Jan Piszczek

Eye for an Eye

<<<Content warning: Extreme violence against humans>>>

The old metal gate screeched as it opened. Keiser passed through and locked it, in case some wayward elk would decide to wind up here again, like it apparently had done two days ago.

The night was silent and gloomy. Dark clouds covered almost the entire sky, leaving space only for the moon, encircling it like a gigantic eye, staring down at him from the heavens. Tall old trees and bushes rose from the ground between the graves and mausoleums. Stone animals and gargoyles stared at him from atop tombstones; depictions of crucified Jesus or the Virgin Mary wept silently as he passed by. Dim lights from dozens of half-burnt candles lit up the darkness.

Finally, he stopped by a small grave, hidden in the shadow of one of the oaks. He kneeled down, dry leaves crunching, and took out a small set of incense.

“Hi honey. How’re things up there? Sorry I didn’t come earlier, you know how busy things are before an auction as big as this,” he chuckled a little, rolling his eyes. “The Duchess brought another dozen or so artifacts, had me put them in those damn vaults. They are quite pretty, all things considered. Shame you’re not here to see them. There’s a set of old medieval armor, a gilded musket, a feather of some exotic bird that the Duchess and her poachers found—”

A raven’s caw interrupted him suddenly. He found the bird perched on the oak, watching him. He didn’t hear the creature fly in or land. It cawed again, moving from the branch onto the tombstone, tilting its head as the pair locked eyes. It was… so beautiful. A pristine coat of black feathers, sharp ebony beak and claws. But its eyes… They glimmered with gorgeous shades of lilac and azure, like twin images of the starry night sky.

The more Keiser stared into the raven’s eyes, the more tired he got. Have the auction preparations drained him this much? Perhaps he did need some rest. Only the manor was so far from here, the last thing he needed was to fall asleep on the way, somewhere in the woods, only to be found by some groundskeeper like a masterless hound. At least the graveyard was walled off from the thicket. It wouldn’t be disrespectful to rest here, right? He would spend some time with his wife. Yes, that was a good idea.

He lay down next to the grave and closed his eyes.

She watches as Keiser puts down the last box of goods and wipes the sweat off his brow. His disdain for his job was palpable. The endless, monotonous tasks, serving a master who probably doesn't even know he exists.

He looks around the vault one more time. Chests and coffers pile up on top of each other. Precious artifacts stand all around, priced and ready to be sold by the Duchess at the next auction. Armors, weapons, books…

The feather. There it is. Locked in a special display cabinet with a gilded lock.

After completing his task, Keiser leaves the vault. A middle-aged woman dressed in elegant clothes waits for him to cross the doorway, then closes the heavy iron door and locks it. She must have the cabinet key.

She digs deeper into Keiser's memory to find the name. The world around her glitches and blurs, cracks and breaks.

At the graveyard, Keiser screamed in horror.

She keeps digging.

She finds the name.

"You found him like this?" asked Valeria Rayne, moving the cigarette holder between her fingers.

"Yes ma'am. This morning," answered the physician, not looking up from the table.

The body of Keiser was almost unrecognizable, if not for the old, rugged coat he always wore. His chest was caved in, ribs cracked, his head looked like it had exploded, exposing pieces of skull and flesh. His one surviving eye stared at her, barely holding onto the socket. He looked terrified, even after death.

"Should we inform the Duchess?" Captain Duval entered the room, his armor clanking as he approached.

"No, don't," said Valeria, exhaling smoke. "The auction is tomorrow; she is already busy. No need to worry her further. Just double the guards for the night and keep watch at the graveyard. I'll come up with some excuse. Anything else?" she added a moment later.

"Dinner's ready," answered Duval, motioning towards the dining hall.

"Don't wait for me," Valeria turned around to leave the room, her eyes lingering on the brutalized form of Keiser. "I don't think I'll eat anything today anyway."

Valeria couldn't sleep that night, hard as she tried. She turned to the other side and silently looked at the empty rest of the bed. Duval left early to make sure the guards

were all at their posts. What a nightmare. She kept thinking about it. Not the loss of the servant, no. People died all the time, but they could be easily replaced. The common folk practically lined up for a chance to work for the Duchess anyway. Rather, the deed itself kept her awake. Someone had the gall to murder a man in the Duchess' employ on her manor grounds. He had been murdered, that she knew. The man's head hadn't exploded because of stepping on some leaves. What *was* he killed with then? She'd never seen anything like that, even during her brief military service.

She got up from the bed and grabbed a gown to cover herself with. She took a glass and a half-empty wine bottle. It tasted heavenly; the slight acidic crispness giving her that "zing" as the younger servants called it.

Something moved outside, distracting her from the wine. Valeria crossed the room to close the window and restore the peace in her bedroom.

An elk stood in the backyard, its fur black as coal, its eyes glinting like two lilac lights. It didn't graze on the evenly cut grass; it just… stood there, staring at her. She turned away for a moment to put away her wine glass and—

Caw!

Valeria jumped, dropping the cup. It shattered onto the floor, pieces of gorgeous glass scattering around the room. A raven stood on the parapet, the same color as the elk outside. It cawed again and flew into the room, landing on the frame of her bed, never breaking eye contact.

All of a sudden, she felt quite tired. Perhaps she would manage to get some sleep after all.

She moves through the endless corridors of the manor, merging with the shadows, slowly making her way to the bottom floor. The chambers and corridors keep going, crossing and forking, like a great geometrical web. She has memorized it all, plucked the images and routes from Valeria's memories.

