Your small hand makes a small knock on the giant black door. It swings open. A tall figure fills the frame, its face shrouded.

“Who are you?” it asks in an accusatory tone. It peers over your head with an anxious look, as if expecting something terrifying to come from behind you.

“I am a candle in the dark,” you reply.

The figure nods its head. “We already have many candles in the dark here. What makes you special?”

You think for a few seconds and reply, “My flame burns brighter and bluer than the rest.”

“Is that so? Prove it.” The figure waves its shadowy hand over your head, and your wick begins to burn. The figure quietly observes, then, after a moment, says, “That is quite a bright and blue flame. However, it is no brighter nor bluer than the other candles I have allowed in.” The figure cast its hand over your head again, extinguishing your flame.

“I will give you one more try to distinguish yourself.”

You think again, this time for a few seconds longer, and reply, “My flame burns slower and quieter than the rest.” You have no way of knowing whether this is true or not, but decide to gamble out of desperation. This is the first door that has ever opened for you.

You sense a smile emanate from the darkness. “Excellent. That is exactly what I’m looking for.” Its voice has completely lost its darkness, now imbued with satisfaction. “Welcome. Please come in.” You hesitate, as the figure did not even bother to verify your claim. As this thought develops in your head, the figure seeps into the complete darkness behind it. You shudder and start to reconsider why you came here to begin with, but you remember the oath you took: *I am a candle in the dark. I will fight the darkness as long as I am able.*

You move forward, and the door closes behind you. The blackness is total, except for a very faint light coming from a distance. Suddenly, you feel yourself being lifted and brought towards the other light’s source. It is another candle on a wooden table, about to join the darkness.

It whispers with smoke-filled lungs, “I shall tell you what the one before me told me on its last breath. Do not be alarmed at what you first see behind this curtain of darkness. If you flicker, you will burn out instantly. The creature is not what it seems.” The dying candle sputters until it takes the last light with it. The figure wastes no time. You feel its hand pass over you, and your wick springs to life. Your light pulls back the curtain of darkness, revealing a living nightmare.

It is a massive pile of candles. All of their wicks burnt to oblivion.

You begin to flicker uncontrollably, but remember the words that were just imparted to you. You focus on your flame and your flame alone.

You sense the figure move near you, but it does not extinguish your flame. This is a different sensation, like a very small piece of you has left.

“You’re a demon!” you hiss.

The figure sighs, and you hear a creak, much like the sound of a wooden chair being sat in. “Your friend who just passed on said the same thing when they arrived. And the candle before them. And on, and on, and on. But each calmed down after I told them my story. If I tell it, will you listen?”

You begin to burn bluer and brighter. “I assume if I don’t listen, then you’ll just throw me into the pile with the rest?”

The figure chuckles. “No, no. I’d just place you back outside. But I’m sure you wouldn’t want to go back out there.”

You know the figure is right, so you cast away what is left of your ego and decide to fully commit to the figure’s story. “I’ll listen,” you say.

“Excellent.” The words escape the figure’s purple lips in a strangely familiar tone.

“First, was my door the first one that has ever opened for you?”

“Yes,” you answer.

“Did the Candlemaker tell you it would be difficult to find a place that would let you in?”

You flicker rapidly in acknowledgement.

The creature shifts its weight in the chair. It places its elbows on its legs and leans forward, presenting a pair of worn hands with fingernails painted black. “There was a recent time when your kind was not needed at all. A group of talented Engineers arrived from another planet and created light for us creatures. After traveling deep into the volcanic core of our planet, they built a heat-resistant pipeline to conduct and distribute the core’s thermal energy for the entire population. We called it the Viaduct. It provided electricity to everyone for centuries. However, one day, the Engineers disappeared without a trace, and the operating knowledge of the Viaduct along with them. The darkness drove our population into total chaos. Those who did not know how to survive without light began trying to acquire resources that would allow them to return to some degree of normalcy. War ensued. The vast majority of people died, either from resource deprivation, violence, or simply not being able to take it anymore.”

You think back to your first memory. The Candlemaker had just finished brandishing your wick, her weathered, scaly hands moving with subconscious precision. “Remember your purpose,” she had crooned. “Fight the darkness as long as you are able.”

“Do you know where the Engineers went?” you ask, curious.

The creature expels a sigh. “No one knows for sure. Many think they went back to where they came from. Regardless, to make a society completely reliant on one energy source, then instantly take it all away. It’s unbelievably cruel.”

