

Reiteration of a Wasteland

The Rook sits placed atop the soft cushioning of his couch, held within the mahogany of his grand home. The chairs, tables, walls, and stairs all immaculately made and hand-carved, each unique, but still cohesive. Lions, ivy, and lilies cover every inch of his home in each carving and design. The scent of the several burning candles fills the room and surrounds him. Even with all this, The Rook is unsatisfied. He has a hunger which will not be satisfied by any material.

His brow furrows and his nose wrinkles as he looks down at the object before him. The voices singing from his music player carried '*Les 7 paroles du Christ: Seventh Word*' through the room. He had been seeking refuge from his concerns in art, but it fails when the clay beneath his hands refuses to take any shape that isn't *him*. He glowers at the face in the clay, it's long, straight nose and thin face. '*Oleander Ellis*' as the public knows him, or *The Knight*, as The Rook knows him. The Rook hates. He hates him. There is no other word to describe it, he hates him. He can almost feel bile begin to rise just looking at the mimicry of his awful face.

His hands clench and his fingers sink into the clay, turning the face to a meaningless pile of sludge. He finds himself leaning forward and bringing the clay to his mouth, his mind slipping away as he takes a bite out of what would have been its forehead. The wet clay stains his mouth and mustache, a mess, and an unpleasant one at that, yet he proceeds. Through his mindless seething, he proclaims to what is left of the mass, "**I will win.**"

We find our Knight in hiding. Deep within a forest, he covers all the windows of the small cabin he resides in. Every possible opening in the house bears a symbol of separation and protection drawn in blood. Softened and damaged wooden floorboards

creak beneath his feet, and he is almost certainly inhaling mold spores considering the state of this place. He cannot risk being discovered.

The locked chest whispers to him, begging to be opened, “*Take a look inside. Open me. Look and see.*”, but he cannot open it. He doesn’t have the key, and he can’t risk damaging the item, no matter how much it insists. He has long discarded his suit jacket, in favor of simply wearing his button-down and slacks. He combs back his somewhat long hair, only for the sweaty strands to fall right back into his face. His eyes are sunken in, and his hands shake, the days without sleep not aiding him in this endeavor.

The chest’s murmurings are driving him mad. A small, wooden, locked box with carvings of eyes adorning the edges sits on a small desk as it whispers promises of knowledge. He paces around the small bedroom of the cabin, hearing its incessant whines. “*Open me, open me!*” It taunts, knowing he cannot. The chest isn’t the only thing driving him mad, either. The sunken, glowing eyes watching him, the banging on his doors, the writing left on papers, walls, and his own body, all done by that horrid man, *William Hoyt*, or as he refers to himself, ‘*The Rook*’.

He seemed inescapable. Showing up in Oleander’s home at night, watching him sleep, leaving him notes, and disappearing without a trace the moment Oleander retaliated. It’s not possible. He seemed inhuman. It didn’t matter if Oleander locked his doors, if he barricaded them, if he stayed at a hotel, he would be found. Until now, hiding in this run-down cabin.

Oleander wants to end this. He *needs* to end this, but he only has two options. Find a way to open the chest or turn it over to The Rook and let him win. Something tells him he cannot let this chest fall into the hands of The Rook and his troupe. The chest supposedly contains all he needs to know, and what would those *things* bring about with that knowledge?

When The Rook returns to himself, he finds that he has cleaned himself up. The clay and mess were disposed of, and he found himself neatly groomed, sitting at the dinner table with a woman. The scent of the candles lingers. She twirled a loose strand of her dark hair as she spoke,

“It was very kind of you to invite me for dinner, William.”

Now he had a grasp on the situation. The Rook smiled at the woman, his dark eyes meeting hers. She has a face like a doe. One of many pawns in this game.

“It was a pleasure to have you, Ms. Upshur. I must thank you for accepting my invitation.” He replies, bringing his glass to his mouth to drink. He does not remember why he staged this meeting, but he is thankful it is coming to an end.

