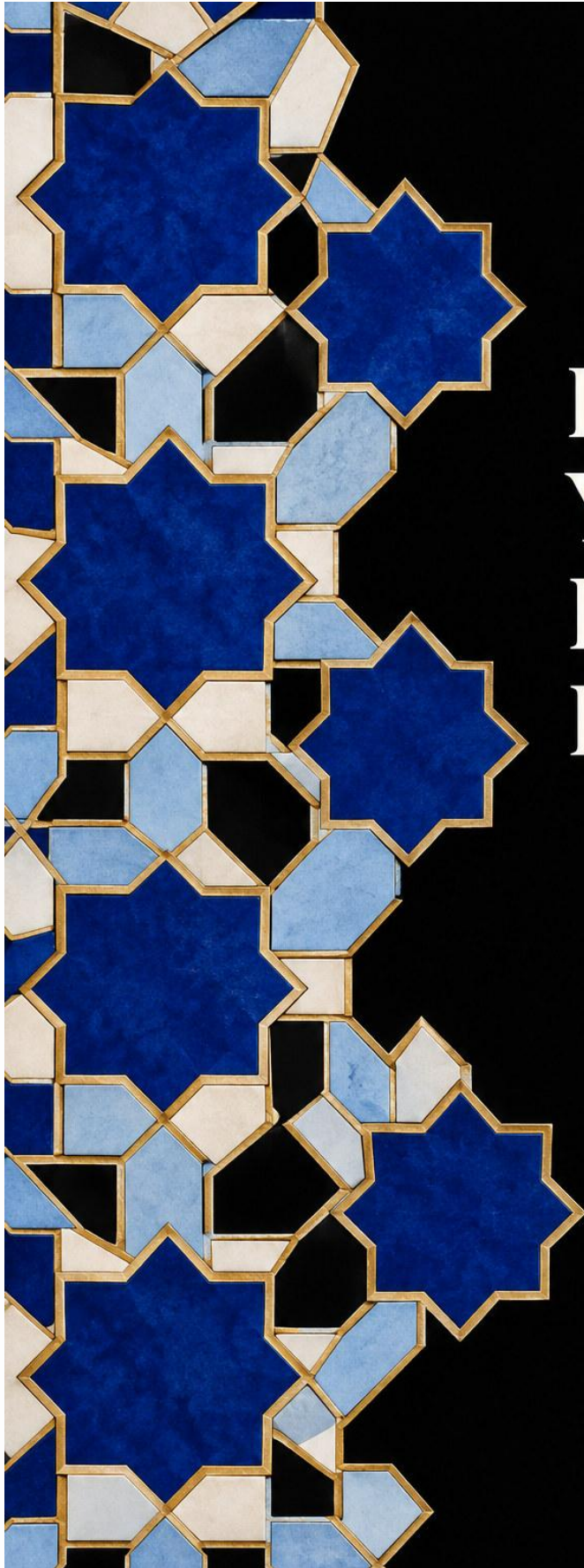




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DOVE HARPER

Test story

Dove Harper

DoveHarperAuthor.com

A Note from Dove

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Devon Harlow unlocked the door to his new office. The brass knob resisted, stiff from disuse, and the door scraped against the frame with a screech. The room was bare: shelves stripped of books, desk drawers emptied, bulletin board naked. Only one object remained, a book set perfectly in the center of the desk.

The leather cover was cracked in places that looked almost like veins, the spine was warped. Greek letters sprawled across it, but some were jagged, not part of any alphabet he recognized. He frowned, running a thumb across the title. His specialty was Ancient Greek philosophy—Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics. He had spent years parsing fragments of papyrus, debating metaphysics in seminar rooms, learning Greek, dreaming of the day he might teach his own students. This—whatever it was—didn't belong to any corpus he knew.

The air was musty, tinged with chalk dust and the faint ghost of stale pipe smoke. Whoever had occupied the office before him must have left in a hurry. They hadn't even bothered to do a proper turnover.

Devon lowered his bag and pulled the chair out, its legs scraping the tile then flipped the book open.

The pages smelled old. His eyes followed the script, a mixture of clean Attic Greek and something more jagged, phonetic syllables interlaced with symbols like thorns. At first, he assumed it was some eccentric academic's game, a pastiche of ritual language designed to amuse or provoke. His lips moved silently as he translated lines about doors and thresholds, about desire given form. The phrasing was strangely erotic...and unsettling.

