

Blood Bound

Crimson Rose

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Tossing yet another stone onto the growing pile, Celeste pushed the shovel back into the ground only to have it glance off something the moment it sank into the dirt. “For fuck sake, is this a yard or a damn quarry?” she swore as she wiped a bead of sweat from her brow. What started as a leisure day of removing a few roots to put in a garden was turning into a full-fledged job. Driving the head of the shovel back into the ground, she tilted it back and struggled to dislodge whatever she had caught onto. Letting out an exasperated sigh she dug around the object and it quickly became evident that she was not dealing with a rock or root.

Bending down to take a closer look at the object she had uncovered she raised a brow as she picked up a dirt-encrusted foot long metal cylinder. Brushing some of the dirt away with her hand, she saw what appeared to be ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. Her scientific mind kicking in, she ran into the house – all thought of putting in a garden completely forgotten.

Sitting the object on the counter next to the sink, she used an entire roll of paper towels to wipe away the rest of the dirt, she turned it over in her hands for several minutes until spotting what appeared to be the bottom of a lid about four inches from the top. Heart racing with the excitement of unearthing an ancient treasure, she gave it a twist. It did not budge. Holding it tightly in one arm she added a bit of elbow grease and just when she was about to resort to using a knife or some other tool to pry it open, it came loose with an audible sound as if she had just broken a vacuum seal.

Eyes going from the lid in her left hand to the container in her right, she looked in to see an ancient leather-bound book with thick pages yellowed with age and a metal cube. Stopping short of touching them, she sat the container on the counter and ran to the bathroom where she grabbed a box of latex gloves before returning to the kitchen. Putting on two pair just in case, she carefully removed the book and cube and lay them out on a towel. Slightly larger than the average mass-produced novel, the book was held shut by a tarnished metal clasp. Leaving it closed for the time being, she picked up the cube and smiled. Though larger than her favorite childhood toy, the five inch diameter object was divided into eight rows and columns with each of the 384 faces covered in the same sort of hieroglyphic symbols as she saw on the container.

Sitting the cube down, Celeste picked up the book and carefully unlatched the clasp and flipped the cover open, but instead of seeing more of the same symbols all she saw were blank pages. “Okay then,” she said with raised brow. Picking the cube up, she went into the living room and sat on the couch. Putting the book on the coffee table she focused all of her attention on the cube. Turning the first section, she heard a soft hum as it began vibrating in her hands. “HOLY SHIT!” she shrieked. Dropping it to the floor, she pushed herself back against the couch and pulled the cushion next to her up as if it would offer some sort of protection from the impending explosion.

When nothing more sinister happened than it thudding to the floor she leaned down and tapped it with a finger. When it did not explode she picked it up and no sooner was it in her trembling hands then she felt the faint vibrations and heard the soft hum. “What the actual fuck?” Turning another section did not increase or decrease either and so she continued manipulating it one section at a time. Minutes turned to hours and as the final symbols fell into place the humming and vibrations stopped. “Well that was anti-climactic,” she sighed in disappointment – not sure what she expected to happen.

Sitting the cube on the coffee table, she stretched and turned to walk away when she heard a loud buzzing followed by something hard banging against the table behind her. Spinning

around, she watched in wide-eyed shock as the cube wobbled on its own accord. Flipping until the side covered with ankhs was at the top it stopped and then a ghostly image of something definitely not human appeared. And though dressed in clothing appropriate to ancient Egypt, it spoke perfect English.

“We are the Daxrid. In ages long passed the human race worshipped us as Gods. We were Zeus, Hera, Poseidon and Hades of the ancient Greek pantheon. The Norse knew us as Odin, Thor, and Freyr. To the Egyptians we were Ra, Horus, Osiris and Sekhmet. But, while the rest of us have moved on to other universes, other worlds, one remains to watch over you. He is a hermit amongst our kind; preferring to remain in the shadows as an observer only, but he is there none the less recording all that you do, biding his time until he determines you are ready.”

“What the hell?” Celeste gasped. Jumping back, she continued watching the hologram speak.