Though she is as good as invisible to the naked eye, the set of keys is not. They dangle in the air, clanking against each other, forcing her to considerably slow down her movement. It is fortunate that the guards do not look up near the ceiling when they hear them.

Finally, she reaches the deepest level of the manor. A pair of guards stands in front of the heavy door. They will surely hear her if she tries to open the door now. She slides back into the adjacent corridor and knocks over a crystal vase. The shriek of breaking glass alerts the humans. One of them reluctantly goes to inspect the sound, mumbling something about some cat or another. She incapacitates him, putting him to sleep and resting against the wall. A few minutes later, the other guard appears, searching for his comrade, only to join him in slumber, placed against the opposite wall.

The key moves into the lock and turns, emitting a satisfying click. She pulls on the knob and heaves the massive door open with some effort.

The vault looks just as it had in Keiser's memories. The number of treasures gathered in the chamber would no doubt cause any mortal to feel as if they were a god. But she is not a mortal and her goal is clear. She passes the coffers and chests, quickly finding the display cabinet and—

It isn't here. The. Feather. Is. Not. Here. Her lilac eyes blaze in fury and panic. None of the other artifacts that Keiser moved have disappeared, so she clearly hasn't missed the auction. Someone must've taken it.

She shoots out of the vault and slides over to the pair of guards, grabbing the nearer one and rummaging through his memories, scrolling through the hours of images like a young scholar pretending to read a tome.

Markus has stood in the same spot for nearly seven hours, with barely any breaks for food or drink. Servants and groundskeepers move around the corridor, cleaning or inspecting, but do not enter the vault. She pushes further.

There. A young woman in egregiously lavish clothing appears and enters the vault, then leaves carrying a small container. She has seen this woman before, in Valeria's memories. The Duchess. She took the feather for herself.

Growling with anger, she leaves Markus' mind and looks down at the man to see his state. Blood is flowing from his nose and mouth. His eyes are red, staring into nowhere; his chest bent at a slightly too large angle. He is dead. The brief connection was enough to collapse his mind. She'll have time to think this over later; for now, she has to go.

The door to the Duchess' bedroom was enormous, decorated with intricate carvings of soldiers and house crests, lined with silver and gold.

The keyhole is two-sided, so she can move through it without using the keys.

This chamber was probably the largest one in the manor, which in itself spoke of its owner. The ceiling, high and vaulted, let in the moonlight from an octagonal roof window. Incredibly ornamented furniture stood all around, holding even more expensive possessions. On the raised dais, hidden behind a set of half-translucent fabrics, stood the bed. It looked large enough to easily fit three people, but at that moment housed only the Duchess herself, sleeping peacefully under a mass of expensive blankets.

She finds the feather, locked in a small glass container. She picks it up and smashes it against the floor.

The Duchess jolted awake with a scream and watched in horror as a shadowy creature picked up the shimmering feather, then placed it back in her wing.

Power surges through her. It's funny how much one missing feather took from her. But no longer, for she is complete again. She turns to the Duchess, cowering in the bed, and jumps over to the furniture's frame. It creaks a little under her regained weight. She abhors violence. She kills only when she has to. All the servants with shattered minds were a means to an end, to recover a part of herself. She could just leave now. But she really wants to make the Duchess pay.

"Hello," the winged creature said, tilting her head at almost ninety degrees. "You haven't forgotten me, I hope?"

Duval opened the door to the room, already taking off his linen shirt.

"God, if only I could sleep through the auction tomorrow…" he snorted faintly, looking around the chamber as a gust of cold wind hit him.

Something was wrong. The wine bottle stood on the cabinet, still open and spreading the smell all over the room. Shards of glass dotted the room, from near the window to the rug. Valeria was nowhere to be found, neither in the bed nor in the adjacent bathroom.

Then he smelled something through the alcohol. Blood.

"Valeria?" he called out, taking out his small iron mace and slowly walking across the room.

He found her on the other side of the room, nestled between the bed and the wall. Or rather, what remained of her. Her head was caved in, as if something had taken away the top part of her skull-bones. The tips of the ribs pierced through the thin nightgown, pieces of meat hanging onto them.

As soon as he defeated the urge to throw up his dinner, he stormed out of the room to call an alarm.

Then he heard screaming. He recognized the voice to be that of the Duchess. Without a second thought, he ran towards her bedroom, joining a growing herd of guards and servants who had decided to do the same.

He pushed through the gathering crowd at the room's entrance. An elderly housekeeper was trying to pick the door open, clearly unable to locate the keys. Duval grunted and smashed the lock with his mace, startling the old man and barging into the bedroom.

The Duchess was lying on the floor not far from the door, as if she had tried to crawl out. Her chest faced upwards, her face turned towards Duval. Blood flowed from her mouth and eyes, spilling slowly. Then suddenly her chest exploded in a shower of blood

and gore like a pinata, almost ripping her body in two and spraying the room with her entrails. Duval cleared the wet pieces of his mistress from his face and looked at the creature standing over the body.

A black coat of feathers covered the antlered humanoid being. Shimmering wings flowed down from its arms, both hands ending in sharp claws. Its tail looked neither foxlike nor birdlike, something in between. It regarded the horrified group of guards and servants with a pair of azure-lilac eyes.

“Remember this,” she hissed, clicking her raven beak and shot up into the air with a single powerful flap of her wings, smashing through the roof window and escaping into the night.

The manor grounds slowly grow distant as she makes her way towards her home. She hopes that, for once, humans will learn their lesson and stay out of the deep woods. She abhors violence. She’d hate to have to kill all of them next time.



Oliwia Dawidowska