He read one passage aloud, partly to test the rhythm:

"Come forth, image of the beloved, shadow of the heart. Come forth, adorned in flesh, so the hunger may be known."

The fluorescent light overhead buzzed. The bulb flickered, dimmed, then steadied again. Devon laughed under his breath. New job nerves, old college that was all. Sterling University was one of the oldest in the country after all. He pushed back from the desk and glanced toward the window, where evening rain pressed against the glass in streaks.

Then the door closed with a sharp click.

The air thickened, heavy as though the room had been sealed shut. His skin prickled. He turned back, and his breath caught in his throat.

Someone stood between him and the desk.

No—not someone.

A woman.

Marissa. His wife.

Her outline was perfect: dark hair falling just below the shoulders, the soft angle of her jaw, even the tiny mole on her chin he'd kissed a thousand times. She wore the navy dress he loved, the one she reserved for dinners or gallery openings. But her eyes—he froze on her eyes. They gleamed a pulsing, impossible, gold.

“Devon,” she said, and his stomach turned at the sound. Her voice was Marissa’s—same cadence, same warmth—but thickened, honeyed, as if someone had draped velvet over her vocal cords.

He stood so fast his chair toppled with a clatter. “What the hell—Marissa? How did you—”

“I’m not her.” A smile spread across her face, slow, deliberate. “Not exactly.”

The overhead light flickered again, and the gold in her eyes seemed to swell, reflecting him in miniature flames.

He backed against the wall, palms damp. “This isn’t possible.”

She tilted her head. “Isn’t it? You read the words. You opened the door. And I—” she spread her arms, graceful, inviting “—answered.”

Devon shook his head. “It was nonsense. A ritual, a parody. This is... it’s a hallucination.”

Her laugh was soft, intimate. “If I were a hallucination, could I do this?” She crossed the space in two steps and touched his wrist. Her fingers were warm, familiar, terrifying. His pulse leapt beneath her thumb.

Every detail was right. The faint scent of her shampoo, the curve of her mouth as she smiled. And yet, wrong, because Marissa was at home grading her own students’ essays, or on her way here to meet him for their first date in a long while.

Devon tore his wrist free. “You can’t be here. You’re not her.”

Her expression softened, almost tender. “No. I’m what you want of her. What you miss. What you dream of when you close your eyes and imagine more.”

He thought of the distance that had opened in his marriage over the past year, of long nights spent apart, of arguments about tenure-track stress. This thing—this demon—had rifled through his thoughts, plucked out the ache he carried, and draped it across Marissa’s face.

“I don’t mean to,” he whispered.

Her lips curved. “Oh, but you do. Somewhere in you, the hunger spoke louder than reason.”

Devon pressed back against the wall, his chest heaving. The thing wearing Marissa’s face moved closer, smooth, gliding. She carried no human hesitation, no earthbound restraint. This figure radiated certainty, hunger.

“You’re trembling,” she whispered.

“I don’t—this isn’t—” His voice cracked. He was a philosopher, trained to dissect arguments, to unmask false premises. Yet here he stood, cornered by something his syllogisms couldn’t hold.

She leaned against the desk, the tome still open behind her, and watched him with those molten-gold eyes. Slowly, deliberately, she slid her hands over the straps of the Navy dress.

Devon shook his head. “Stop.”

But his body betrayed him. His eyes followed.

The straps slipped from her shoulders, the fabric falling away. Her skin gleamed pale in the fluorescent light, impossibly smooth. Every familiar curve of his wife was here, but magnified, sharpened by something otherworldly. Where Marissa’s movements might be cautious, this double moved with impossibly languid grace.

When the dress reached her waist, she let it pool on the floor. She stood bare, unashamed, her gaze never leaving his.

Devon’s throat closed. He wanted to look away, but couldn’t.

Then the air shifted. From the floor beneath her feet, wisps of smoke unfurled—red, curling, alive. They wound upward in delicate coils, clinging to her thighs, circling her hips, obscuring what lay below the waist. The smoke pulsed faintly, as if in rhythm with a heartbeat, concealing and revealing with each subtle swirl.

Devon's mouth went dry. The smoke wasn't a veil; it was a lure. It kept his imagination restless, filling the gaps with forbidden shapes. He wanted to dismiss it as illusion, but a scent reached him—perfume and spice.

"Why hide yourself?" His voice was low, strangled. He hadn't meant to speak.

Her smile deepened, sly and knowing. "Because hunger sharpens when it's denied. You know that, professor. You've lectured on eros, haven't you? Desire thrives on distance, right? A glimpse. A suggestion. The mind does the rest."