“We are eternal, benevolent and above all we are patient. But this was not always so. In eons long passed, we were much like you. Primitive, arrogant, short-lived beings that grew too big for one small world. We were on the brink of destruction until we discovered a truth so profound that it changed everything. Yours is but one of a million, billion universes we have created but that does not make it any less unique. Embrace this fact. Let it be the guiding force to drive you to better yourselves. Use the knowledge that you are not alone to strive for a way to reach other world, to meet other species.

“You hold in your hands the key to finding us if you are brave enough to take the first steps into the vast ocean that is the multiverse. We promise you knowledge without compare, but first you must prove yourself worthy. But be warned! This is only the first of your tests. What comes after is a life altering event that few solve and fewer still survive. Are you brave enough to accept our challenge? Do you have the courage to stand as testament to the achievements of the human race?”

The hologram disappeared leaving a stunned Celeste staring blankly at the cube. “Ok, you can come out now,” she said looking around the room. “There’s no use in hiding anymore, you got me! Good prank guys,” she said growing more suspicious by the second. No one was popping out of the closet. There were no camera crews to catch her reaction for the world to see and laugh at. As always, she was alone in her house.

Sneaking over to the coat closet she jerked the door open. Empty save for her jacket, a winter coat and an umbrella resting in its stand. “I know you’re here somewhere!” she said looking intently at the corners of the room near the ceiling and at the paintings hanging on the walls in the hopes of spotting the hidden cameras she just knew were there.

Sitting the cube on the glass-top coffee table she ran into the kitchen. Empty. She tip-toed down the hall checking bedroom, bathroom and den alike. She peeked into the laundry room and garage. All empty. Rushing back into the living room she picked the cube up again and gasped. “It...it can’t be! This has to be a joke, right?” Placing it back on the coffee table she sat on the couch and stared at it intently, waiting for something else to pop out.

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The first rays of the sun were coming up over the horizon when the last symbol fell into place. She did it. The cube pulsed in her hands and grew warm to the touch. She had the distinct feeling of falling and jerked violently as one does in those situations, but instead of

stopping, the sensation intensified. Vision blurring, head spinning her living room became the roof of her house as she felt herself rising higher and higher. Zipping past the tops of trees, she stared in wide-eyed shock as clouds became nothing more than distant wisps and the earth came into view only to become a pebble in the ocean as she zoomed beyond Jupiter, Saturn Uranus. Picking up speed, she flew through the cosmos until she was going so fast entire galaxies were gone in the blink of an eye. And then it was over. The universe came to a screeching halt and she suddenly found herself standing in what appeared to be an enormous concourse abuzz with activity. Head spinning, the last thing she saw before blacking out was what appeared to be a humanoid monkey complete with prehensile tail.

Coming to, Celeste opened her eyes and stared up into the furry tan and white face of a monkey man looking down on her. W-Where am I? What happened?"

"Gluthom," the monkey man said.

"Huh?"

"Felir vulto." Pointing from himself to a massive display to his left his furry finger stopped on a picture of his species. He then pointed from her to the display in the hopes he got the idea.

Staying rooted to the cool metal floor, Celeste looked from the monkey man to the monitor and then beyond to the myriad creatures going to and fro. A hand waving in front of her face drew her attention back to the alien standing over her. Following his arm, she got what he was trying to indicate and after a long moment pointed to a picture of a human.

"Imgly vu," he smiled politely, pointing to another smaller display that showed the earth. "Quek?" The tone of his voice told Celeste it was a question, but she still could not understand a word he was saying to her. He pointed to Asia. "Quek?" With a finger he rotated the globe and pointed to Mexico. "Quek?" Pointing once again to the frightened Celeste he motioned to the display and took a step back.

Celeste moved the display with her finger as she saw him doing and pointed to North America. "Ah, English," the monkey-man said with a smile. "Can you understand me now?"

"Y-Yes, but how? Where am I? What's going on? W-What are you?"

"My name is Rylk and I am an Uzane from the planet Alpha Kentarris. You have absolutely nothing to fear from anyone here so please remain calm."

