

Escape Behind

The library in the manor seemed endless. So many tales by authors all long dead. Bloom didn't know why all the authors were dead, but they'd asked the caretaker before and she'd confirmed it. None of the authors were alive. She'd said it with an indulging smile, as if Bloom had asked something amusing, before she'd reprimanded them for stealing into the library in the first place.

The caretaker, Aileen, was always so concerned about Bloom, even though they did quite well on their own. Quick witted and nimble, as Aileen herself had remarked when the two had first met. That was many years ago. Bloom hadn't really kept count of the days, months, years, since they'd moved into the manor. It was useless to do so, considering there was no way out. At least not for Bloom.

People came and went from the manor, though. Sometimes even in the dead of night. Startling Bloom awake from a feeble dream. They'd asked the caretaker about the happenings outside their room but Aileen, always there to calm Bloom down, had said not to worry about it. Aileen left too, Bloom guessed, but they were never quite sure when. For when they would come back to their floor, Aileen would promptly greet them and immediately begin to admonish them.

"Child, why have you wandered off again?" The voice belonged to the old librarian. They hadn't been careful enough and now he will surely call their caretaker to bring them back upstairs, Bloom silently cursed.

They weren't a child, Bloom was pretty sure that when they entered the manor they were already of legal age, but according to the librarian, Mort, 'everyone is a child to you when you're almost seventy'.

"My room is boring," Bloom said, "I want to read the stories that are told here."

Mort shook his head slowly, "I will never understand your fascination with these books, I've worked here for forty years and no guest has ever wanted to read these books."

They frowned, "But why? Even if the authors are dead, their stories are still important."

"Many think it's macabre," he said, "wandering around here, reading of experiences that you have not lived yourself."

But Bloom will never experience anything, if they weren't allowed to leave the manor. What else were they supposed to do?

And while the library wasn't the prettiest room in the mansion, that would be the winter garden, it was nonetheless a place Bloom could get lost in. The shelves, while Bloom

was sure they were wooden, had a metallic coating, the floor was tiled unlike the rest of the manor which had hardwood floors, and it was continuously drafty as if someone had left a window open and it was never closed, despite there being no windows to Bloom's knowledge.

They shuddered, and that seemed to remind Mort that Bloom wasn't supposed to be here.

"Come, I'll bring you back up, maybe we can sneak you past Caretaker Aileen."

They smiled, grateful for the help, and the company.

Bloom took up their walking stick—a fancy one Aileen had gifted them when she couldn't get Bloom to stay in their room—and followed Mort.

The library let out into a wide hallway, empty book carts on either side of it as they walked toward the elevators. The manor was so grand it had many elevators to carry all the visitors, and the spirits. Bloom had learned early on that if they ignored the spirits they would stay away from Bloom as well. Sometimes they even seemed to be more afraid of Bloom than the other way around. Aileen reassured them that it was normal for a manor to have spirits, there wasn't one where they didn't appear every once in a while.

The elevator lifted them up from the basement to the fourth floor. The view up here was what Bloom liked the most about their floor; their room looked directly upon a field where wild horses grazed.

"You can't stay put even when I specifically tell you that the Lord wants to see you today, can you?"

Aileen didn't wait for an answer as she stalked away from the elevator, leaving Bloom to quietly thank Mort and hurry after Aileen as best as they could, the walking stick making that a lot harder.

Thankfully one of the attendants saw Bloom's struggle and helped them, wrangling the walking stick from them and carrying it himself. He lent Bloom an arm and together they made it to Bloom's room.

"Thank you, Norm."

Sometimes Bloom's strength left them like this, but it had been a good hour that they had been off in the library so Bloom didn't worry.

He carefully sat Bloom down on their bed. "You can ask one of us," Norm said, straightening up, "when you really need to explore the manor. We'll take you, it would ease Caretaker Aileen's mind, I'm sure."

Bloom shook their head with minuscule effort, "I wanted to see the library. You never allow me to visit the library."

Norm looked pained and a little frustrated, “Because it’s the *library*, Bloom. You’re going to be—!”

A throat clearing behind Norm stopped his sentence from ever being completed, and Bloom felt the loss of unspoken words like a tiny needle prick.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that,” he said before hurrying out of the room, and avoiding Aileen’s eyes where she’d just wandered in.

“Do you always have to scare the attendants like that?” Bloom got comfortable on their bed.

“Norm should know better by now,” Aileen said. “They’re the ones that keep letting you wander around unattended.” She went over to the windows that dominated the northern wall of Bloom’s room, rearranging the flowers on the windowsill and properly pulling the drapes all the way back to let as much late afternoon sunlight into the room as possible. “You missed the Lord today, he wasn’t happy about that.”

“He can come visit me whenever he wants. Why just when I want to explore?”

Aileen sighed, “You aren’t supposed to explore, that’s not why you’re here. And the Lord has very little time, running this mansion is very stressful. You’re not the only visitor he needs to check on.”

