—the same prideful boy who'd sooner fall off his horse than ask for a helping hand.

The first letter alone would have gotten Ezra on an eastbound carriage, but shortly after the first letter, another two followed in its wake. The second letter came from the same sender as the first. Only unlike the elegant calligraphy of the first, it seemed as though Mahlon had written to him in urgent haste, as though pressed for time. To add to its strangeness, the letter spoke of how he should disregard his latest request, that there was no need to make the long journey. Faced with such contradiction, Ezra paused; long enough that he barely managed to receive the last letter before departing east. This letter came from an entirely new sender—a maid by the name of Gabrielle—writing to tell him that Mahlon had suddenly fallen into a deathlike sleep.

[->]

[He takes note of the cold welcome he's received in, despite having fond memories of most of the senior staff. So much for absence making the heart grow fonder.]

It's been years since he last stepped foot in the Desdemona manor. It's exactly as he'd remembered. From the carvings on the ceiling to the ebon floorings in every room. Gothic decorations decked every inch of the manor and somber portraits hung on the walls. Life at the manor was as lifeless and suffocating as ever.

[No wonder why he hated coming over as a child. As though the frosty atmosphere wasn't welcoming enough, he feels a familiar shiver run down his spine. As a child, he'd never really been able to place a name to the feeling—it's only now that he recognizes it as the feeling of being *watched*.]

[->]

A maid leads him to Mahlon's bedside.

The room is large and lofty, befitting someone of royal status. The windows, long and narrow, provide an undisturbed view of the countryside that the Desdemona family owned, stretching on for miles. Comfortless, antique furniture decorates the room. Center of it all, laying on a bed fit for any king, is Mahlon. Ezra almost doesn't recognize him. In his every memory, Mahlon is filled with a vitality that rivalled the sun. A shining light that persisted in a place determined to snuff it out. Laying there with his hands folded over his chest, pale and motionless, he seems almost drained of life.

[->]

Pained to see his friend so frail, Ezra revisits their old haunts. Meandering over to the study, he rummages through the desk's drawers, to their hidden compartment where they'd left each other secret notes.

[Open drawer]

Huh... What's this for?

Looking around, Ezra notices the floor in front of a bookshelf seems scuffed. Moving it reveals a hidden door.

[Try the key]

The door creaks open, revealing a spiral of stone stairs, coiling downwards into a black void of darkness. The stone walls glisten with moisture, shadows clinging to the walls as though trying to drag the world into their inky embrace.

Ezra wouldn't be much of a detective if he'd left.

Everything that's happened thus far is shrouded in mystery. He takes a breath, squares his shoulders, and begins to descend—steps swallowed by silence—until he finds...

[->]

...an underground cellar.

Wandering inside, he's met with a towering vaulted door, shrouded in shadows. The Desdemona family crest glares down from above, a silent judge. The air is still, heavy with the scent of damp stone and something older. Fouler.

A quick sweep of the room reveals a single table pushed against the far wall, holding a silver tray and a flickering torch—the only source of light in the suffocating darkness. Its flame dances erratically, casting long shadows that writhe across the floor.

A single painting adorns the stone walls of the cellar, staring at Ezra through the gloom...

[It's a replica of the cellar, save for a mysterious light source cast over the crest.]

[Use the tray and the torch to reflect a light over the crest.]

[->]

Despite himself, Ezra feels a thrill of excitement shot through him. He's not been this intrigued by a case since he first started as a detective. Teeming with anticipation, he enters the chamber.

[-> The door shuts itself closed behind him]

The smell hits him like a punch to the stomach—thick, putrid and acrid. An abominable mix of odours, alien to Ezra's senses but somehow still *wrong*.

Covering his nose proves futile against the reek, and it takes him a moment to regain his bearings.

He wishes he hadn't.

The room stretches outward in a massive arc, a heavy mist clings to the floor and the walls rise high and curve inward like the inside of a grotesque womb. But what's worse is—

Rows of cylindrical glass tubes are embedded in the walls, each pulsing faintly with dim green light. They stretch from the floor to the ceiling, stacked like coffins. Floating in the tubes are figures that could have once been considered humans. Each encased in a viscous, bluish

fluid—suspended motionless, with cables plunged into saggy flesh. Some are naked, others in tattered clothing. Each one's face is pale, waxy, lifeless.

And yet—familiar.

There's Mr. Claye, Mrs. Arden, and—and—dozens of others Ezra had once known. Familiar faces he'd half-remembered from childhood, people he'd grown up around. Neighbours, teachers, shopkeepers. All of them had simply... moved away. That's what everyone had said. That's what he'd believed.

But they hadn't.

They were here.

Preserved. Entombed. *Displayed*.

He staggers, blue light warping their faces into something both familiar and monstrous.

His breath catches at the sight of one of the tubes.

One of the Desdemona maids.

The woman who opened the front door when he'd first arrived at the manor, greeting him with an icy glare. He'd thought it strange; he'd always known her to be kind. He'd thought she'd simply grown bitter with time; kindness never survived long in this world. But no—

She was here. Floating motionless with the rest of them, uniform still clinging to her and her hair floating adrift. Ezra stumbles back, pulse hammering in his chest.

Either something was pretending to be her.

Or something had *replaced* her.

Shuddering, he forces himself to move deeper in, the mist curling around his legs thicker now, the hum of machinery louder. And then he sees it.

A larger chamber opens up at the end of the corridor, lights flickering to life above a single unit.

The glass is clear and pristine. Tubes dangle like vipers, hissing as they pump in the thick liquid.

A nameplate gleams beneath it, freshly engraved.

"Mahlon Desdemona."

His heart pounds against his ribs.

Just beyond the glass, a shadow moves. Watching.