"What happened? How did I get here? And for that matter where is here? How do you know English? Have you been to earth? OH MY GOD ALIEN ABDUCTIONS ARE TRUE!" she said as panic started setting in.

"I will gladly answer any and all questions you might have if you give me time to do so." Pausing to see if she would interrupt, he continued. You are on Concourse Seven," Rylk explained. "Think of it as a gateway to the multiverse. As for how you got here, I think you already know the answer to that question."

"T-The cube?"

"The cube. No, I have never been to your planet. I can speak your language because it was just downloaded into my brain and unfortunately, yes, some alien species do in fact abduct others but mine is not one of them."

"And the Daxrid? Are they here?"

"No. They do not reside in our space and time. I assume you heard the cube's recording?"

"Some of it. I don't know if I heard it all."

"Did you hear the part about the tests?"

"I did. So, you're telling me that was real? I really flew across the universe to wherever this is? I passed some sort of test and have to pass others?"

"All true. But you did not simply fly across the universe, human."

"Celeste. My name is Celeste."

"My apologies, Celeste. You did not simply fly across your universe. You are in something of a nexus – a place between places. We are in every universe and none. Don't bother trying to figure it all out as only the Daxrid truly understand how it works."

“And is everyone here for the same reason? They really all come from different universes?”

“There are a few that come from the same universes. Take the Granthites for instance,” he said pointing to an extremely tall, grey-skinned humanoid that looked like he was made from stone. “They come from Alpha Kentarris as well. On our world they are powerful sages capable of foretelling the future.”

“And what are you on your world?”

“Personally or as a species?” Rylk smirked.

“Both I suppose.”

“I was an advisor to the king of our people. Our species are forest-dwellers for the most part, but there are some that prefer the city life. You surprise me, Celeste. The last human I had the...privilege, of greeting was far less coherent and way more terrified than you.”

“Oh, I’m terrified,” Celeste confessed “But I’m a scientist on earth. I’ve spent many nights looking up at the stars wondering if there was intelligent life out there somewhere and while I have no idea if this is real or a bizarre hallucination, it is never the less a dream come true. So, what happens now?”

“That is entirely up to you Celeste. Such a pretty name,” he said as he stared into her wide grey eyes. “On my world that name means ‘messenger of the gods’ so it is quite fortuitous that I be the one greeting you.”

“Holy shit! Are you hitting on me?”

“Hitting on you? Of course not!” Rylk gasped at the accusation. “I would never hit a woman!”

“No, no,” Celeste started “oh, nevermind. Forget I said anything. So, what are my options?”

“You can remain here for the rest of your natural life, or you can accept the next test and continue your journey.”

“And the test is? WAIT! Rest of my life? What about going back to earth?”

“That may only be achieved by completing the tests and getting the return key from the Daxrid. Should you choose to remain you will be given accommodations appropriate for your species and you’ll be free to explore to your hearts content, but this will be your new home.”

“That’s fucked up! I’d like to go back to earth now thank you very much.”

“I’m sorry but only the Daxrid have the power to send you home and the only way of meeting them is to complete the quest you began.”

“So, I stay here for the rest of my life or go on a quest? Okay, what’s this quest I have to complete and do I have to decide right now?” she asked as she looked around the seemingly endless building of glass and metal she now stood in. Out of one window she saw waves gently lapping a beach of lavender sand and another showed a forest of silver-barked trees with blood-red leaves. “Are we on a planet or floating through space?”

“Floating through space is an accurate enough description.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning the truth is likely to drive you mad so it’s best not to ask.”

“Which only makes me want to know more. Look, I don’t know if you know what a scientist is, but on earth...”

“I am aware of the word and its meaning and I assure you few minds are capable of grasping the reality of this place. So, have you decided on what you wish to do?”

“Do I have to decide now?”

"No, but whatever answer you choose is final so make sure before making it.

"What is this quest I must complete?"

"I'm afraid I am not permitted to tell you anything more on that subject unless you agree to accept it."

"That's hardly fair! What if you ask me to jump into a volcano or something equally suicidal?"

"The task will be dangerous, of that you can be assured, but it is not suicidal so long as you are able to keep a level head about you."