The facade of a put together gentleman gets tiring. He feels as if he has a beast’s fur just beneath his thin layer of skin, and this performance is irritating. After some meaningless chitchat, they exchange goodbyes. As she leaves, he knows all the pawns are in their place. The Queen will be pleased to know all is going as planned.

Still, he finds himself gazing into the cup he holds. He extends his arm and releases his grip, allowing it to fall to the floor. As it shatters, a pattern is made by the shards of glass. The Rook smiles.

A spider has begun to weave a web in the corner of his room.

The Knight feels the end approaching rapidly. Silence means ambush, and it has been very silent. He knows something is going to happen. He understands now that none of them are human, not even himself. He understands that there is something deeply wrong here. Oleander hides the chest, praying his efforts will be enough to at the very least keep it safe, locked within something that is locked within something that is locked within something that will hopefully never be found.

Oleander finds himself on his knees, pleading to a God he knows is not there, a God that would save him. He knows it will change nothing, and yet he prays.

He will make one last move.

When he comes to, he pulls in a ragged breath of air. All his nerves are firing with an overwhelming, mind-numbing pain. A guttural scream rips itself from him before he turns to the side as his stomach forcefully expels its contents onto the ground. He falls back onto the ashen ground again, desperately gasping for air.

He can't stay here; he has to move. He doesn't know why, but he must move. He forces his body to move, crawling slowly towards the ruins of a cabin through ash and mud. A coppery taste fills his mouth, but he pays it no mind. He forces himself to crawl, despite the dirt making its way into his wounds. Half of his body is burnt beyond recognition, muscle and layers of skin exposed, fingers missing, and he cannot see out of one of his eyes. He can only assume it is gone.

Even so, he crawls.

He crawls into the small ruins of what was once a wooden cabin, the burnt smell of the entire place combined with the soot and ash in the air burning his lungs. He drags himself to the kitchen, weakly grabbing a knife which has a symbol carved into it. It is the same symbol that previously adorned this building. Separation.

He regains his awareness of himself, who he is, and where he is. He is Oleander. He is The Knight. This is his cabin, and he did this. He created this place of no honor. His last-ditch effort.

There is a loud thud.

He throws himself into the building, staggering, and catching himself against a wall. He turns to glare at The Knight, whom he finds in a disheveled heap on the floor,

his physical state not dissimilar to The Rook's own. **"You."** The Rook states, his words laced with a poisonous level of malice and contempt.

He storms over, grabbing The Knight, bringing him to stand, **"Why couldn't you just cooperate? What was so difficult?"** He forces him back, slamming Oleander's body against the wall behind him. The weakened wall gives way and the two tumble onto the floor of the next room. The Rook pulls himself up, kneeling over The Knight. He raises a fist and brings it down against The Knight's face, striking him repeatedly, only stopping once he hears his nose make a sickening crunch.

"Your stubbornness has led you to your death." The Rook angrily declares. Any more he has to say is cut off, as he sees The Knight weakly move, and feels the coolness of metal accompanied with a sharp pain. The Rook looks to the wound placed in his abdomen as it bleeds profusely, the red seeping into the white of his damaged shirt.

After a moment, he begins to go pale and sinks to the floor, next to The Knight. There is a silence, before The Rook croaks out an assertion, "I will win." The Knight responds weakly, "You've already lost."

There is a small shifting, before William takes the blade, driving into Oleander's gut. There is a pause, the silence hanging thick in the air for a moment, before he manages to reply to the prior statement, "So have you."

They sit in silence, drained and exhausted.

The Rook is the first to go. The Knight only dares to speak once he is sure of his absence. The air feels stagnant, and his voice shakes as he confesses, "I don't understand this. I don't understand *you*. Why do we do this?" he asks, knowing that there will be no answer.

Oleander sees a figure flickering in and out of the corner of his eye. He doesn't need confirmation to know who it is. The Rook's Queen. "You..." He weakly starts, only to be cut off by his own noise of pain as the knife is pulled from his stomach. He does not get the chance to voice his loathing before he, too, slips away. All that remains in his mind as he disappears is a clear message burning white hot in his mind.

"We will try again."

End