He swallowed hard, conscious thoughts scattering like birds.

The smoke coiled higher, brushing her perfect stomach, teasing the underside of her breasts before curling back down, never dispersing, always moving. Devon's gaze flickered helplessly, caught between what was hidden and what was shown.

She stepped toward him, and the smoke followed, trailing across the floor like a living shadow. When she reached him, she took his hand and guided it to her shoulder. Her skin was warm—too warm, fevered—and the contact sent a shudder through him.

"You. Called. Me," she murmured haltingly. Her lips hovered inches from his. "Don't pretend you don't crave me."

Devon's chest tightened. "You're not her."

Her smile softened. "And yet, I am everything you wanted her to be. Everything you feared to ask for." She pressed closer, her bare chest against his shirt, heat radiating through the thin cotton. The smoke curled around his legs now, licking at his ankles, his knees, his thighs, his crotch.

Devon squeezed his eyes shut. "This is wrong."

Her breath warmed his ear. "Then why does your body betray you?"

He opened his eyes and found her face inches away, gold burning in her gaze. Her lips brushed his cheek, feather-light, then traced the corner of his mouth. The smoke thickened, wrapping his waist, holding him in place.

For a moment, he almost yielded. The promise of it was overwhelming: the union of memory and fantasy, the collapse of guilt into desire. The demon knew exactly where his hunger lay, and she had draped it in smoke and skin.

Devon jerked his head back. "No." His voice cracked, but the word hung in the charged air.

Her expression flickered—not anger, but amusement. She let his hand fall from her shoulder. The smoke loosened its grip on him but did not vanish, curling lazily around her as though waiting for his surrender.

"You resist," she said, tilting her head, "but resistance feeds me too. Do you understand, professor? Every denial only deepens the thirst."

Devon's hands clenched at his sides. He forced himself to look at her face, not her naked body, not the smoke. "Leave me."

The demon's laugh was soft, delighted. "Not until you learn what it means to want and never have."

Devon's hands shook as he picked up the tome, his voice cracking in the dim lamplight. The demon that wore Marissa's face—her laughter, her warmth, her sultry cruelty—had leaned too close, testing him with every whisper and curl of smoke. He had resisted as best he could, but the air around him throbbed with her presence, and the lines between wife and demon blurred until he could barely breathe.

With a hiss, the words on the pages of the book lit, burning bright as he forced the final words from his lips. The creature arched back, hair streaming as if underwater, and screamed in something like ecstasy and fury. "You cast me away," she said, voice doubled, eyes glittering with satisfaction. "But you will not be free. I leave you with hunger, professor. A hunger that will rot you from the inside out. You will look at every woman and ache. You will disgrace yourself again and again. Years it will take—years of denial, years of penance—before you may even hope to be whole."

Before Devon could reply, she pressed herself to him, lips scalding against his cheek. When she drew back, a perfect smear of crimson remained, a mark that glowed faintly as the smoke rose. Then, with a sound like tearing silk, she vanished, leaving only the bitter-sweet fragrance of perfume hanging in the room. The book shut itself on the desk.

Devon staggered, half in relief and half in dread. He touched his cheek, the warmth of the kiss still tingling, the lipstick impossible to wipe away it seemed. The perfume clung to the air like a mocking ghost, and no opening of windows could drive it out. He slumped into his chair, heart racing, telling himself that it was over. That she was gone.

Then the door opened.

Marissa stood there, her face already hardened before she even spoke. She took in the scene in a long, devastating glance: her husband's shirt half-open, his hair damp with sweat, the faint haze of smoke still drifting near the floor. And most damning of all—the crimson kiss on his cheek, glistening fresh under the lamplight, paired with the unmistakable scent of perfume.

Her voice cracked like a whip. "This is the last straw, Devon. And it isn't the first time."

He stumbled up, words failing. "Marissa, it's not—this isn't what it looks like—"

But she was already shaking her head, arms folded tight, eyes wet but merciless. "I can't keep doing this. The late nights, the secrets, the... whatever this is. I don't know if you've been unfaithful before, but I've lived too long on the edge of it. And now—" she gestured toward him, the kiss, the cloying air—"I won't be made a fool again."

The silence after her words felt heavier than any curse. Devon reached for her, but she stepped back, her decision already final.

When the door closed behind her, the perfume still lingered. So did the kiss. And the curse.

Also by Dove Harper

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