"And what happens when I've completed the test?"

"You will be brought back here for the next phase."

"And that would be?"

"I cannot tell you until you've completed the task that awaits you now."

"I see. So spend the rest of my life here, or take a quest that could potentially get me killed? Seems like an easy decision doesn't it?"

"Actually, it's one of the hardest decisions you'll have to make,"

"Were you given the same options?"

"I was. And I chose to remain here. After a hundred years or so I applied for position of Greeter and have been doing this ever since.

"A hundred years? How old are you!?"

"I am three-hundred-forty-seven years old as my Alpha Kentarris reckons time.

"Three hundred..."

"And forty-seven," Rylk finished the sentence. "And how old are you?"

"Not three hundred and forty seven! You're like elves or something."

"Elves? I'm not familiar with that species. Do they come from earth as well?"

"Sort of. They are a fictional species thought up by one of earth's authors. Anyways, I'm twenty-seven," she sighed. "I must look like a child to you."

"Not at all," Rylk smiled knowingly. "I know you are new here and all, but there is one thing you should know right now. There are going to be races that find you attractive. Others will see you as a delectable morsel and then there are those that find humans an intolerably annoying species."

"Which are you?"

"I hope you're one of the ones that find me attractive," Celeste blurted out as her brain to mouth filter went on break. "Oh god! I can't believe I just said that."

"It's okay. In fact, I find you incredibly attractive but my job is to educate, not seduce. That being said, one of my duties is to assign newcomers to their quarters so if you'll follow me I'll show you where you'll be staying until you decide on your future."

"Is it even possible?"

"Of course. Countless individuals do it every second of every day."

"Huh?"

"Decide their fate."

"Oh. I was talking about...um, nevermind."

"Ah, I see. Yes, that is possible as well."

"Really?"

"Not with every species, but ours are similar enough to not only make mating possible, but quite enjoyable. In fact, on Alpha Kentarris our species can not only mate, but procreate as well."

“WOW! Okay then. And have you tried with humans from other planets or universes?”

“Never one from earth, but yes, I have mated with eleven humans from across the multiverse.”

“And?”

“I don’t understand the question.”

“Did you impregnate any of them?”

“All eleven.”

“HOLY COW!”

“Do you want me to impregnate you, Celeste?”

Stunned at the forwardness of his question, she stopped in her tracks and stared at him for a long moment. “Did you seriously just ask that question?”

“My apologies. I often forget that human can be, what’s the word for it? Right, prudish, when it comes to sex.”

“I’m not prudish about sex but asking someone you just met if they want you to impregnate then isn’t exactly how things are done where I come from.”

“I apologize if I offended you, but the offer remains open.”

“Um, thanks, but I think I’ll pass.”

“Understandable, but just for your information there are only seven humans on all of Concourse Seven and the three that identify as male will be leaving soon so your options are limited.”

“Is that your way of saying I should have sex with you?”

“Not at all. There are currently ninety-two species capable of mating with humans on Concourse Seven and of those five are able to procreate.”

“I think I’d like to be alone now to think about my options.”

“Of course.” Guiding her into an elevator, Rylk pressed a few buttons and they descended deeper and deeper into the station until finally stopping on floor 208. The elevator door slid open and Celeste stared out into a long hallway of sterile metal illuminated by lights recessed into the ceiling. She then followed him along several corridors before coming to a stop in front of a closed door with her name written on a plaque about a quarter of the way down from the top.

“This is you, Celeste of Earth.”

“Um, how do you already have my name here?”

“The Daxrid work in mysterious ways. That being said, unless given permission you are the only one that may enter. I ask that you please invite me in so that I can show you how everything works.”

“Everything?”

Taking her meaning, Rylk smiled. “If that is what you want I am more than happy to oblige.”

Hand on the doorknob, Celeste nervously chewed her lower lip while staring at the Uzane to her left. Different species aside, he was quite handsome and well-built and as his prehensile tail slowly swayed back and forth she wondered what used it could have in the bedroom. Cheeks suddenly feeling warm, she averted her gaze and gulped. “Um, you may come in.”

“Thank you.”