You offer a sympathetic flicker, but then start to think about how disposable you are compared to the Viaduct.

“There is one detail I omitted,” the creature continues. “It was not by coincidence the Engineers arrived on our planet. We asked them to come. We needed a more reliable light source than, pardon me, *candles*, to help complete technology that we had designed. You see, once we got the Viaduct completed, we were able to innovate at an exponential rate, until our standard of living became incredibly high. Everyone was comfortable, pursuing the endeavors that made them the happiest. People started living a lot longer as well. But some of us had even loftier goals, like exploring the rest of the universe. So we invented two devices that allowed us to do so.

“The Omni allowed us to pinpoint where in the universe there is sentient life. The Harbinger allowed us to identify how technologically developed this sentient life is. If they were further behind than us, which they all were, we were able to occupy their minds, disguised as a ‘higher intelligence’, and direct their society as we saw fit. Some populations we left alone.”

A small droplet of melted wax cascades down your side onto the table. You already feel weary. “So the Engineers left when you started interfering with other societies?”

“Yes, just about,” the creature acknowledges. It reclines in its wooden chair, which cries out with another *creak*. “It was around when they first found out about our plans with the Harbinger. Maybe they thought we were going to discover their species and manipulate them. Or, more likely, their species is more technologically advanced than ours. So in order to stop us from surpassing them, they dismantled the Viaduct.”

Your flame continues to burn quietly. You muster up the courage to ask a question you know very well could end your existence, and more importantly, your purpose. “So why are you still here? What are you doing?”

You see two ruby-colored eyes burn through the darkness. “Very good,” the creature says. “Many of you never ask. You see, when the Candlemaker told you to ‘fight the darkness’, she was talking about it more than just the literal sense. Curiosity is the brightest light in a world of many unknowns. I remind myself that daily. My only purpose remaining in this life is to restore the Omni and the Harbinger. To restore our society to what it once was and, more importantly, complete our original mission: exploring the entire universe.”

The creature reaches towards you and slides your body across the table, closer to where it is sitting. Your flame reveals several pages of notes scattered across the surface. Various diagrams and rough sketches adorn the paper, each one spotless of revisions.

“I knew the Engineers better than any other native of this planet. About a hundred of them arrived in a small spacecraft, each fitted with tiny space suits and helmets to protect their small bodies from our atmosphere. They were able to speak our language without needing to hear a single word. At first, they probably thought I was being nosy, asking them all sorts of questions about why they were here. Over time, I came to learn that they appreciated a certain efficiency us creatures never attained. Every conversation between us and them never used more words than needed, as if they spoke our language better than we did. It was quite strange.”

You pause and mull over the next question you wish to ask. If the creature misinterprets it, you are certain it could lead to a swift termination. As if to make your decision for you, your wax drips down onto the wooden desk. It is beginning to pool next to dry wax, a jarring reminder of your predecessors. You gather up your resolve and ask, “What makes you certain that you’ll be able to rebuild the Omni and the Harbinger?” You send an anxious wisp of smoke into the darkness above you.

The creature releases a loud laugh. “I like you! Candles really can be interesting. Most of you don’t ask that question until you are drowning in wax tears.” A purple-skinned hand extends from the darkness and picks up one of the note pages next to you. The hand pushes the page next to the metastasizing pile of wax at your base. On it, five groups of concentric circles overlap at seemingly random intervals, creating a dizzying patchwork of waves and connections on the page. A second hand materializes and places an object next to the note page. It is not large, only as long as you are tall, but you notice its importance immediately. The same concentric circle pattern is etched into the solid blue frame of the object. It is what is at the center of each group of circles that astounds you: light. It’s dim, but you are able to see it better than anyone.

“This is the beginning,” the creature says. “Our civilization will emerge from the darkness in solidarity. And we will make the universe know our presence.”

You are able to slightly make out the creature’s face with the newfound light. Shadows dance across its hollow cheeks and purple skin. A pair of small, black horns juts from below its overgrown, seaweed-like hair. You are not sure whether you fully support this creature’s quest. If the Engineers plunged this civilization into darkness, they must have done so for good reason.

But you cannot be concerned about these things. You have one goal: to fight the darkness as long as you are able. You wave your flame slightly and watch as the creature diligently designs its future in front of you. A future you’ll never see.

You keep burning, quietly and slowly.