“I’m barely a visitor anymore, Aileen.” Bloom grabbed the walking stick next to their bed to pull themselves up. “You won’t let me out. You know I want to see the world.”

Since Bloom had been little they’d wanted to see all the sights. All the places the books they read were talking about, but they could never do it. There had always been something holding them back. They weren’t sure anymore what it was, but it was insignificant compared to now. Confined to the manor.

Aileen didn’t react to Bloom’s words; they’d been over this countless times before. Instead she said, “The Lord will try to come by again tomorrow, you can be glad that he is so used to your antics. For now rest, you drained all your energy with that foolish trip down to the library.” She moved around the bed and toward the door, “And get under the covers, the library is always so cold. It’s not good for you.”

She watched as Bloom complied and gave a short nod, “I’ll come check on you again in a bit.”

Bloom didn’t reply, already knowing that Aileen wasn’t in the mood to talk with them anymore.

And so Bloom did what they were told, resting and watching the remainder of the day pass by. The sun set behind the ca—NO. Horses. The sun set behind the horses. The

wonderful wild horses that came and went as they pleased and could vanish behind the mountain, sometimes never to be seen again. The spirits were out there too, but Bloom willed himself not to see those.

It was right before dinner when Aileen came back, once again strutting around the room and tidying it despite the fact that nothing changed while she was away. She asked Bloom about innocuous things and Bloom gave clipped answers. They were tired, not physically but it still dragged them down. After dinner they retired early.

Morning came and it felt just like the day before. Bloom was barely awake when an attendant entered their room, helped them get dressed, and took care of the everyday things. They were so used to it by now that they barely reacted to the prick they felt when the attendant, a woman Bloom had seen before but never learned her name, cleaned their skin. She was gone again before Bloom even registered it.

“Don’t worry about it,” Norm said when he checked in on them. “It’s just routine.”

They knew that, everything around here was ‘just routine’.

“I have your breakfast,” he said, setting it down on Bloom’s bedside table. “Especially made by the chef for you.”

Norm smiled and Bloom tried to match it.

“Thank you, good sir,” they joked. “Have you seen Aileen yet? I want to apologize to her for yesterday. I know she cares a lot about what the Lord thinks of her, and I guess my not being here might have reflected badly on her.”

“She’s around, you know she always stays too long and comes in too early. And don’t worry too much. The Lord knows it’s hard for you to stay put so long.”

Bloom hummed but didn’t say any more, instead beginning to examine their breakfast. With a silent wave Norm left their room. They continued to observe the horses while eating their bread to distract from its dryness.

Only a short period of time passed before Aileen stopped by, in her usual white dress and with a list of things to do for the day in hand. She was frowning at it before looking up at Bloom.

“How are you feeling today?”

Bloom actually managed to smile for her, “I’m feeling well. How are you?”

She continued to frown and rubbed her eyes, “Did sleeping help your fatigue from yesterday?”

They hummed, “Just like you said. I’m sorry for—”

“It’s alright, don’t worry about it.” A lot of people were telling them that today. Aileen

seemed frazzled. “Bloom, I—”

But those words would also never get spoken or heard, since just then the Lord entered. He was a stately man, dressed all in white just like Aileen but less tired looking.

“My Lord,” Bloom and Aileen nodded their welcome.

“Good morning.” He took up Aileen’s to-do list, looked it over, and grimly nodded, as if confirming something he’d already suspected. “Bloom, I want to talk about your...stay...here...can you do that?”

“Of course, what about my stay? You know, I love the manor, my Lord. Although I’d love to go travel soon.”

“Bloom, we already talked about how that isn’t possible.”

“My Lord,” Aileen interrupted, “I don’t think they’re...completely comprehending right now.”

“Yes, of course,” the Lord smiled almost fondly. “You are quite the dreamer.”

“I’m not sure what you—”

“I need you to be here with us for a moment, Bloom, can you do that for us?”

Bloom didn’t want to. It had taken them a long time, to build all this and believe it too. The Lord sounded serious though. Slowly, the lavish room shrank. The tapestries vanished, and the hardwood floor turned to linoleum. The walls became an unforgiving white and the beeping faded in. Their hand pricked where the IV lay and their arm stung where the nurse had taken their blood earlier. The cold overhead fluorescents replaced the candlelight. And everything came into stark contrast.

“Dr. Ist and I have been looking over your blood work, Bloom,” the Chief Physician said. “It’s worse than we thought, progressing much faster than we expected. You have weeks, at most.”

This wasn’t worth coming back for. Bloom looked out at the parking lot and its cars coming and going.

“I’m sorry,” the Lord said. But Bloom was already planning their next adventure to the winter garden. All the flowers would be in bloom around now. They could ask the florist for new flowers for their windowsill.

The last bunch was almost dead.